

AN OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY:

From Abraham to Modern Israel

Lesson 7

This will be our 7th week that we have spent connecting the dots of historical Biblical events beginning at the time of Abraham. To this point, we've covered about 14 centuries and have arrived at about 600 B.C. We've followed along as Abraham was singled out by the Lord to create a special people, the Hebrews, separated from the rest of humanity to be His servants and representatives on earth. Then we saw Abraham's grandson Jacob given a special anointing as the patriarch of 12 tribes who would be called after the new name the Lord gave to Jacob: Israel. A relatively small piece of land was claimed by God for Himself, and He gave it over to this separated people for them to live in as leaseholders: Canaan.

But first the 70 or so offspring of Jacob were driven to Egypt in order to survive a regional famine; there they prospered for a long time beginning with the goodwill afforded them by Jacob's 2nd youngest son Joseph who had become 2nd in command over all Egypt. But later Egypt turned against Joseph's people and subjugated them. Nonetheless, their population increased enormously even during their time of oppression and slavery.

When it was time, the Lord sent Moses, a member of the tribe of Levi, to redeem the Israelites from their Egyptian oppression. God decimated Egypt in order to persuade the Pharaoh to let His people go; Moses led them to Mt Sinai where the 2-3 million Israelite refugees met the same God who had spoken to Moses at this same place, in a burning bush, perhaps only a couple of years earlier. The Lord set up this new relationship with His people, Israel, by giving them a divinely inspired manual for living the life of a redeemed people: the Torah. Among other things, the Torah established a well-defined moral code, set up a priesthood along with specific instructions for them, gave the Israelites boundaries for human to human and human to God interaction, and revealed God's nature and character and the pathway for a

relationship with Him. He even explained how the earth and the Universe were formed and began to imply that a Savior and Mediator greater than Moses was needed and would be provided by Godeventually.

After 40 years of camping in the desert as a people without a country, the Israelites obeyed the Lord's instructions and crossed over the Jordan River from the east to the west, and began to conquer the already inhabited Land of Canaan. The 12 sons of Jacob, known better as the 12 tribes of Israel, each were given specific districts to live in and to govern. Some were more successful than others both in ridding their districts of the enemy and in achieving prosperity and peace.

But because of foolishly establishing treaties with the inhabitants of Canaan whom the Lord said Israel was to drive out of the land (or kill them if need be), the 12 tribes were heavily influenced by paganism. Even more, some of these Canaanite peoples were none too happy to have the Israelites around and so they attacked and harassed several of the 12 tribes. God raised up special leaders among some of the tribes to deal with these problems; they were called **Shofetim**, Judges. After some 250 – 300 years of what has come to be known as the era of the Judges, the attacks of the many gentile peoples within and without Canaan became too much to bear and the 12 Israelites tribal chieftains agreed that they needed to be united and led by one person: a king. The first king was chosen and anointed by the Prophet and Judge Samuel and the era of the Kings dawned.

Israel was not fully united until the 2nd King of Israel, David, was coronated and he was followed by his son Solomon who increased the power and size of Israel. But that experiment lasted only 80 years and shortly after Solomon's death the nation of Israel entered into Civil War and divided into two Kingdoms: Judah to the south and Ephraim-Israel to the north. Since Jerusalem and the Temple were in Judah, the people of Judah tended to stay more pure in their worship of Yehoveh. But up north Jeroboam led his people into multiple god worship: idolatry.

Over the years the Lord sent a number of Prophets to warn Ephraim-Israel to turn from their idolatry and their wickedness, but often these Prophets were run out of town. Eventually, the Lord followed through with His warnings; He raised up the Assyrians as a huge Empire who came down from the north and attacked Ephraim-Israel and scattered this conquered people

all over Asia. The fall of Samaria, the capital of Ephraim-Israel, occurred about 722 B.C. This is where the legend of the 10 lost tribes of Israel was born.

To the south, however, Judah survived by making a treaty with Assyria. However, in time a new power arose: Babylonia. Babylonia eventually took Assyria's Empire away from them, and they too made a treaty with Judah. But unwise leadership in Judah led to Babylon losing their patience with them and so a huge army came to Jerusalem and attacked. Judah was sent into exile to Babylon, and that is where we will begin this lesson.

I hope you have found this survey helpful as each of the many so-called Bible stories shows itself to be but a milestone along the way of Redemption history. But like the mile markers along a highway, each is relative to the previous one as a measure of our progress. To isolate one milestone as a stand-alone feature can be informative, but it misses the point if connection is not made between the ones before and after it.

