

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Telling the Old Testament
Story of God



SESSION 10
The Postexilic Period

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The Postexilic Period

SESSION OVERVIEW

The Postexilic Period

Apocalyptic Literature

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- explain Judah's shift in focus from political concerns to more individual religious concerns in the wake of the exile and under Persian rule.
- recognize how Ezra and Nehemiah contribute to the new focus of law and purity in the postexilic community.
- describe the implications for expectations of the Messiah. This will especially include the images of the Son of Man in Daniel and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah.

INTRODUCTION

This session deals with the formative stage of Judaism as the postexilic (after-exile) period in which the people of Judah are released to return to the Promised Land. Attention will be given to specific aspects of the development of apocalyptic literature, which refers to books like Daniel and Revelation.

THE POSTEXILIC PERIOD



NOTES

RETURN FROM EXILE

Cyrus of Persia overtook Babylon and made a proclamation allowing the exiles to return home. This proclamation is often called, The Edict of Cyrus. The edict is described in both 2 Chron. 36:22-23 and Ezek. 1:1-4 and dated around 538 BC. The edict opens the door to the postexilic period.

Two main groups left Babylon and returned to Palestine. The first group of returnees, under Prince Sheshbazzar, son of King Jehoiachin, departed for the Holy Land shortly after 538 BC. This first group began rebuilding the Jerusalem wall and the Temple but only got as far as laying the foundations.

A second group of returning exiles came to the Holy Land about 20 years later under the leadership of Zerubbabel (possibly a nephew of Sheshbazzar) and Joshua, a priest. Ezra appears to reflect some confusion in that it states the foundations of the Temple were laid by both Zerubbabel (3:10) and earlier by Sheshbazzar (5:16).

The returning exiles faced considerable opposition in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Neither the people already living in Palestine nor the inhabitants of Samaria welcomed the returning exiles. The Jews left behind in Palestine certainly did not welcome the return of their sisters and brothers to their homeland. Those left behind were the poor and unskilled. They struggled to survive off the land left in ruins. For about 50 to 70 years, they lived off this barren, desolate land. The wealthy and educated returned, wanting to reclaim the land. These opponents tried to stop the rebuilding of the Temple and the city walls. Such opposition was the reason for little progress on the work during the time between Sheshbazzar's return (circa 538 BC) and the group with Zerubbabel (circa 520 BC).

When Zerubbabel and Joshua arrived with their group of exiles (circa 520 BC), the prophets Haggai and Zechariah began to preach warnings that God was displeased with the delays and that the Temple must be built. Zerubbabel and Joshua led an intensive effort, and the Temple was rebuilt by March or April of 516 BC.

Opposition to the efforts of the returning exiles appeared again about 50 years later in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was finally completed. These restoration periods are described in Haggai, Zechariah, and the later portion of Isaiah (56-66), as well as Ezra and Nehemiah.


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SHIFT IN FOCUS: FROM POLITICS TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

Persia did not allow the restoration of Judah's political independence and power. Though the exiles were allowed to return, Persia did not want a threat to their power to develop in Judah. Thus, they did not allow the restoration of Judah's royal house. Instead, Persian officials progressively granted more and more authority to the high priest of Judah. At the same time, a shift in the general role and message of God's prophets took place after the exile. This transition was a shift from politics to piety.

The emphasis of prophetic preaching shifted away from political concerns and criticism of the king and nation, to more individual matters of daily living and worship. It was a shift away from government matters to community life; away from social injustice to personal and inner-directed concerns regarding faithfulness and worship.

The new focus for Israel, without hope of political power, became the proper worship of God. Consequently, the message of prophets came to feature an emphasis on the Torah and hopes for the future. The focus on the Torah emphasized the study and application of the Law of God in everyday life.

BOOK OF EZRA

Chapters 1-6: Tell of the first two groups of returning exiles under Sheshbazzar (538 BC) and Zerubbabel (520 BC). This section of Ezra reaches its climax with the rebuilding of the Temple in 516.

Chapters 7-10: The scene shifts (circa 458 BC) when Ezra, a priest, is sent from Babylon (under the Persian king Artaxerxes) to restore Israelite faith (Ezra 7:10-26). This second portion of Ezra recounts the work of the priest Ezra in his efforts to restore the faith of the Jews. A major problem Ezra encounters is that the people had intermarried with Gentiles, which distracted them from the Law. Remember, the downfall of Solomon was attributed to his many marriages with foreign women who led him to worship other gods. Recall also the explanation in Kings for the destruction of Israel and that the exile was based on idolatry and the forsaking of the covenant law.

Recall the many prophetic warnings to stay away from idolatry. Ezra strongly feared the mixed marriages of the returned exiles because of the potential to lead the people away from God and toward false gods and idolatry.

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In addition to this concern, Ezra sought to correct a general disregard for the laws concerning purity and sacrifice. Consequently, Ezra began a work of reform. A major step in this reformation was the sending away of all foreign wives and their children (9-10). God's covenant law was to be practiced even at home. Such practice would have been impossible in homes filled with mixed beliefs, including idols.

