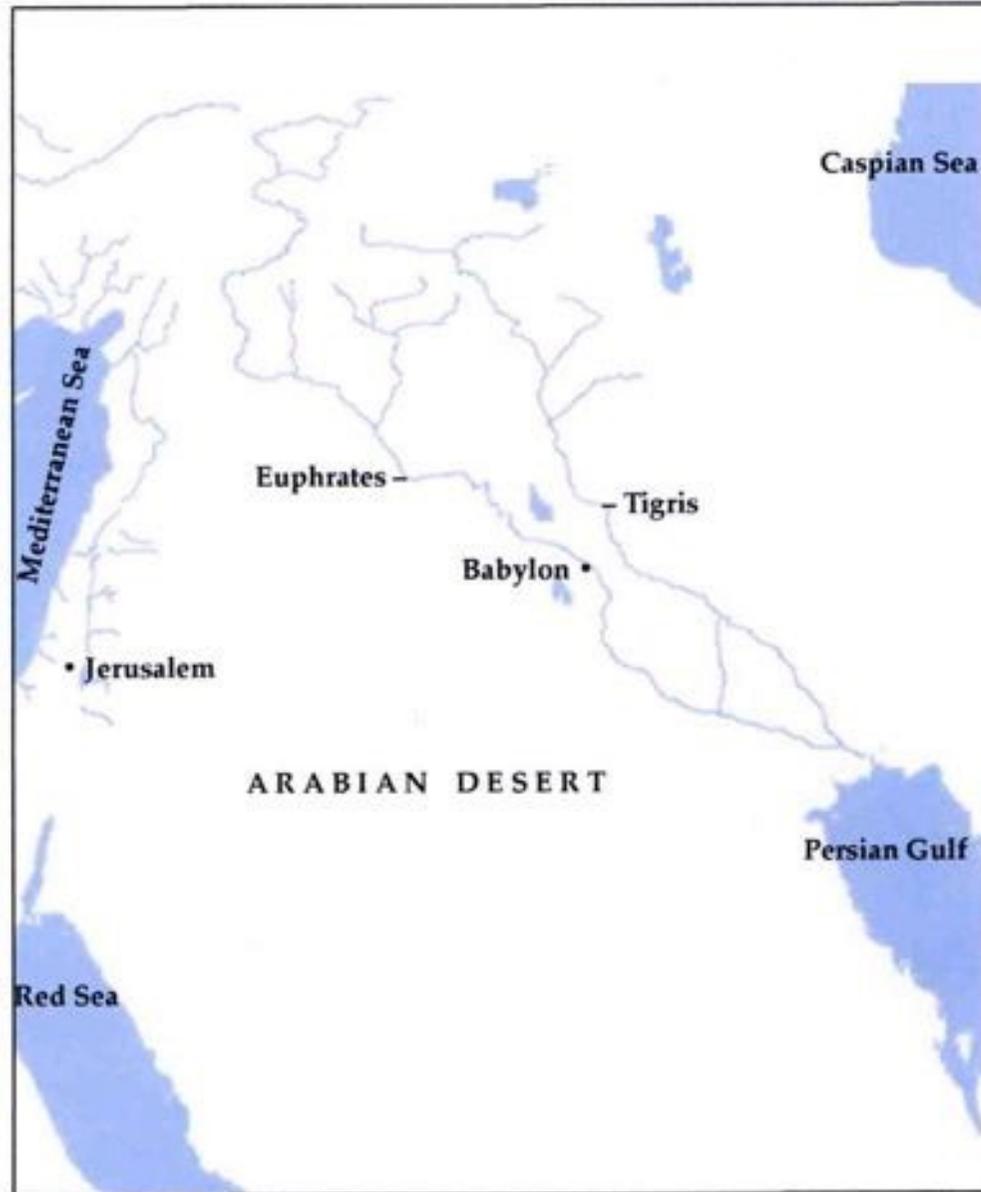


# 01. 6th Century world: Exile and Return

Babylonian Exile



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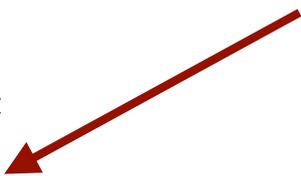
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## The final years of the Kingdom of Judah

When King Josiah died in 609BC, the king-makers of Judah bypassed Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, and chose as king his younger brother, Shallum, who took the throne name Jehoahaz (see Jeremiah 22:11; 1Chronicles 3:15). They hoped he would continue the policies of his father, Josiah. However, Neco deposed him in favour of Eliakim, who was given the throne name, Jehoiakim. This began the unravelling of the independence that Josiah had achieved.

