

# The Return from Exile

Persian Empire  
&  
Esther

# The Persian Period

## (~ 200 years)

- ❖ Cyrus the Great (“the Mede”) 559-530 BC
  - Released Jews in ~538 BC (**first return**)
- ❖ Consolidation of his Empire
  - Median – Persian conflict (Cyrus defeated his maternal grandfather, King of the Medes)
  - Persian – Babylonian conflict
  - Cyrus ruled more land than any ruler before him (Babylon + Medo-Persia)

# The Persian Period

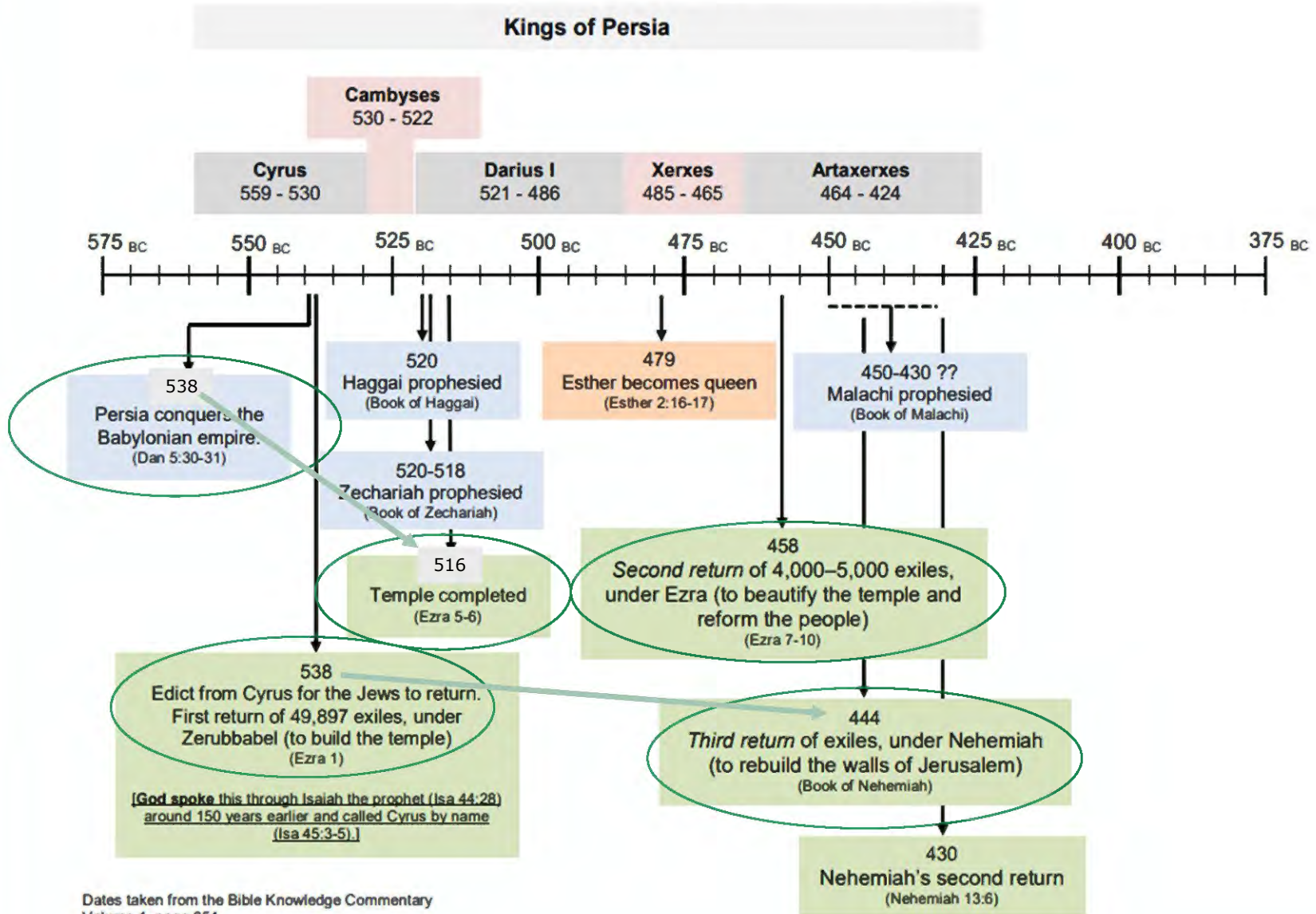
- ❖ Xerxes I (Greek name) (486 – 465 BC)
  - Ahasuerus of the Bible (Esther's husband)
  - Events of Esther prior to second return (Esther 1.3: 3rd year of Ahasuerus (~484))
  - Conquered part of Greece, including Athens (480-79); his fleet & army subsequently routed
- ❖ Artaxerxes Longimanus (465 – 425)
  - **second and third returns** of Jews

# The Three Returns

# Which 70 Years?

- ◆ 70 years = one life span
- ◆ 70 years from 605 BC (first deportation) to 535 BC ( 4 years *after* Daniel's prayer and Cyrus's defeat of Babylonians and his decree)
- ◆ 70 years from destruction of Temple in 586 BC until the rebuilding of Second Temple, completed in 516 BC

# Return from Babylon Timeline



Dates taken from the Bible Knowledge Commentary  
Volume 1, page 654

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# First return (Ezra 1 – 6)

c. 538 BC

## Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1.2-4)

- ◆ all Jews who wished could return
- ◆ rebuild the temple
- ◆ remaining Jews *in diaspora* to assist financially
- ◆ gold and silver vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar returned
- ◆ contribution from treasury of Cyrus

# First Return

Led by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 5.14, 16) /  
Zerubbabel (Ezra 3.2, 8)

- ◆ Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel the same person?
  - ◆ both called governor of Judah
  - ◆ both referred to as leading the return and leading in the rebuilding of the temple
  - ◆ mitigating against same person: different Babylonian names




# Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel

## 1 Chr 3.17-19

- ◆ Zerubbabel, grandson of Jeconiah, who was taken away to Babylon and released 37 years later
- ◆ Shenazzar, son of Jeconiah, considered by many to be same as Sheshbazzar (in Babylonian the two could be forms of the same name)
- ◆ This would make Zerubbabel his nephew and probable co-leader, then successor to Sheshbazzar
- ◆ The order of appearance in the Scriptures (Zerubbabel → Sheshbazzar) can be misleading; however, they both are introduced just before the foundation of the new Temple was laid

# First Return Events

- ◆ Registration of the people (total 49,897)
  - ◆ Restoration of Worship (Ezra 3.1-7)
    - ❖ offerings and sacrifices
    - ❖ Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread
- 
- ◆ Temple construction started (3.8 – 4.24)
  - ◆ Adversaries stop the construction
  - ◆ Ministries of Haggai and Zechariah calling Jews to rebuild (5.1, 2)
  - ◆ Temple completed in 516 BC (5.1 – 6.22)



**Model of the Second Temple at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem**

# Second Return under Ezra (c. 458 BC)

- ◆ Artaxerxes' decree (**Ezra 7.1-8; 12-21**)
  - ❖ Whoever wants to go
  - ❖ Treasures given
  - ❖ Two-fold decree (to Ezra and to the treasurers in the provinces)

# Second Return

- ◆ On arrival in Jerusalem Ezra finds apostasy (Ezra 9 & 10)
  - ◆ Intermarriage with pagan peoples
  - ◆ Ezra's reaction: prayer and confession (cp. Daniel)
  - ◆ People respond with repentance and mourning
  - ◆ Remedy: divorce

# Third Return under Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1 – 13

(c. 444 BC)

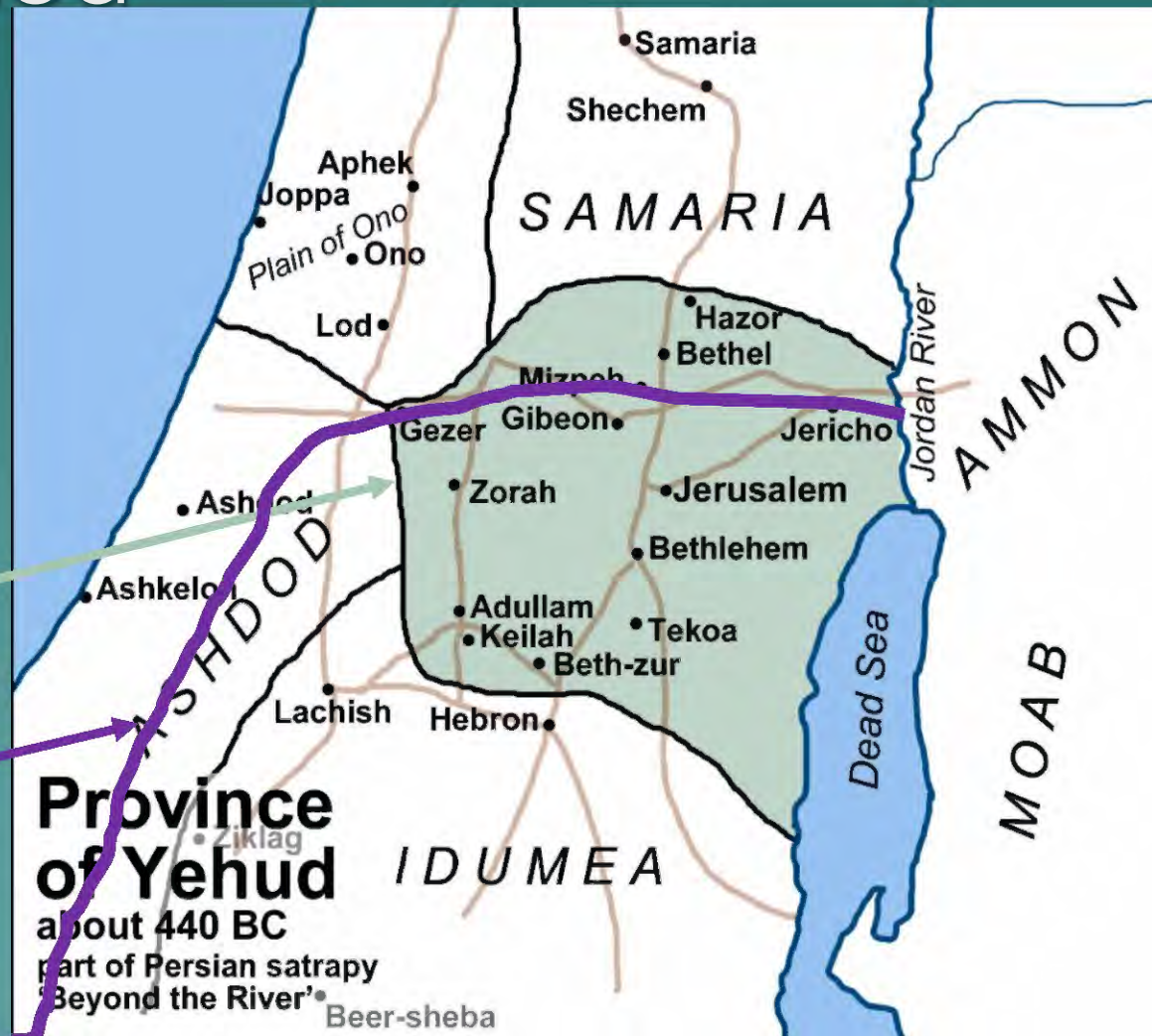
- ◆ Nehemiah, cupbearer to king Artaxerxes (1.1—2.8)
- ◆ His concern: Jerusalem's walls broken down
- ◆ His response
  - ◆ prayer of confession (cp. Daniel)
  - ◆ petition to Artaxerxes

# Third return

- ◆ Rebuilding the walls
- ◆ Opposition
  - From without: pretense (6.1-4) → intimidation (6.5-9) → treachery (6.10-14)
    - ❖ *scorn, mockery*: “*You* can’t do it!”
    - ❖ *threat* → “Don’t *you* dare do it!” →
    - ❖ *discouragement* → *fear*: “*We* can’t do it!”
  - From within
    - ❖ greed: some tried to profit at their brothers’ expenses during the hard times
- ◆ Reconstruction completed in 52 days (Nehemiah 6.15)

# Third return

- ◆ Debts cancelled (recall the problem of greed)
- ◆ Size of Judah much smaller than before exile





# Third return

- ◆ Reading of the Law by Ezra
  - ◆ had to be translated from Hebrew into Aramaic
  - ◆ Levites explained the Scriptures among the people as it was being read

# Third return

- ◆ Restoration of the Feast of Tabernacles
- ◆ Repentance of the people & recommitment of all leaders and people
- ◆ Dedication of the walls

# Third return

- ◆ Apostasy (Nehemiah 13)
  - ❖ defilement of a temple room (4-9)
  - ❖ tithes not given for the Levites (10-12)
  - ❖ Sabbath violated (15-17, 19)
  - ❖ intermarriage with other people (23-26a): second verse, same as the first!

# Esther

- ◆ Historical background: King Xerxes (Ahasuerus; 486 – 465 BC)
  - ❖ desired to conquer Greece (Darius, his father, had failed)
  - ❖ defeated twice by Greeks after initial success
  - ❖ Herodotus: “He found comfort in his harem”
    - this would be about the time of Esther (479 BC)

# Esther

- ◆ Ascendancy of Esther (Esther 1 – 2)
  - ❖ Vashti deposed for refusing Ahasuerus
  - ❖ Esther chosen for harem and 'candidate' for queen
  - ❖ Esther honored within the harem → Queen
- ◆ Mordecai reveals plot against the king by two of his official doorkeepers

# Esther

- ◆ Threat to the Jews: Haman's plot (3 – 6)
  - ❖ Mordecai would not bow down to him
  - ❖ Haman's wrath drives him to want to kill all Jews
  - ❖ suggests to king to allow destruction of Jews, offering him a "bribe"
  - ❖ *Lot* cast and date set for annihilation (13<sup>th</sup> day of twelfth month)

# Threat to the Jews

- ◆ Mordecai to Esther: “who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this” (4.14)
- ◆ Esther to Mordecai: “assemble all the Jews . . . and fast for me . . . for three days . . . I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish” (4.16)

# Threat to the Jews

- ◆ Esther's procedure: invite King and Haman to a dinner and reveal her request at that time
- ◆ The restless night of Ahasuerus → Mordecai providentially honored (6.4-11)



# Esther

- ◆ Triumph of the Jews (7 – 10)
  - ❖ Haman's plot revealed
  - ❖ Jews' defense authorized
  - ❖ Deliverance → Feast of Purim
  - ❖ Mordecai's promotion:  
“Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and in favor with his many kinsmen” (10.3)