

## Historical & Cultural Context: Persian Empire & the Hellenistic World

### 1. Chronology: Babylonian Exile and the Beginning of the Second Temple Period

ca. 600-580 BCE - Judean Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel

597 BCE – Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, begin to invade Israel (i.e., what's left of it = the Southern Kingdom, Judah) and besieges its capital Jerusalem; first (small) exile of Jews to Babylon

586 BCE – Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah and razes Jerusalem. What follows is a second (large) exile of Jews to Babylon. Leading Judeans and others are relocated, while others flee elsewhere (e.g., Jeremiah to Egypt). This marks the beginning of the **BABYLONIAN EXILE** (major pivot in Israelite history, such that texts and traditions are often categorized as “pre-exilic,” “exilic,” or “post-exilic”)

ca. 550 BCE - Judean Prophet “Second Isaiah” (responsible for Isa 40-55)

538 BCE – In the course of conquering much of the “known world” (Median Empire, Lydian Empire, and by virtue of the latter the Ionian Greeks), Cyrus the Great, ruler of the Persian Empire, takes Babylon in 539 BCE, marking the end of the Babylonian Empire. The Persians allow exiled Jews to return to their land and grant them funds to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Even though Jews were permitted to continue their ancestral customs and practice their own religion (possibly with the Pentateuch as the official law of the land), they were no longer an independent state, but only part of the Persian Empire. Thus they no longer had kings of their own, only priests. The province in which they lived was in the same place as the Israelite kingdom of Judah (albeit smaller) and was termed “Yehud” (the equivalent of “Judah” in Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire). Those who lived there were called “Yehudi,” from which comes our English term “Jew.” **Beginning of SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD**

ca. 538-520 BCE - Judean Prophet “Third Isaiah” (responsible for Isa 56-66)

ca. 520 BCE - Judean Prophet Haggai.

ca. 450-400 BCE – Reformation led by Ezra and Nehemiah

333-323 BCE – Conquests of Alexander the Great

305 BCE – Israel comes under Ptolemaic (Greek-Egyptian) rule

250 BCE – Torah first translated into Greek (= Septuagint [LXX])

200 BCE – Israel comes under Seleucidic (Greek-Syrian) rule

168-165 BCE – **MACCABEAN REVOLT** against Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes

### 2. Persian/Iranian beliefs about death and the afterlife

- **Zoroastrianism** = religion of the Persian Empire (~ present day Iran), practiced to this day by some Persians
- **Theology:** History as battle between two divine forces, each with its army – Ahura Mazda (associated w/wisdom, goodness, truth, purity, light, fire, etc.) and Angra Mainyu (associated w/evil, treachery, lies, darkness, etc.). Hence, ancient Zoroastrians prayed at fire altars, appealing to Ahura Mazda for guidance and wisdom, but also propitiated Angra Mainyu in curses and exorcisms.
- **Theodicy:** Despite this dualism, ancient Zoroastrianism may have been monotheistic, believing these two forces, good and evil, as coming from a single divine source. Dualism, seen from this perspective, provides a response to issues of theodicy. If there is one God, evil must come from Him too; the only questions are why and how (evil may be an active force in battle with good, e.g. in a battle eventually won by good; or evil could be inactive, merely the deterioration or corruption of good; etc. etc.).
- **Anthropology:** Death was fate of all humankind and what distinguishes humans from the divine. After death, the soul was thought to stay with the body for three days and nights and then takes a journey to the Beyond. Funerary practices includes special rites during these three days, followed by exposure of the dead: bodies were picked clean by birds and beast and dried by the sun (the later perhaps purificatory); later, the bones were gathered and put in ossuaries, often placed high in mountains. Here, it seems to have been seen as impure to bury a body in the ground; the proper place for remains was in the air.
- **Collective Eschatology:** Zoroastrianism includes traditions, albeit of unclear age, about resurrection of the body. The dead are raised together on a single day and live thereafter in “future bodies,” a perfected and spiritualized version of bodies in this world. Sinners are punished in the interim time between death and resurrection; hence, everyone will be resurrected in the end. Resurrection will be aided by a single savior figure, Soshyans, who helps bring about the new creation, reuniting dead bodies with souls. This process involves purification, which will be painful for the sinful but easy for the righteous.

