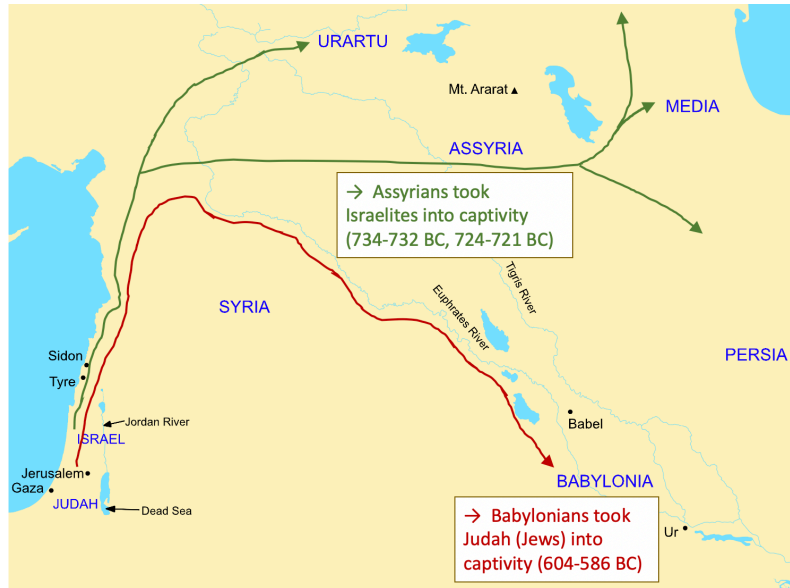


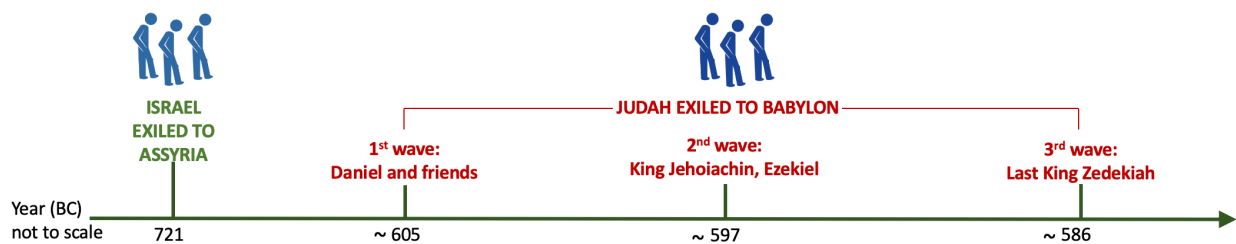
Lesson 28: Partial Return of Judah

Previously...

Due to Israel's repeated disobedience and rebellion, God carried out the final level of disciplinary cursing on the nation: exile. God used the Assyrians to send Israel, the northern kingdom, into exile. Israel remained in captivity and ended up scattered throughout the nations. They never returned to their land.



Some two hundred years after Israel's exile, Judah, the southern kingdom, was exiled to Babylon. With both kingdoms destroyed, the Kingdom of God was no longer in operation.



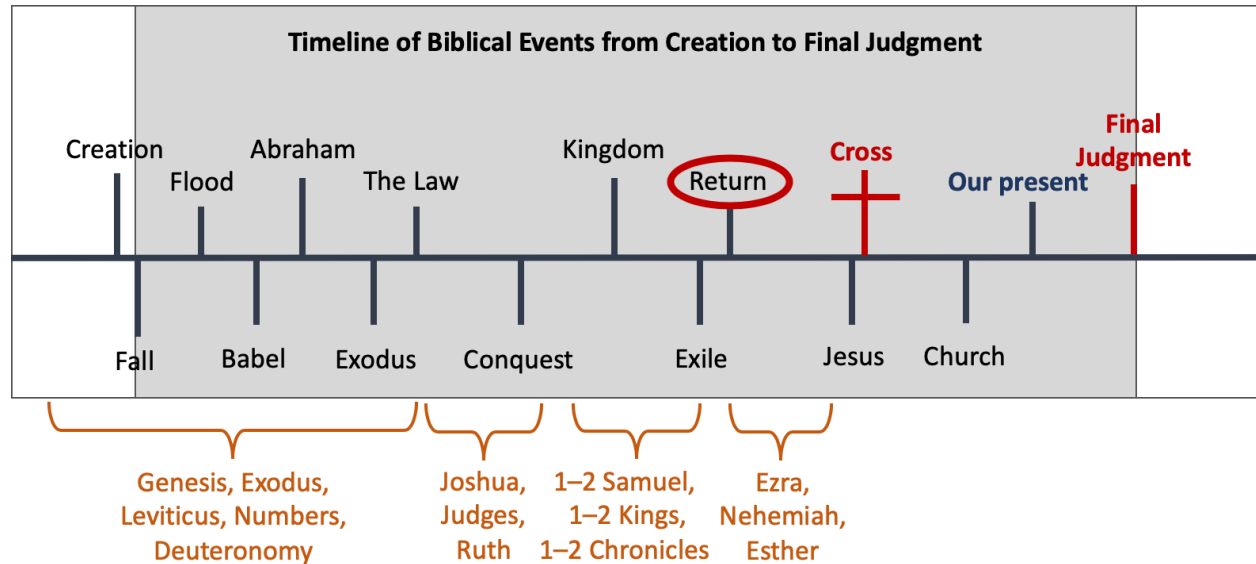
During the time of exile, God showed both Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, and Daniel, an exiled Jew, a vision of a statue that represented five pagan kingdoms that would be in power before God's Kingdom would return to earth.



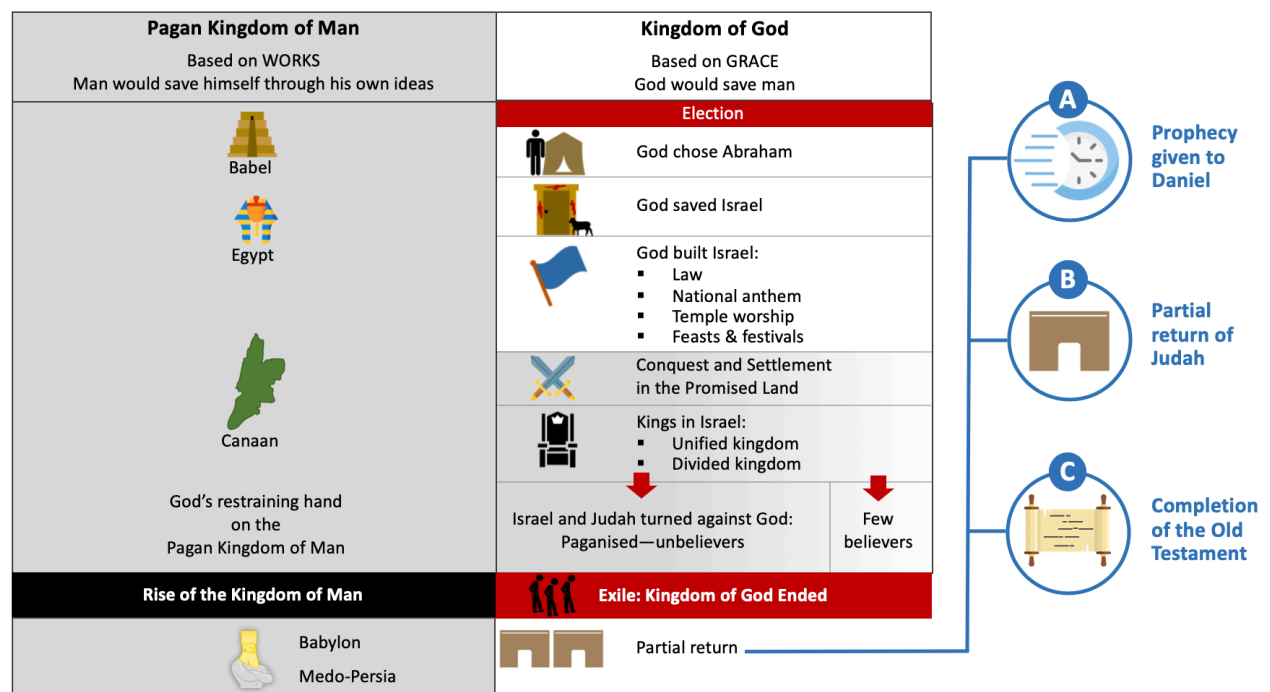
Partial Return

Years after the exile, God allowed some Jews to trickle back to Judah.

The Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, as well as the books of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were written during this period.



Three important events happened at the time of the partial return.





A. Prophecy given to Daniel

Daniel was exiled from Judah and brought to Babylon as a young teenager. He was trained to be a Babylonian government official. Later, when the Persians conquered Babylon, he served in the Persian court.

At the start of Persian rule, Daniel was diligently studying the writings of the prophets. From Jeremiah, he learnt that Judah would be exiled for 70 years.

Daniel 9:1–2

¹ It was the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede, the son of Ahasuerus, who became king of the Babylonians. ² During the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, learned from reading the word of the LORD, as revealed to Jeremiah the prophet, that Jerusalem must lie desolate for seventy years.



Daniel was reading from Jeremiah 29.

