

# Could God's People Be Restored?

## PROPHECIES OF HOPE AND RENEWAL AFTER EXILE

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After centuries of prophetic indictment against Israel for their unfaithfulness to the covenant, judgment reached its climax in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587/6 BC (described in 2 Kings 25). The biblical historians and prophets unanimously interpret these events as God's judgment on his people for their rebellion. God had finally brought upon them the ultimate covenant curse, the loss of the land.<sup>1</sup>

### Exile as theological crisis

The fall of Judah and the ensuing exile constituted a crisis of God's people on several levels. On the one hand, for any nation, the violent destruction of cities with unspeakable torture, ending for many people either in death or forced deportation, would result in severe trauma. And yet for Israel it was a crisis at the theological level, as well. The people of Judah lost the very foundations of their faith and identity as God's chosen people: their land, their temple, and their king, all three of which were tied to their deepest theological beliefs.

1. They were exiled from their land—the land God promised to Abraham and his descendants (throughout Genesis, beginning in 12:1–3).
2. The temple was destroyed—the unique place in the world where God had chosen to dwell (1 Kgs 8).
3. The king was taken captive to Babylon, bringing the Davidic dynasty to a halt—the dynasty God had promised would be everlasting and represent his own rule in the world (2 Sam 7; Ps 2).

At this moment, the future was uncertain. In the grand narrative of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Kings ends

with a cliffhanger: What will become of God's people? The exiles must have asked significant existential questions.

Although the biblical historians and prophets would soon provide answers, we should not forget what it must have been like to live in the aftermath of such trauma. Texts like Lamentations and Psalms 79, 89, and 137 bear witness to the raw emotion of the people as they lamented the disaster, bore the shame of their captors, and longed to return to Zion. The exile left them disillusioned, pondering the meaning of what had happened, particularly with respect to Yahweh's supremacy among the gods and his commitment to his people. Like their neighbors, the people of Judah may have wondered if Yahweh was unable to defend his chosen city and his temple from the Babylonian god Marduk.

Here's how J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh explain the situation: "Having recently lost their literal and symbolic world of land, city, and temple, with their narrative of election in tatters and even the power and faithfulness of their God in doubt, the exilic Israelites would have been plunged into a massive identity crisis."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, they wondered whether God was done with his people or had a future for them.

### Promises of restoration

In the aftermath of the exile, the two major prophets of the time, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, declared that Yahweh was not done with his people. Indeed, he would restore the kingdom to its former glory. The prophetic promises of restoration together paint a picture that involved four primary elements. God would restore the three foundations of his people's faith and identity: (1) return to the land, (2) a new temple and the return

of Yahweh, and (3) a new Davidic king. And, in addition, (4) he would change his people on the inside.

While the restored land, temple, and king appear in many places in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we can see all three elements of the prophetic vision together in Ezekiel 37:21–28.

### 1. Return to the land

Jeremiah and Ezekiel declared that God would bring his people back to their land. Ezekiel 37:21–22 provides a clear example:<sup>3</sup>

“Thus says Yahweh God, ‘Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land.’”

### 2. A new temple and the return of Yahweh

Ezekiel spoke of a new, rebuilt temple, as well as the return of Yahweh to dwell in it. In Ezekiel 37:26–27, Yahweh promises: “I will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them.” Ezekiel’s vision of a new temple appears in chapters 40–48.

The temple building itself meant little without Yahweh’s presence. Earlier in Ezekiel, the prophet described Yahweh abandoning the temple before Jerusalem was destroyed (Ezek 10:18–19). In the future Yahweh would return to his chosen city and dwell among his people in the new temple (Ezek 43:4–5)—following the pattern of earlier theophanies when God’s presence filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35) and Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11).

Isaiah 40–55 also speaks of Yahweh’s return to Zion, including the well-known chapter 40: “Prepare the way of Yahweh in the wilderness ... then the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed” (Isa 40:3, 5).

### 3. A new Davidic king

The prophets of the exile also declared that God would reestablish the Davidic dynasty. According to both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, when God restored his people, a descendant of David would be king.<sup>4</sup> In one example from Ezekiel, Yahweh declares: “my servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd” (Ezek 37:24).

In another instance, Jeremiah roots the hope for a new Davidic king in God’s faithfulness to his covenant with David: God would restore the dynasty because of his promise to David (Jer 33:20–21). Jews would later call this coming Davidic king the “messiah.”

