

## Introduction



We are walking through some difficult texts today. An entire people go into exile primarily because of the unfaithful, exploitive, and oppressive powers of their leadership.

My first time in Cambodia...

**We don't have to look at Cambodia, or ancient Judah - which we will do in a moment - to realize humans treat each other terribly and that evil exists. It's part of our own history: From the Trail of Tears to slavery and the killing of African-American lives to ongoing injustices of being an Empire that include continued racism, classism, and sexism. Our own history has scars that need healing.**

**2 Kings 18-25**  
 [slide]<sup>1</sup>

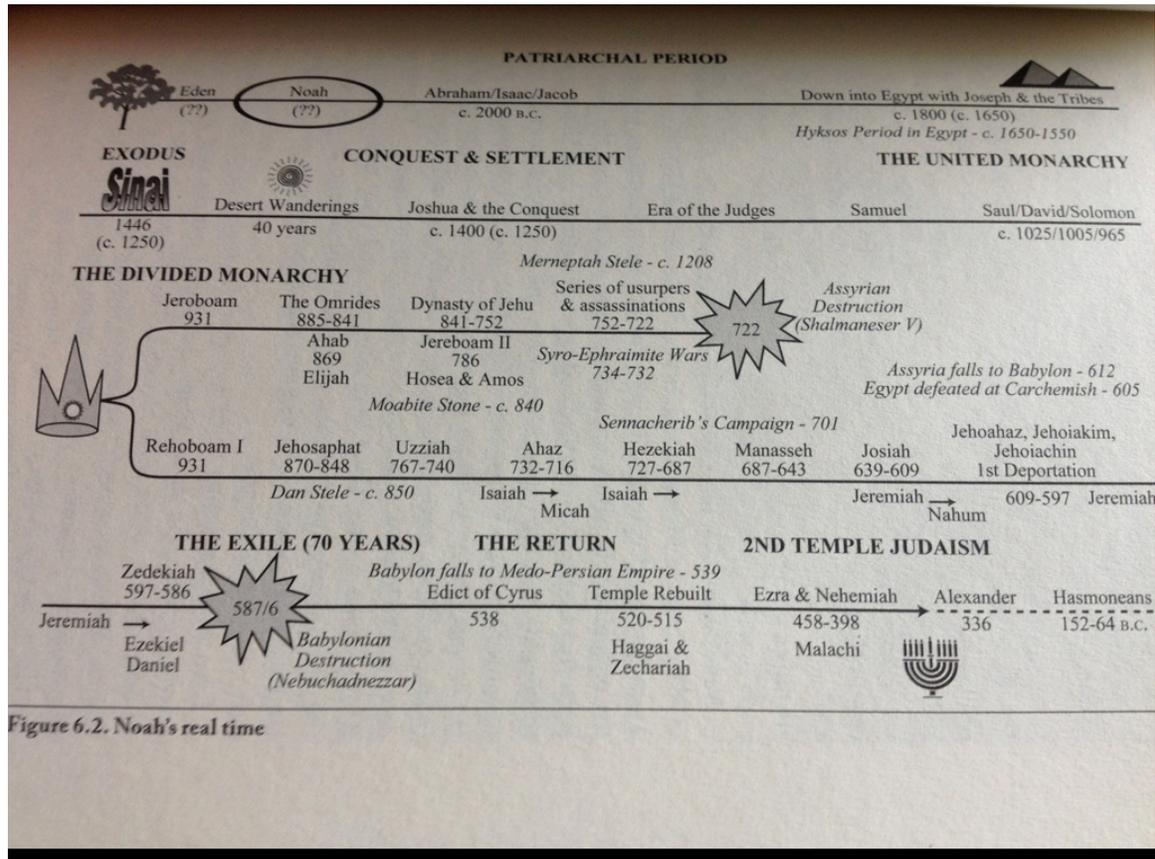


Figure 6.2. Noah's real time

In 2 Kings 18-25 a scene unfolds before our eyes. The timeline on the screen helps give an overall picture of what is occurring. What does it mean? What can we learn from it? We have to remember that Judah was a theocracy and this changes how the prophets' view decisions the kings made.

