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# Lesson 1

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## Historical Setting of the Postexilic Prophets

**H**aggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were Israel's last writing prophets in Old Testament Times. They were called postexilic prophets because they served after the Jews had returned to Canaan from exile in Babylon. See Chart A. Who were the preexilic prophets, and who were the exilic prophets? Do you see why the postexilic prophets are also called the restoration prophets?

It can be seen from this chart that a natural order of studying the Bible's prophetic books would be (1) preexilic, (2) exilic, and (3) postexilic.

This lesson is devoted to a study of the historical setting of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The Bible text of the three books comes alive to you if, among other things, you have seen what situations moved God to commission the three prophets to write.<sup>1</sup>

### I. POSTEXILIC PROPHETS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

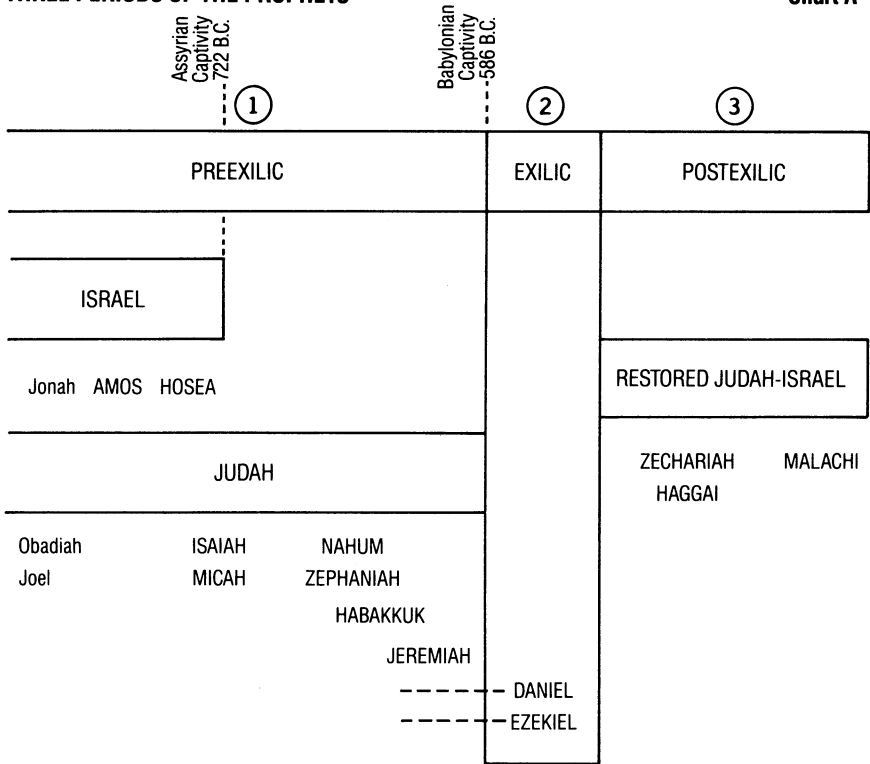
Refer to the list (canon) of Old Testament books in the opening pages of your Bible. Where do the names Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi appear? What books in the list do you associate with the following groups:

- five books of the law
- twelve books of history
- five books of poetry
- five books of major prophets (beginning with Isaiah)
- twelve books of minor prophets<sup>2</sup> (beginning with Hosea)

1. The prophets also preached many, if not all, of the messages they were divinely inspired to write.
2. The designations *major* and *minor* represent the length of each book, not the relative importance.