So let's continue today as Babylon attacks Jerusalem. The first attacks by King Nebuchadnezzar upon Jerusalem happened around 600 B.C. Among those first taken to Babylon were the prophets **Yechezk'el** (Ezekiel) and **Dani'el** (Daniel). **Dani'el** due to his academic and leadership skills was put into the palace service of the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. **Yechezk'el** (Ezekiel), however, was sent to the countryside where he prophesied about the coming destruction of Judah. He was not well received; nobody likes the messenger of bad news. As ruthless as the Babylonian army was, the citizens of Babylon were gracious and tolerant of these new foreigners. The Jews were permitted to move around and meet freely, buy land, own businesses, even practice their worship and religion to an extent, provided the gods of Babylon were also honored. Within a few years, **Yechezk'el** (Ezekiel) turned from telling the Jews to have courage and hope in their subjugation, to exhorting them to prepare to go back to **Y'hudah** (Judah) as a free people, because many had adopted the rather attractive Babylonian ways and become quite comfortable in their new home.

Throughout the Babylonian Empire, several of the conquered nations convened secret meetings to plot rebellion. Pharaoh made a deal with Zedekiah of **Y'hudah**. When Nebuchadnezzar got wind of the secret pact, he marched his army toward **Yerushalayim** (Jerusalem) yet again. Zedekiah ran to meet him assuring him of his loyalty to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar relented. Not long after, Judah openly rebelled against Babylon, and this time

Nebuchadnezzar was not swayed. He laid siege to the Holy City. It began in the winter of 587 BC.

The siege lasted for 18 months. By the time Jerusalem fell, some inhabitants had turned to cannibalism to survive. Bodies, dead from disease and starvation, were stacked like firewood; fully one-third of the people had died. When the Babylonian army entered the city, they put half of those remaining to the sword. The rest were spared and used as forced laborers. Why did the Jews resist so fervently? Surely they knew that they were no match for Nebuchadnezzar's armies, and if they simply opened their gates to the invaders, the worst might have been deportation, like those before them. What could have caused these Jews to choose slow death over life somewhere else? Two reasons stand out: first, they believed that Egypt would come to their rescue because a secure and independent Judah was essential to keeping Babylon from taking Egypt. Judah was the perfect place for an enemy to launch an attack upon Egypt. Second, the thought of living on foreign soil, away from their Temple, was too shocking to consider as a viable alternative to death.

In the first years of their captivity in Babylon, these exiled Jews were despondent and could not be comforted. What irony: here they were, back in the birthplace of their forefather Avraham. The very place God had instructed Abraham to leave was now where they found themselves, 12 centuries later; no doubt this irony did not go unnoticed. But now they were captives; every new day was darker than the one before. Though they were treated considerably better than they had expected, the very air they breathed was laden with the stench of paganism. They felt they were living a defiled existence in Babylon because the Jews had become isolationists as a result of the massive reforms put in place by King Josiah after the re-discovery of the Torah. They took God's command to stay separate from the world quite seriously and literally. So they felt that the very dust of Babylonian soil that accumulated on their sandals was defiled. The only Holy air to breathe was in Y'hudah. The only Holy soil to grow food upon was in Judah. The food they ate was unclean, not kosher. They were as the walking dead. They had no way to atone for their sins as their sacrificial system and priesthood was now inoperable without the Temple, which lay in ruin.

Though the Jews were a disconsolate community, nonetheless they remained as a community. They had not been scattered and dispersed throughout the Babylonian Empire; generally speaking, they were together, living in Babylon. Babylon was a resplendent city; huge for that day, almost a mile square, with a large population that worshipped every sort of deity in the many temples to the gods that adorned the city. The river Euphrates that flowed through and around the city was tamed with the use of dikes, canals, dams, and bridges. The land outside

the city was rich and fertile. That's where the bulk of the Jewish deportees lived, near the Chebar Canal, just outside the walls of the great city; in a town called Tel-Aviv.

Their survival required that the Jewish exiles in Babylon establish a means of livelihood.....and quickly. This was no welfare state they had been carried off to. They immediately began to farm and to reestablish the crafts of their trades. They still needed clothing, shoes, cookware, food, and wood for fires. They built homes, small open markets to conduct day-to-day business, and met to discuss their plight. The cause of their misery, they agreed, was clear: the sins of the evil King Manessah, some generations earlier, had caused God's judgment to fall upon them. The Prophets had warned them, they ignored the warnings, and so it happened precisely as foretold.

Among the exiles lived Ezekiel a prophet taken in the first deportation from Jerusalem [**Book of Ezekiel**]. While Daniel lived and prophesied among royalty in the grandest city in the entire world, Babylon, it was left to Ezekiel to prophecy to the common folk. God gave to Ezekiel the duty to make the Jews aware of the real reason for their destruction and to lead them to repent, inwardly, taking personal responsibility for their offenses before the God of Israel. Later, God gave Ezekiel different marching orders: he was to give the Jews hope for restoration. A time would come when God would forgive them, they could return home, and rebuild their Holy Temple and re-establish their Holy City. How would this happen? **Yechezk'el** told them a new empire from the north would rise up and destroy Babylon (just as Babylon had risen up to destroy Assyria), and the leaders of this future world power would allow the Jewish exiles to return to **Yerushalayim** and even help them to build a new Temple.

The Jews met and talked endlessly of such things: God is doing this to glorify His own name, so do not fall to the corruption of the other peoples who live in Babylon; hold true to the Torah, to the Mosaic Laws; worship only the One True God, Yehoveh. He will continue to love us and care for us, even in this impure place. Redemption is near.

Oh, what a hope this was! The Jews held tightly to one another. Intermarriage with pagans was forbidden, though as time passed it became commonplace. They met to worship in homes.... not to sacrifice.... because the only allowable place for sacrifice was the Temple in Yerushalayim, now destroyed. Rather, they met to pray and study the Word of God, the Torah, using whatever oral traditions and portions of scrolls they had been able to bring with them.

They clung to their Jewish identity. Many continued with their loyalties to elders and clans; and it was those who continued to listen to their priests, scribes, and prophets; they continued to trust God. Others opted to cozy up to the dazzling power and grandeur of their tolerant conqueror, to benefit from the situation rather than fight it.

The years passed, and scribes set about copying scrolls and writing down memorized scriptures and teachings so that they would not be forgotten. But, they no longer wrote only in ancient Hebrew, they now wrote in Aramaic (a cousin of Hebrew), the companion of the spoken Aramean that was the everyday script and language of the empire. Some Jews took Babylonian names. The names of the months of year became Babylonian, and are still in use in our time.

As with the immigrants who came to the new hope of America; who arrived in New York and, at first, instinctively sought to live in familiar cultural groupings we call ghettos, the Jews found staying separate was possible only inwardly, and that to a degree. Most of the Jews almost unconsciously found themselves integrating with the mainstream Babylonian culture; perhaps not fully, they didn't give up their strong religious beliefs, but certainly, they separated those beliefs from the realities and practices of everyday living. This should be quite easy for us moderns to understand. For, does not society today demand of us to compartmentalize our Spiritual beliefs, as separate and irrelevant to all other facets of life? Yet there, in Babylon, the heartland of the pagan world, God separated the faithful from the unfaithful and wrung the paganism out of the Jews just as He had wrung the Egypt out of the Israelites in the desert wilderness of the Sinai 800 years earlier.

In Babylon, the ancient culture of the Israelites died, and the new culture of the Jews was born. One could reasonably say that Hebrew-ism gave way to Judah-ism; a culture that would serve them well right through to the present. Unfortunately, what came with this cultural shift was a bent towards adding to, and often overriding, the Holy Scriptures with new customs and traditions. Judaism was based on a newfound intellectualism that produced series after series of Rabbinical rulings and interpretations that eventually led to a doctrine that forsook the Torah of Moses, and replaced it with Tradition called Halakah; God's word, replaced with Man's word.

It was also in Babylon that the Synagogue system was born. Let's examine this significant

shift in Hebrew worship practices for a moment. Up to the time the Jews were carried away to Babylon, worship centered on the Temple in Jerusalem; though within each Jewish town and village people certainly celebrated the Sabbath ritual in their own homes, for that was its design and purpose. However, the Temple was the ONLY place where the only provision for a Jew to have atonement for his or her sins could occur, and that accomplished with animal sacrifice. And, the Temple could only exist in Jerusalem, as this was God's direct scriptural instruction. As the Jews were now 800 miles away from Jerusalem, and the Temple lay demolished there, the Jews were in a bind. They lived on unclean land, dealt daily with unclean people (gentiles), and surely ate much unclean food. Worse, they now had no way to atone for their sins before God, so they walked around in a perpetual state of impurity and sin-guilt. What to do about this intolerable situation must have occupied their daily thoughts to a great degree.

Now, from another perspective, this situation of oppression and discomfort was exactly what God WANTED them to be in. This impure condition was part of God's punishment against them. God wanted them to understand just how serious sin is, and how grievous their offenses were; offenses that had simply become part of their everyday lives back in Judah. God wanted them to have no way to atone for their sins for a time (about 70 years) so that they would see how wonderful this atoning provision was that God had supplied, and how much they had abused it. But, the Jews decided to try to find a way around this problem.

The answer they found was twofold: they decided that study and knowledge of the Law, the Torah, was in itself an atoning act of righteousness, and declared it so. And, they more or less reinvented the Temple and came up with the Synagogue: a place of worship where communal meeting, learning, and praying would take the place of sacrifice. Sounds nice, but this was not necessarily a good thing. God didn't give them this choice, they simply invented it. And the Synagogue system is at the heart of what was soon to become the true driving force and authority behind Judaism: Tradition.

I do not want to paint a picture of the Synagogue system as being an inherently evil or wrong institution; not at all. But the Synagogue was far more than merely a building, a commonplace large enough for Jews to come together and meet as Jews. The fact remains that whereas likely in its first few years of existence it was little more than a place for a displaced people to fellowship and worship, in a short time it evolved into a man-made religious system designed to rule over Jewish society and to create an alternative means to atonement for sin and, therefore, righteousness before God; which, of course, is an oxymoron because no man-made system can atone for sin nor can it attain righteousness for us.

The Synagogue in time so dominated the Jewish people's worship lives, that when, after 70 years the Persians overcame the Babylonians and took their Empire away from them, the Jews were freed and given permission to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. Yet, they RETAINED the Synagogue system; the alternative system became the accepted system and the most desired system. One could reasonably see that the vast bulk of Jews who remained living in the Babylonian, and then Persian, Empires needed houses of meeting and worship because they lived so far away from the Temple in the Holy Lands. Yet how about those Jews who moved back to Judah but took the Synagogue system with them? Understand: God, in His mercy, allowed the Temple to be rebuilt and the God-ordained sacrificial system for atonement of sin to begin once again, but it now wasn't enough in the Jewish mind. They accepted some of God's ways of the Torah, but they also added their new Babylonian-born religious philosophy to it. And, as is man's habit, they generally liked their new ways better than God's old ways. In fact, by Christ's day, some scholars argue that there is ample evidence to prove that the Jews had actually built a Synagogue INSIDE the grounds of the re-built Temple. At the least, we know that there were many Synagogues even in Jerusalem because several from that era have been found.

Now, before gentile Christians get too judgmental or high and mighty about all this, it would be wise to remember one thing: the Church system was, ironically, modeled after the Synagogue system..... a gentile model, but a nearly parallel model nonetheless. The typical physical Church model, that is a fancy building with a raised platform, an altar from which a minister speaks, and seating surrounding the platform; even the liturgy, music, singing, praying, collecting money, all are near duplicates of the Synagogue system. And of course, that's easy to understand since the first several scores of thousands of Believers were Jews, and Jewish leaders were the leaders of the first so-called churches even for awhile after gentile believers began to outnumber Jewish believers.

This cultural shift away from the Biblically-based Hebrew-ism (to coin a term) whose foundation was the Torah of Moses, to a Babylonian-born Judaism manifested itself even in the practical matters of everyday behavior and life during, and even after, their exile to Babylon. For it was in Babylon that Jews learned several new trades they had only a few years earlier been shunned for purity reasons: among them commerce and banking. In Judah, the Jews had been primarily herders, farmers, and craftsmen; peasant tasks and occupations. In Judah, merchants were often looked upon as evil and because many merchants were foreigners; they were seen as participating in legalized stealing. The derogatory terms 'Canaanite' and 'merchant' became one in the same. But, now, ironically as a consequence of their exile in Babylon, they became bankers and lawyers, professions that in the future

would become associated with Jewishness and it remains so to this day. Professions that would over the centuries serve to help the Jews garner wealth and power, but along with it scorn and persecution.

THE RETURN FROM EXILE

It's about 540 BC. To the northeast of Babylon lay Persia, a land ruled by the Babylonian's ally and partner in empire building, Media. Persia was governed by King Cyrus, a vassal king under the control of the Medes. King Cyrus led the Persian army in rebellion against the Medes, and won, taking over their portion of the empire. The rule of the Persians spread like a friendly virus throughout the region. Isaiah was prophesying again: 'The Persians are God's judgment on those nations who have mistreated His people, the Jews'. Soon Persia marched into the great city of Babylon and took it without a struggle.