We need to keep two perspectives in mind as we move through the Biblical text today.

1. The first is considered as "being on the dance floor." This perspective places the perceptions of events occurring as a result of what one sees from the vantage point of being in the dance. So if I am in the mosh pit, or doing the waltz, or salsa, and particularly if I am slow dancing, what I see, the perspective I have, is pretty much what is directly in front of my face.
2. The other perspective is "being on the balcony." This is like parents of middle schoolers on the balcony to see what's going on with their kids and to make sure they aren't dancing too closely together. This perspective sees the larger picture at

<sup>1</sup> Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 48.

work because it sees all the players, movers, and shakers, and sees who is dancing with whom and what that means.

### ***The Seduction and Sin of Self-Reliance***

Ahaz was King from 732-716 and is considered an evil King. He appeases the Assyrian Empire to the North and as a result compromises the Nation of Judah religiously and politically.

Ahaz cuts a berit (Hebrew word for covenant/treaty) with Assyria, and Judah becomes a vassal to Assyria. In the Ancient Near East, treaties were set up as covenants and they were signed in a ceremony that was called “cutting a berit” and literally entails the vassal, weaker party, to walk through the middle of an animal sacrifice, reciting the oaths of the covenant as they walked through sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

In essence they were saying, “If we do not keep our end of the covenant agreement, we know that we will be slaughtered like the sacrificed animal we are walking through.”

Brutal.

The motive of Ahaz seems pure... Israel to the north was just taken over by Assyria. Yet the prophets tell a different story. A story of pride that says, “We know best. Let’s use and trust our own abilities and intellect to solve the problems we face. God?”

And Torah obedience goes right out the window.

The theological significance we receive from King Ahaz is this:

**Disobedience = Trust in self-reliance**

### ***Return to Faithfulness?***

Hezekiah (727-687) leads two revolts against Assyria. He breaks the Assyrian political dominance and begins to purify the Israelite faith through abolishing the Canaanite and Assyrian gods.

The theological emphasis in Kings is that Hezekiah helps the nation repent and turn towards Torah obedience. He moved the nation towards faithfulness. This is in contrast to the apostasy of Ahaz earlier.

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<sup>2</sup> Richter, 77.



Yet this is not exactly the full picture. Hezekiah also instituted the building of a massive tunnel to the well that was located outside of Jerusalem. This was done in case the Assyrians attacked Jerusalem in the future. Ancient Near East Warfare tactics include a siege – the foreign army would surround the city and cut off any trade, food, or water supply. Since the water supply Jerusalem used was outside the gates of Jerusalem, this would have been complete disaster.

So Hezekiah builds this tunnel. Seems wise, right?

But Isaiah had harsh words to say about this because he felt that this still indicated *self-reliance*.

Isaiah 22:8-11 (NRSV)

He has taken away the covering of Judah. On that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest, and you saw that there were many breaches in the city of David, and you collected the waters of the lower pool. You counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool. But you did not look to him who did it, or have regard for him who planned it long ago (emphasis mine).

So again, there seems to be a focus on self-reliance instead of believing and fully trusting God.