**THREE PERIODS OF THE PROPHETS**

**Chart A**

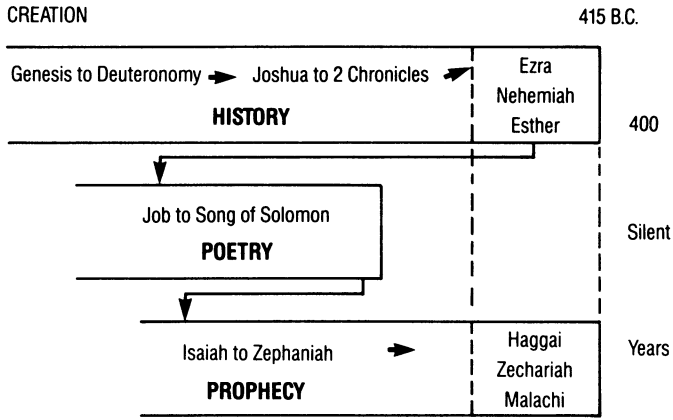


Because the books of the law are mostly historical records, they could be associated with the twelve books of history, making a total of seventeen historical books. In this simplified grouping, it is then correct to say that the Old Testament comprises history, poetry, and prophecy, in that order. Study Chart B, which shows these three groups.

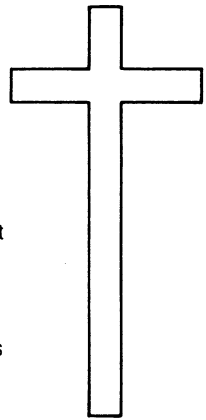
Note the following on Chart B:

1. There is a general chronological progression in the books of history, from Genesis to Esther. (Read the top group from left to right.)
2. The poetry books, Job to Song of Solomon, revert back to a time earlier than the last three historical books.
3. The books of prophecy, from Isaiah to Malachi, cover a span of time that overlaps the history and poetry books and extends into the period of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

**LOCATION OF HAGGAI-ZECHARIAH-MALACHI  
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON**



**Chart B**



4. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are chronologically the last historical records of the Old Testament. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are chronologically the last prophetic messages of the Old Testament. Both groups are of the same time, which is the period of *restoration*. Record the word *restoration* in the appropriate blank box on the chart.

5. The period of 400 silent years is so named because no Scripture was written during this time. (Note that the number 400 is a round number.)

**II. TWO KINGDOMS AND TWO CAPTIVES**

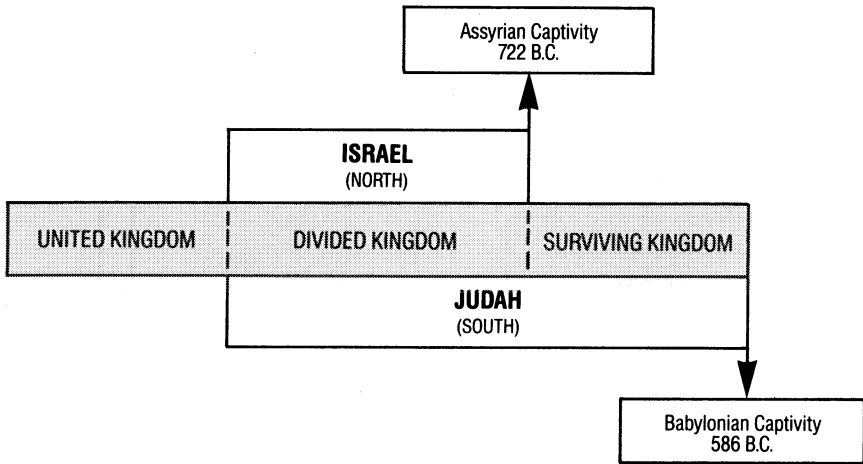
Before we look at the restoration period of the postexilic prophets, let us review the historical setting *before* the restoration. When we speak of “restoration” we are referring to the conditions accompanying the *return* of God’s people to Canaan *from captivity*. The captivity took place in two stages, known as the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. See Chart C, which shows the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the two captivities.

