

# **MODULE 4:**

# **EXILE AND RETURN**

In this short module, we cover the story of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. We also look at a few of the prophets who spoke toward the end of the exile and after it (Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). We'll briefly investigate what happens between the Old and New Testaments.

# SESSION 1: THE RETURN FROM EXILE BACK TO JUDAH

## PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Read 2 Chronicles 36:17-23; Ezra ch. 1, 2:1-3, ch. 3, 7:1-8:23, chs. 9-10; Nehemiah (skim the book, read at least the subject headings for each section); Nehemiah chs. 1-2.

## Summary of the Video: Module 4, Episode 1

A recap of the story so far helps us get reacquainted with what we've covered. Some of the key ideas we've looked at: blessing, victory, glory, the New Covenant, kingship, presence, descendants, nations blessed, and land. While the people of God were in exile (roughly the 500s BC), what was their experience like in each of these areas? Pause and spend a few minutes filling in the blanks of the PowerPoint slide to give your reflections on their experience in each area. (We will use your reflections in our discussion time.)

Next, we look at the three waves of people returning from captivity back into the land of Israel ("return"). The Babylonians had ruled much of the area, but now the Persians take over (and they remain in charge until the end of the OT writings). Relative to other dominant empires, the Persians were more tolerant of other religions. This led Cyrus (ruler of the Persians) to issue the edict for the people of God to return to Israel. In fact, there were three major "waves" of returning exiles. Each wave allowed Israel to reestablish a key aspect of their worship (temple, Torah, city walls) under the leadership of a well-known Jewish leader (Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah).

### ***WAVE 1: BUILDING THE HOUSE OF YAHWEH***

In response to Cyrus' decree that they return to build their temple, the first wave of Jews return to Israel. They build the altar and the temple. The mixed feelings the people have about their return and the reestablishment of their religion reveal that this is not the realization of what Isaiah (and other prophets) had foretold; this disappointment paves the way for the Messiah to bring something better.

Between waves 1 and 2 comes the story of Esther. She doesn't return from exile. The story mirrors the exodus story in order to show God's renewed hand of deliverance and how the return from exile will be similar to God's previous means of salvation.

*Why didn't the exiled people return immediately when they were given opportunity? Andrew Wilson doesn't know, so he uses this as an opportunity to explore why Judaism has always existed outside its homeland. Perhaps, they didn't return because there's a natural tendency to settle and the role of temple had diminished in light of Torah and synagogue's elevation.*

## **WAVE 2: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TORAH**

Under Ezra's leadership about 2,000 Jews return to the land in order to sort out the problem of intermarriage and reestablish God's law among his people in the land. Intermarriage was the "pressing issue" of the day that needed correction from God's Word.

## **WAVE 3: REBUILDING THE WALLS**

Nehemiah is sent back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls. The story isn't about "God's man doing God's task" as much as the whole people of God being inspired to work towards God's vision for his people. With further "echoes of exodus", Nehemiah's reforms mirror God's earlier salvation.

The historical portion of the Bible ends here. It's unsatisfying. They're "out of exile" but the glory of God hasn't returned and the people still feel something is missing.

Jesus' announcement of the arrival of God's kingdom satisfies centuries of unfulfilled longing in the people of God.

*We've talked about the return of "Judah" (the southern tribes), but what happened to the northern tribes of "Israel"? The "Jews" are actually the "Judeans" (those from the southern tribes). The southern tribes retained their faithfulness to the Lord. In fact, some of the northern tribes who remained (who became the Samaritans) opposed the returning exiles. There is no historical story of the northern tribes returning, but there are promises in the prophets of their reuniting with the southern tribes in God's kingdom.*

## **Terms You'll Need to Know:**

Exile—when the Israelites lived in foreign lands; "exilic" refers to this time period.

Post-exilic—refers to the time after the exile, when the people had returned home.

Intertestamental Period—the time between the Old and New Testaments.

Hellenic league—the Greek city-states formed a type of collaborative network that wasn't quite a unified "nation".

LXX—abbreviation for the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament written around 200 BC.

