

A HISTORY OF ISRAEL FROM JERUSALEM'S DESTRUCTION IN 586 BC TO THE MINISTRY, CRUCIFIXION, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS

CHAPTER 4

THE RISE OF PERSIA, FALL OF BABYLON, AND RETURN OF THE CAPTIVES

I. THE EMERGENCE OF DANIEL'S SECOND EMPIRE—THE BEAR

A. Some Consequences of the Babylonian Exile

- Hebrew abandoned as the vernacular tongue; remained the language of prayer, study, and law, but the common folk spoke Aramaic
- Hebrew began to be written in the alphabet of Aramaic; Daniel is in Aramaic rather than Hebrew
- Book of Kings reedited according to Babylonian chronicle tradition

- Exiles adopted Babylonian names [Zerubbabel {seed of Babylon}; Mordechai]
- Jews of northern kingdom [Israel] influenced more by false idols and so more easily absorbed into local culture than the Jews of Judah

B. The Rival to Babylon

- Persia's rise to power came under brilliant leadership of Cyrus the Great [559-530 B.C.]
- By the time of Cyrus, the northern kingdom of Israel had been captive in Mesopotamia for nearly 200 years

- Isaiah prepared his people long in advance of the advent of Cyrus [Isa 41:1-7, 21-29; 43:14-15; 44:24-45:8; 46:8-11; 48:14-15]

- The last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, contributed to his overthrow when he left the city of Babylon for ten years and went to the Arabian oasis of Tema
- In his absence, he appointed his son Belshazzar as coregent—his ten year absence caused unrest among his people and angered the powerful priests of Marduk

- Persian forces, aided by Babylonian defections, defeated the Babylonian army at Opis on the Tigris River—Nabonidus hastily withdrew and fortified Babylon

- In 539 B.C., Cyrus' army marched against the Babylonian Empire and their king Nabonidus; Babylon was taken without a fight
- Cyrus entered Babylon a few weeks after it fell and was welcomed as a liberator

- Neither Cyrus nor Nabonidus mention Belshazzar in their reports to help us know how to fit the story of Daniel 5 into this conquest
- Belshazzar's death may have come when Cyrus' governor first entered Babylon in late 539 BC

- Cyrus treated Babylon with consideration; the city wasn't looted nor were religious or civil practices changed—the people transferred their allegiance to him quickly

- Cyrus ruled over more land than any ruler before him; from the Aegean Sea to India
- For nine years Cyrus ruled after his Babylonian victory; he was greatly admired by friend and foe, but in 530 BC, he was killed in battle leading his troops
- The Jews remained a part of the Persian Empire until Alexander the Great defeated King Darius III in 333 BC at the battle of Issus

C. Persian Kings Connected to the Captive Jews in Babylon

- Cyrus II the Great [559-530 BC]
 - He permitted the return of the Jews from exile
 - Facilitated the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem [Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5]; the “Anointed One of Isaiah 45:1

- Darius I [522-486 BC]
 - Haggai and Zechariah preached during the second year of Darius I
 - Temple rebuilt and dedicated in 515 BC [Ezra 6:13-15]

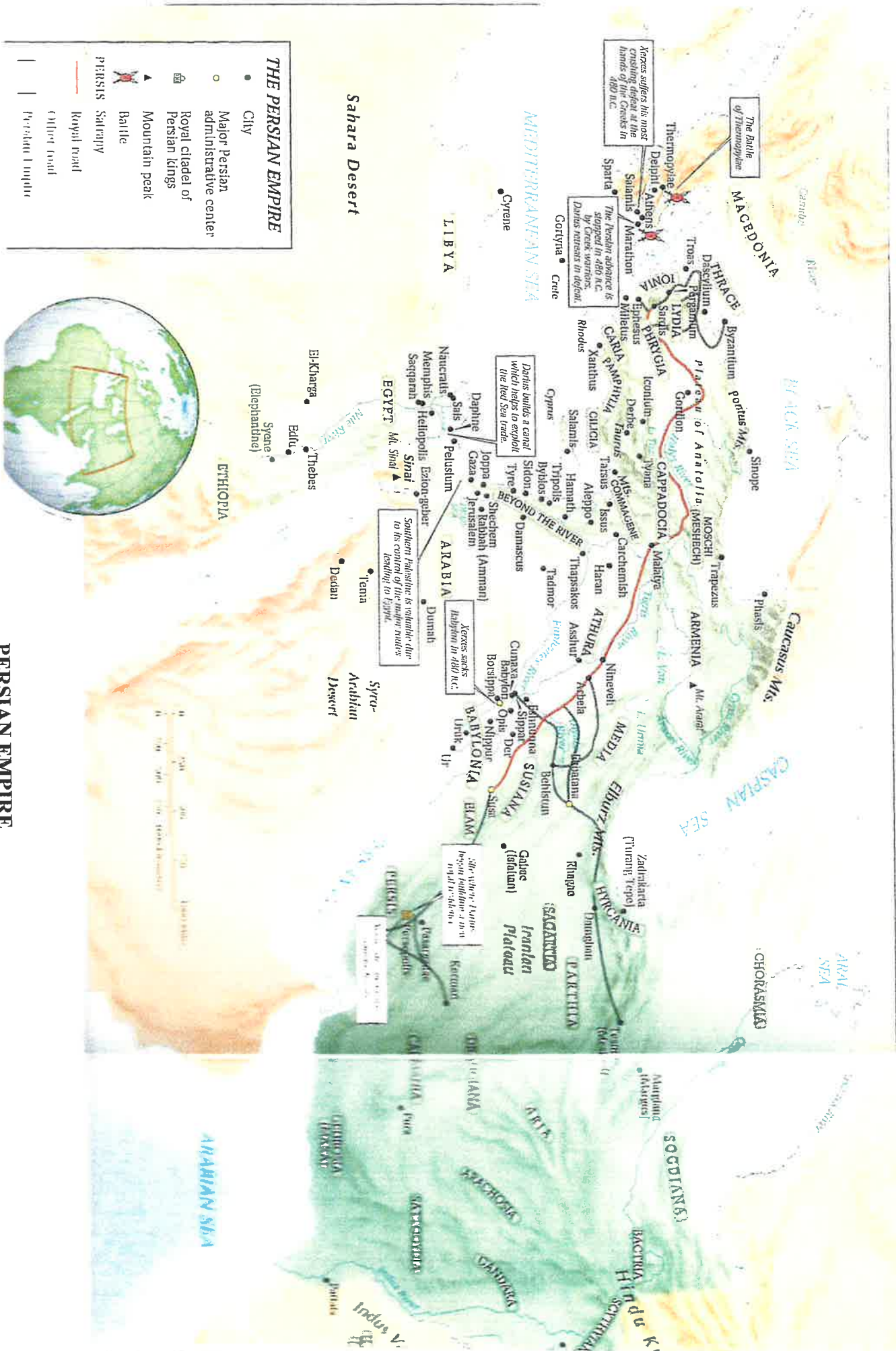
**NOTE At the Battle of Marathon, Greek warriors stopped the Persian advance in 490 BC and Darius I retreated in defeat

- Xerxes I [486-465 BC]
 - Best known to Bible students as the Persian king Ahasuerus in the Book of Ester
- Artaxerxes I [465-425 BC]
 - Authorized the mission of Nehemiah his cup bearer to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem [Neh 2:1-5; 13:6]
 - Traditional date of Ezra’s mission in the seventh year of his reign, 458 BC [Ezra 7:7]
 - Artaxerxes I probably let the Jews go because he needed their loyalty in the south against Egypt
- His death in 425 BC likely marked the end of the Persian kings who played roles in the return of the Jews to Zion unless the Artaxerxes named in connection with Ezra’s mission [Ezra 7:7] was Artaxerxes II [404-358 BC]

II. RETURN OF THE FIRST CAPTIVES [EZRA 1-6]

A. The Edict of Cyrus the Great [2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5]

- Cyrus had a policy of religious toleration and he made a decision at the beginning of his reign in 538 BC to restore the Temple in Jerusalem [Ezra 1:2-3; 6:3-5]
- Also a strategic move to counter Egypt and needed loyalty of the Jews



THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

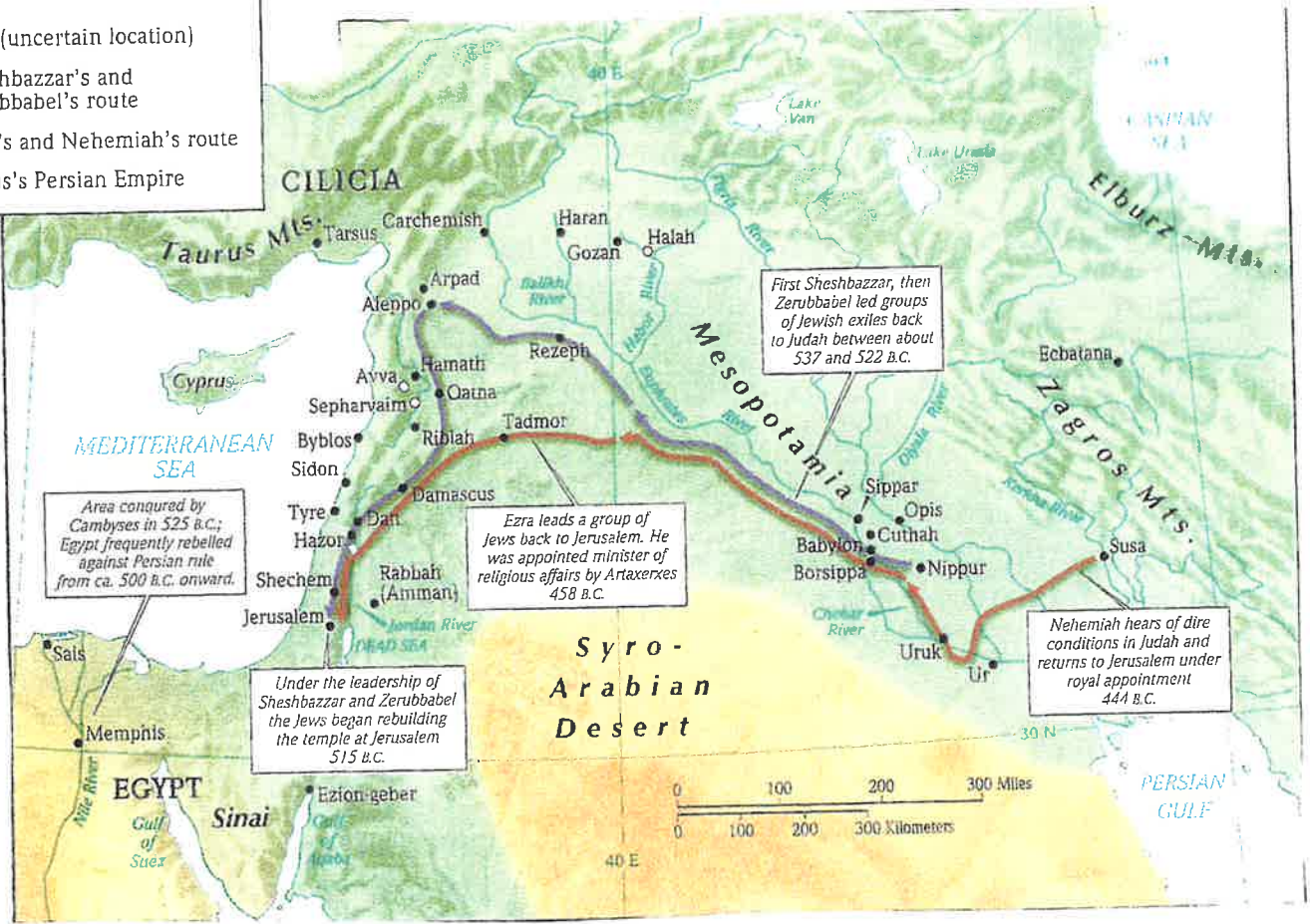
- City
- Major Persian administrative center
- ◉ Royal citadel of Persian kings
- ▲ Mountain peak
- ⚔ Battle
- ⚓ Persian navy
- Royal road
- Other road
- Persian frontier



THE RETURNS OF JEWISH EXILES TO JUDAH

THE EDICT OF CYRUS: EZRA 1:2-4; 6:1-4
see also EZRA 1:5-8:35
NEH. 1-3

- City
- City (uncertain location)
- ← Sheshbazzar's and Zerubbabel's route
- Ezra's and Nehemiah's route
- Cyrus's Persian Empire



- Orders were given to rebuild the Temple with the cost coming from Cyrus' treasury; certain specifications had to be met in the rebuilding; all Jews could return home
- Isaiah called Cyrus the Lord's anointed who would be God's chosen instrument to restore the exiles to their ancestral homeland [Isa 45:1, 13]
- Gold and silver taken by Nebuchadnezzar would be returned to Jerusalem [Ezra 1:7-11; 5:13-16]
- Some Bible scholars believe the edict was penned by Daniel himself

B. The First Return With Sheshbazzar[Ezra 1:5-2:70]

- Around 538 BC, the first group of exiles under the leadership of Sheshbazzar [perhaps Zerubbabel, but may have been a son of Judah's king Jehoiachin] left for Judah and Jerusalem [Ezra 1:8; 2:1-2]
 - Many Jews decided not to return because they had established themselves in Babylon
 - Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 list a total of 42,360 returnees but this total may be from several groups over an extended period of time
- Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar as governor and entrusted to him the return of silver vessels taken from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar [Ezra 5:13-16]
- There was some fear of the surrounding people in Jerusalem, but walls were not the priority [Ezra 3:3]
 - Priority was to build the Lord's altar and get right with God by sacrifices [Ezra 3:2-3]
- Second month of the second year, work begun on the Temple with the laying of the foundation [Ezra 3:8-13]
 - Some rejoiced, others wept because the new Temple was more modest than Solomon's Temple
- Opposition to rebuilding the Temple came from the Samaritans [Ezra 4:1-5]
 - An appeal was sent to Artaxerxes to suspend work on the Temple [Ezra 4:17-24]
- Work stopped on Temple for 16 years until the second year of the reign of King Darius in 520 BC [Ezra 4:24]
 - Prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the building to continue (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1:15)
- Opposition rose again and Darius was written concerning the Temple building [Ezra 5:3-17]
 - Darius confirmed Cyrus decree to rebuild the Temple [Ezra 6:1-12]
- The Temple was completed and dedicated four years later in 515 BC [Ezra 6:13-18]

III. THE SECOND RETURN LED BY EZRA, [EZRA 7-10]

A. The Intervening Years

- Fifty years will pass between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra; Esther takes place during this time
- Malachi the prophet sought to revitalize the spirit of the people; Jews near cultural assimilation/extinction
- Darius ruled Persia until 486 BC, followed by Xerxes I, who ruled until 465 BC
- Esther was queen during the rule of Xerxes [King Ahasuerus in the Book of Ester]
- The second return was under the rule of Artaxerxes and was led by Ezra, a descendant of Aaron, skilled in teaching the Law [Ezra 7:1-6, 10]
- Ezra was evidently known by the king [Ezra 7:6], and received a royal letter from the king to depart to Judah and Jerusalem as minister of religious affairs [Ezra 7:11-26]

B. The Journey from Babylon [Ezra 8]

- Ezra assembled about 1500 for the trip back, a much smaller number than the first return [Ezra 8:1-14]
- When no Levites were found, Ezra delayed until 38 Levites were persuaded to join [Ezra 8:15-19]
- When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, the treasure from Babylon placed in the Temple [Ezra 8:31-34], and the exiles gave the governors the king's royal orders [Ezra 8:35-36]

C. The Main Problem on Arrival

- The problem for Ezra was intermarriage of Jews with surrounding peoples [Ezra 9:1-2]
- Ezra reacted very strongly [Ezra 9:3-4] and then offered a confession prayer [Ezra 9:5-15]

D. Dissolving the Marriages [Ezra 10]

- The Israelites propose to send the foreign wives and children away [Ezra 10:1-4]
- The decision was made that elders and judges would look at each case separately because they would know the situation better [Ezra 10:12-17]
- Large scale separations worked hardships, but the issue was serious
- From the time of Moses, God's Law demanded separation from foreign peoples lest they be influenced to worship pagan gods
- The situation so soon after return was very serious

IV. THE THIRD RETURN [NEHEMIAH 1-13]

A. Nehemiah Leads [Neh 1:1-2:10]

- Held a position at the Persian court as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes [Neh 1:11]
- Heard of the distress of those in Jerusalem; prayed to God asking favor before the king [Neh 1:1-11]

- Petitioned the king to let him go to Jerusalem around 445 BC [Neh 2:4-8]
- No indication is given regarding the number of Jews who went along in this return
- His purpose lay in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls—they had not been restored even though the people had been back in the land nearly a century

B. Nehemiah Builds the Wall [Neh 2:11-6:19]

- Made a secret inspection of the walls at Jerusalem [Neh 2:11-16] and then encouraged the people to rebuild the walls [Neh 2:17-18] and fortifications [Neh 2:11-4:23]
- The walls and the gates were rebuilt [Neh 3]
- The rebuilding was not without opposition, especially from Samaria and its governor, Sanballat, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab chieftain [Neh 2:19-20; 4:1-3]
- There were also plans laid to attack Jerusalem by the surrounding tribes opposed to the walls being rebuilt [Neh 4:7-8]
- Nehemiah divided his forces into two groups—one to continue building and the other to protect the construction

C. Nehemiah as Governor

- One of his first actions was to remit the debts of poor people who had been taken advantage of by the more wealthy [Neh 5:1-19]
- He established security measures after the wall was completed to protect the city [Neh 7:1-4; 11:1-36]
- Nehemiah encouraged all to assemble for the reading of God's Law [Neh 8-10]
- The people confessed their sins and further separated themselves from pagan influences
- The walls were dedicated {444 BC} [Neh 12:27-47]

D. Nehemiah's Second Term as Governor

- Nehemiah served in Jerusalem during two periods of time
- He was governor for 12 years and then went back to the Persian court
- After a short time he returned to Jerusalem and his people [Neh 13]
- Upon arriving the second time, Nehemiah found the people lax toward God's Law [Neh 13:4-9]—they were working and doing business on the Sabbath with total disregard for the Sabbath [Neh 13:15-22]
- He also had to deal with a return to the practice of mixed marriages [Neh 13:23-28]
- How long Nehemiah remained in Judah or if he ever went back to Persia is not known
- What is certain is He and Ezra saved the Jewish community and were primary contributors to the return of the captive Jews and restoration of Jerusalem and the land

V. PROPHETS OF THE RETURN

A. Haggai

- He was one of the early post-captivity prophets
- His ministry was to rebuke the returned exiles for their delay in rebuilding the Temple
- Haggai began by calling the people to face their sinful neglect of completing the Temple {520 BC} [Haggai 1:1-6]

- Economic stress, drought, and unemployment directly traceable to neglect in building the Temple [Haggai 1:7-11]

- The people responded to the call to get back to work on the Temple and the Lord responded [Haggai 1:12-15]

- Haggai also gives a message of the destruction of Gentile power in the future
- The shaking of the heavens and the earth and the destruction of the kingdoms of the nations refer to the future Tribulation [Haggai 2:20-22]

B. Zechariah

- He was a prophet during the return from Babylon and a contemporary of Haggai
- No other Old Testament prophet has more prophecy concerning Christ, Israel, and the nations than Zechariah

- His messages began with the rebuilding of the Temple and concluded with the Millennium

- He predicted the Lord's second coming; His reign, priesthood, kingship, humanity, Deity; building of the Temple of the Lord; coming in lowliness; His bringing permanent peace; rejection and betrayal for 30 pieces of silver; His return to Israel as the crucified One

- His predictions of end time events are equally clear and significant as illustrated in the last chapter

C. Malachi

- The last of the writing prophets, he probably ministered during Nehemiah's time
- He implies that the second Temple had been in existence for some time [Mal 1:7-10]

- He wrote of sins of his time that are identical to those Nehemiah encountered
- His immediate message deals with the sins of the priests and the people of his day, especially the absence of personal piety among the priests and their outright sinfulness [Mal 1:6-14]

- The conduct of the priests was utterly reprehensible, and their conduct would be punished [Mal 2:1-9]

- Malachi also addressed the existence of foreign marriages [Mal 2:10-16]

- The coming of John the Baptist to pave the way for the Lord is foretold [Mal 3:1-5]

- Malachi contrasts those who have robbed God [Mal 3:7-12] and those who have been faithful [Mal 3:16-18]
- Malachi concludes with a warning of the coming of the Lord [Mal 4]

D. Joel as a Post-Exile Prophet?

- Most modern scholars date Joel in the late post-exile prophets, but others place him as perhaps the earliest of the minor prophets during the reign of Joash, around 800 B.C.
- Joel is hard to date because no Israelite king or foreign nation is mentioned in it
- He described the invasion of Judah by a plague of locusts that destroyed everything in its path and impoverished the people [Joel 1:1-2:11]
- In this situation, the prophet urged the people to turn to the Lord [Joel 2:12-17]
- Joel 2:18-19 shows the Lord accepting the repentance of the people and promising that He will remove them from the locusts [2:20] as well as restoring to them all that the locusts have eaten [Joel 2:23-25]
- In chapter 3, Joel addresses the judgment of the Gentile nations [Joel 3:1-8] and the coming of Armageddon [Joel 3:9-15]
- The final verses of chapter 3 addresses the final restoration of Jerusalem in the end times and full kingdom blessings [Joel 3:17-21]

VI. ESTHER

A. Background

- Between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, 50 years pass; Esther takes place during this time
- Esther closes the historical section of the Old Testament; it records events that occurred when the Jews were captives in Persia
- Esther [means Star] was a Jewish maiden who, as queen of Persia helped deliver her people from massacre
- Name of God is never mentioned, nor is Esther ever alluded to in the New Testament

B. The Account

- Narrative begins in 3rd year of Xerxes rule
- During a feast, the king demanded his queen Vashti display her crown and beauty before guests; she refused and was deposed [Esther 1:10-22]
- Maidens were brought before the king, and Esther a Jewish orphan was one of them
- She had been brought up in the home of her cousin Mordecai

- Esther was made queen and Mordecai saved the king's life [Esther 2:5-23]
- Haman, one of the members of the court, conspired to kill all the Jews because he said they were dangerous to the empire; the king signed the decree but he did not know Esther was a Jew [Esther 3:7-15]
- Mordecai informed Esther of the plot, and so she went before the king [Esther 4:4-17]
- The king indicated he would receive her petition, but she would not tell him what her request was until he came to a banquet she prepared
- The king was asked to bring Haman [Esther 5:1-8]
- Haman prepared a gallows for Mordecai's execution [Esther 5:9-14]
- The king could not sleep and so read of Mordecai's detection of the plot to kill the king
- The king summoned Haman and asked him what reward the king should give to honor a man
- Haman thought it was him and did not realize the king was referring to Mordecai [Esther 6]
- At the banquet, Esther pleaded for the Jews; Haman incriminated himself and was hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai [Esther 7:1-10]
- The edict to execute the Jews was revoked and Mordecai was elevated to prominence in the king's court [Esther 8]
- The Jews turned the tables on their enemies and destroyed them and the feast of Purim was instituted [Esther 9]
- Purim means Lot—Haman cast lots for determining the day on which the Jewish slaughter should take place [Esther 3:7]
- Since the day turned good for the Jews, the feast was instituted and named accordingly
- Mordecai raised to even higher levels of power in the king's court and Persia [Esther 10]