**A. Assyrian Captivity (fall of Samaria, 722 B.C., recorded in 2 Kings 17)**

Most of the people and rulers of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were deported to Assyria and scattered among the inhabitants there. The *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dic-*

## TWO KINGDOMS AND TWO CAPTIVITIES

Chart C



*tionary* comments on what happened to these people and their offspring in the years that followed:

The Ten Tribes taken into captivity, sometimes called the Lost Tribes of Israel, must not be thought of as being absorbed by the people among whom they settled. Some undoubtedly were, but many others retained their Israelitish religion and traditions. Some became part of the Jewish dispersion, and others very likely returned with the exiles of Judah who had been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>3</sup>

### **B. Babylonian Captivity (fall of Jerusalem, 586 B.C., recorded in 2 Kings 25)**

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. sealed the fate of the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar was the captor, and Babylon was the place of exile. Second Kings closes with an account of this tragic event in Judah's history. Read chapter 25 at this time to appreciate the theme of the restoration books. (Note: Unless otherwise stated, the names "Israel" and "Judah," denoting chosen people of God, will be used interchangeably throughout this manual.)

3. Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, p. 147.

### III. DURATION OF THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Before Judah was taken captive, Jeremiah had prophesied that the duration of exile would be seventy years<sup>4</sup> (read Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10; 2 Chron. 36:21). The exile began with Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion of Judah in 605 B.C. (2 Chron. 36:2-7) and ended with the first return of the Jews to Canaan in 536 B.C.<sup>5</sup> (Ezra 1). See Chart D.<sup>6</sup>

### IV. CONTEMPORARY RULERS

The Jews in exile in Babylonia were subject to the kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, such as Nebuchadnezzar. When Cyrus, king of Persia, overthrew Babylon in 539 B.C., the rule of Babylonia was transferred to the Persian Empire. Cyrus's policy of liberation for the exiles in Babylonia brought about the first return of Jewish exiles to the land of their fathers. Observe on Chart D the names of the Persian kings who succeeded Cyrus. The names of Darius and Artaxerxes appear frequently in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The former name appears three times in each of the books of Haggai and Zechariah.

### V. LEADERS OF THE RESTORATION

Three key leaders of the returning Jews were Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah were appointed by Cyrus and Artaxerxes, respectively, as governors of the Jewish returnees. Ezra was a leading priest of the Jews who not only was a leader of the second return but also was a co-worker with Nehemiah on the third. Locate the names of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah on Chart D. Note also the dates associated with each of the three returns to Judah:

536 B.C.—first return under Zerubbabel

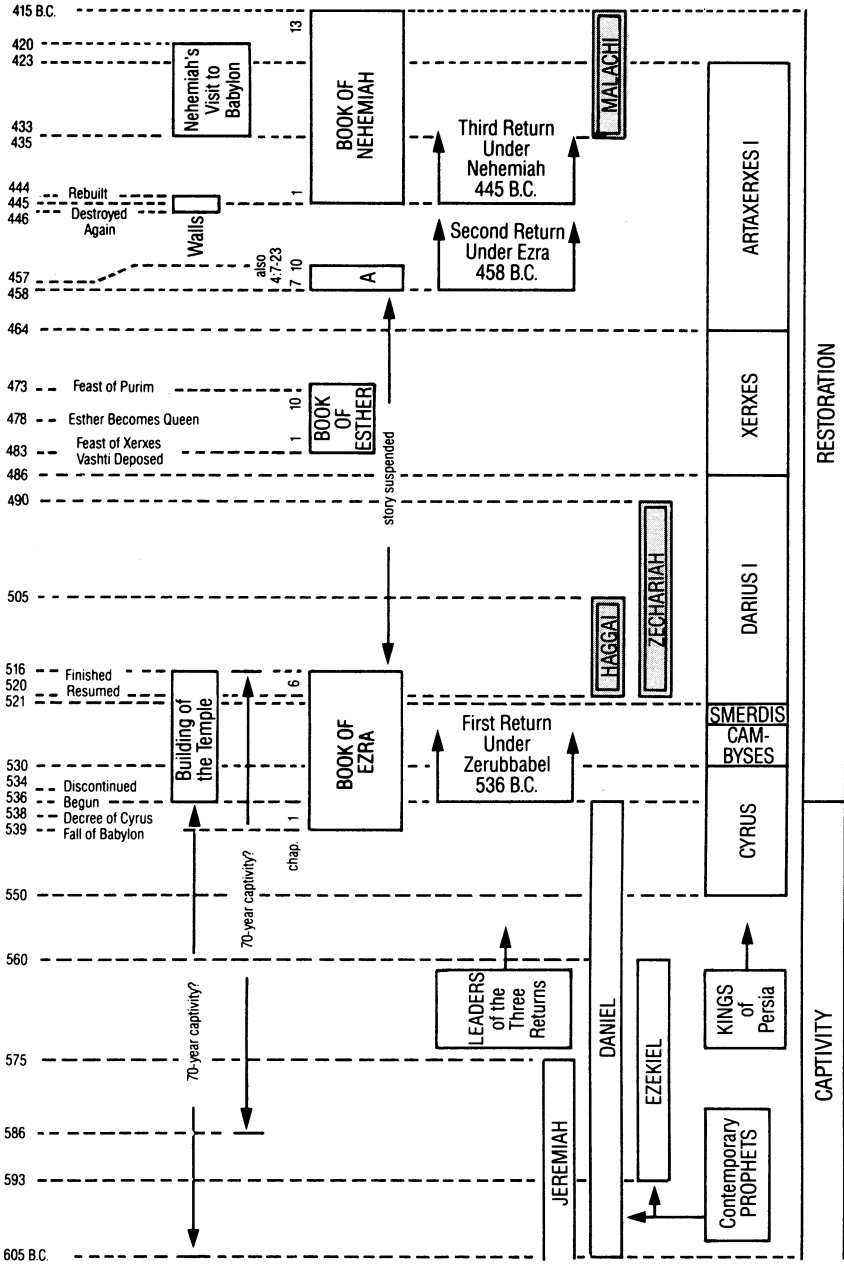
458 B.C.—second return under Ezra

445 B.C.—third return<sup>7</sup> under Nehemiah

4. Read Ezek. 36-48, which teaches that the Jews who would be returned to Canaan were to be gathered from many countries.
5. If Jeremiah's prophecy is interpreted from an ecclesiastical standpoint, with the Temple as the key object, then the seventy-year period extended from the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. to the year of completion of its reconstruction, which was in 516 B.C.
6. Most of the dates of Chart D are those of John C. Whitcomb's *Chart of Old Testament Kings and Prophets*.
7. No large contingent of Jews was involved in this return.

**HISTORICAL SETTING OF HAGGAI-ZECHARIAH-MALACHI**

**Chart D**



Fix in your mind other dates and events cited on the chart. Refer back to this chart while you are studying the various lessons of this manual.

The preaching and teaching ministries of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi during the restoration period were crucial because they were God's messengers to the people. Observe on Chart D when these prophets ministered. Read Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 for brief but important mention of the influence of Haggai and Zechariah. The name *Malachi* does not appear in these or any other historical books. Observe on the chart that most of Malachi's ministry took place during Nehemiah's return visit to Babylon. Those were years of backsliding on the part of the Jews in Canaan, when the first spiritual zeal had subsided. Hence the message of Malachi was mainly about sin and its judgment.

The prophet Daniel went into exile with the first contingent of Jews in 605 B.C. and was ministering in Babylon in the services of Darius the Mede, who was made king of Babylon by Cyrus (Dan. 5:31, 9:1) when the exiles received permission to return (cf. Dan. 1:21, 6:28). Though aged Daniel did not return to Jerusalem with the exiles, he supported the project in spirit (see Dan. 9:1ff.).

## **VI. THREE PERIODS: KINGDOM, EXILE, RESTORATION**

The Lord makes a clear diagnosis of Israel's spiritual condition during each of the three successive periods of kingdom, exile, and restoration, recorded in the book of Ezekiel. Read the verses cited on the work sheet of Chart E, and record in your own words the corresponding diagnosis:

In reading the above passages, did you observe these attributes of God:

1. God's holiness
2. God's justice—for example, sin brings judgment (cause-effect)
3. God's grace—for example, Ezekiel 36:22 (there would have been no restoration for Israel but for the grace of God)
4. God's omniscience and omnipotence—the only way to explain 36:23-32