Pantomime—an exaggerated comedy play for family entertainment in which each character is a caricature.

Torah—the Hebrew word for "law" or "instruction" that refers primarily to the Pentateuch.

## **Watch Video**

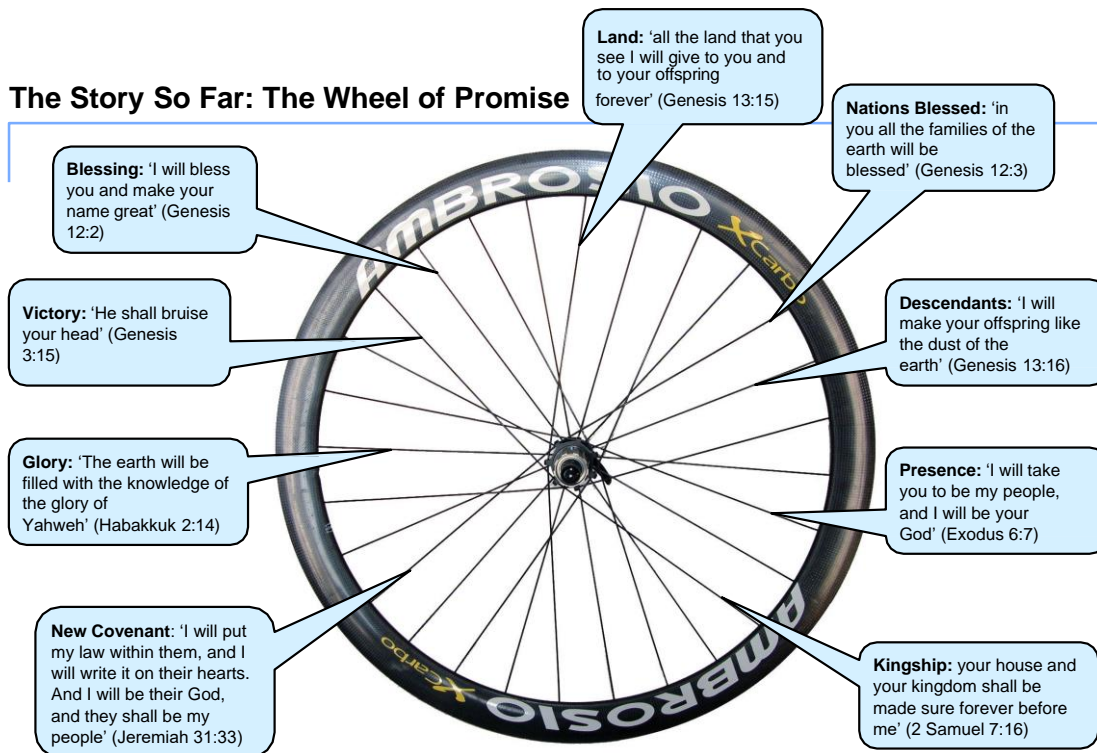
Watch Module 4 Episode 1 (1hr 1 minutes).

## Exile and Return

- I. The Story so Far
- II. The Return from Exile back to Judah
- III. From Malachi to John the Baptist
- IV. God, Gospel, People, Mission