Another important act of Ezra's renewal efforts included the public reading of the Law (possibly a version of the Pentateuch) and a covenant renewal ceremony (Neh. 8-9). Practices defined in the Law were reestablished. After the covenant renewal ceremony, the Festival of Tabernacles was celebrated, as recorded in the Law.

Ezra's work brought a sense of unity to the previously depressed postexilic community. Ezra inspired the spirit of the community with a new foundation built on the following ideals of holiness and purity:

- A sense of election as God's people
- A worship-centered community of faith
- Recognition of the Torah (God's law) as the guidebook for living

BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah was appointed by King Artaxerxes I of Persia to be governor of Judah and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (circa 445). Opposition to Nehemiah's project came from Sanballat, the governor of Samaria; Tobiah, the governor of Ammon; and Geshem, the governor of Edom (each appointed to their position by Persia, which still ruled God's people).

The first portion of Nehemiah recounts his work of completing the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the face of such opposition. The opposition actually sent armed troops in an attempt to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Nehemiah armed his workers and the basic wall was finished in 52 days. The text describes workers building the wall with one hand and carrying defensive weapons in the other (4:10-17). Nehemiah also records continued efforts to purify the community by eliminating mixed marriages and following the law, with special emphasis in regard to Sabbath observance.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE



NOTES

POSTEXILIC DEVELOPMENT OF APOCALYPTIC HOPE

Apocalyptic literature can be characterized as messages of hope in the midst of tribulation and/or depression. Messianic texts (texts that promise the coming of a Messiah) are filled with the hope of a coming leader who will deliver His people from oppression and establish an age of prosperity.

Not all apocalyptic literature is messianic. Some, as in the case of Revelation, offers Christians in difficult situations hope by reminding them God will eventually be victorious over the forces of evil. As in Revelation, the message in apocalyptic literature is often masked in grand imagery and colorful writing.

In this section we will focus on messianic texts which have been seen as referring to Christ. This type of hope-filled literature emerged in the postexilic period, when Israel was no longer an independent political force and was subject to Persia, Greece, and eventually Rome. Daniel is one example of a text which was seen as refer to a coming Messiah.

For many, these messianic texts were interpreted as promises of a military and political leader who would overthrow Rome (or Greece) and restore Israel as in the days of David and Solomon. In the New Testament, Jesus is identified as a Messiah. However, Jesus is described as a Messiah distinct from the expectations of a military messiah. Jesus fulfills the type of Messiah modeled after spiritual concerns. Two important Old Testament passages the Gospel writers draw upon to describe the character of Jesus as Messiah are Daniel 7 and the Servant Songs of Isaiah.

MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS APPLIED TO CHRIST

Jesus as Son of Man (Daniel 7)

Daniel 7 contains a vision of gruesome beasts struggling for authority, by means of power, strength, and might. The text states authority is simply taken away from these beasts and life is granted to them for a time by the Ancient of Days. Notice how the vision depicts authority and even length of life itself as completely outside the control of these beasts. It is in the control of the Ancient of Days.


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In contrast to the beasts, the text describes one like the Son of Man who comes peacefully in a cloud, and all authority and dominion is given to Him. Notice how the beasts fought, scratched, bit, struggled for power and dominion, and it was all simply taken away from them. However, this peaceful Son of Man floats in on a cloud and authority and dominion is simply given to Him (no battle or struggle).

Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, seeming to identify himself with the figure in Daniel. If Jesus, who suffered and died, is to resemble such a Son of Man as in the vision, Jesus seems to be implying His kingdom/dominion will come through suffering, death, and resurrection, as opposed to military strength, might, and power (such as the beasts signify). Jesus' dominion comes through the laying down of life, rather than the taking of others' lives. Jesus' dominion comes, not by contributing to sin and violence in the world; but rather, by acting in love and trusting God to control who has dominion in the end!

Daniel 7:15-28 offer an interpretation of the vision. The interpretation given here describes the beasts as waging war against the saints and overpowering them. Then the Ancient of Days passes judgment in favor of the saints and the Kingdom is given to the saints (notice the beasts may kill the saints, but God can simply raise them up again). The saints seem to follow the Son of Man; as the disciples follow Jesus. In each case, those who remain faithful, and do not side with the opposition, will inherit the Kingdom. Daniel 7 gives us a picture of devotion to God which wins, not by force of arms, not by killing and conquering; but by living defenseless lives, even to death, faithful to God (i.e., by loving God and loving neighbor).

Daniel 7 is an apocalyptic text that reflects the hope of a coming Messiah; but not one who will come with military power and authority. Rather, the Son of Man in Daniel 7 comes in peace and is granted authority because He is obedient to God, not because He has superior weapons. It is important to note that the original readers would not know about Jesus, and so would have been looking for this figure to come.

