

A Brief History of Ancient Israel
1051 BC to 400 BC

1051 BC is the date of the beginning of the Kingdom of Israel under the reign of King Saul. For the next 120 years, Israel had 3 kings: **Saul** (1051 to 1011 BC); **David** (1011 to 971 BC); **Solomon** (971 to 931 BC). The reigns of these three kings can be read about in I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and in I and II Chronicles.

In 931 BC upon Solomon's death, Israel split into 2 separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel and existed from **931 to 722 BC**. The southern kingdom was called Judah and existed from **931 BC to 586 BC**. The northern kingdom disappeared when the Assyrian Empire, the world's first empire, attacked Israel and crushed them. The Hebrew men were taken into captivity, and the Hebrew women were forced to intermarry with men that the Assyrians moved into the land of Israel. The descendants of these mixed marriages were called the Samaritans. The northern kingdom was composed of 10 tribes, and Judah was composed of 2 tribes (**Judah and Benjamin**). It was only after the loss of the northern kingdom that the Hebrews became the Jews (an abbreviation for **Judah**). The histories of the northern and southern kingdoms under their respective kings (19 northern kings and 20 southern kings) and the respective prophets can be read in Kings and Chronicles as well as the respective books of the prophets. To understand the time period "Between the Testaments," you must grasp the situation of the Jews at the close of the Old Testament. *The entire Hebrew Scriptures revolve around the concept of Exile/Return.*

I. The Babylonian Empire (609-539 BC) – read II Chronicles 36:11-23; Jeremiah 52:4-11.

The Assyrian Empire (first capital city was Nimrod; second capital city was Nineveh became the world's first empire (900-609 BC). In 612 BC, the Babylonian's captured Nineveh, but Ashur-uballit II, King of Assyria escaped the city with his army. King Ashur-uballit II died three years later in 609 BC. That death marks the rise of the Babylonian Empire. Egypt, an ally of Assyria, tried to put a stop to Babylon's rise by sending an army to fight against Babylon in 609 BC. On the way, King Josiah met the Egyptians on the plains of Megiddo and was killed. From 609 to 586 BC, Jerusalem was under constant threat from the Babylonians. Three times Nebuchadnezzar marched on Jerusalem (605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC). The final time he destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, maimed and chained King Zedekiah of Israel and took the Jews as captives to Babylon. This Exile is key to understanding the Hebrew Scriptures.

II. The Prophet Daniel Lives in Babylon (605 BC to Daniel's death est. 520 BC) – read Daniel 5.

Daniel was a young adult when he was taken to Babylon in 605 BC with other members of Israel's young leaders and royal family. The story of Daniel (told in the book of Daniel) is a lesson in faith, courage, and perseverance. The King of Babylon (first Nebuchadnezzar, then Belshazzar "Bel protects") gave Daniel favor because of his ability to interpret dreams, see visions, and give wisdom (e.g. "Magi"). The end of the Babylonian Empire is recorded in Daniel 5 (October 539 BC) and parallels secular history. Daniel did not return to Jerusalem to live (he may have visited), so he died and is buried in Susa, Iran. The legacy of Daniel is the School of the Magi he founded in Persia, the "magi" who came to Judah at the birth of Christ, looking for "He who is born King of the Jews" (Matt. 2:1-12). They had read Daniel.

III. The Persian Empire (October 539-330 BC) – read Isaiah 13:17-20; Jeremiah 25:11; Isaiah 45:1-3.

The story of how King Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon is recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus, who is called the Father of History. Herodotus recounts the capture of Babylon in Book 1 of *Histories*. Cyrus' capture of Babylon is prophesied in Isaiah (written 732 BC) and discussed in Jeremiah's scroll. The Jews of today consider Cyrus Israel's great Savior, publicly comparing Cyrus to Donald Trump.

IV. King Cyrus' Decree (538 BC) – read Ezra 1:1-5.

In March 1879, an archeologist discovered the Cyrus Cylinder in excavations under the auspices of the British Museum. This cylinder, now on display at the British Museum in London, England, records the King of Persia issuing a decree to release all of Babylon's slaves, allowing them to return to their homes. Though the Jews are not mentioned in this cylinder, the wording is very similar to Ezra 1:1-5. The Jews are released to return to Judah to rebuild the Temple. They return to Jerusalem in 3 successive waves. Zerubbabel (538 BC) leads the first wave to rebuild the Temple. Ezra (458 BC) leads the second wave to reinstitute Hebrew Temple worship. Nehemiah (446 BC) leads the third wave to rebuild the walls. The prophets Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi wrote to encourage the Jews during this time period.

V. The Dedication of the Second Temple (516 BC) – read Ezra 3:8-13.

The first wave of Jewish returnees to Jerusalem after the Exile (led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC), worked hard to rebuild the Temple. This building was dedicated in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This was the Temple that was being "remodeled" or more precisely "rebuilt" by King Herod in the days of Jesus. When work on the Second Temple began, the Great Assembly of Men met in Jerusalem to outline Jewish worship in synagogues, all of which had come into existence because there was no Temple during the Exile, and Jewish people worshiped Yahweh in their home localities, replacing the "ark of the covenant" with the "ark of scrolls."

VI. The Story of Esther, Persian Queen (486-465 BC) – read Esther 1:1-5.

Xerxes was the grandson of Cyrus the Great (through Cyrus' daughter Atossa). Xerxes father was Darius I who reigned over the Persian Empire from 522 to 486 BC. The story of Esther is important because she "came into the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14), saving the Jews under Persian rule from annihilation by Haman (a Persian prince) through interceding with her husband. King Xerxes is known throughout history as the man who attacked Greece (480 BC) and destroyed Athens, only to see his navy defeated in the greatest naval battle in the history of Western Civilization. The Naval Battle of Salamis in September 480 BC, won by the outnumbered Greeks, set the course for Greece to rise to power under their future leader, Alexander, who wiped out the Persian army, destroyed Persia's capital of Persepolis (330 BC), and led to the rise of the Hellenistic world (323 BC).

VII. The Jews in Judah when the Old Testament Closes (400 BC) – read II Chronicles 36:23; Malachi 4.

As the Old Testament closes, there is a loss of ancient Hebrew religion, and the rise of a new kind of Judaism. There is no record of the Spirit of Yahweh falling on Temple worship during the Second Temple. Anytime there is the worship of God without the Spirit of God, you will either have the rise of legalism (Pharisees) or the rise of liberalism (Sadducees). One gives more answers than needed, and the other gives no answers at all. From the close of the Old Testament to the birth of Christ, you have a period where the Persians are defeated by the Greeks, the Greeks are then defeated by the Romans, and during the Roman rule of the world, the Messiah appears (see Daniel 11). All these events prepare the way for the Messiah of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem.

The messianic expectations in the Jewish and Christian faiths are traced back to God's covenant with King David (II Samuel 7) and the aftermath, the Exile, and the cessation of the Davidic dynasty. Hope arose that God would someday restore a godly king to Israel. Some of Israel's prophets foretold the coming of a regal Davidic descendant, and their descriptions seem to portray him as far more than a mere mortal. Isaiah foretold the coming of a "child" and "son" who *"will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace,"* and whose kingdom will never end (Isaiah 9:6-7). Again, Isaiah prophesied the coming of a Branch of David, on whom the Spirit of God will rest, who will rule the earth with justice and equity (Isaiah 11:1-5).