

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 1: BABYLON

On week 8, as we follow the signpost towards Babylon, we get a reminder that we have only another 200 Old Testament years of route 66 to go. By a general scholarly consensus, we have already travelled approximately 1200 years from the time of Abraham to this 605BC point. So, congratulations on getting this far. We will encounter 9 books along this stretch of road. Three of them are of particular relevance to Babylon and they cover 70 of those 200 years. We need to stop at 3 important landmarks, all of which you will recognise by name - Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Each one of the named landmarks is very significant because, together, they give us invaluable insight into their past, their present and their future.

Now the one thing that puts most people off history is having to learn dates. But in this case, 4 dates help us clear up some confusion about these 70 years because order of books in the Old Testament is not really helpful when we try to unravel exactly what people or events go together at any given time. Firstly, the captivity and exile of the people of Judah happened over a period of 20 years. Judah had allied with Egypt against Babylon and in 605BC the Babylonians routed Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish. Judah's punishment was to have the most talented young people in the kingdom removed to Babylon. Daniel, who was probably about 15 years old at the time, and his friends were among them.

2 Kings 24:15-17 (NIV) Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land. 16 The king of Babylon also deported to Babylon the entire force of seven thousand fighting men, strong and fit for war, and a thousand skilled workers and artisans. 17 He made Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, king in his place and changed his name to Zedekiah.

2 Kings 25:9-12 (NIV) He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. 10 The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. 11 Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon. 12 But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

Then 8 years later in 597BC, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and king Jehoiakim surrendered, resulting in a further weakening of Judah. The prophet Ezekiel was among the deportees taken on that occasion. Taking the king and the army and artisans meant Judah lost the means to regroup or build up the resources to fight again. Nevertheless, Zedekiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had installed as king, after 11 years, decided he was in a position to rebel. By 586BC it was obvious his gamble was a terrible and tragic failure. His sons were killed in front of him and he died a horrible death. The people of Jerusalem were weakened from the famine caused by the Babylonian siege of the city, the temple this time was left in ruins and the city of Jerusalem itself destroyed.

These three dates 605BC, 597BC and 586BC brought the Southern Kingdom to an end. Over the next 59 years or so the exiled people as well as those left in Judah would have time to

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reflect on the fact that not only had all of David's territory been lost, so too was his direct dynastic line i.e unbroken line of son following father as king. Never again has there been an ethnic earthly king of the Israelites. Then in 536BC, the last of our 4 dates on this landmark, Cyrus who had defeated the Babylonians, decreed that the people, who had now become known as Jews, would be allowed to return to their homeland. That, however, was restricted to Judah and Jerusalem. Even then there was no return to sovereignty, for Judah was to remain a vassal state of the newly victorious Medes and Persians empire and the empires that succeeded them.

Political reflection in those years bred nationalism in the Jewish race. While king Jehoiachin lived in Babylon, they still could regard themselves as a sovereign nation. We have no knowledge of when he died but he remained a prisoner for 37 years, then was released and treated as a guest in the Babylonian court until his death. Once he did die, however, Jewish nationalism took the form of a hope of the coming of a king like David, who would restore the people's territorial integrity and give them back their independence from foreign domination. That embryonic hope emerging during the period of captivity fed that nationalistic hope which exists to the present day. What is remarkable is that they had to look back nearly 500 years to identify their ideal king. Looking back to David satisfied aspirations for political and territorial supremacy, but what is not obvious in their reflection is an emphasis on the reason for his success as a ruler. It was the prophets of this period who reminded them that they needed to look back to this root cause of their current situation.

That brings us to the landmark of Jeremiah. He was a remarkable man in every sense of the word. He ministered under Judah's last five kings— Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He had been preceded by Joel, Isaiah and Micah. Zephaniah and Habakkuk were Jeremiah's contemporaries.

Joel 1:15 (NIV) Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty..... Joel 2:1 (NIV) Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand—

Isaiah 3:1-3 & 8-9 (NIV) See now, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support: all supplies of food and all supplies of water, 2 the hero and the warrior, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the elder, 3 the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counsellor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter..... Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling; their words and deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. 9 The look on their faces testifies against them; they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.

Isaiah 13:6-7 (NIV) Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

So, for at least two hundred years, Judah had been given warnings of the danger of trying God's patience to its limit. By Jeremiah's time, he could look back and see what had been

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prophesied in the past was fast becoming a reality. Zephaniah and Habakkuk concentrated on the fact that the persistent sin of the people would bring about God's judgement. They were, in fact, confirming Isaiah's prophecy that they brought the disaster upon themselves.

Jeremiah 4:5-6 & 16-18(NIV) “Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say: ‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land!’ Cry aloud and say: ‘Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities!’ 6 Raise the signal to go to Zion! Flee for safety without delay! For I am bringing disaster from the north, even terrible destruction.”..... ‘A besieging army is coming from a distant land, raising a war cry against the cities of Judah. 17 They surround her like men guarding a field, because she has rebelled against me,’” declares the Lord. 18 “Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you.

Jeremiah 11:1-4 (NIV) This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. 3 Tell them that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant— 4 the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Jeremiah saw this even more clearly than the other prophets. For twenty years before the conquest started he proclaimed God's judgement on Judah. Chapter 11 of the book explains why this was going to happen and if further confirmation that the people had shown themselves more faithful to the false pagan gods than they had been to the one who had brought them into a covenant relationship with the one true God. And the people of Jeremiah's time had no excuse. Josiah's reforms and renewal of that covenant relationship was known throughout Judah. But it became increasingly obvious even during Josiah's lifetime, and even more starkly in the times of his successors that kings and people preferred to revert to their former anti-God practices. They turned their backs on the one course of action that could have averted the tragedy.

The incident that showed just how determined was the rebellion against God was when Jeremiah was in hiding for fear of his life and Baruch took the scroll he had written to King Jehoiakim.

Jeremiah 36:1-3 (NIV) In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. 3 Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, they will each turn from their wicked ways; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.”

Jeremiah 36:27-28 (NIV) After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 28 “Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up.

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Burning a scroll, which would have been a very valuable article in its own right, was an act of arrogance. To burn a scroll on which God's word directly to the king was written, was sacrilege, and the action of a man acting in utter defiance of God. Jeremiah had done his best, even writing another scroll, but everything he said and did was ignored.

No one was more passionate in trying to make people see sense. No one was more grief stricken at his failure to make this happen for he lived throughout the whole twenty years of the dismemberment of all that he held dear. His life was fraught with danger because of the message he proclaimed. He was thrown into prison (chapter 37) and into a cistern (chapter 38), and he was taken to Egypt against his will (chapter 43). He was rejected by his neighbours (11: 19-21), his family (12: 6), the false priests and prophets (20: 1-2; 28: 1-17), friends (20: 10), his audience (26: 8), and the kings (36: 23).

Jeremiah 31:31-33 (NIV) “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Throughout his life, Jeremiah stood alone, courageously and faithfully declaring God's messages of doom. He wept over the fate of Jerusalem and his country. In the eyes of the world, Jeremiah was not a success. But in God's eyes, Jeremiah deserves his place as one of the Jews' major prophets. For in one of the last prophecies God gave him there is the hint of better days ahead. There was also hope because in the letter Jeremiah sent to the exiles, there was the promise of restoration.

Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NIV) This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”.... Jeremiah 29:10-11 (NIV) This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

God said He had plans to prosper and not harm them and to give them hope and a future. And it is perhaps because of how completely Jeremiah fulfilled his calling in spite of personal suffering, that God gave him one of the most important promises in the Old Testament. Jeremiah had witnessed the result of forsaking the old covenant. God gave him the promise

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of a new one. God would initiate it and it would rest solely on the authority of God and be written on the hearts and minds of His people. The history of the old covenant would come to an end and this covenant would be new in the sense that it would be everlastingly fulfilled in every detail. So, we leave the tragedy inscribed on this landmark knowing not listening to God can have drastic consequences, yet with the knowledge that hope still exists in the promise of the new covenant

That letter must have cheered the heart of those like Ezekiel and Daniel who had been taken to Babylon during the first two captivities. In fact, in these two landmarks we find a new way of looking to the future. Dreams, visions and a new genre of apocalyptic language enter these writings. The Ezekiel landmark is particularly hard to decipher because of the picture language that dominates its chapters, but each vision accentuates God's holiness.

Ezekiel 2:4-5 (NIV) The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says.' 5 And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Ezekiel 10:18 (NIV) Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim.

Ezekiel 11:23 (NIV) The glory of the Lord went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.

As someone who would have become a priest but for exile, Ezekiel prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple to the exiles between 597BC and the actual event in 586BC. The saddest motif on this landmark is recorded in the spectacular vision of the chariot throne in chapter 10. It was an emphatic declaration that it was impossible for a holy God to maintain a presence with a people who had turned their backs on Him and had flouted every law He had given them. We know that the words of Ezekiel were also ignored. In total arrogance the people thought that regardless of their rebellion against Him, God would not destroy the city of David and His dwelling place. After all, hadn't He saved it from Sennacherib when the Assyrians invaded Judah? Yet these references in chapter 10 perhaps record the worst thing that happened to Jerusalem, worse even than the physical destruction inflicted upon the city. God's glory – in other words, God's presence left both the temple and the city. Never again would the presence of God be associated with either. The most tangible symbol of God's glorious presence was the Ark of the Covenant. It disappeared during the Babylonian invasion and to this day it has never been found. Books and films even today probe this mystery. But when it is regarded as the symbol of God's dwelling on earth in a physical setting, its disappearance from history is a highly significant reminder that God no longer dwelt among His chosen people. The valley of dry bones is an apt symbol of the ruin of Judah and its people. But at the same time, God's reviving of those bones would have been a sign of hope of restoration for the exiles, echoing Jeremiah's prophecy of a better future.

Two further prophetic visions would have been further encouragement for them.

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Ezekiel 34:22-25 (NIV) I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken. 25 “I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety.

While Jeremiah was promised a new covenant, Ezekiel was given an even greater promise – that of a Shepherd King like David. This prophecy would have given voice to the developing hope of a people who had literally lost their land, their kings, and their religious way of life based on the Mosaic covenant and the Temple rituals. All that remained for them were the records of their prophets and it was their words of the hope of restoration, ruled by a king like David and reconciliation with Yahweh that changed the religious thinking of the exiles and the returning Jews. And a further vision nourished the hope of that glorious future. From chapter 40 of Ezekiel, the vision of a temple gave the people hope of the return of the presence of God with His people.

Ezekiel 43:4-7 (NIV) The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. 5 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. 6 While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. 7 He said: “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings at their death.

Ezekiel 43:10-11 (NIV) Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider its perfection, 11 and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations.

The details given about the temple are reminiscent of length of the details given for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness. In purely practical terms, however, it would have been impossible to build such a structure on earth. Nevertheless, for a people living with the tragedy of being stripped of all vestiges of their ethnic and religious origins, the coming of a Shepherd King and the rebuilding of a temple to which the glory of God would return, emerged as a Messianic promise for the future of their nation. It would grow and develop in future centuries as the people explored the records of the writing prophets. These were visions and promises which would sustain the Jews into the unforeseeable future and which still sustain them in this present day.

There is no doubt that as we come to the last landmark on this part of route 66 we are left with more questions than answers. So, to start with what is certain. Daniel lived in Babylon

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until that empire was in turn defeated by Darius, ruler of the Medes and Persians in 589BC. And it was because of the jealousy of Darius' officials that Daniel found himself in the lion's den. What that event tells us that Daniel, in spite of spending the whole of his adult life in the pagan surroundings of Babylon, had remained wholeheartedly committed to God, for the punishment was the result of him not hiding the fact that he was praying to God where he could be seen doing so.

Daniel 9:1-6 (NIV) In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom— 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. 3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. 4 I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: “Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. 6 We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

His prayer in chapter 9 is further confirmation of his faithfulness to God. It was a reflection on his reading of Jeremiah's words. On reflection, he confessed the rebellious sin of the nation by turning from God laws and not listening to the prophets. He goes on to recall that the shame and disaster was the result of not heeding the law of Moses (13). He prayed for forgiveness and restoration appealing to God's mercy and for the sake of the city and the people who bore His Name. This prayer on behalf of his nation showed that whatever visions Daniel had of the future, this had to be interpreted in the context of the times in which he lived and his nation's past, present and hopes for the future. That is where a difficulty comes in for a very puzzling vision is given in answer to his prayer.

Without a doubt, the cryptic visions in Daniel have divided scholarly opinion with the result that some have to remain inexplicable because there is no scholarly consensus as to their meaning. Particularly problematic are verses 24-29 in chapter 9 generally referred to as “Daniel's 70 weeks.” They are mentioned in connection with an “Anointed One” but there is no clue as to the start or end dates; nor can the person can be identified. The rest of the passage is so cryptic that explanations range from it referring to events up to the second destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in AD70 to end time events.

What there is scholarly agreement on is that the Jews would not become masters of their own fate for a very long time indicated by Daniel's vision of the 4 beasts. Here we find that the course of history does follow the symbolism of that vision

Daniel 7:2-7 (NIV) Daniel said: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. 3 Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

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Daniel 8:19 & 26-27 (NIV) He said: “I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. “The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future.”²⁷ I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king’s business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

The Babylonian empire was followed by that of the Medes and Persians. That empire fell to the Greeks led by Alexander the Great, and when that empire split when he died, the Romans took control. Given that Daniel had been gifted with the interpretation of dreams and visions, to say this vision exhausted him for several days and was beyond his understanding should caution those not having those gifts about trying to presume we know what they mean.

But especially relevant in our day and age when there is such preoccupation with the end times, verses 19 and 26-27 in chapter 8 are very relevant. The words in these verses are attributed to the angel Gabriel. Verse 19 speaks of the “appointed time of the end”. It verse 26 Gabriel orders that this vision about the distant future had to be sealed up. There is a further order to seal up the visions in 12: 4 & 9. Furthermore in 12:9, when he asked to be told about the outcome of the visions, his request was denied and he was told to ‘Go his way’. God, by His own authority ordered these visions to be sealed. As yet, we cannot assume He has given permission for them to be unsealed.

One vision, however, that undoubtedly points us in the right direction is that of the heavenly messenger in chapter 10.

Daniel 10:4-7 (NIV) On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, 5 I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. 7 I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision;

Daniel 10:14 (NIV) & Daniel 12:7-8 Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.”... Daniel 12:7-9 (NIV) The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, “It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed.” 8 I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?” 9 He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end.

The messenger is not identified and all that we can say is the description of the figure in this passage will partially reappear in John’s vision of the Risen Christ in Revelation. This vision is a clear example of how apocalyptic language gave hope for the future which would be determined according to divine planning and not human calculations.

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Whether we realise it or not, this part of route 66 has led us through an amazing transition in the Jewish psyche. Politically and territorially the past was dead and gone. All that was left for the exiles was their shared history and religious traditions. Looking back they could see that God regarded the Mosaic law as the determinant of the fate of His people. They could not help but realise that their fate was the result of forsaking that Law and ignoring the prophets who had consistently warned them of the Day of the Lord, when retribution for their unfaithfulness to the Sinai covenant would come. Kings, priests, officials and the people in general, all had contributed to that fate. As a result, kingship disappeared and religious traditions were made impossible to continue because of exile and the destruction of the temple. Yet, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel had given them visions of a messianic future which have lasted to the present day. But because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the precise form that future would take, apocalyptic language allowed a long-term vision to emerge. Only as those promises and indications of their political future were fulfilled would these images be properly understood. But, as we leave Babylon and the Medes and Persian empire and follow the signpost back to Judah, it remains to be seen if the exiles had learned lessons from the consequences of their rebellion.