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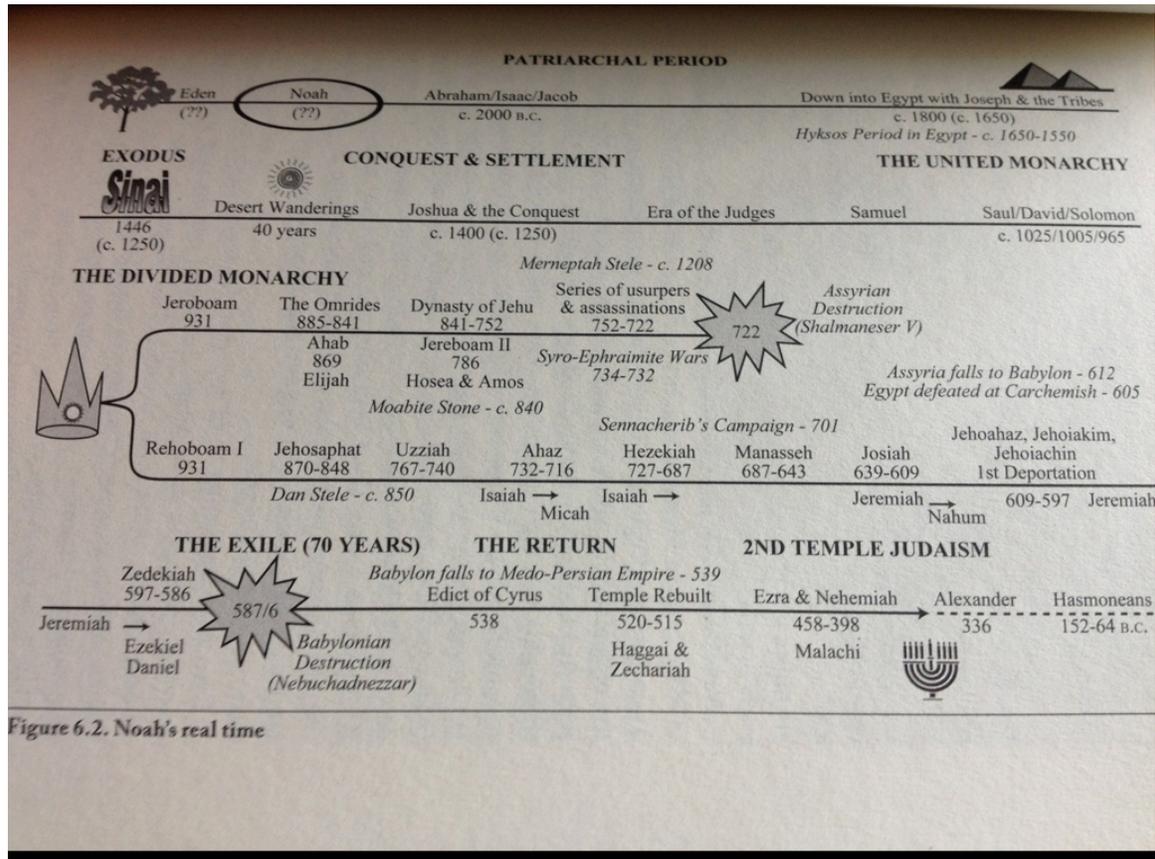


Figure 6.2. Noah's real time

Nevertheless, the writer in Kings wants us to understand there was some repentance and turning back to God.

Theological Significance here is:

**Obedience = Repentance**

**Idol Worship**

Manasseh (687-643) was considered the most evil king. He drastically changed the policies of Hezekiah and re-established Canaanite idol worship.

The text also says the streets of Jerusalem was filled with innocent blood. Manasseh was most concerned about power and privilege – he was not concerned with the weak.

As we return to the scene in 2 Kings, Manasseh was the tipping point to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. He is one player (the worst!) in a whole line of players who dance with the partners of self-reliance, idol worship, not only turning a blind-eye to the marginalized, the poor, and the downtrodden, but also actually exploiting them. The big-eye view is seeing the nation of Judah continue on its downward slope,

<sup>3</sup> Richter, 48.

even though there were bumps of upward faithfulness along the way. Manasseh is the quintessential king of unfaithfulness, and the Theological Significance of his reign is this: **Disobedience = Idolatry; and Exploitive and Oppressive Power**

***Return to Torah Worship***

King Josiah (639-609) responds to the scroll of Deuteronomy being found and repents; He turns himself and the nation back towards obedience.

The writer of Kings places the center of attention on the Torah and King Josiah is the King who rediscovers the Torah vision that is at the core of Deuteronomy.

Walter Brueggemann describes Josiah as embodying the central mandates from Moses to Joshua.<sup>4</sup>

Joshua 1:7-9 (NRSV)

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Notice the emphasis of not turning to the left, which in biblical language is a terrible choice, OR turning to the right, which is good choice. Rather, obedience is staying in the center, which is choosing the path of the law. This is the BEST choice. Theological Significance is this:

**Obedience = Reliance on God (Torah Worship)**

During King Josiah’s reign the Assyrian Empire was weakening due to internal conflict, and the Babylonian Empire comes and takes them over.

