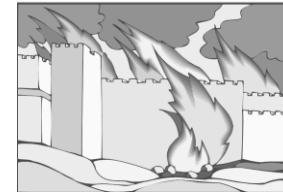


The Road to Christmas Detour Through Exile

The "Great Nation" Collapses

During the reign of Solomon, Israel was a "great nation" (*Genesis 12:2*). After building the temple, Solomon said, "Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses" (*1 Kings 8:56, NIV*). However, Solomon's heart turned toward false gods, and away from the Lord (*11:1-6*). As a result of Solomon's sin, Israel would become a divided kingdom (*11:9-13*).

After Solomon died, the kingdom was split into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom (called "Israel" or "Samaria") and the southern kingdom (called "Judah"). Judah would continue to be ruled by the descendants of David, as God promised. Almost all of the kings of Israel and Judah were corrupt and did evil.¹ Most of the people turned away from the one true God and worshiped false gods and idols. As a result, Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The people of Israel and Judah were exiled, outside the promised land.



What about the promise?

Road Signs

During Israel's time of rebellion, God was still speaking to them through his "prophets."² The prophets brought both bad news and good news. The bad news was God's judgment because of their sin. The good news was God's blessing because of his grace. Both God's judgment and God's blessing were demonstrations of his faithfulness to his promises and covenants.

Rest Area Ahead

Israel's "rest"³ in the promised land was lost. But the prophets spoke of a future "restoration."

📖 *Jeremiah wrote, "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess," says the LORD* (*Jeremiah 30:3, NIV*).

📖 "At that time," declares the LORD, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people."

This is what the LORD says:

'The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness;
I will come to give rest to Israel' (*Jeremiah 31:1-2, NIV*).

¹ All of Israel's kings may be characterized as evil. More than half of Judah's kings may be characterized as evil.

² See 'Times of the Prophets' (from Jay) for a list of the Bible prophets, and their placement within Israel's history. The prophets were both 'forth-tellers' (proclaiming God's word for the present day) and 'fore-tellers' (proclaiming God's word about the future).

³ The term 'rest' in the Old Testament refers to the peace, security, and well-being of Israel in the promised land (*Deuteronomy 3:20; Joshua 21:44; 1 Kings 8:56*). However, the New Testament makes it clear that the temporary, earthly rest experienced in Canaan was not the ultimate rest, but pointed to a rest that is heavenly and eternal. The ultimate rest is still future (in the age to come)

A "New Covenant"

📖 *Jeremiah wrote, "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant⁴ with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31, NIV).*

📖 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.
 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.
 I will be their God, and they will be my people.
 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
 or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,'
 because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD.
 For I will forgive their wickedness
 and I will remember their sins no more" (31:33-34, NIV).

Looking for Kingdom Road

📖 *Jeremiah wrote, "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.
 In those days and at that time
 I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;
 he will do what is just and right in the land" (Jeremiah 33:14-15, NIV).*

📖 "For this is what the LORD says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel'" (33:17, NIV).

Isaiah wrote, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse (David's father); from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1, NIV). These prophecies, and many others, declared that God would be faithful to his promise to David. Thus the Jews looked forward to this future, ideal king; that is, the "Messiah."⁵



A Sampling of Road Signs⁶

What signs pointed to the Messiah? Consider the following:

📖 "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14, cf. Matthew 1:22-23)⁷

📖 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2; cf. Matthew 2:1)

⁴ 'covenant' – an agreement between two parties that establishes a relationship and in which obligations or mutual responsibilities may be enacted. Some Bible covenants provide only divine promises while others entail obligations. Though the 'new covenant' is 'with the people of Israel,' the book of Hebrews makes it clear that the new covenant is not limited to ethnic Israel, but applies to the Christian Church (Hebrews 8:1-12; 10:16-17).

⁵ 'Messiah' comes from the Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one.' The Greek word is *Christos*, thus 'Christ.'

⁶ These verses are a mere sampling of Old Testament verses that point to or allude to the Messiah and his kingdom. Barry Leventhal writes, 'According to Alfred Edersheim, an earlier messianic believer and scholar, in some 558 rabbinic writings there are 456 separate Old Testament passages used to refer to the Messiah and the messianic times. More recently, J. Barton Payne cited 574 verses in the Old Testament that were direct, personal messianic predictions' (Barry Leventhal, 'Why I Believe Jesus is the Promised Messiah,' *Why I Am a Christian*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman [Grand Rapids, Baker, 2001], 207).

⁷ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

📖 “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace, they will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (*Isaiah 9:6-7; cf. Luke 1:32-33; John 8:58; 10:30*)

📖 “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (*Zechariah 9:9; cf. Matt. 21:1-5*)



📖 “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” (*Isaiah 53:3; cf. John 1:11*) “... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed ... He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (*Isaiah 53:5, 7; cf. Mark 15:1-32*)

Not There Yet!

Before and during Israel’s exile, the prophets proclaimed that Israel would be restored to the land. In 537 BC, the first group of Jews returned to the land, and eventually rebuilt the temple. A second group of Jews returned in 458 BC. A third group returned in 445 BC, and rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem. Though they had returned to the promised land, the number of Jews was relatively small, and they did not possess the land.⁸ During that time, the prophet Zechariah still looked forward to the coming Messiah (*Zechariah 6:12-13; 9:9-10, 14*).⁹ But the Jews grew impatient. The last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, wrote of the Jews’ discouragement, and doubting of God’s love, faithfulness, and justice (*Malachi 1:2; 2:17; 3:14-15*).