In 605 the Babylonian army led by Nebuchadnezzar defeated the combined forces of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish. In 598 Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim died during the siege. He was succeeded briefly by his eighteen year old son, Jeconiah (Coniah), who took the throne name Jehoiachin. He reigned for the first three months of 597BC. He decided to surrender, and the siege was lifted.

He was taken into exile in Babylon, along with all the leading citizens, including the priest-prophet, Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle, Mattaniah, who was given the throne name Zedekiah.

- 605 Nebuchadnezzar  
Carchemish



## Exile in Babylon 597 -538

‘In the seventh year, the month of Kislev [18 Dec 598 – 15 Jan 597], the king of Akkad mustered his troops, marched to the Hattiland, and encamped against the city of Judah [Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month of Ada [March 16, 597] he seized the city and captured the king [Jehoiachin]. He appointed there a king of his own choice [Zedekiah], received its heavy tribute and sent them to Babylon’ (from the Babylonian Chronicles)

597BC - King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem. King Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), the leaders and artisans were taken as hostages and deported. Jehoiachin retained his kingly status and was released while still in Exile in 561BC , the year after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:27-30). The records of the number taken into exile vary:

2 Kings 24:14 speaks of 10,000

2 Kings 24:16 speaks of 7,000 + 1,000 craftsmen

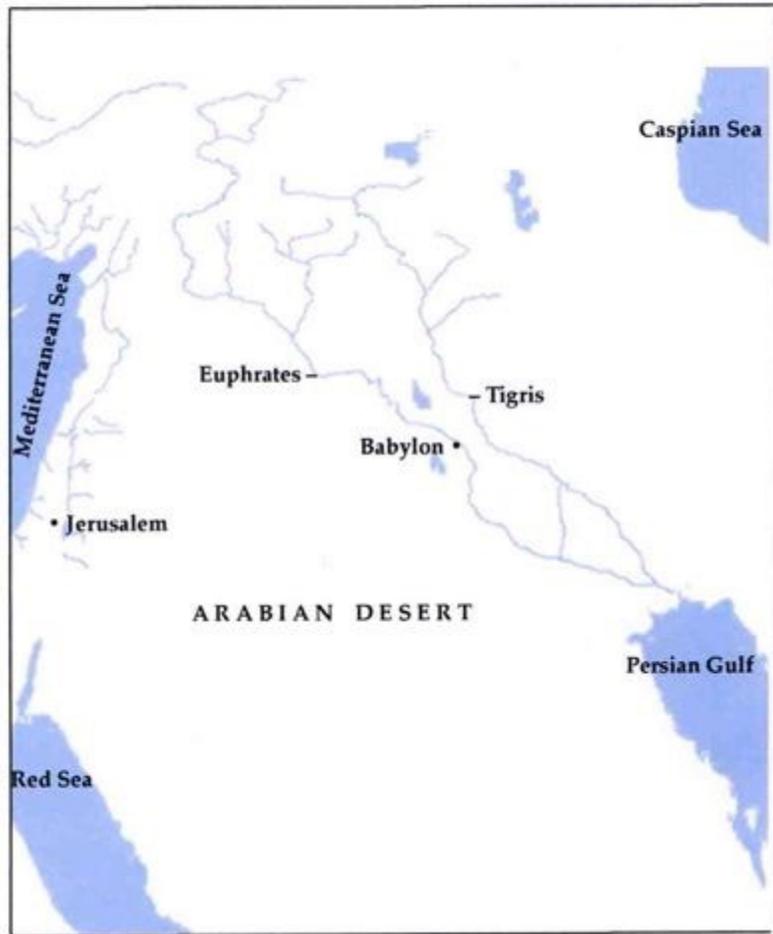
Jeremiah 52:28 speaks of 3,023 Judeans

(need to add citizens of Jerusalem?)

In 594 Nebuchadnezzar had to put down an anti-Babylonian conspiracy in which Zedekiah was involved. A few years later, Zedekiah repeated the mistake made by his brother Jehoiakim and, encouraged by Egypt, withheld tribute. In 588 the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem. Egypt's intervention was unsuccessful. Zedekiah attempted to escape, but was captured and taken to Babylon. Ravaged by famine, Jerusalem capitulated (587). A further group of the leading citizens were taken into exile, and the city, including the temple, was razed to the ground.