Josiah is killed in a battle fighting the Babylonians and Judah enters into a covenant with King Nebuchadnezzar – they become a Vassal to Babylon.

The following three kings of Judah revolt against Babylon. They are confident that God is going to come through for them because of the Covenant they made with God.

They felt entitled.

And the Babylonian Empire eventually defeats Judah, causing the Exile.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 188.

**The Clay Pot Was Smashed: Faith-Crisis**



Jeremiah uses the imagery of smashing a clay pot to describe the Lord's judgment. The proud boundaries of Israelite faith and worship were broken.

1. The Promised Land was gone – geographical boundaries destroyed.
2. The Nation-State was gone – political and ethnic boundaries wiped out
3. Torah worship was gone – religious boundaries

The people in exile were in a faith-crisis because their identity was stripped bare. Gone.

We leave the story of God's people here in a depressing state hopelessness: The Exile.

The Exile, God's judgment, was not so much about personal sin as it was about corporate sin. There certainly is an element of personal sin at stake, though, and its focus is a strong indictment on leadership: those that speak for God and are in positions of authority need to work for the good of all, especially the weak and marginalized. This is working for shalom of the community, and God's judgment occurred because the kings exploited their power in oppressive ways.

Yet God was not just focused solely “in the moment” of the dance floor perspective. Rather, God was focused on justice and shalom for all over the course of history – the balcony perspective.

### **Grace: Hope Born**

In our timeline we see that the problem of Genesis 1-11 is this: God is God and we are not

And the problem in Genesis 1-11 seems to be an ongoing problem for us today: a problem with humility. We often place ourselves in God’s position and think we have the right, and the intellect, to do as we please.

God begins the solution through establishing the Abrahamic Covenant in Gen. 12:1-3 and the solution begins to unfold.

Remember the technical formulation of a treaty? Cutting the berit? This is the same kind of covenant God initiates with Abram.

In Genesis 15:1-21 we read about the covenant.  
Abram, the vassal, sacrifices the animals for the covenant.

God speaks about the future enslavement of Abram’s descendants in Egypt, and references the Exodus and the future hope of his descendants.

And then Abram falls into a deep sleep. The sun had set and darkness had fallen, and a smoking firepot with a blazing torch passed between the broken flesh of the sacrificed animals, and the God of the Cosmos made a covenant with Abram.

It was God who passed through the broken pieces, not Abram. It was God who was saying, “If you or your descendants break this covenant, they will not pay the full price of being the vassal, I will pay it.” And Redemption is born, for this is not only a picture of Yahweh the liberator leading the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land, but by taking a canonical view of scripture our eyes are now resting fully on Jesus the liberator, healer, and redeemer.<sup>5</sup> This is a picture of God’s amazing love and grace ushered through Christ.

And because of God’s balcony perspective from the earliest pages of Genesis we are grafted into the family and now have the privilege to participate with Jesus in the important reconciling work by addressing African-American and Latino inequality in our neighborhoods and towns; working towards economic justice by working to eliminate the systemic nature of poverty; and by working towards gender equality, among others.

I look around the sanctuary today and see these redemptive things happening in our communities because of our participation. There is much work yet to do, but we are

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<sup>5</sup> Richter, 77-79.

engaging the issues. This congregation loves Jesus and acts on it. It really is exciting to see.



I met these particular kids three different times and even preached in their small, outdoor church twice. They are beautiful, resilient, and full of life. And for me, they symbolize the hope of a people coming through their horrendous exile.

### **Grace for Individuals**

Finally, while much of the focus today has been on broken communities, there is obvious brokenness we face as individuals. If you are walking through the exile in your personal life you are facing a type of brokenness that you have never faced before. You are facing a complete loss of identity, and it is impossible to have a balcony perspective. You are on the dance floor, and it can feel as if there is no hope.

### **My Story**

We, as the church, the body of Christ, we must surround you. We must help you cling to the garment of Jesus. Sometimes this means tough love. Other times it will be tender love. Either way the message is the same: We must have the balcony perspective and believe for you when you can't believe for yourself. We must cultivate a place for Jesus to show up. And then, perhaps, the broken pieces will begin to mend, heal, and allow the living water of God to once again fill up our pot.