

# ***Meet God Again for the First Time (2003)***

**By Jon Paulien  
Review and Herald, 2003**

## **Chapter 4**

### **Exile and Return**

In the second chapter we spent some time walking through creation, the Flood, and the Exodus story, and showing the patterns in God's saving actions. We noticed that God is consistent but doesn't necessarily repeat every detail of His prior action. He can do new things within the overall consistency. There are patterns in His action, but He sometimes surprises us.

In this chapter we turn to the fourth great mighty act of God in the Old Testament, the Exile to Babylon and the return after seventy years. This single event is the main theme of much of the Old Testament. It's the sum and subject of virtually all the prophets. Some wrote

before the Exile and predicted it, like Hosea, Amos and Isaiah. Others wrote during the Exile, like Daniel and Ezekiel. Still others wrote afterward, like Malachi and Zechariah. So the basic thrust of most of the prophets, most of the history books, was this great event that was coming or, from their experience, had already happened.

Now let's put together some things we learned in the previous chapter. When the prophets start writing about the Exile to Babylon, what language would you expect them to use? The language of their past. And what is the language of their past? What is the past of Isaiah? And the past of Jeremiah? And the past of Hosea and Amos? It is God's mighty act for Israel in the Exodus. If the pattern remains consistent, we should expect that God will portray the Exile from Babylon in the language of His previous mighty acts--particularly the Exodus. The story of the Exodus is repeated throughout the Old Testament, because there, above all, God set the tone for what He was going to do from then on. So let's take a look at a number of these prophets so how this worked out.

## **Hosea**

Let's start with Hosea 2:8-15. Hosea is a prophet who is looking forward to the Exile. He was writing somewhere around 760 BC (The Exile occurred partially around 722 and completely around 586 BC). In Hosea 2:8 God says, with reference to Israel: *"She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold--which they used for Baal."* Notice the fascinating dynamic of this verse. God is rehearsing His mighty actions for them. Not just the Exodus, not just something way,

way back but He says, "Hey, look at your new wine, oil, grain, gold, silver. Everything you have, you got from Me." What was Israel's problem? They did not acknowledge what God had done for them, they did not rehearse His mighty acts. They did not remind themselves continually that it was God Who had done these things in their experience.

A little background to this text. At this point in time, Israel is under the rulership of Jereboam II. He's a king that's not widely featured in the Old Testament, but we do know that this was an incredibly prosperous time. Jereboam II ruled over a territory nearly as large as that of David. It was a very prosperous and a very successful time. Apparently the super powers of the time, Egypt and Assyria, were both going through a low period economically and politically. With these super-powers out of the way, Israel became a mini super-power in its own right for a few years. So this was a very special time--a time when things were going well, people were prosperous, their enemies were at bay, and things are going pretty good. And you would think, after all the hard times they'd been through, that they'd be thankful to God for the good times. But, it was not so. According to Hosea 2:8, they forgot the source of their good things and instead they praised Baal.

Hosea 2:9: *"Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it's ready. I will take back my wool, and my linens, intended to cover her nakedness."* Do you hear an echo of Deuteronomy 28 here? Depending on how they respond to His mighty acts, either prosperity will come or difficult times will come. Verses 10-13: *"So now I will expose her lewdness before the eyes of her lovers; no one will take her out of my hands. I will stop all her celebrations: her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days--all her appointed feasts. I*

*will ruin her vines and her fig trees, which she said were pay from her lovers; I will make them a thicket, and wild animals will devour them. I will punish her here for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot' declares the LORD."*

Do you see what Israel's problem was? Her focus is not on what God has done; her focus is on what she has gained, God had become like a vending machine from which you get what you want when you want it. But people don't think a lot about vending machines between snacks, do they? This is animistic type of thinking: manipulating the gods to keep the rain and the prosperity coming. The Canaanite god Baal was the god of thunder and storm. So he was the god that provided rain. And this is a part of the world where there is never enough rain. So if you can get Baal to bring more rain, everything's going to be great.

So, Israel was losing its focus on the true God and was falling back into primitive ways of relating to God. But notice verse 14, where God steps in to help them: *"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her."* What's this desert business all about? It is a subtle reminder of Israel experience during the Exodus. God is reminding them of His mighty actions for them in the past. Israel forgets to rehearse what God has done, so He rehearses for them. It's a pattern throughout the Old Testament—when Israel stops rehearsing God rehearses for them. He rehearses His mighty acts in the past.

He offers a solution. He says, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to bring her back into the desert." What's He saying here? That He's going to do the Exodus all over again. It's like a love story. God looks back on Israel's youth, when the nation was young, He and

Israel were dating--so to speak--in the desert. In later years the marriage has gotten rough and God is thinking about divorcing her, but then he comes up with a plan. Let's go back and do the things that got us together in the first place! Let's start dating again!

Notice verse 15: *"There (in the desert) I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt."* This is the incredible story of a God Who has lost His lover. She's not thinking of Him; she's thinking about other gods all the time.