### 3. Greek/Hellenistic beliefs about death and the afterlife

- **Theology:** Even despite certain exceptions (e.g., later philosophical schools that defended certain types of monotheism or monism), one does not generalize too much by calling the Greeks profoundly polytheistic, like ancient Near Eastern and Canaanite peoples, with different gods responsible for different aspects of earthly, human, and heavenly life.
- **Personal eschatology:** Hades is the name given both to the god of the dead and ruler of the underworld realm of the dead, on the one hand, and to the realm of the dead, on the other. Rare exceptions aside, Greeks of the archaic era seem to have thought of Hades as the ultimate destination for all—this was a shadowy, dark, and boring place. Accordingly, we find a stress that humans are mortal by nature and must settle for other kinds of immortality (in this case, what is stressed is fame, in contrast to the Israelite stress on family and the ANE stress on wisdom). → Already in Hesiod and Homer, however, we find the beginning of the concept of blessed otherworldly places (Isles of the Blessed; Elysian Fields) to which certain select heroes might go after death. But this is not yet a rule whereby the heroic or righteous automatically go to such a place. Similarly, a couple of mythological figures are punished in Hades, but it is generally not a place of retribution or reward in the early period, just an abode of the dead (similar in this sense to Sheol). The idea of Hades would gradually become articulated to include all the familiar features: the dead's journey w/Hermes as a guide, the encounter with Cerberus the 3-headed dog, the payment of Charon the ferryman (placed in the mouth of a corpse) for safe passage.
- **Anthropology:** The Greek term later used for "soul"—Greek *psyche*—refers in the archaic period (e.g., in the writing of Homer) to what leaves the body at death and goes to Hades; it is insubstantial and not alive. → By the the fifth century BCE, we begin to get a sense that the *psyche* is the essence of the individual, which survives death, and we begin to get a contrast between body and soul. Pythagoras (ca. 575-500 BCE) and his followers are credited with introducing the concept of the immortality of the soul, according to which the human soul, at death, would try to reunite with the universal soul, from which it originated in the heavens above. → These ideas would be developed and spread by Plato (ca. 427-347 BCE) and his followers and come to include notions of reward and punishment after death—as we shall discuss them later in the context of Plato's influence on Jewish and Christian authors.
- **Cosmology:** In the archaic period (e.g., Homer and Hesiod in eighth to seventh centuries BCE) Greeks held a view of the cosmos similar to that in the ancient Near East (i.e., flat earth, topped by dome – but in this case encircled by a single body of water, *Okeanos*) → Greek scientists and philosophers of the classical age innovated new models of the cosmos that would have a wide-reaching effect on others around the world as well: Pythagoras speculated about the universe as a sphere in which were other spheres, all rotating and making sounds as they did. → This notion was developed by later Pythagoreans (esp. Athaxagoras, ca. 500-428 BCE), such that at the center was the earth (spherical not flat!), around which rotated the moon, sun, Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the "fixed stars" on set paths. In this form, this idea was also picked by Plato and came to define the Hellenistic concept of the heavens.

#### Rough Periodization of Greek History

"**Archaic**" = term referring to the early period of Greek history, ca. 800-480 BCE (497-479 BCE = Persian Wars); the era, e.g., of Homer and Hesiod. This period overlaps with much of the Monarchic Age in Israel as well as the Babylonian Exile and Return.

"**Classical**" = term referring to the period ca. 480-323 BCE, e.g., an era that includes the life of Plato. During the entirety of this period, Israel was under Persian rule.

"**Hellenistic**" = term referring to the period between the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of the Roman Empire (i.e., ca. 323-30 BCE). During this period, Israel was part of a series of Hellenistic empires (i.e., empires founded by Alexander's underlings), then under self-rule after a successful revolt (Maccabean Revolt). But later, like the Greeks, they came under Roman domination. The term "Hellenistic" also refers to the classical culture of the Greeks as it later came to be spread throughout the areas conquered by Alexander (and developed in new ways by the peoples in those areas).