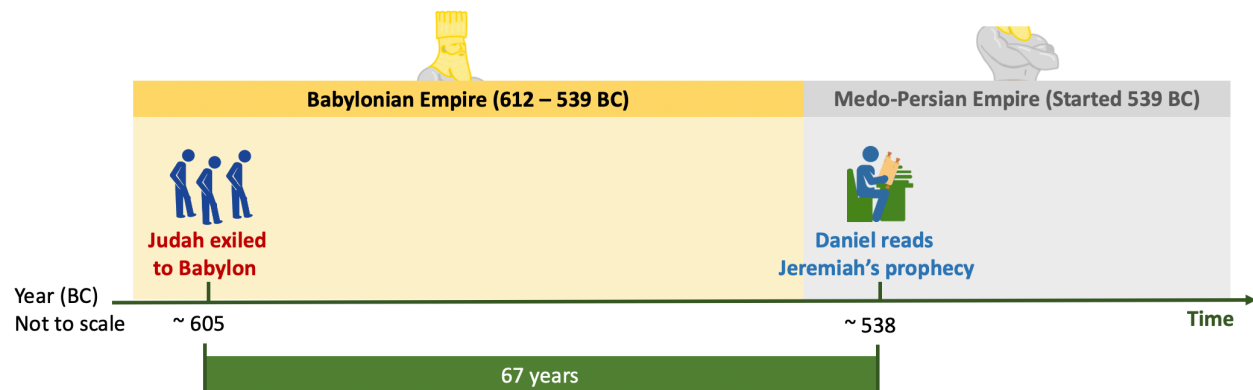
Jeremiah 29:10–11

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: “You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again.

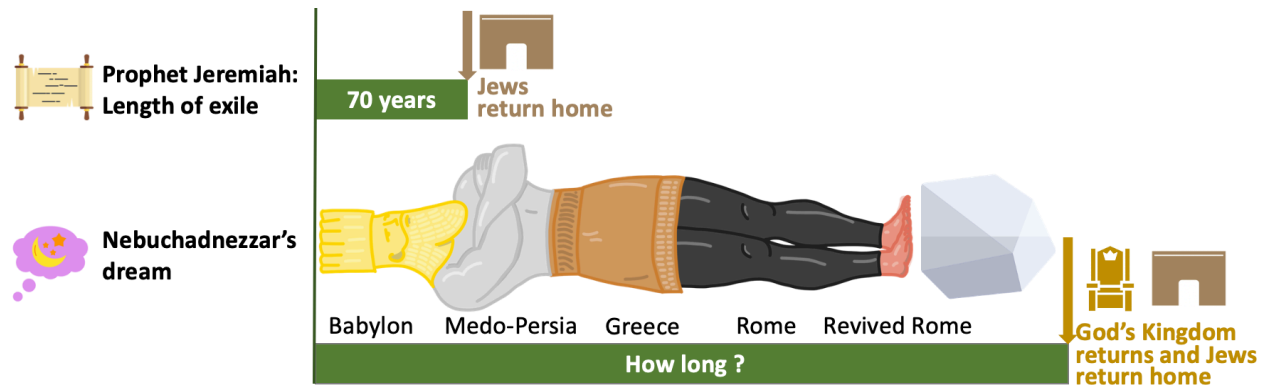
¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

This information confused Daniel. Why?

1. Seventy years in exile were almost over. This meant that according to Jeremiah, it was time for the Jews to return home to Jerusalem.



2. But in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, God revealed that five kingdoms would rule before the return of God’s Kingdom on earth. They were only at the start of the second kingdom, Medo-Persia. A lot more time would have to pass before God’s Kingdom returned.

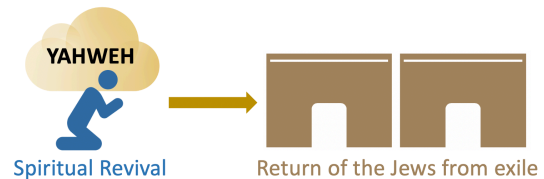


Why was there a difference in timing? Exactly when would the Jews return home and the Kingdom of God come back?

What also confused Daniel was that Jeremiah had prophesied there would be spiritual revival among all the Jews. This would then be followed by God bringing all Jews home.

Jeremiah 29:12–14

¹² In those days when you pray, I will listen.
¹³ If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” says the LORD. “I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land.”



This made Daniel concerned as he didn’t see any sign of spiritual revival among his people at all! So he made a huge effort to pray for God’s help.

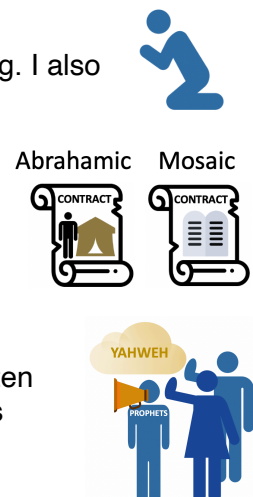
Daniel’s Prayer

Daniel 9:3–19

³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and fasting. I also wore rough burlap and sprinkled myself with ashes.

⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: “O Lord, you are a great and awesome God! You always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises of unfailing love to those who love you and obey your commands.

⁵ But we have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled against you and scorned your commands and regulations. ⁶ We have refused to listen to your servants the prophets, who spoke on your authority to our kings and princes and ancestors and to all the people of the land.



⁷ “Lord, you are in the right; but as you see, our faces are covered with shame. This is true of all of us, including the people of Judah and Jerusalem and all Israel, scattered near and far, wherever you have driven us because of our disloyalty to you. ⁸ O LORD, we and our kings, princes, and ancestors are covered with shame because we have sinned against you.



⁹ But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him. ¹⁰ We have not obeyed the LORD our God, for we have not followed the instructions he gave us through his servants the prophets. ¹¹ All Israel has disobeyed your instruction and turned away, refusing to listen to your voice.



“So now the solemn curses and judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured down on us because of our sin. ¹² You have kept your word and done to us and our rulers exactly as you warned. Never has there been such a disaster as happened in Jerusalem. ¹³ Every curse written against us in the Law of Moses has come true. Yet we have refused to seek mercy from the LORD our God by turning from our sins and recognizing his truth. ¹⁴ Therefore, the LORD has brought upon us the disaster he prepared. The LORD our God was right to do all of these things, for we did not obey him.



¹⁵ “O Lord our God, you brought lasting honor to your name by rescuing your people from Egypt in a great display of power. But we have sinned and are full of wickedness.



¹⁶ In view of all your faithful mercies, Lord, please turn your furious anger away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain. All the neighboring nations mock Jerusalem and your people because of our sins and the sins of our ancestors.

¹⁷ “O our God, hear your servant’s prayer! Listen as I plead. For your own sake, Lord, smile again on your desolate sanctuary. ¹⁸ “O my God, lean down and listen to me. Open your eyes and see our despair. See how your city—the city that bears your name—lies in ruins. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of your mercy.

¹⁹ “O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for your people and your city bear your name.”

Yahweh provides an answer through the angel Gabriel

Because of his sincere prayer, God sent the angel Gabriel to give Daniel an incredible amount of information about future history! God told Daniel about what He planned to do and why there seemed to be a difference in timing.



Daniel 9:20–23

²⁰ I went on praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people, pleading with the LORD my God for Jerusalem, his holy mountain. ²¹ As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice.

²² He explained to me, “Daniel, I have come here to give you insight and understanding.
²³ The moment you began praying, a command was given. And now I am here to tell you what it was, for you are very precious to God. Listen carefully so that you can understand the meaning of your vision.

So what did Gabriel say?

1. Gabriel said there was a difference between the:

- the **immediate partial return** of the Jews to their homeland (what Jeremiah wrote) and
- the **ultimate or full final return** of ALL Jews to their homeland.

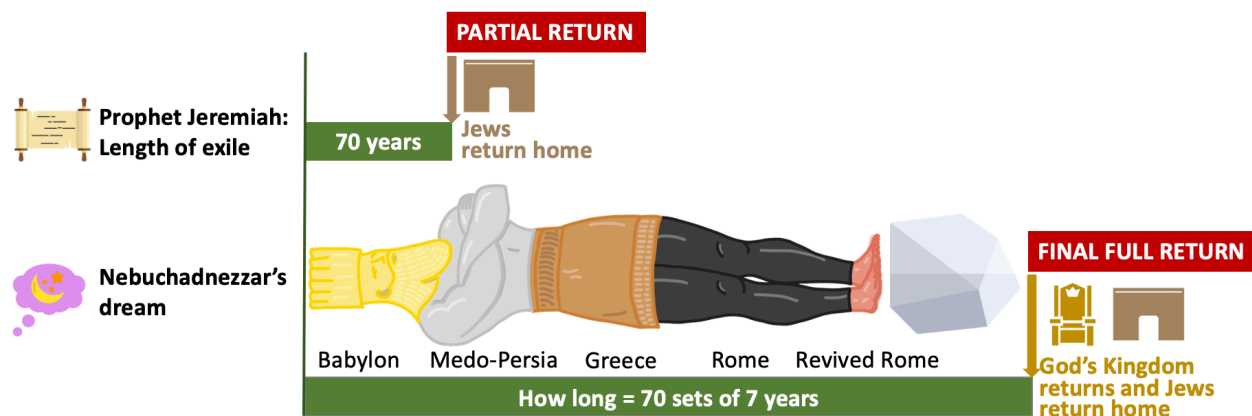
Daniel 9:24

“A period of seventy sets of seven has been decreed for your people and your holy city to finish their rebellion, to put an end to their sin, to atone for their guilt, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to confirm the prophetic vision, and to anoint the Most Holy Place.