Total number deported about 4,600

Babylonian Exile



The Babylonian Exile demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701 – the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground. Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king.

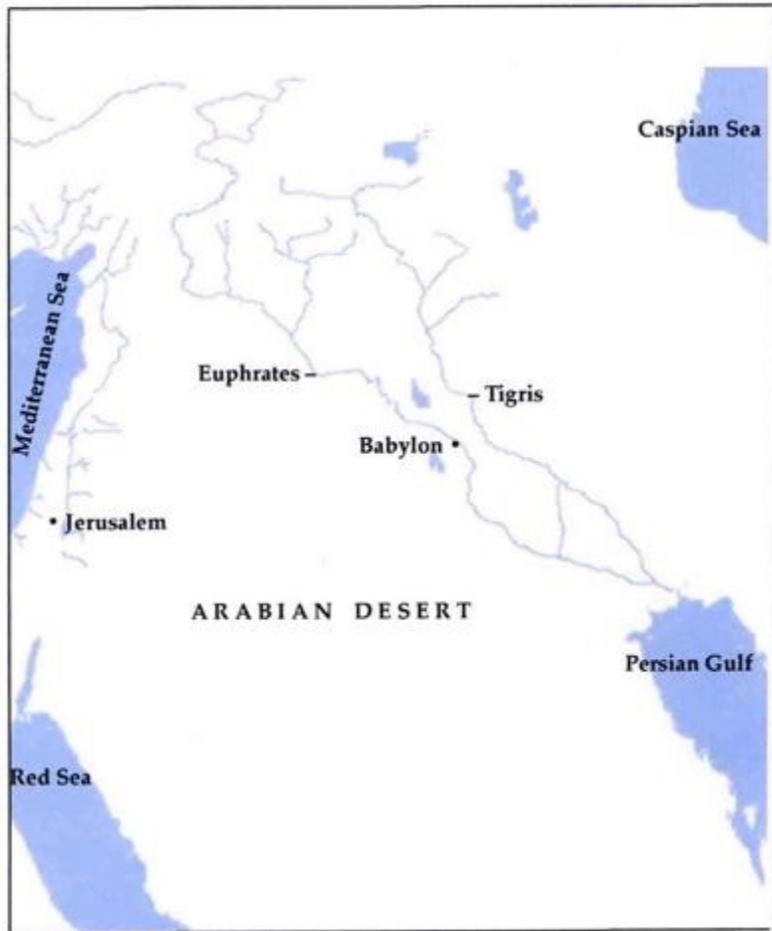
Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God, YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge, as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6).

Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray.

In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened.