### 4. Inward transformation

There is a fourth element of the prophets’ picture of restoration: an inward transformation of God’s people. Looking back on the nation’s history of repeated rebellion and eventual judgment, Jeremiah and Ezekiel realized the people were incapable of keeping the covenant Torah (or law), and something would have to be different lest the whole history repeat itself. If God was going to restore his people, he would have to change them on the inside so they would have the capacity to obey.

The two prophets described this in different ways. Jeremiah had said the people’s sin was “written on the tablet of their heart” (Jer 17:1), but when God made a new covenant with them, he would “put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts” (31:33). In Ezekiel, God says: “I will give them [a new] heart and a new spirit,” and “I will put my Spirit within you” (Ezek 11:19; 36:26–27; also see 37:14). In both cases, the purpose of the inward transformation is a new ability to keep the covenant (“so that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them”; Ezek 11:20; compare 36:27; 37:24).

Together these promises attest to God’s continued faithfulness to his people in the midst of disaster and anticipate the restoration of his people in their land. **B3**

Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

<sup>1</sup> See Jason Gile, “The Theology of Covenant: Tracing the Pattern of Ancient Treaties in Deuteronomy” *Bible Study Magazine* (May/June 2017).

<sup>2</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Other notable examples include Jer 16:14–15; 23:3; 29:10; 30:3, 10–11; 31:8–10; Ezek 11:17–18; 20:34–35, 41–42; 34:13.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Jer 17:25; 23:5; 30:9; 33:17–26; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25.



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# Is This Restoration?

## AFTER THE EXILE: PROPHECY VS. REALITY

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After the Babylonian exile and the prophets' promises of restoration, does the prophetic vision of a restored Israel come to pass as the Old Testament story draws to a close? The historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi give us a window into the early community of returned exiles as they pondered the promised restoration and the realities on the ground.

On the one hand, these books record what God had done for his people and his ongoing commitment to them. But, on the other hand, they highlight something that is too often neglected: the strong impression that the restoration had not fully materialized. These books make clear that the reality did not live up to the grandiose promises of the prophets.

Therefore, the Old Testament's story ends anticlimactically, without resolution. Understanding this ending is critical for grasping how the two testaments relate. Indeed, we cannot fully understand the New Testament apart from the story of God's people that precedes it. We can see this by tracing the four elements in the prophets' promises of restoration (see previous article):

### 1. Return to the land

After the Persians took over the Babylonian empire in 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia permitted the Jews (along with other exiled peoples) to return to their homeland. The book of Ezra begins by declaring that their return to the land is a fulfillment of

prophetic promises (Ezra 1:1).

At the same time, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah make clear that the exiles' return is marred by their continued subservience to imperial overlords. Judah remains a province of the Persian empire with no political sovereignty.

The prayers in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 reflect the mood of the time. Although Ezra recognizes Yahweh's mercy to allow a remnant to return and rebuild Jerusalem and to grant "a little reviving in our bondage," he nevertheless laments that they are "slaves" in their own land (Ezra 9:8–9). The prayer in Nehemiah 9 captures the despair of those who returned:

Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, *and we are in great distress.* (Neh 9:36–37 NRSV; italics added)

When comparing the circumstances to the prophetic promises of restoration, Gordon McConville observes that "the books [of Ezra and Nehemiah] express deep dissatisfaction with the exiles' situation under Persian rule [and] that the situation is perceived as leaving room for a future fulfilment of the most glorious prophecies of Israel's salvation."<sup>1</sup>

# Yahweh was not done with his people.

# When would God fully restore his kingdom?

## 2. A new temple and the return of Yahweh

In the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, we learn that, after some delays, the people did rebuild the temple. But there were several disappointments. First, as the foundation was being laid, many of the elders—those who had been alive to see Solomon’s temple—wept because this new temple paled in comparison (Ezra 3:12–13). Zechariah speaks of this day as “a day of a small things” (Zech 4:10).