In Daniel’s mind, because of what Jeremiah wrote, the exile was only 70 years long and then ALL the Jews would return.

But Gabriel explained that the FULL return of all Jews would be in “seventy sets of seven”, meaning 70 x 7 years!

What did this mean?



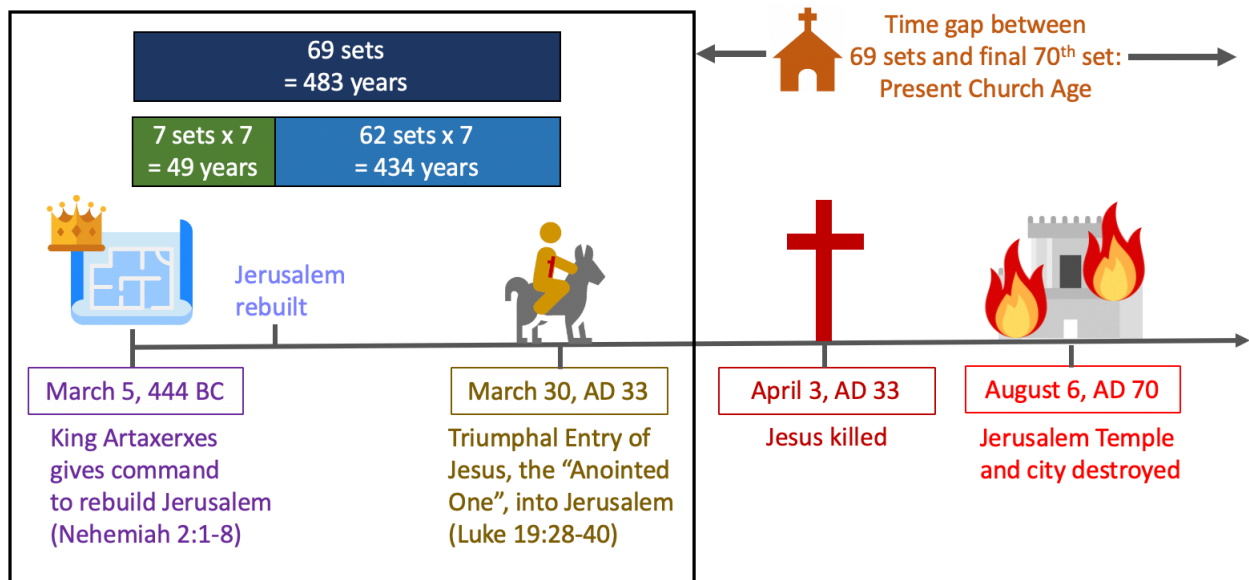
- **Immediate partial return:** The Jews would receive God’s promised relief from their captivity and exile. A remnant would return to Judah in accordance with Jeremiah’s prophecies.
- **Ultimate or full final return:** But because the nation would still not be in proper spiritual state after 70 years, the Jews would have to wait another long period before full restoration would come. The pagan kingdoms of man would have to pass through their five prophesied stages before the Jews could enjoy God’s fulfilment of His promises.

2. Gabriel also said the 70 sets of 7 years were broken up into 69 sets and then 1 set.

This is what would happen in the first 69 sets of 7 years.

Daniel 9:25–26

²⁵ Now listen and understand! Seven sets of seven plus sixty-two sets of seven will pass from the time the command is given to rebuild Jerusalem until a ruler—the Anointed One—comes. Jerusalem will be rebuilt with streets and strong defenses, despite the perilous times. ²⁶ “After this period of sixty-two sets of seven, the Anointed One will be killed, appearing to have accomplished nothing, and a ruler will arise whose armies will destroy the city and the Temple. The end will come with a flood, and war and its miseries are decreed from that time to the very end.



Note: In the Jewish Temple calendar, a year is 360 days.

<p>Daniel 9:25–26 ²⁵ Now listen and understand! <u>Seven sets of seven plus sixty-two sets of seven</u> will pass from the time the command is given to <u>rebuild Jerusalem</u> until a ruler—the <u>Anointed One</u>—comes. Jerusalem will be <u>rebuilt</u> with streets and strong defenses, despite the perilous times.</p>	<p>²⁶ “After this period of sixty-two sets of seven, the <u>Anointed One will be killed</u>, appearing to have accomplished nothing,</p>	<p>and a ruler will arise whose armies will <u>destroy the city and the Temple</u>. The end will come with a flood, and war and its miseries are decreed from that time to the very end.</p>
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The Jews would take the first 49 years (7 sets x 7) to rebuild Jerusalem. Then it would be another 434 years till the Anointed One (Messiah) arrived.



However, when He came, it would look like He accomplished nothing. In fact, He would be killed! And He would not have ushered in the promised Kingdom at that time. However, from our vantage point, we know that Messiah Jesus came, died on the cross and was raised from the dead. He accomplished a lot with His death and resurrection!



Gabriel said that after the Messiah's death, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed. The ruler whose armies destroyed the city and the Temple in AD 70 was the Roman general, Titus. However, Gabriel said this would not end the suffering of the Jews. The Jews would continue to suffer until the 70 sets of 7 were completed when Jesus came the second time.



However, there was a time gap between the first 69 sets and the last 70th set. God placed a "pause" on the prophecy time clock and on the full return of all the Jews. God instead introduced a "Church Age", something the Old Testament prophets never spoke about. In this time gap, God would set aside the nation of Israel to grow the church. So today, we are still waiting for the start of the "final set of 7", that is, the final seven years.

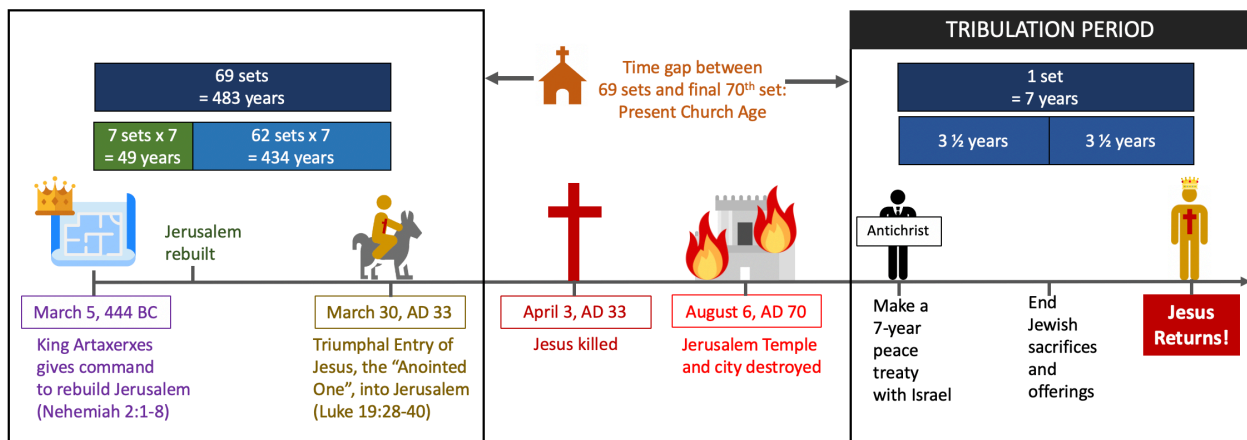


3. The final set of 7, the 70th set, is also known as the Tribulation. The Bible uses other names for this time such as "Day of the Lord", "day of wrath", "day of distress", "day of trouble", "Times of Jacob's trouble", "day of darkness and gloom" and "wrath of the lamb".

Daniel 9:27

The ruler will make a treaty with the people for a period of one set of seven, but after half this time, he will put an end to the sacrifices and offerings. And as a climax to all his terrible deeds, he will set up a sacrilegious object that causes desecration, until the fate decreed for this defiler is finally poured out on him."

At the start of the Tribulation period, "the ruler", also known as the Antichrist, will make a treaty with the Jews.



Note: In the Jewish Temple calendar, a year is 360 days.

But halfway through the seven years, at the 3½ year mark, he will break the treaty and cause great suffering and persecution to come on the Jews.

Jesus will return at the end of the Tribulation period to deal with all the rebellion and to usher in the Kingdom of God.

We will study all this out in more detail at a later lesson.

However, what we need to know right now is that because the first 69 sets of 7s (or 483 years) happened just as Gabriel said, we can be confident the last 7 years, or the Tribulation period, will happen just as he said as well.

Importantly, because Daniel prayed, God sent Gabriel to give him all this additional information that the Jews in exile had not known before.

Why did Daniel bother praying if he knew it was God's plan to discipline the Jews through exile?

Daniel knew that the prophecies in Daniel 2 and 7 said that Gentile kingdoms would rule over the Jews for a very long time. Yet, he continued to pray for God to return the nation of Israel to its homeland (Daniel 9:15–19). Was this wrong? No.