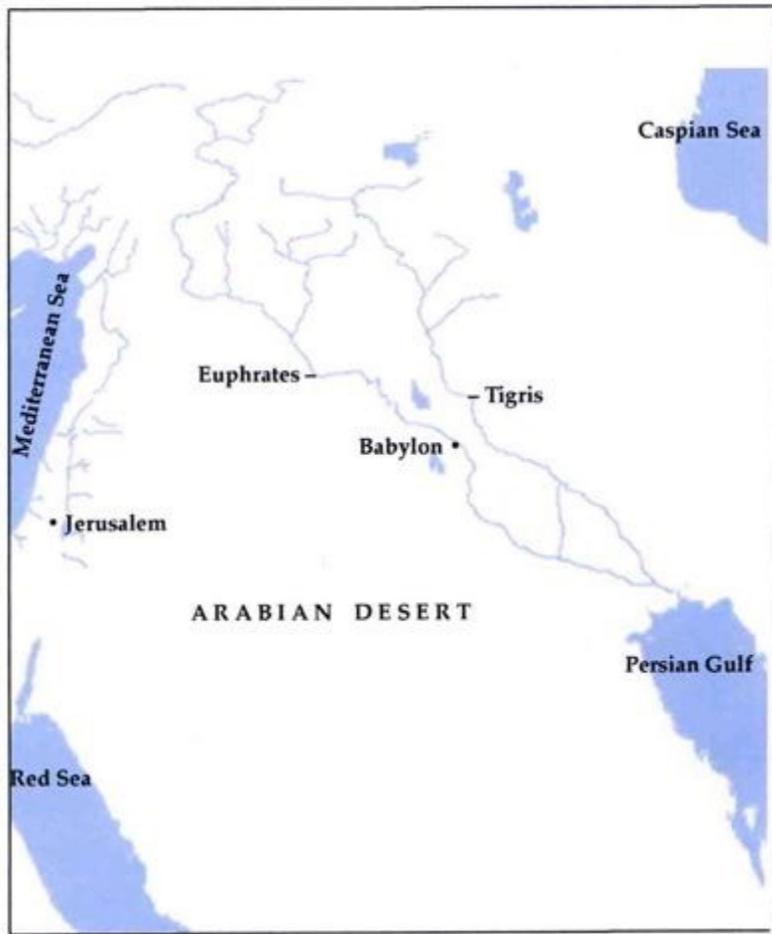
Babylonian Exile



It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different 'Schools' during the long years of exile. We are left to imagine the dialogue, debate and discussion that went on between them as they struggled to make sense of what had happened to them.

Babylonian Exile



The **Deuteronomic School** was working on a comprehensive ‘history’ to reflect on what had gone wrong and to provide a guide for future leaders.

The **Priestly School** was working on composing an accurate record of the cult. In different ways both were exploring the essential ethical dimension of what it means to be YHWH’s chosen people.

**593BC** The priest-prophet Ezekiel began his prophetic career in Exile (Ezekiel 1:1). He 'guided responsive exiles beyond arrogance or despair to recognition of their shame and guilt, and finally to repentance, all the while instructing them in the content of YHWH's teaching about the morally just and ritually proper life' (Gottwald). Ezekiel mentions the deportation in 17:13 and 19:1-14

**588BC** - Zedekiah [King Jehoiachin's uncle, appointed by Babylon as governor of Judah] was persuaded by a more aggressive Egyptian ruler to join the anti-Babylonian forces. This led to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and a second, smaller deportation of remaining leaders [Jeremiah 52:29 gives the number as 832].

Ezekiel writes of the beginning of the siege (24:1-7), and of the fall of the city (33:1-33). Ezekiel (3:15, 8:1, 14:1, 33:30-31) indicates that the Jews in exile had some measure of communal life in the deportation camps.

Most of Ezekiel 1-24 (prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587) consists in declarations of the divine punishment that was coming upon Judah because of the people's infidelity. When we add to this chapters 25-32 and 35-39 which consist in divine punishment of other nations it is clear that divine punishment takes up the largest part of the scroll. Yet YHWH is reluctant to punish.

*'Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord YHWH, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? ... Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'*(Ezekiel 18:23, 31).

## Special responsibility of anyone in leadership

Ezekiel has a lot to offer those of us who are in positions of leadership. He is devastating in his criticism of bad leaders who look after themselves and neglect those they are supposed to care for (see especially his declaration against the 'shepherds, chapter 34). God will not abandon his 'sheep':

**'I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out'**(Ezekiel 34:11)

**'I will break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them'** (Ezekiel 34:27).

Ezekiel criticises the priests (see 22:26-27; 8:1-18), and especially those who claim to speak for God but who ‘**follow their own spirit and have seen nothing**’(13:3); who see a cracked wall and cover the crack with whitewash (13:10, 15); who ‘**prophecy out of their own imagination**’(13:17). Ezekiel himself is instructed to ‘**eat**’ God’s word (3:1-3), to ‘**receive it in your heart**’(3:10), to speak whether people listen or not (3:11).

## Restoration

Dotted throughout the scroll, especially in the chapters that post-date the fall of Jerusalem (chapters 33-39), we find a promise of restoration (36:8-12, 24-28; 39:25-29), and of a covenant that will last forever (37:26). Though YHWH must punish, his will is that **‘they will be my people and I will be their God’** (14:11).

**‘I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am YHWH, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord YHWH’** (16:62-63).

YHWH wants to re-establish the loving communion he offered when Israel first became his people (see 16:8). The people will need a new spirit.

‘I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God’(Ezekiel 11:19-20).

This text seems to make this gift dependent on repentance (see the context, 11:18-21). Elsewhere the gift is presented as wholly a divine initiative flowing from God’s largesse (read 36:22-32; 37:14).

## Awe in the presence of the divine

Ezekiel uses extraordinary imagery to express his experience of his initial encounter with God (chapter 1; see also 3:23 and 8:4), including the imagery of ‘spirit’ (1:12) and ‘fire’(1:13, 27; 8:2). The destruction of the temple does not end God’s presence with his people. The glorious (and always transcendent and mysterious) YHWH is ‘a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone’(11:16). This is surely a consoling message for all of us, whatever state we find ourselves in.