Jesus as Suffering Servant (Isaiah)

The Servant Songs of Isaiah also depict the promise of a coming Messiah. Like Daniel 7, the picture given here is not that of a powerful military authority. Rather, the Messiah described here in Isaiah is a servant who suffers in obedience to God.

Consider the following list of Servant Songs in Isaiah and their interpretations:

- 42:1-4: The mission of the Servant is to bring justice by gentle persuasion.
- 49:1-6: The Servant is a model of trust when He has no strength. This model will convert Israel and be a witness to the nations.

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- 50:4-9: The Servant's role encompasses suffering and rejection. By accepting His suffering, the servant will be supported by God and emerge with victory.
- 52:13-53:12: God uses the unmerited violence against the Servant to save other guilty people. This song promotes the concept of how God accepts the suffering of an innocent one to atone for the sins of others.

The Servant represents Israel in the past and the restoration of Israel to come. God uses Israel's suffering and restoration as a witness and light to the world. It is a testimony that success and victory does not come through military power and authority, because all power and authority is ultimately in the control of God. Victory and prosperity come through obedience and trust in God.

The New Testament writers recognized Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of the Suffering Servant image. God acted to redeem all nations by the suffering of the innocent and obedient Servant, Jesus Christ. These Old Testament apocalyptic texts (in Daniel and Isaiah) were recognized by New Testament inspired writers as the foundations of a proper messianic expectation, fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Notice again the two layers of meaning in the Isaiah text. The original readers most likely saw themselves, Israel, as the servant. However, when the New Testament writers read Isaiah's text after the death and resurrection of Jesus, they saw Jesus as the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Look at the Learner Objectives for this session. Can you:
 - Explain Judah's shift in focus from political concerns to more individual religious concerns in the wake of the exile and under Persian rule.
 - Recognize how Ezra and Nehemiah contribute to the new focus of law and purity in the postexilic community.
 - Describe the implications for expectations of the Messiah as they are presented in Daniel (Son of Man) and Isaiah (Suffering Servant).
2. Read the following passages, which describe the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. Note any verses within these accounts that explicitly name the Servant of the Lord, and identify Him. List the characteristics and qualities attributed to the Servant of the Lord.
3. Write in your journal. Include your reflections and insights from this session and from your reading and study. Select one prophetic description of Jesus from Isaiah. How was this prophecy fulfilled by explicit events in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John's accounts of the life of Jesus?

EXAM



NOTES

1. The proclamation which opened the door to allow the first wave of exiles to return home from Babylon was called _____.
 - A. The Edict of Milan
 - B. The Edict of Cyrus
 - C. The Edict of Persia
 - D. The Edict of Babylon
2. The Jews who stayed in Jerusalem during the exile welcomed back the exiled from Babylon with open arms.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. When Zerubbabel and Joshua arrived with their group of exiles (circa 520 BC), the prophets Haggai and Zechariah began to _____.
 - A. Talk about getting some eating establishments in Judah
 - B. Preach about oppression of the poor
 - C. Preach warnings that God was displeased with the delays and that the Temple must be built
 - D. Warn the people that they were about to be conquered again
4. Under Persian rule, the emphasis of prophetic preaching shifted away from political concerns and criticism of the king and nation, to more individual matters of daily living and worship.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. The priest Ezra encouraged the people to marry women in other faith traditions to diversify God's people.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Ezra inspired the spirit of the community with a new foundation built on three ideals of holiness and purity. Which of the following is NOT one of these ideals?
 - A. Recognition of the Torah (God's law) as the guidebook for living
 - B. A sense of election as God's people
 - C. A worship-centered community of faith
 - D. A need to relocate worship to its proper place in Shiloh

**NOTES**

7. A major step in Ezra's reformation was the sending away of all foreign wives and their children.
 - A. True
 - B. False

8. The book of Nehemiah describes _____.
 - A. The destruction of the walls of Jerusalem
 - B. The construction of the first homes in post-exilic Jerusalem
 - C. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem
 - D. None of the above

9. Apocalyptic literature can be characterized as messages of hope in the midst of tribulation and/or depression.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, seeming to identify himself with the figure in Daniel chapter 7.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. The Servant in Isaiah represents Israel in the past and the restoration of Israel to come.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. When the New Testament writers read Isaiah's text after the death and resurrection of Jesus, they saw Jesus as the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Discuss what might have been the impact on the community when Ezra persuaded the people to send away their foreign wives and children. Consider the commitment that motivated such dramatic measures. Is Israel's record of devastation resulting from idolatry, and the recent return from exile, enough to justify such drastic action? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the implications for the contemporary Church, of a Messiah modeled after the Son of Man and Suffering Servant. In our efforts to be Christlike, how should these models impact our daily living?
3. What are the main concerns for Ezra and Nehemiah? How has exile led to their message? What are stacked against their message being heeded?
4. What is apocalyptic literature? Can you give two examples of apocalyptic literature from the Old Testament? Can you see at least two layers in the apocalyptic sections of Isaiah and Daniel discussed above?