## **VII. IMPORTANCE OF THE RESTORATION FOR THE JEWS AND THE WORLD**

The restoration was important for various reasons. For Israel, it showed that God had not forgotten His promise to Abraham concerning the land of Canaan. (Read Gen. 13:15, and note the strength of the phrase "for ever"). Hence the *relocation* of a re-



**ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL CONDITION IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES**

**Chart E**

PERIOD	REFERENCE IN EZEKIEL	SPIRITUAL CONDITION	
Kingdom 1043-586 B.C.	36:16-18		CAUSE
Exile 722-536 B.C.	36:19-21 2:3-7		EFFECT
Restoration 536-415 B.C.	36:22-32		SEQUEL

turning remnant. Hope for a missionary outreach for the Gentiles was stirred up in *revival* of true worship, for a key mission of Israel was to show the heathen nations of the world what true worship of the true God was. And then, the restoration was directly related to the life and ministry of the coming Messiah in the *renewal* of the messianic promises. For example, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Zion were some of the geographical places woven into the promises concerning Jesus' coming. In about 400 years Jesus would be born of the seed of David in *Bethlehem*, *not* in Babylon. The Holy Land of *promise*, *not* a land of captivity, was where His people would be dwelling when He would come unto them, "His own" (John 1:11).

**VIII. RESTORATION OF THE END TIMES**

Israel's restoration in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. was but a shadow of the final restoration in the messianic kingdom of the end times (Ezek. 36:22-37:28). By the time you read the last five verses of Ezekiel 37, you will realize that the prophecy concerns the still future messianic kingdom, with Christ ("David") ruling "for ever."

A prominent principle of Old Testament prophecy is that of multiple fulfillment. An example of this is Haggai 2:7, "I will fill this house with glory." This was a conditional prophecy about Zerubbabel's Temple, but more gloriously about the Temple of the

messianic kingdom of the end times. Be ready to apply this principle of multiple fulfillment whenever you read a prophecy of restoration. For clear revelation that Israel will play a prominent role in world history of the end times, read Romans 11.

## **IX. THE MINISTRIES OF THE LAST THREE PROPHETS**

See Chart D and note that Haggai and Zechariah ministered around the beginning of the restoration period, and Malachi ministered toward the end.<sup>8</sup> In the lessons that follow, more will be said about the immediate setting of the writing of each of their books. This may be noted now: the main appeal of Haggai and Zechariah was to inspire the Jews to finish building the Temple, which had been discontinued in 534 B.C. (Chart D); and the burden of Malachi was the tragic apostasy of God's people. Whatever there was of revival and spiritual restoration in Israel's return from exile had, by Malachi's time, degenerated to spiritual coldness with threat of disaster. It is not without significance that the last word of Malachi, and therefore of the Old Testament, is the awful word "curse." Read Malachi 4:6. What thoughts come to you as you compare this last verse with the Bible's first verse (Gen. 1:1)?

### **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What three historical books of the Bible record the last events of the Old Testament times?
  2. What were the last three writing prophets to minister in Old Testament times?
  3. When was the Northern Kingdom taken captive? When was the Southern Kingdom taken captive?
  4. What two prophets ministered mainly to God's people in captivity after 586 B.C.?
  5. Is it possible that descendants of Israelites of the Assyrian captivity were among the returning exiles from the Babylonian captivity?
  6. What was the Lord's diagnosis of the spiritual condition of His people in each of the three periods of kingdom, exile, and restoration?
8. No historical event, as such, marks the end of the restoration period. The date 415 B.C. represents the last Old Testament historical record, given in Neh. 13. Note: During the restoration period the Jews were not ruled by kings but by governors appointed by a foreign king.

7. What does the word *restoration* suggest about Israel's experience?
8. According to Ezekiel 36:22-32, what was God's main purpose in leading His people back to Canaan?
9. Name three key leaders of the Jews when they returned to Canaan from Babylon.
10. In what different ways was the Jews' restoration important?
11. What did the restoration prefigure or typify?
12. What were the main spiritual burdens of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi?