

## **Dr. Jeffrey Hudon, Biblical Archaeology, Session 22, The Persian Period**

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This is Dr. Jeffrey Hudon in his teaching on Biblical Archaeology. This is session 22, The Persian Period.

Okay, to review, we've left our narrative off at the Babylonian exile.

The children of Israel, the people of Judah have been taken to Babylon along an arduous 900-mile trek from Jerusalem to Babylon. And we're now going to see those, at least some of those people return on that same trek back to Jerusalem after the exile. On the exile, you can see here the dates 586 to 539.

Now, that needs to be qualified because some of them were deported in 597 and some much earlier, such as Daniel. So, for some, the exile was much longer. And, of course, for those, most of them died in exile anyway.

But for the very young who were exiled in 586, they came back many years later as mature adults, probably older adults, and came back and saw the Jerusalem of their youth or of their childhood. The Persian period, again, the Persians conquered Babylonia and took over, and they had probably the largest empire to date in antiquity. Again, we've talked about this earlier.

They controlled Egypt, all of Asia Minor, Greece, Europe, and all the way to the Indus River, a huge empire. And they had a very, very good system, administrative system and courier system, much like the Pony Express. They could send messages from one end of the empire to the other in a very short period because of this way, stations and horses and riders would switch and get messages back to Persepolis or Susa or some of the other major centers of the Persian Empire.

Now, actually before this time, we see the rise of the synagogue, Beit HaKnesset. And it's important to understand that the early, early history of the synagogue is a historical history. We have hints, such as in Jeremiah 39, Beit Ha'am, house of the people, may suggest some sort of community center that existed at the time of Josiah or perhaps earlier.

Beit Midrash, house of study or learning, literally to seek, may be related to that as well. Again, Beit HaKnesset, a house of assembly, a community center. These were certainly in use during the exile, which kept the Jewish community together, kept them united, kept them in contact with each other.

It's, again, not an overstatement, as I say here, to say that certainly, later in Judaism the history of Judaism, the synagogue really saved the faith, saved the identity of the Jewish people. And of course, after the destruction of the temple, both by Solomon, both the Solomonic temple by the Babylonians, and later on, the second temple that Herod remodeled, initially built by Zerubbabel, remodeled by Herod, that was destroyed by the Romans, the synagogue was vital. It was necessary because there was no place to sacrifice.

They had to reinvent themselves. So, the synagogue is a Jewish prototype for the Christian church and provides a pre-existing public platform and aid in Jewish and Gentile evangelism for the early church, for the early apostles, Paul, and the other apostles during the first century to spread the gospel. So, just to summarize, the synagogue was an institution that probably predated the exile.

There were probably similar community centers or similar institutions in and around Judah, but it flourished under exile because of the Jewish need to identify with other Jews. So, as we know, the Persians conquered Babylon, and everything changed. And we see this Edict of Cyrus again, that was proclaimed and published in 538, that allowed all peoples, not just Jews, but all peoples that were in exile that had been deported to go home, to return to their lands if they so desired.

So, the first group of exiles from Jerusalem returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel. And he was, again, a member of the Davidic line, certainly a leading candidate for some sort of a leader, perhaps king, eventual king, or ethnarch. However, the Old Testament is silent concerning his fate.

And as we know, as Christians, the Jews would have to wait for a later Davidic family member to be their Messiah. As the picture shows, Jerusalem's temple was rebuilt, but at a much more modest structure, not like Solomon's, but much more modest. And people were disappointed.

Many who came back saw it and were disappointed. But at least they had a temple, unlike their kinsmen back in Babylon. So, the Persian Empire had satrapies, or provinces, greater provinces, and then they had smaller sub-provinces.

The satrapy beyond the river was a satrapy or satrap that included Judah. And, of course, they had a province named Yehud, which was Judah. The capital of that province was Jerusalem.

We have pictures here, though, of the Babylonian period, where the earlier province was Mitzpah. And there's some pictures there of the Mitzpah. And, of course, we talked about the Yehud coins that came into circulation at that time and the Yehud jar handle stamps as well.

Now, the gentleman here pictured is Ephraim Stern, the late Ephraim Stern. He was kind of the world's foremost expert on the Persian period in the Holy Land. He literally wrote the book *Material Culture of the Bible* during the Persian period.

It's still very, very useful. Here, the map shows the province of Yehud, as we can determine from the sources and from archaeology. Okay, so the building of the temple and the reading of the law by Ezra were all important aspects.

But the most important, archaeologically, was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. We have this depicted artistically here. They had to build with one hand and use the other hand to hold a spear because of the constant threat of attack by Jerusalem's neighbors, who did not like the idea of Jews rebuilding their city.

Now, there is a tower along the eastern slope of the city of David, that is the remains of the lower courses of that are the remains of the tower built by Nehemiah. And as we know from the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah came after requesting leave to come to Jerusalem from the king. As his cupbearer, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem and did a night circuit with his donkey around the city walls to survey the damage that Nebuchadnezzar had done to the city several decades ago.

When Nehemiah reached the western, actually the eastern slope, of the city of David, he had to get off his animal because there was so much rubble and destruction there. He again enlisted all of the different families and clans of the returnees, and each received a section of the wall to rebuild. Of course, the most damage was done on this eastern part of the city of David because of the slope there.

And they had to build the city walls, as we know from archaeology, higher up the slope. And so, some of the city, the old city, pre-exilic city, was abandoned. In the 1950s, Michael Aviona wrote a very important and influential article on Nehemiah chapter 3, *The Walls of Nehemiah, A Minimalist View*, in the *Israel Exploration Journal*.

That was a, again, a very, very famous article. This is an illustration from that article. And what he does is he looks, because Nehemiah has a very detailed itinerary when he does this midnight tour around the walls of Jerusalem, coming out the valley gate and coming around and doing the whole circuit of the city of David and beyond.

So, Aviona, again, tries to reconstruct the pre-exilic city from the description of Nehemiah 3. To this day, Nehemiah chapter 3 is the best description of the pre-exilic city of Jerusalem. Notice I said pre-exilic because these are the ruins of Jerusalem from the time of the first temple, from the time of Jeremiah, and before. So, this is an extremely important source.

However, Aviona did make some errors. For instance, he got around to the broad wall and recognized that it was just a wide section of the wall for some reason. But an Israeli scholar followed up Aviona's article with an article about 20 years later and argued that a broad wall should be translated as an expansive wall, a wall that covers the entire western hill.

So, this broad wall is actually the remains of the old pre-exilic wall that came around the western hill. Instead of Aviona, it is simply a wide part of the wall. Aviona, again, was a minimalist.

He believed that Jerusalem at the time of the Old Testament, pre-exilic Jerusalem, the Jerusalem during the monarchy, was confined, essentially, to the city of David, the Ophel, and Mount Zion, where the temple and palaces were. He did not follow the fact that more and more archaeological evidence was showing that Jerusalem was much larger during the last two centuries of the monarchy. I think towards his death, he realized that, but early on, he was a minimalist.

Here is an example of an artist's reconstruction of what Jerusalem at the time of Nehemiah would have looked like. They re-fortified the original city of David, the Temple Mount, and the Ophel, but the returnees did not apparently re-fortify the western hill. Perhaps because there were so few of them, the numbers simply did not make it worthwhile.

But they kept Jerusalem to its early size, roughly dating to the time of Solomon. Later on, certainly, during the time of the Hasmoneans, that western hill was re-fortified. It was called the First Wall by Josephus, and the western hill became enclosed by a wall for the first time since 586.

Going back to Persia, we have to understand that most Jews remained in exile, chose to remain in exile, and died in exile. Some of the events in Ezra, Nehemiah, and certainly in Esther occur in Persia. And this is again some excellent views of Persepolis, the royal capital of Persia.

Just incredible, beautiful architecture there that's still in ruins is impressive to this day. And then finally, Susa, the secondary capital, again the scene of the Book of Esther. Just extensive ruins, not as well preserved as Persepolis.

A lot of it is in mud brick, but still an impressive site with a lot of architecture and archaeology work done there up until the fall of the Shah in the 1970s. And finally, we have Pasargadae, which was Cyrus the Great's great gardens and palace and the place of his burial. So, Persia, even though it was still overlord of the Jewish people, was much more lenient and allowed limited autonomy with governors like Nehemiah and others who were Jewish overseeing the province of Yehud and Judah for the most part.

Jews prospered under Persian rule until the coming of Hellenism and an even more serious threat with that totally opposite worldview that Hellenism brought to the table. Thank you very much.

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