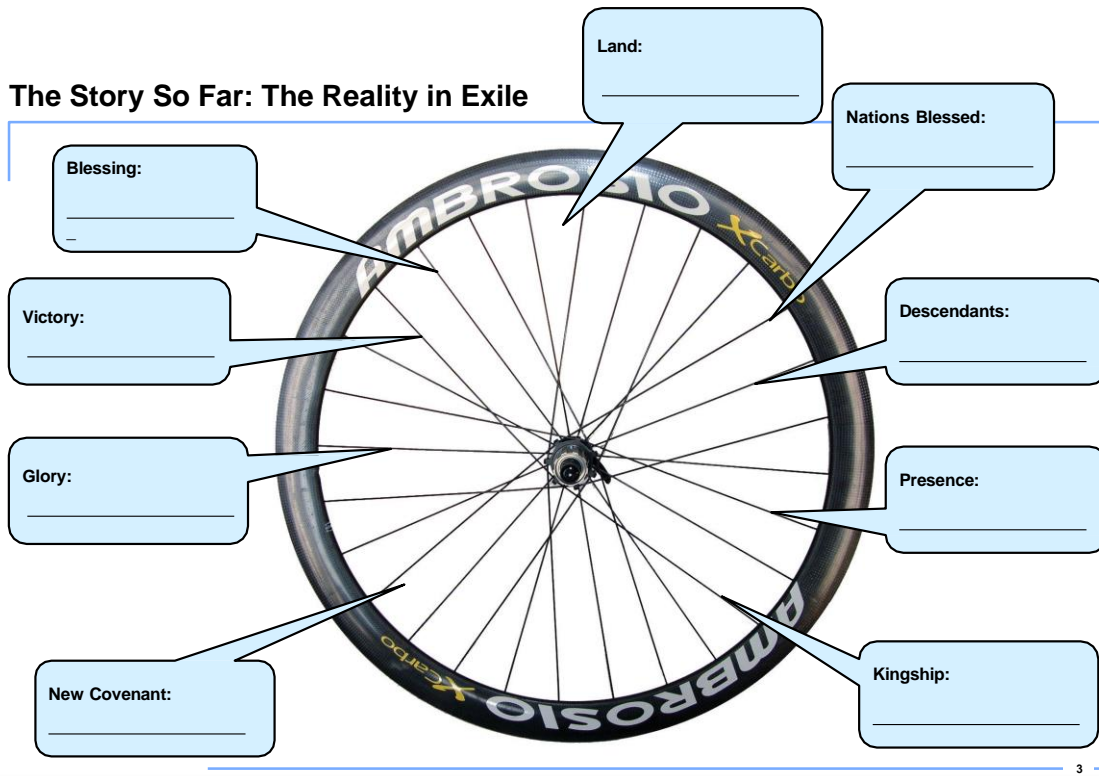
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### The Story So Far: The Wheel of Promise



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## The Story So Far: The Reality in Exile



## Exile and Return

- I. The Story so Far
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## Kingdoms of the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE



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## Cyrus the Great

- In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Yahweh had spoken to Isaiah about a deliverer who would set his people free from the Babylonian captivity
  - “[Yahweh] says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’” (Isaiah 44:28)
- During the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Persian empire, under the rule of Cyrus the great, quickly became the dominant empire of the day.
  - In 539 BC, Cyrus conquered Babylon and proclaimed himself king of Babylon
  - In contrast to the Babylonian and Assyrian king’s brutal treatment of their conquered nations, Cyrus saw himself as a champion of peace and freedom, claiming that he had freed the inhabitants of Babylon from the oppression of the former king Nabonidus
- As part of imperial policy, the Persians let peoples that had been exiled to Babylon return to their home country
  - “I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus ... had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy” (Cyrus Cylinder, lines 32-34; compare Ezra 1:2-4; 6:1-5)
  - The Jewish return from Exile from 538 was a part of this empire-wide policy. The Biblical writers are clear, however, that as far as the Jewish people were concerned, this move was prompted by God (see Isaiah 45; Ezra 1:1-4)

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## Phases of the return from Babylon

	Wave I	Wave II	Wave III
<b>Focus and Purpose</b>	Building the house of Yahweh	The importance of Torah	Rebuilding the walls
<b>Date</b>	c.538 BC	c.458 BC	445 BC
<b>Persian Ruler(s)</b>	Cyrus the Great; Cambyses; Smerdis; Darius the Great	Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes I
<b>Key Jewish leader(s)</b>	Sheshbazzar; Zerubbabel	Ezra the scribe	Nehemiah son of Hachaliah
<b>Key mission</b>	Rebuilding the Temple of Yahweh	Instruct God's people in the Law of Yahweh	Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem
<b>Prophetic voices</b>	Haggai; Zechariah 1-8	Malachi	
<b>Biblical writings</b>	Ezra 1-6	Ezra 7-10	Nehemiah

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## Wave I: Building the House of Yahweh (Ezra 1-6)

- In about 538 BC, Cyrus issues a decree that the Jewish people should go back to Judah to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple
  - Cyrus' claim that Yahweh had told him to do this (see Ezra 1:1-4) is probably political propaganda; Isaiah claims that Cyrus did not know who Yahweh was (Isaiah 45:4)
  - Many Jews (see the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7) return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, carrying back the Temple utensils which Nebuchadnezzar had taken into Babylon
  - The altar is rebuilt in the seventh month, before work on the Temple has even begun, and the people restore the regular sacrificial offerings and observe the feast of booths. There is clearly a sense in which this return is seen as a new exodus (see Leviticus 23:42-43; Isaiah 40-55)
- The foundation of the temple was laid in the second year after the return (c.536 BC)
  - There is a mix of rejoicing and mourning when the foundation is laid (Ezra 3:10-13). The young men rejoice and the old men, who had seen the former Temple, weep. Clearly, it was obvious that the new Temple was not as great as Solomon's (see Haggai 2:3)
- Due to external pressure, work on the Temple stops for 16 years (!) until the second year of Darius
- In 516 BC, the Second Temple is finished and dedicated
  - The returned exiles celebrate the Passover together: new Exodus motif again
  - There is, however, a conspicuous difference between the accounts of the dedication of the first Temple in 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 7, and the dedication of the second Temple in Ezra 6:16-18. The glory of Yahweh does not seem to fill the Temple (and we will return to this later)

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## Esther: Living in the Diaspora

- Esther is the only book in the Old Testament which does not mention God. It tells the story of Esther and Mordecai, two Jews in the Persian diaspora under the rule of the Persian king Xerxes (b.519, r.485-465 BC)
  - It is somewhat like a pantomime, with a beautiful queen, a boorish king, a cartoon villain, an embarrassing own-goal, poetic justice, and Mordecai as Buttons
- Although Esther does not mention God (the LXX editors changed this), God's providence is under the surface
  - The three day fast (4:15-17) is clearly understood as the cause of the rescue that follows
  - Mordecai tells Esther that if she refuses to help, "deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place (*maqom aher*)" (4:14): many Jewish commentators see this as a reference to God
- Moreover, there are numerous echoes of the exodus story
  - Oppressive empire (Egypt/Persia) that was formerly favourable (Pharaoh/Cyrus) and gave Israel land (Goshen/Susa) because of a wise dream interpreter (Joseph/Daniel), but is now ruled by a wicked king (Pharaoh/Xerxes) ...
  - ... so God raises a beautiful rescuer (Moses/Esther) through a wise relative (Miriam/Mordecai), tricks the villain by means of a woman, and brings judgment on him (Pharaoh/Haman) at a nighttime meal, after which Israel plunders the nation, and celebrates victory forever (Passover/Purim)
- The book is also a (quite amusing) satire of ungodly empire
  - King Xerxes comes across as a powerless, emotionally driven, drunken fool
  - Herodotus: "It is [the Persians'] general practice to deliberate upon affairs of weight when they are drunk; and then on the morrow, when they are sober, the decision to which they came the night before is put before them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act on it; if not, they set it aside. Sometimes, however, they are sober at their first deliberation, but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine" (Herodotus, Histories 1.133)

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## Wave II: The Importance of the Torah (Ezra 7-10)