1. Prayer should avoid fatalism

Fatalism is the thinking that our lives will go in a way that we cannot control. Fatalism says, "What will be, will be. Nothing I do will change that." However, this is not what Daniel believed nor how he behaved. He continued praying nevertheless.



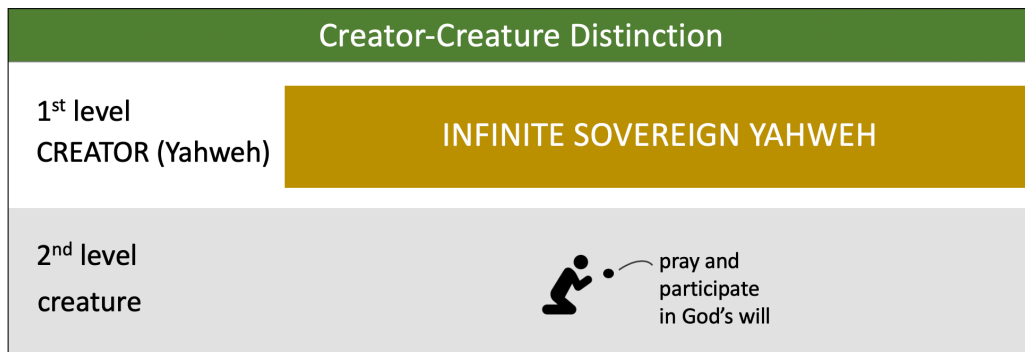
Although Daniel's prayer for immediate restoration was not completely answered, because he prayed, Yahweh gave him more details about the 70 sets of 7 years (490 years) of waiting. This was to give Daniel and the Jews a sure hope for the final restoration.

Imagine, if Daniel had not prayed, he would never have found out these juicy details of prophecy!

After Daniel received the initial prophecies, he continued to take part in this unfolding history by praying fervently to God.

We should learn from Daniel and do the same. We must not be fatalistic and think our prayers are unnecessary because God will do His will anyway. The Bible tells us that "we do not have because we do not ask" (James 4:2b).

God gave us prayer so that we can participate with Him in making His will on earth happen. Although Yahweh sovereignly directs world history, He does so in a way that allows mankind to exercise free will. Thus God can and will listen to us as He directs the big picture of history.



Daniel's prayer is one of the most famous and important prayers in the Bible for what it teaches us. Here are other lessons.

2. Prayer is focused on God's grace towards us

When Daniel prayed, he was very conscious of his own sin and Yahweh's holiness. He confessed his sin and the sins of Israel and trusted that in God's grace, He would extend forgiveness and make Daniel acceptable (Daniel 9:4–19). Daniel had full confidence in the mercy and grace of God, so he was able to approach God confidently.



Likewise, when we pray:

- We need to recognise it is only because of God's grace that He accepts us and listens to us. But we must be assured in our hearts that His grace means He truly accepts us.
- We need to be humble. Instead of arrogantly demanding from God, grace helps us acknowledge that we are approaching the sovereign God. Grace prevents us from thinking that we can achieve whatever we want through manipulating God in prayer.

3. Prayer is based on God's faithfulness

Daniel's prayer was filled with words from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. It showed he had studied God's Word carefully. Daniel knew God's character, that the God of Israel would keep His covenantal promises. And that is why he could pray in confidence.



Daniel 9:4

I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "O Lord, you are a great and awesome God! You always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises of unfailing love to those who love you and obey your commands.

Do we know the character of the God we worship and pray to? Is He truly faithful to His promises? Scripture reminds us repeatedly that He is indeed faithful.

Hebrews 6:17

God also bound himself with an oath, so that those who received the promise could be perfectly sure that he would never change his mind.

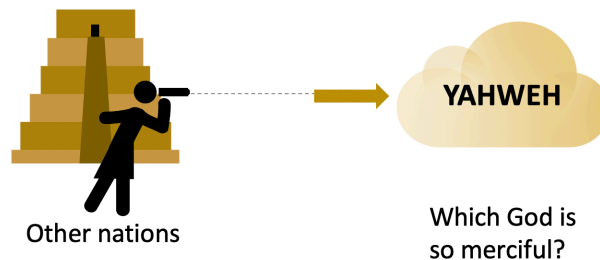
It is because God is faithful that we can even pray. Otherwise, it would be a meaningless thing to do. We can learn from Daniel by basing our prayers on God's promises.

4. Prayer is focused on the glory of God

Yahweh is the only one truly worthy of praise because of His perfect nature, righteousness and glory. When Daniel prayed for God to take action and fulfil His promises, he was asking God to show the world who He truly is so all can appreciate Him.

Daniel 9:17–19

¹⁷ “O our God, hear your servant’s prayer! Listen as I plead. For your own sake, Lord, smile again on your desolate sanctuary. ¹⁸ “O my God, lean down and listen to me. Open your eyes and see our despair. See how your city—the city that bears your name—lies in ruins. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of your mercy. ¹⁹ “O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for your people and your city bear your name.”



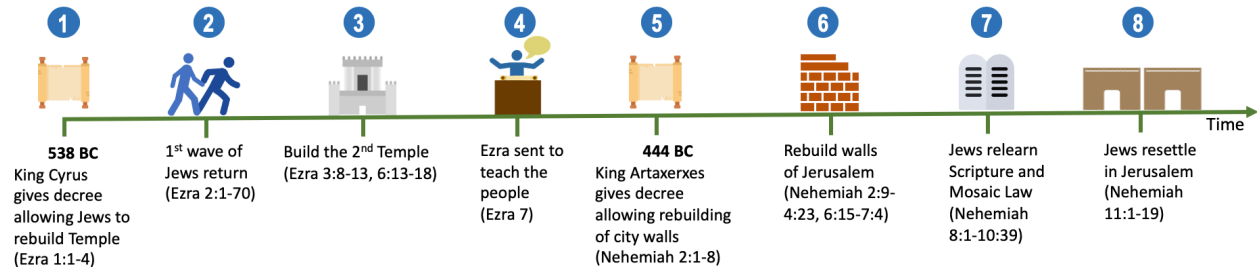
Likewise, do we pray because we really want to see God's glory in all the world? When we pray about our needs and concerns, are we only concerned for ourselves or do we wish for God to act in our lives in such a way that His glory will be shown to the people in our lives?

Let us learn to pray as Daniel did, with great confidence in God's faithfulness and grace, focused on His glory and never with a fatalistic attitude.



B. Partial Return of Judah

After God gave Daniel the prophecy, a remnant of Jews returned to the land of Judah. Here is a brief look at what happened.



1. King Cyrus gives a decree allowing Jews to rebuild Temple

As Yahweh had promised, He prepared the way for the partial return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

First, He did this through King Cyrus, ruler of the Persian Empire (modern-day Iran). King Cyrus's decree was that Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple.

Ezra 1:1-4

¹ In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the LORD fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom: ² "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you!

⁴ Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

With this decree, the king of Persia not only allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, he ordered that people contribute to the Jews' travel expenses and food supplies, as well as to the cost of re-building God's Temple!





2. The first wave of Jews return to build the Second Temple



Zerubbabel led the effort to rebuild the Temple, which became known as the Second Temple. He was helped by Joshua (also spelt Jeshua) the high priest. This happened during the reign of another Persian king, Darius.



Haggai 1:14–15

¹⁴ So the LORD sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the enthusiasm of Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the enthusiasm of the whole remnant of God's people. They began to work on the house of their God, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, ¹⁵ on September 21 of the second year of King Darius's reign.



3. Built the Second Temple

This temple was nowhere as grand as the one that King Solomon had built. In fact, as the prophet Haggai would lament, this second temple was a shadow of the original (Haggai 2:2–3). King Solomon had built the temple at a time when Israel was at its wealthiest. Now the Jewish remnant had barely enough for their daily living. And unlike Solomon's Temple, God's glory did not return to reside in it.



4. Ezra sent to teach the people

Some years later, Ezra the scribe, who was a Levite (a descendant of Aaron), returned to Jerusalem. He was to teach God's laws to the Jews who had returned.

Ezra 7:1a, 6, 10

¹ Many years later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, there was a man named Ezra. ⁶ This Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given to the people of Israel. He came up to Jerusalem from Babylon, and the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the LORD his God was on him. ¹⁰ This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel.



5. King Artaxerxes gives a decree to rebuild Jerusalem and surrounding areas

While Yahweh had earlier guided Zerubbabel to complete the building of the Second Temple, the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were still in shambles.

Some years later, this news reached Nehemiah in Babylon. He was serving as King Artaxerxes's cupbearer. Nehemiah was distraught and asked the king's permission to return to rebuild the gates and walls of the city (Nehemiah 1:11).

Later, on March 5, 444 BC, the king agreed to his request. This decree is the one that the angel Gabriel referred to, the one that started the 69 sets of 7 years.



6. Nehemiah restarted and reformed the lives of the Jews

The king not only agreed to letting Nehemiah rebuild, he gave Nehemiah permission to use the king's resources to rebuild Jerusalem! In this way, Nehemiah returned to his homeland and became its governor.

Nehemiah was a courageous leader who had to discipline the Jews and fight off several political threats from neighbouring provinces to complete the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and the buildings in the city. He was a godly, shrewd and tough manager.

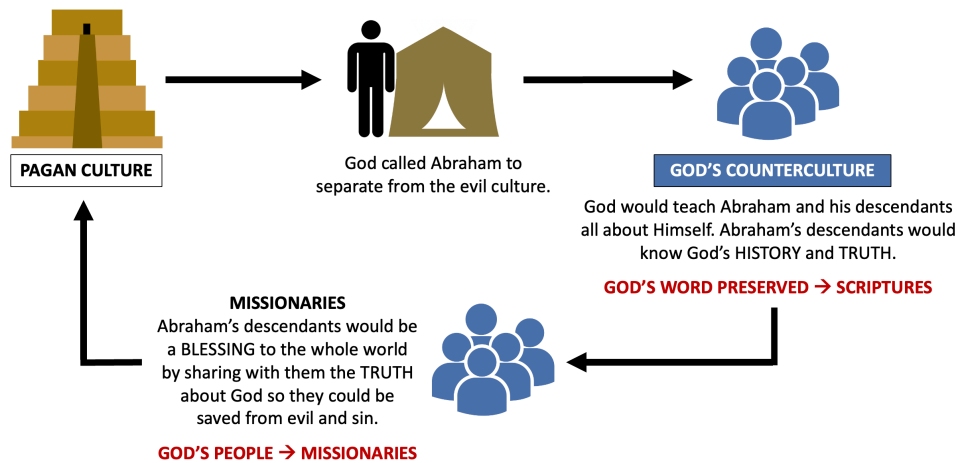


7. Jews re-learn Scripture and Mosaic Law

With Ezra's help, Nehemiah led the people to re-learn God's Word. He also re-started the worship, religious and social life of Israel and led a reform to ensure that the returned Jews faithfully followed Mosaic Law.

Why was it important for the Jews to restart their religious life?

Yahweh had chosen Israel for a very specific mission: to preserve His Word and take it to the pagan world. Part of that mission was to be a counterculture and be an example of what life is like when people love and worship God and love their neighbours.



God wanted the way they lived their lives to attract the pagans and turn their attention to Him. For that to happen, Israel had to exist as an obedient nation under God. Therefore it was important that God once again establish the foundations for Israel to fulfil its mission to be a worldwide blessing.

8. Jews resettle in Jerusalem

This was how a remnant of Jews came to resettle in Judah. However, they didn't return as an independent nation. They were indeed living in their land, but as subjects of a Gentile kingdom.

While thousands of Jews returned to Israel in several waves, there were also many who did not return. We know some of the history of those who stayed in Babylon from sources like the book of Esther and Babylonian and Persian historical records.

Is it true that God is done with Israel and will now only focus on the church?

Some believers think that God is finished with the kingdom of Israel. Because of Israel's continued rebellion against God till today, they believe God has laid Israel aside and transferred His covenant promises over to His new people, the church.

But this totally goes against the character of God. Yahweh is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. God signed the Abrahamic contract with Abraham and his descendants, not the church.

Abrahamic Covenant	Parties Involved	Promises	Signatories	Type
	God, Abraham and descendants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land Descendants Worldwide blessing 	God alone (by passing between the animal halves)	Unconditional

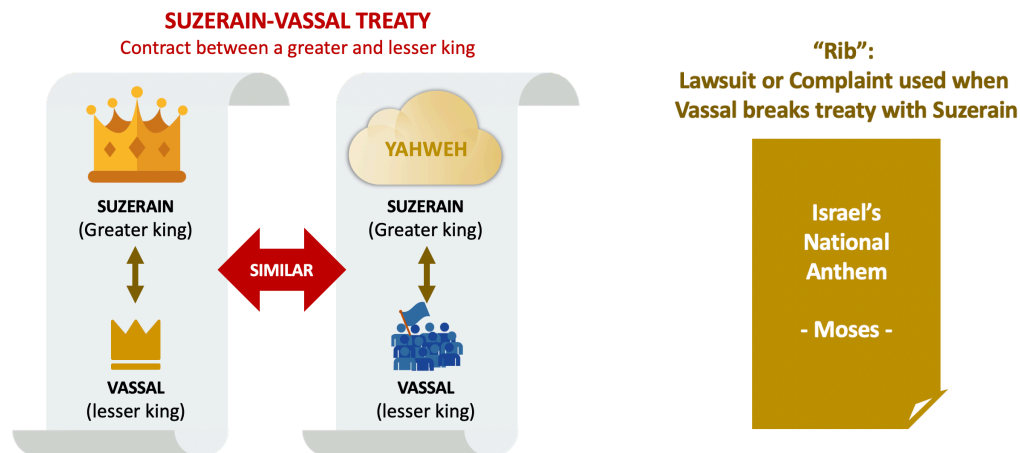
Moreover, the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional. When God made this contract, He made it dependant on Himself alone, not on any good behaviour or action from Abraham or his descendants, the nation of Israel.

Over and over again, we have seen in Scripture how God reminded Israel that though He would discipline them as He said He would in the Sinaitic Covenant, He would not abandon them because He was committed to the contract with them. He staked His own character on this promise.

Leviticus 26:44–45

⁴⁴ “But despite all this, I will not utterly reject or despise them while they are in exile in the land of their enemies. I will not cancel my covenant with them by wiping them out, for I am the LORD their God. ⁴⁵ For their sakes I will remember my ancient covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of all the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD.”

The contracts were so important to God that the prophets, as prosecuting attorneys, kept using the “rib”, the legal court process to show Yahweh “suing” His people for breaking contracts.



To think that Yahweh would then break His contracts, give up on Israel and transfer the agreements over to the church would make Him out to be a cheat and a liar. This totally goes against Yahweh’s revealed behaviour and character.

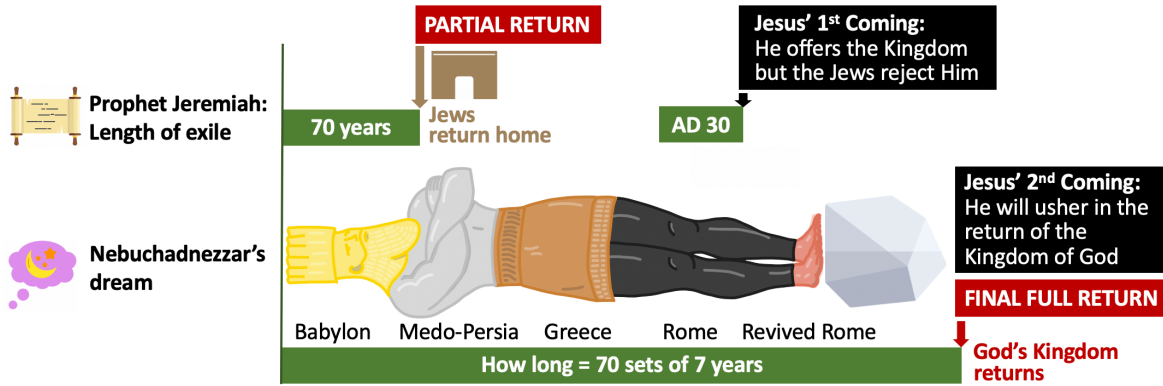
Instead, we see that God supernaturally intervened many times in the life of His chosen nation to keep them from turning into complete pagans. And He will continue to do so.

When Jesus came the first time, He told the Jews to repent and come to Him to receive the Kingdom of God (also known as the Kingdom of Heaven). Jesus was offering them the fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Matthew 4:17

From then on Jesus began to preach, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

But the Jews rejected Him. As a result, Jesus withdrew the offer to restore the Kingdom at that time. Instead, He will do it when He comes the second time.



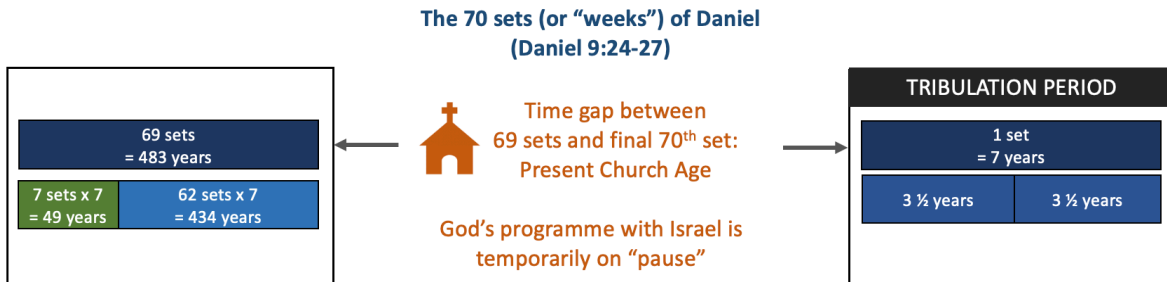
Yahweh explained that for the moment, His programme with Israel was on hold or on “pause”. This is what the apostle Paul explained to Gentile believers about what God is doing during this “Church Age”.

Romans 11:25–27

²⁵ I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say,

“The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem, and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness.

²⁷ And this is my covenant with them, that I will take away their sins.”



This hardening of the hearts of Israel will not be forever. There will come a day when God will restore His Kingdom of Israel. Jerusalem, filled with believing Jews, will be the capital of the global Kingdom led by Jesus.

Gentile believers are welcomed into the Kingdom of God but at no time must we think that God gave up on keeping the promises He made in the Old Testament. Yahweh will completely fulfil His promises to Abraham and the nation of Israel. We will study this in more detail in upcoming lessons.



C. Completion and Preservation of the Old Testament

The third important event we will look at is the gathering of God's collection of Old Testament Scriptures. This would be one of Israel's worldwide blessings: the gift of God's Word for everyone, everywhere.

1. The completion of the Old Testament

Starting with Moses, God wrote the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3:16) through prophets from all walks of life who lived at very different times. At the time of the partial return, near the end of the fifth century BC, the Jews gathered all the different manuscripts written by the prophets.

Back then, the books were not put in the order we see in our Bible today. Instead, they were individual scrolls carefully stored together in a storage area of a synagogue called an ark.



A Torah ark in a synagogue



An Old Testament Scroll



Scripture scrolls stored in a Torah ark

The scrolls were organised into three broad categories:

TANAKH



Torah (Law)

Navi'im (Prophets)

Ketuvim (Writings)

In Hebrew, they called Scripture by the first letters T-N-K: Tanakh.

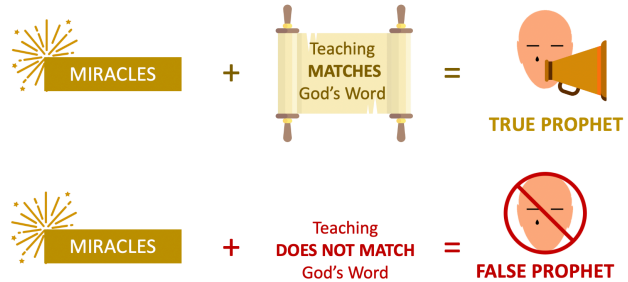
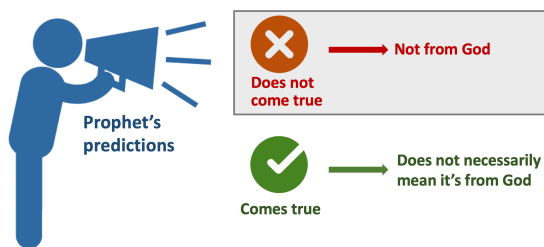
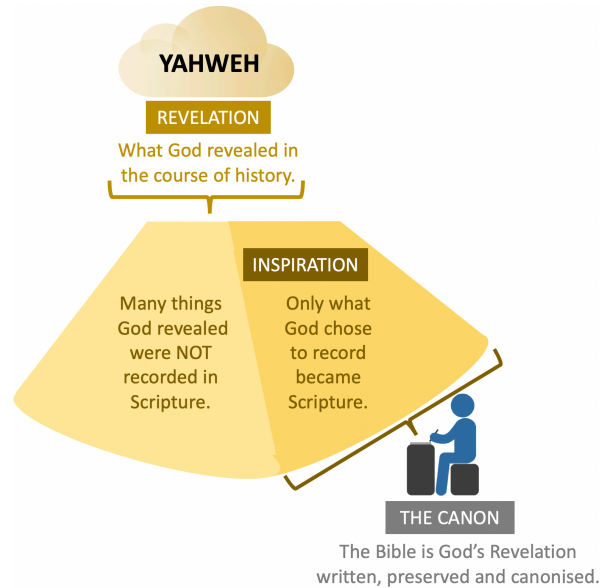
Probably led by Ezra the scribe (Nehemiah 8), this process of collecting the scrolls together produced what we now call the Old Testament.

All the writings that were included as part of the Old Testament had to pass very strict standards or the "canon".

The word “canon” means “rule” or “measuring rod”. Every book that passed the standards was “canonised”. What were these standards? For example:

- Is this book inspired by God?
- Was it written by a prophet or a recognised spokesman from God?
- Can it be traced back to the time and place of the writer?

The Israelites knew who were true prophets of God because God would often send miracles, confirming signs or fulfilled prophecy so the people would recognise the true prophet (Deuteronomy 13:1–3, 18:21–22).



Importantly, Jesus and the apostles quoted from the Old Testament more than 600 times, showing their recognition that those Scriptures were the words of Yahweh Himself.



The long line of prophets that spoke God’s Word and performed confirming miracles came to an end some time in the fifth century BC. It was then that the Jews realised God’s revelation to them had stopped.



The scribes put together a list of 24 books with Genesis as the first book and a combined 1 and 2 Chronicles (a summary of Israel’s history from a priestly point of view) as the last book (although the Jews were not so strict with the order).

These 24 books match the 39 books of the Christian Old Testament. The difference in number is because books were combined in the Hebrew Bible:

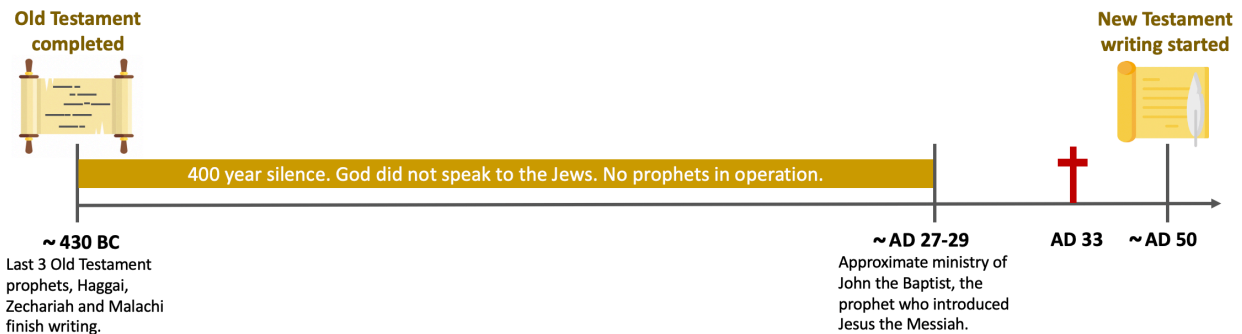
- 1 and 2 Samuel were one book.
- 1 and 2 Kings were one book.
- The 12 Minor Prophets were one book.
- Ezra and Nehemiah were one book.
- 1 and 2 Chronicles were one book.

 TANAKH: 24 books		 HOLY BIBLE OLD TESTAMENT: 39 books	
Torah (Law) 1. Genesis 2. Exodus 3. Leviticus 4. Numbers 5. Deuteronomy	Ketuvim (Writings) 14. Psalms 15. Proverbs 16. Job 17. Song of Solomon 18. Ruth 19. Lamentations 20. Ecclesiastes 21. Esther 22. Daniel 23. Ezra and Nehemiah 24. Chronicles (1 and 2)	Law 1. Genesis 2. Exodus 3. Leviticus 4. Numbers 5. Deuteronomy	Wisdom 18. Job 19. Psalms 20. Proverbs 21. Ecclesiastes 22. Song of Solomon
Nevi'im (Prophets) 6. Joshua 7. Judges 8. Samuel (1 and 2) 9. Kings (1 and 2) 10. Isaiah 11. Jeremiah 12. Ezekiel 13. All 12 minor prophets		History 6. Joshua 7. Judges 8. Ruth 9. 1 Samuel 10. 2 Samuel 11. 1 Kings 12. 2 Kings 13. 1 Chronicles 14. 2 Chronicles 15. Ezra 16. Nehemiah 17. Esther	Prophets 23. Isaiah 24. Jeremiah 25. Lamentations 26. Ezekiel 27. Daniel 28. Hosea 29. Joel 30. Amos 31. Obadiah 32. Jonah 33. Micah 34. Nahum 35. Habakkuk 36. Zephaniah 37. Haggai 38. Zechariah 39. Malachi

TANAKH and OLD TESTAMENT share the same Scripture

This Old Testament canon was shared by Jews in Israel as well as the Jews still dispersed throughout the Babylonian empire.

The close of the Old Testament canon was followed by 400 years of silence. God didn't provide new revelation to the Jews. Instead, He expected them to use His recorded truth and history to learn about Him.






During these 400 years, there were books written about the history of the Jews, but none of them was accepted by Israel as God's Word. This was because these writers didn't claim to speak God's Word nor did God provide any miracles to confirm them.

For example, the Apocrypha (the word means "hidden writings") is the name given to around 14 books that were written during this period. They contain statements that do not agree with the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures. How were they treated?

- The Jews have never accepted these as the inspired word of God.
- Jesus and the apostles never quoted from them.
- These books were not accepted by the early church nor the Protestant church.

Examples of Apocryphal Books			
1. 1 Esdras	5. Wisdom of Solomon	9. Prayer of Manasseh	13. Additions to Daniel
2. 2 Esdras	6. Ecclesiasticus	10. 1 Maccabees	14. 1 Enoch
3. Tobit	7. Baruch	11. 2 Maccabees	15. 2 Enoch
4. Judith	8. Letter of Jeremiah	12. Additions to Esther	16. The Testament of Adam

 <p>NOT inspired Word of God</p> <p>JEWS</p>	 <p>NEVER quoted from them</p>	 <p>Apocrypha</p> <p>Not accepted by the early church</p>
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(However, a number of them appear in the Roman Catholic Bible. A Greek translation of the Apocrypha “slipped in” with the Greek Septuagint during the fourth century AD and was eventually recognised as Scripture by the Catholic Church in 1546 at the council of Trent. This decision was in response to the Reformers who insisted the Apocrypha was not part of the canon.)

We will examine in greater detail how we got the whole canon of Scripture in a later lesson.

2. Keeping the Old Testament text accurate

One of the miracles that God performed is how He preserved His Word accurately over the centuries. During the time when the prophets were actively listening to God and recording Scripture, God allowed prophets to make small edits and clarifications to the work of earlier prophets. They are like “editor’s notes” in the Bible.

For example, in the following passages, all the underlined portions are additions made by later prophets of God.

Example 1

The second half of the verse was clearly added during or after the exile period.

Judges 18:30

Then they set up the carved image, and they appointed Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, as their priest. This family continued as priests for the tribe of Dan until the Exile.

Example 2

Explanatory notes added by a later editor.

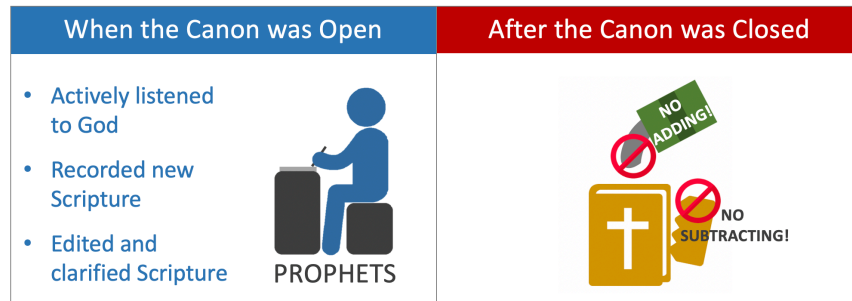
1 Samuel 9:9

(In those days if people wanted a message from God, they would say, “Let’s go and ask the seer,” for prophets used to be called seers.)

2 Samuel 18:18

During his lifetime, Absalom had built a monument to himself in the King’s Valley, for he said, “I have no son to carry on my name.” He named the monument after himself, and it is known as Absalom’s Monument to this day.

With the prophets' active ministry ongoing, it wasn't a problem to produce new text from God or update existing Scripture. But when the canon was completed, no one added to or edited the text.

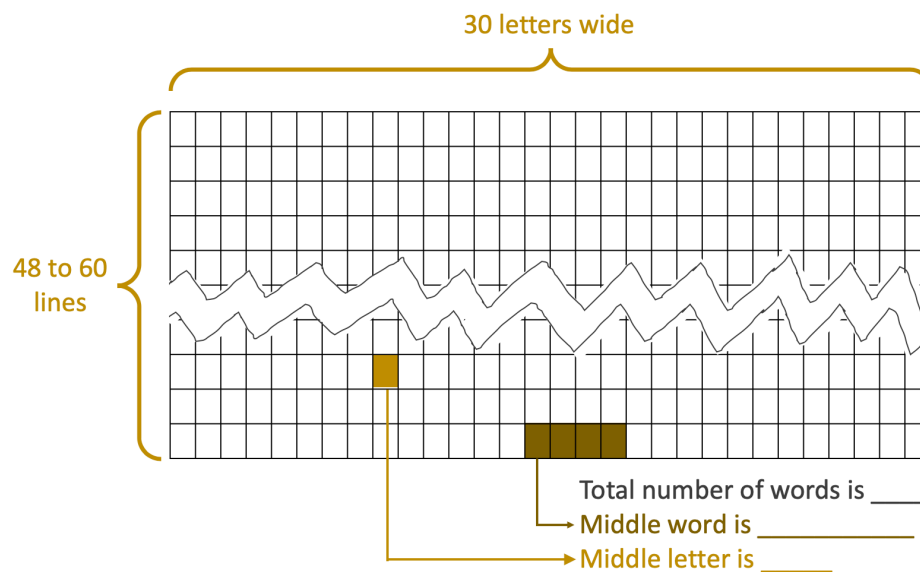


Rather, the focus after that was on making sure the text was accurately recorded. The scribes responsible for making new copies of Scripture had many safeguards to ensure that accurate copies were made.



Some examples of safeguards:

- Each copy had to be written in a certain number of columns that were 30 letters wide, with a certain number of lines (48–60) to each column.
- The total number of words of each scroll, the middle word and the middle letter were noted. The copy had to share the same middle word, middle letter and the total.



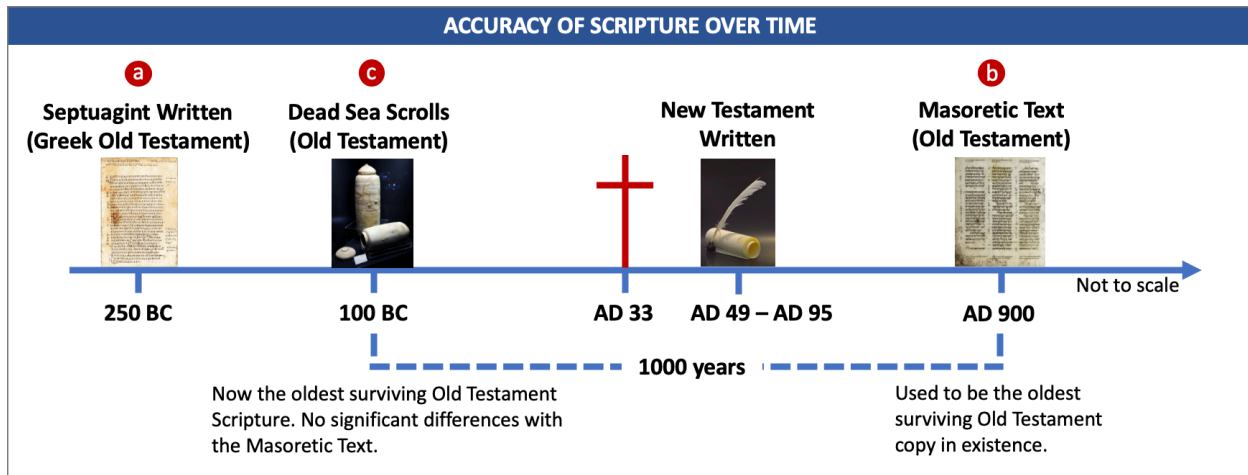
- No word was written from memory. Each letter had to be looked at, spoken out loud, and then copied over. The spacing between letters were measured by a thread to ensure even spacing and no overlaps.
- Copies that had errors were stored in a “genizah”. This is a Hebrew term meaning “hiding place”. These were usually kept in a synagogue, a Jewish place of worship or sometimes in a Jewish cemetery.

During the time of the exile, people like Daniel and Esther had the Scriptures available to them. This was because copies were made by the Jews who continued to live in Babylon.

In this way, the Scriptures went along with the Jews wherever they were.

3. Scripture remained accurate over time

How do we know that the Scriptures remained accurate over time? Here is a brief history of the scrolls and text.



a The Septuagint

In approximately 250 BC, the Old Testament was translated into the common Greek of the time (Koine Greek). This translation came about because many Jews outside of Israel could no longer speak or read Hebrew but they wanted to read God's Word for themselves.

About 70 Jewish scholars worked to get the books of Moses translated. This edition has come to be known as the Septuagint, which means "70" (for the 70 scholars who did this work). Over time, all of the Old Testament was translated into Greek. In some Bible commentaries, the Septuagint is referred to with the Roman numerals "LXX".



b Masoretic Text

After the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, the Jews felt the need to preserve God's Word, so they created three Scripture centres: in Jerusalem, Tiberias and Babylon. Each centre was managed by entire families of scribes and scholars.

These scribes became known as the Masoretes. Their name comes from the Hebrew word "masorah" which means "fetter" or "bond" (See Ezekiel 20:37 for an example). It probably refers to their job of making permanent or fixing the text for future generations. Their meticulous work resulted in excellent manuscripts. In modern times and for many years, theirs were the oldest Old Testament scrolls available, dating from around AD 900.



Dead Sea Scrolls

Then, in 1946, scrolls were found in the Qumran caves surrounding the Dead Sea. These Old Testament scrolls in clay jars were dated to 100 BC. That makes these scrolls 1000 years older than the Masoretic text. Bible scholars were amazed to see there were no significant differences to the text of God's Word when they compared the scrolls.



The Psalms scroll that was discovered in Qumran

Caves in Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered

4. Accuracy even in the small details

Because of how carefully God made sure that the words in the Bible are accurate, we can trust even the small details when they are important. For example, at one point, Jesus was having a discussion with the Sadducees. They were religious leaders who believed that life simply ended when a person died and there was no such thing as the resurrection, where people would be raised from the dead. To prove them wrong, Jesus quoted from Exodus.

Matthew 22:31–33

³¹ “But now, as to whether there will be a resurrection of the dead—haven’t you ever read about this in the Scriptures? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said, ³² ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ So he is the God of the living, not the dead.” ³³ When the crowds heard him, they were astounded at his teaching.

Jesus was picking on the details. He was pointing out that God didn't say, “I was the God” but “I am the God”. The use of the single present tense verb “am” indicated that Abraham, Jacob and Isaac were not dead but alive in the spirit!

Jesus was showing that God's Word is accurately preserved, right down to single words and its tenses. And as further proof, the religious leaders didn't argue that God's Word was flawed or inaccurate. They had lost the argument to Jesus.



5. The availability of God’s Word for all people

God’s plan in choosing Abraham’s family was to have them preserve and spread His Word. And God made sure this was done. By the time Jesus came to earth, the Old Testament Scripture was readily available to anyone. If people wanted to learn about Yahweh, it wasn’t hard for them to find out.

To give an example of how widespread the Hebrew Bible was by Jesus’ time, notice what Jesus said. When He was relating the account of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man begs Abraham to send someone back to his brothers to warn them about eternal punishment. Abraham replies that there’s no need to do that because “Moses and the prophets” (meaning God’s Word) contains all the information they need to know about life, death and eternal life.

Luke 16:29

“But Abraham said, ‘Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.’

Jesus was saying that God’s Word was readily available and anyone who wanted to know God’s truth could get access to it.

The apostle James also mentioned that God’s Word was easily available.

Acts 15:21

For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”

Interested people everywhere could get a copy of God’s Word. This is even more true today where the Bible is available in many languages. The internet has also made getting access to God’s Word even easier.



Should translations of the Bible be treated as the “real Bible”? Should people treat it like God’s Word?

Some people, including believers, have doubts about the accuracy of the Bible. They believe that the Bible contains errors and contradictions or that we don’t have an accurate copy of the original manuscripts.

But we have to remember that as a record of God’s truth and history, the Bible is a supernatural book. It was written by God through the prophets. And God Himself works to keep His Word accurate.


Others feel that translations are even worse because they are not in the original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek.

However, Jesus Himself used “translations”!

During the time Jesus was on earth, the Scriptures were available in the original Hebrew and also in Greek. When the New Testament writers and even Jesus, who is God Himself, quoted Scripture, they readily quoted from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament)!

Here’s one example among many.

In the following passage both quotes are in English but notice that Jesus’ quote is based on the Greek and the original Isaiah quote is based on the Hebrew.

 Septuagint (Greek)	Original Hebrew
<p>Jesus quoted from the Septuagint (Greek) version of Isaiah 29:13.</p> <p>Mark 7:6–7 ⁶ Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ <u>Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.</u>’</p>	<p>Original Hebrew version of Isaiah 29:13</p> <p>Isaiah 29:13 And so the LORD says, “These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <u>And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.</u></p>

The message is the same but there are some differences in the wording! Somehow God was okay with recording His Word in this way. This tells us that in the translation of His Word, the accuracy and truth of Scripture are not lost!

This is an interesting point especially when we consider the effects of the Tower of Babel. There, God confused the world by creating many languages. But He knew there would be a need for translations since He would be preserving His history and truth in the Hebrew language.

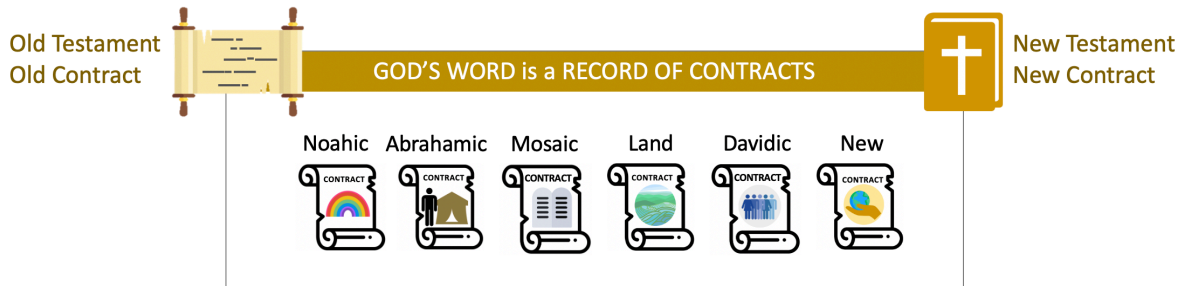


In order to have His truth go out to the rest of the world, God clearly would have to have His Word translated so all people could understand. It seems that God has no problems with this!

If the sovereign God wants people all around the world to know Him, He is able to ensure that Bible translations in different languages will contain accurate records of His history and truth.

Importantly, we need to remember that God’s Word is a record of a contract.

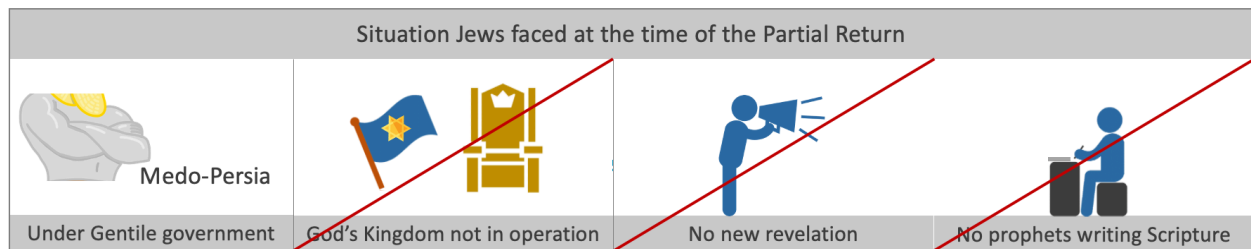
The Old Testament and the New Testament, also known as the old and new contracts or covenants, contain a record of God’s and man’s behaviour. Because God made contracts with mankind, He wants man to know the answer to these questions: Did He keep His side of the covenants? Did man?



Because it is God’s intention that all mankind be saved (2 Peter 3:9), God has to ensure the Scriptures are accurate and true. Using Scripture’s record as legal proof is useless unless the record is accurate.

The Word of God Continues to Speak to Us

The period of the “return” was the last period of history recorded in the Old Testament. Part of Judah, a remnant, had returned to the Promised Land. However, God’s people were now under Gentile authority and God’s Kingdom was not in operation. God wasn’t providing any new revelation and prophets were no longer writing new Scripture.



But this didn’t mean that God was truly “silent”. His people now had a whole collection of His Word in the Old Testament. So the 400 years of silence wasn’t because God was ignoring mankind, but He wanted people everywhere to focus on His written Word.

In many ways, our situation today is similar:

- Many of us live under the rule of Gentile governments and God's Kingdom is not in operation.
- God is not providing new revelation through prophets.



So is God speaking to us? Yes, He is—through His recorded Word. Like the Jews at the close of the Old Testament, we too have God's Word available to us. In fact, we have more Scripture than the people had back then; we have both the Old and the New Testaments.

While we live in a pagan world, let us learn from Daniel. Let's take God's Word seriously and study it rigorously. God speaks through His recorded Word and we respond through prayer.

God speaks to us
through His Written,
Recorded Word



We respond
to God
through prayer



Doing both these things regularly will help us live in a way that pleases God. Our lives will be filled with God's instruction, inspiration, guidance and hope, even while we are under pagan leadership. Let us live as Daniel did.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. The Jews experienced a devastating exile and returned a generation later to start their lives from scratch. Throughout all this, God had not abandoned them but was directing them. Are there any lessons you can draw from them to help you through your own life, especially through difficult challenges? How involved do you think God is in your life?
2. Which do you think is better: having God speak to us audibly or having God speak to us through His written Word? As you look back on history, why do you think God communicated with mankind in the way that He did? Why did He change His method of communication?
3. Reflecting on your prayer life, how has your communication with God been? Have your prayers been like Daniel's? Why is your prayer life the way that it is? How should knowing that God sovereignly directs history impact the way you pray?



Pre-reading for next lesson: Isaiah 11, 52:13–53:12; Jeremiah 30–31, 32:36–44

Endnotes

Page 18: The left photograph “Torah ark of the Great Synagogue, Budapest, Northern Hungary” by Zairon. 2013. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license (CC BY-SA 3.0). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Budapest_Gro\u00dfe_Synagoge_Innen_Thoraschrein_2.JPG (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)

Page 18: The middle photograph “Torah inside of the former Glockengasse Synagogue in Cologne” by Willy Horsch. 2007. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0). <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:K\u00f6ln-Tora-und-Innenansicht-Synagoge-Glockengasse-040.JPG> (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)

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Page 23: The Septuagint manuscript photograph “Codex Marchalianus Pg 71” featuring Ezekiel 5:12–17. Public domain work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex_Marchalianus_Pg_71.JPG (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)

Page 23: The photograph “Two Dead Sea Scrolls Jars at the Jordan Museum, Amman” by Dr. Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin. 2018. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license (CC BY-SA 4.0). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Two_Dead_Sea_Scrolls_Jars_at_the_Jordan_Museum,_Amman.jpg (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)

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Page 23: The Masoretic text photograph “The Aleppo Codex (Deuteronomy)” by Ardon Bar Hama. From the Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi Institute. 2007. Public domain work. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_\(Deut\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aleppo_Codex_(Deut).jpg) (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)

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Page 24: The photograph “Psalms Scroll” by the Israel Antiquities Authority, 1993. Public domain work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Psalms_Scroll.jpg (Accessed 16 Apr 2020.)