Yet, King Cyrus was no bloodthirsty barbarian. He was an enlightened ruler and his reign and methods were unique in history up to that time. He was a beneficent dictator. An idealistic and Spiritual man, he perceived his purpose on earth was as the inheritor and successor of the Babylonian Empire. And further that his duty was to restore civilized humanity, peace, and to make reparations to all those nations whom Babylon had enslaved; essentially he felt that he was here to create a new world order. The Bible presents us with a fairly magnanimous view of Cyrus, the new King of the World. Ancient records of the Persians, and tens of other vassal states, confirm the Biblical account.

King Cyrus worshipped in the Babylonian temple of Marduk (by the way, Marduk was simply a Chaldean name for Nimrod), partly as a sign to the citizens of Babylon that he was a respecter of their culture (can we still visualize President George W. Bush standing in a Muslim Mosque, but days after 9-11, praising the god of Islam for the same purpose?). The conquered peoples were immediately smitten with this King's sincere and progressive ways. He ordered all the stolen and captured gods and idols returned to their cities of origin, and ordered his charges to treat the conquered peoples with decency. He tolerated all gods and all religions. He ordered that any group, from any religious cult, that wanted to rebuild their demolished temples and altars, should be allowed to do so. The Jewish captives were free to go home, to migrate back to their homeland in a 2nd Exodus; Cyrus urged them to rebuild their Temple **[Ezra 1]**.

About 50 years has passed since *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) was emptied of its finest at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Most of the original Jewish deportees are now dead, or very old. A new generation of Jews was born, and even another generation after them; and they were raised in Babylon. Babylon is the only home they know. When King Cyrus of Persia issued a proclamation urging the Jews to return home and rebuild their Temple and their city we learn that about 50,000 took him up on his offer [**Ezra 2**].

The Biblical record gives us an inventory of exactly who left Babylon; it even lists the families and count from each family that departed Babylon. However, when adding up the list of numbers of those who immigrated from Babylon we find an anomaly; for the list of who left falls about 11,000 short of the number said to have arrived in Jerusalem. It appears that about 39,000 of those 50,000 who arrived back in the land were the Jews from Babylon and their house-servants; and the 11,000 that were unaccounted for may have been tiny remnants of the Ephraim- Israelite tribeswhat today is called the 10 lost tribes of Israel...that had been dispersed by the Assyrians some 2 centuries earlier. It is also possible that along with these Ephraim-Israelite hitchhikers, several non-Israelite (but Semitic) tribal members attached themselves to the returnees, to achieve that larger number. They were all apparently accepted and quickly absorbed into the Jewish tribe.

It's not long after their return that we have hints of Ephraim-Israelites residing in Judah when we read of 12 bullocks and 12 goats (an obvious reference to the 12 tribes) being sacrificed for "All Israel". No doubt, requirement number one was for this handful of Ephraim-Israelites and non-Hebrew foreigners to swear allegiance to Yehoveh the God of Israel, and no other. But second, and of near-equal importance, would have been the requirement for unwavering loyalty to the tribe of Judah. This loyalty meant giving up the identity they may have had with their old tribe(s); therefore, with but an oath, these various groups became Jews. There is also another very interesting outcome from this reunion and intermixing of tribes that, though speculative, would seem to be almost automatic for the minds of those returning Jews.

Ezekiel prophesied that eventually both houses of Israel.... that is, the members of the two kingdoms that resulted from the civil war and split of Israel.....the House of Ephraim, and the House of Judah.... would come back together to re-form the Whole House of Israel. Those up in Babylon that had heard Ezekiel speak his mystical pronouncements, many hearing it directly from his own mouth, were likely the zealous Jews that left the comforts of Babylon and

ventured back to Judah expecting this reunion. And, on their journey home, as they encountered a few remnants of their long lost brothers the Ephraimites of the House of Ephraim, it would surely have seemed as though the most joyous and wonderful fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy was happening. So, upon arriving in Judah, they must have felt once again whole; all Israel, back in the Land! Of course their exuberance had failed to take heed to other parts of the same prophecy that could not have made their happy reunion the one which Ezekiel spoke of; rather, it was something that would have to occur far into the future.... in the End Times. Yet, from that day to our time, the Jews have stubbornly insisted that they are the representatives of all 12 tribes of Israel.....a mistake to be sure that only in early 21st century has been made clear by the rediscovery, and return, of some of the 10 tribes who have retained their original tribal names and allegiances.

What is all too clear is that the vast majority of Jews, something around 95%, chose to stay behind in what was now the Persian Empire. Why? Because for the new generation of Jews born in exile, Babylon (and now Persia) was home. We see the same phenomenon today, as only about half the world's Jews have returned to their homeland. The remainder, the majority of which live in the U.S., have no interest in leaving their comfortable and secure life in America, for an uncertain future in Israel. Babylon had a robust economy, and farming was much easier and more reliable in the Fertile Crescent than in the rocky soil of Judah. They already had a comfortable life. The Babylonians were at the forefront of progressive social policies and new technologies for their era, and the Persians were determined to advance things even further. Simply put, the Babylonian Jews found the gentile culture attractive and economically advantageous. Jewish schools and Synagogues had been set up. Although not yet called Rabbis, Jewish leaders had evolved from being teachers of Scripture to becoming religious authorities, commentators, and makers of doctrine. Thus, Babylon was and would remain for centuries to come, one of the foremost centers of Jewish religious authority for the newly formed Judaism.

It was primarily older and more pious Jews that made the difficult and long 800-mile journey back to **Y'hudah**. When they arrived and looked upon the ruins of their city and Temple, it must have been a most bittersweet experience. They found the uneducated peasant caretakers, a mixture of gentiles and Jews, living in the hillsides. The returning Jews, with a chip on their collective shoulders, regarded themselves as the true remnant of Israel and the current inhabitants of Jerusalem as something less. They were intent on establishing their new Jewish culture, invented and refined up in Babylon, revolving around their God, their rapidly evolving Traditions, and their newfound professions. A schism quickly arose between the Babylonian Jewish returnees and those few Jews who had remained in the land for the last half-century. Power struggles, issues of proper worship, and loyalties to differing sets of religious leaders served to create a deep divide between the Jewish returnees and the indigenous Jewish residents of Judah.

Ezra led the way to rebuild the sacrificial Altar at the Temple and the Jews celebrated Sukkot, the Feast of the Tabernacles [**Ezra 2, 3**]. Within a few more months the foundation was laid for a new Temple; but, upon seeing its meager size only a few were joyful. Those older men, who remembered the grandeur of Solomon's Temple (the first Temple), wept over the modest structure they were building. Work continued on the Temple and on the city walls but it was continually slowed and sabotaged by various groups who were unhappy with what they felt was the haughty attitude of the newcomers. Work ground to a halt for 15 years [**Ezra 4**].

In 522 BC, King Darius found his way to the throne of Persia and was as sympathetic to the Jews as was the former King, Cyrus. A second wave of Babylonian Jews decided to migrate back to Judah. Under the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, work on the Temple was resumed. King Darius ordered the Temple to be completed and even used Persian treasury money to help. Soon the Temple was completed [**Ezra 5, 6**] but it took many more years, and the strong leadership of Nehemiah, to fully restore the walls and buildings of Jerusalem.

THE WORLD BECOMES GREEK

We now enter the 400 year Inter-Testamental Period, also known today as the "silent" period. The Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the last of the historical documents of the Old Testament. Not until just before the birth of Christ, and the beginning books of the New Testament, can we once again turn to the Bible for information on the progress of the Jews. This silent period is actually covered by what we today call the Apocrypha, but it was removed from Protestant Bibles in the 1800s at the behest of the British and American Bible Societies.

It's about 440 BC, and Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) is once again a bustling Jewish city. The Greeks had emerged from their "dark age", and become a dynamic and influential society in the region; they would eventually displace Persia as the rulers of the world. Hundreds of Greek cities had been built throughout the Mediterranean region, with new settlements sprouting up in every direction. Each Greek city of any consequence was an independent, walled city-state.

The foundation of each city was family and their own gods. We know of the Greeks as intellectuals, pragmatic thinkers, societal experimenters, and innovators. They were also, at once, equal parts deep religionists and mystical sorcerers; a strange combination of the rational and irrational, that was widely adopted throughout the Greek and Roman empires.

Key to understanding this time in history is grasping that the Greek culture was a way of life desired and imitated by most nations in the Middle East, Asia Minor, and those nations surrounding the Mediterranean Sea; even reaching to the eastern parts of Europe. The concept is not unlike the desire we see in so many nations today for what we loosely call “Western Culture”, with its capitalism, democracy, religious freedoms, and all-devouring desire for wealth and personal comforts.

Next week we’ll resume with the conquests of Alexander the Great, who changed the world in dramatic fashion.