- In c.458 BC, Ezra the scribe returns to Jerusalem from Babylonia
  - Artaxerxes I commissions him to (1) inquire about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Torah, (2) bring more gold and silver to Jerusalem and (3) appoint magistrates and judges in Judah
  - Ezra returns with about 1800 Jews, including about 50 Levites (cf. Ezra 8:1-20)
  - Ezra's concern with the Temple matters is quite prominent (see Ezra 8:15-20, 24-34)
- Ezra's mission mainly focuses on sorting out the problem of intermarriage with the surrounding nations (Ezra 9-10)
  - Many of the returned exiles had married women from the surrounding nations. They "have mixed the holy seed (Heb. *zera haqodesh*) with the people of the lands..." (Ezra 9:2)
  - This was already an issue highlighted by Malachi (cf. Malachi 2:10-12; this assumes Malachi's ministry was before Ezra's)
  - Ezra orders the Jews to send away any foreign wives (Ezra 10:10-11)
- Ezra's ministry, here and later during the time of Nehemiah, highlights the central role of the Torah and purity in the post-exilic period
  - Frequent use terms such as "Torah of Moses", "book of Moses" (e.g. Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Neh 1:7-8; 8:1, 14; 9:14; 10:30; 13:1)
  - It is interesting that the story as a whole, like that of Esther, follows an Exodus shape: deliverance from foreign oppressors → the teaching of Torah → security in the Land → the threat of idolatry
  - The author of Ezra-Nehemiah felt it appropriate to include a list of those who married foreign women (Ezra 10:18-44), thus highlighting how seriously this issue was taken

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## Wave III: Rebuilding the Walls (Nehemiah 1-13)

- In 445, Nehemiah, who serves as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, is sent back to Jerusalem in order to oversee the repairing of Jerusalem's walls, which had not been rebuilt since their destruction in 587/6 BC
  - Nehemiah becomes governor of Judah (cf. Neh 8:9) from 445-433 BC
  - Nehemiah starts by assessing the damage done to the walls of Jerusalem. Then the repairing of the wall begins (Nehemiah 3 is not the most exciting read in Scripture, but it shows that the work on Jerusalem was the effort of a whole group of people, not just Nehemiah)
- The work is opposed by Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. Before the building started they were frustrated that "some had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel" (2:10; cf. 2:19)
  - Initially, they mock the Jews for their efforts to build the wall (4:1-6). Then they turn to military threat (4:7-23). Finally, they oppose Nehemiah himself (6:1-14). Yet the work is completed in 52 days!
- After the walls are rebuilt, the Torah is read out and put into practice
  - Ezra the scribe reads and explains the Torah to the whole assembly of the Jews
  - The Feast of Booths is celebrated (again, the return from Exodus theme appears)
  - The people confess their sins and repent, recognising that they are in many ways still in exile in their land (9:36), and make a covenant to live by the Torah (9:38-10:39)
- Then Jerusalem and Judah are repopulated (10% of the people are required to live in Jerusalem to ensure that it is sufficiently populated), and the newly repaired wall is dedicated (12:27-43)
- Finally, in c.433/2 BC, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem for some final reforms, involving misuse of Temple buildings (13:4-9), Levite wages (13:10-14), work on the Sabbath (13:15-22) and intermarriage (13:23-30)
  - In this sense, the last historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible ends on an anticlimax: Israel's heart has not been circumcised and Nehemiah's reforms had not solved the people's sin

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## GROUP MEETING:

### Discussion Questions

Before getting into these specific questions, spend a few minutes discussing what struck you or stuck with you from the video. What were some of the main points? Did any of Andrew's comments or questions open up the Bible in a profound way to you? Also, ask if anything was confusing or needs clarification.

1. Discuss your responses to the "Wheel of Promise" chart.

2. God's people endure seasons in which governments favor and disfavor them. What does the Bible say about God's involvement in these situations and how might that help us in our situation?

3. In Ezra's day "intermarriage" was the "pressing issue" that required biblical correction. What is the "pressing issue" these days in your culture? How does Ezra's approach to the pressing issue give insight to how we ought to approach other issues we might face?

4. Describe what was "missing" in the return from exile. Why was it unsatisfying? How does Jesus fulfill what was lacking?

## Meditation on Scripture

Ezra 7:10

Haggai 2:3-5

Isaiah 45:1 and 2 Chronicles 36:22

## Putting This Session into Practice

Part of the lesson in this period is that God's people might experience the physical blessings of being in God's care without actually knowing him or experiencing the spiritual blessings of relationship. In that situation, they remain in sin. What we need is a return of the glory of God, the salvation of God, and the revival of God into our communities. Let's pray this week along those lines, namely that God's people wouldn't confuse physical blessing with the fullness of what God wants for us.