What about the promise? To be continued in Lesson 4.

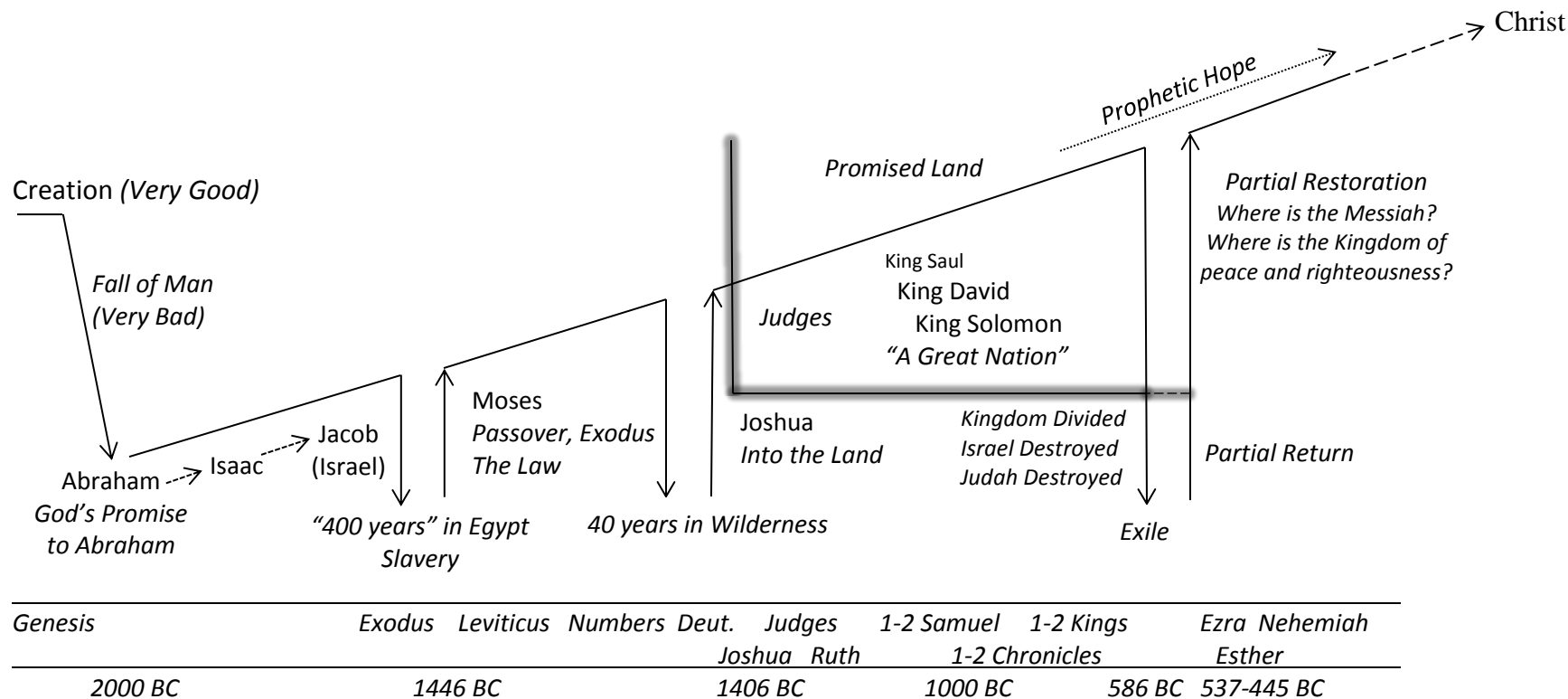
Our Own Journey

1. Like Israel, we may experience good times (“great nation”) and bad times (destruction and exile). When life doesn’t go *our* way, we might doubt God’s goodness, love, or power. (Some might doubt God’s existence.) What lessons can we learn from Israel’s experience?

⁸ This ‘restoration to the land’ falls short of Isaiah’s prophecy, as well as numerous other prophecies (e.g. Jeremiah 32:37-38; 33:1-13; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Amos 9:11-15). So how are these prophecies fulfilled? Bible scholars differ. Some say that the prophecies concerning the land will be literally fulfilled in a future millennial kingdom. Other scholars say that God’s promise of the physical land (in Palestine) was conditional, and its realization was forfeited by Israel’s disobedience and rebellion. These scholars tend to see the prophecies as pointing to a greater fulfillment in the new heaven and the new earth, which is the final state of the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:1-2).

⁹ For further study, see Zechariah 13:7; 11:12-13; and compare to Matthew 26:31; 26:12-13; 27:3-10.

2. The Jews of the Old Testament spent many years hoping and waiting for the Messiah and his kingdom, which would be characterized by the Lord’s righteous rule, “rest” (peace, security, well-being), and the full knowledge of God. How are our hopes and waits similar and dissimilar to theirs? What can we do to stay encouraged and faithful in our own hopes and waits?



Road to Christmas - Big Picture
(Timeline Not to Scale)