Even more significant, when the new temple is completed (Ezra 6), the biblical text does not mention a theophany—the appearance of Yahweh’s presence to fill the temple. While we should be cautious about attributing significance to something that is *not* mentioned, the absence of a theophany in this case is significant because of the biblical precedent: the appearance of Yahweh is always the climactic moment of the tabernacle/temple narratives:

- When the tabernacle was completed in the wilderness, Yahweh’s presence filled it (Exod 40:34–38).
- Later when Solomon’s temple was completed in Jerusalem, Yahweh’s presence filled it (1 Kgs 8:10–11).
- In the prophetic promises of a second temple, Yahweh would return to fill it (Ezek 43:4–5; Hag 2:6–7).

Given the pattern of God’s presence (*kabod*, “glory”) appearing at these significant moments, it is striking we do not hear about it for the rebuilt temple in Ezra and

Nehemiah. The biblical writers could have made a statement about the fulfillment of prophecy, but they chose not to.

## 3. A new Davidic king

Among the four elements in the prophets’ vision of restoration, the Davidic king is the most conspicuously absent after Israel returned to the land. There were hopes that a descendant of David named Zerubbabel—the grandson of Judah’s last legitimate king, Jehoiachin—would become king.

Indeed, in Haggai, Yahweh declares that Zerubbabel is his chosen ruler, his “signet ring” (Hag 2:20–23). However, Zerubbabel is never called a king in the Hebrew Bible, only a “governor.” So, in this final episode of the Old Testament’s story, no new Davidic king takes the throne in Jerusalem.

## 4. Inward transformation

Back in their homeland, the people get off to a fine start, repenting and renewing the covenant with the Lord (Neh 8–10). But by the end of Nehemiah, things are not looking good. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to find the priests had defiled the temple (13:4–9), the Levites had abandoned the temple (13:10–14), and the people were violating the Sabbath (13:15–18) and marrying non-Jews (13:23–27). In McConville’s words, “the compiler of Ezra–Nehemiah intended to end his work with the rather depressing re-emergence of problems which had beset the community.”<sup>2</sup>

The book of Malachi reflects a similar disregard for obedience to the Torah, as Claude Mariottini explains. By Malachi’s time, “the [historical] situation was so out of focus with those promises of restoration proclaimed by the pre-exilic prophets that the people became despondent and negligent about the religious demands of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the inward transformation was meant to give the people a new ability to keep the Torah, it was apparent that it had not happened.

## Is this restoration?

The historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi paint a bleak picture of the “restoration.” The full scope of the prophets’ vision did not materialize, and the Old Testament story ends with disappointment.

Some scholars refer to this state of affairs as “continuing exile”: for the Judeans who returned, the exile in a *literal* sense (forced deportation) may have been over, but they remained in exile in a *theological* sense, in terms of their faith and identity (no sovereign land, no divine presence, no Davidic king, and no inward transformation).<sup>4</sup>


On the one hand, we have the Old Testament's claim that the return to the land was a fulfillment of prophetic promises (Ezra 1:1); on the other hand, there were significant disappointments in the full scope of the restoration. To balance these realities, I prefer to describe the situation as "partial restoration."

The story of God's people in the Hebrew Bible more or less comes to an end at this point—without resolution. For the hundreds of years between the return to the land and the time of Jesus, Jews continued to hope in God's promises. When would God fully restore his kingdom and ultimately accomplish what he set out to do for Israel and for the nations?

### The fulfillment of God's promises

The New Testament picks up the story where the Old Testament leaves off. The Gospels reflect a time of hope and anticipation in God's promises, including the coming of the king, the Messiah. In Matthew 12:23, for example, the crowds wonder about Jesus: "Could this be the Son of David?"

The New Testament brings resolution to the promises of land, temple, and inward transformation, announcing Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah-King who saves God's people and brings God's rule over the world.<sup>5</sup>

It is the Old Testament story—including the unresolved ending of the exile—that gives context and meaning to Christian belief about Jesus. 

Scripture quotations are the author's translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>1</sup> J. Gordon McConville, "Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy" *VT* 36 (1986): 223 (205–24); see also Elie Assis, "The Temple in the Book of Haggai," *JHS* 8 (2008): 9 (1–10).

<sup>2</sup> McConville, "Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy," 211–12.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Mariottini, "Malachi: A Prophet for His Time," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26 (1998): 149 (149–57).

<sup>4</sup> For example, H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Thomas Nelson, 1985), 134. See also *Exile: A Conversation with N.T. Wright* (ed. James M. Scott; IVP Academic, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Bird, *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2013); Joshua Jipp, *Christ is King: Paul's Royal Ideology* (Fortress, 2015).