So God develops a two-fold strategy to win her back. First, she must discover what life would be like without Him. She has to lose the vending machine. She has to "hit bottom." This is a pattern familiar to us today. People have to hit bottom before they are willing to do whatever it takes to gain a better life. Some people call what God did here "tough love." Others call it "intervention." Whatever you call it, it's a constant thing in the prophets. And in the dark times, when everything falls apart, God will return and try to allure Israel back to Himself. And if in the dark times she will come back to Him, then the suffering will be worth it all even though He would rather make her prosperous. So God's tough-love plan for Israel is a new wilderness experience. What is that new wilderness experience? The Exile. That's the theme behind all this. But notice that the Exile is described in terms of the Exodus. God uses the language of the past to describe the future.

Second, God will spend time with Israel seeking to win her back to Himself. One of my favorite authors tells us that if you want a marriage to success, you need to continue the early intentions. Treat each other the way you treated each other before you were married. Go out

on dates, stay up late together, and so on. That's what God plans to do with Israel in the "wilderness." His goal in putting Israel into exile is to win her back to Himself.

## **Micah**

Let's move on to Micah, who prophesied around 750 BC in Judah. And Micah offers a message that is similar to Hosea's. Micah 7:15-20: *"As in the days when you came out of Egypt, I will show them my wonders. Nations will see and be ashamed, deprived of all their power. They will lay their hands on their mouths and their ears will become deaf. . . . Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depth of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago."*

Notice that once again, a prophet addresses the Exile from the standpoint of the Exodus. There is reference to "wonders" in the land of Egypt. There is reference to the promises made to Abraham. But the point of emphasis in Micah is not Israel's physical move into exile and their physical return after seventy years. The point of emphasis in Micah is the spiritual nature of this pilgrimage. The "exodus" from Babylon will involve pardon, forgiveness, mercy and compassion. Israel's consistent unfaithfulness will be forgotten like something that falls to the bottom of the sea, something the Egyptian armies had done a thousand years before.

So once again there is a spiritualization of the type. The real enemy is no longer the

Egyptians or the Babylonians, it is the sins and failures of God's own people. Their captivity to sin and unproductive behaviors is as much in view as their physical captivity to any particular foreign nation. The exile, from God's perspective, is not so much a political or economic issue as it is a spiritual issue.

## Isaiah

But there is a physical side to this release from exile as well. Let's look at another prophet, this one named Isaiah. He had a lot of things to say about the Exile even before it happened. Isaiah 11:15-16: *"The Lord will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. . . ."* What's going on here? We're hopping from continent to continent all of a sudden. What Isaiah is doing is speaking of a future event in the language of the past. The Red Sea experience (in Egypt) is compared Israel's future experience by the Euphrates River (the river of Babylon). That's how the two come together. Isaiah 11:15-16 continued: *"He will break it (the Euphrates River) up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals. There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt."*

Isaiah is saying, "Like the Red Sea experience, I'm going to do it again. But this time it will be the Euphrates River. This time it will not be Egypt, it will be Assyria." He is talking about a future event but in the language of the past. When they go into exile, the pattern of Israel's experience in Egypt will be instructive.

But here's a question for those who are relatively familiar with the Bible, could you

predict the exact nature of that Euphrates experience from this prophecy? No, you couldn't. It was not a scorching wind that dried up the Euphrates River, it was an engineering strategy by Cyrus, the Persian king around 539 BC. The river was not dried up so the Israelites could pass through, it was dried up so that the Persian armies could bypass the city walls conquer it. When Cyrus came, it was to conquer Babylon, not Assyria. So it would have been impossible to predict the exact nature of the fall of Babylon from the prediction. On the other hand, when that event happened, it would not be hard to see that the prophecy had been fulfilled. The language of the past provides the language with which to predict the future. Prophecy is not given to provide for us the details of the future, it is given to help us recognize the events *when they come*.

Note the words of Jesus to this effect. John 13:19: *"I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe that I am He."* Sometimes students of Bible prophecy want to fully understand all the future before it happens. They want to see a point by point correspondence between the text and future events. But I just don't see that type of one to one correspondence in the Bible. Just go to the Biblical text. Read the prophets through as a whole. Let the Bible teach you how the Bible thinks. That is the best way to understand the tougher passages of the Bible.

Another text from Isaiah, Isaiah 43:16-17: *"This is what the LORD says--he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick."* What's this about? It's the language of the Exodus again. Whenever



the prophets don't make sense to you, ask the question, where in the Bible have I seen this before? When you can answer that question, the Bible will often make perfect sense.

In Isaiah 43:18-19, however, the prophet makes an interesting switch. *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland."* What's this text telling us? It's telling us the future will be like the past but it won't be limited to the past. The past provides the language of the future but the future transcends the past. Remember that the focus of all of this, in its primary sense, is the Exile to Babylon. And when you realize that, there are some things that make sense that otherwise would not make sense.

Take Isaiah 65:17-20, for example. God is getting so excited about what He's going to do during and after the exile to Babylon, that the language of the Exodus is no longer big enough. God goes all the way back to creation to find language big enough to describe the mighty act that He is planning to do. Isaiah 65:17-19: *"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more."*

This is a favorite text of those who would like to better understand the life of heaven. But notice what happens in verse 20: *"Never again will there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be*

*thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.”*

Where did this dying business come from? I thought that isn't supposed to happen in heaven. But remember that this text is in the context of Israel's return from exile. As was the case with Deuteronomy, the restoration of the land and the people was to be gradual. Their obedience to Him would enable Him to do greater and greater things for them until the land of Canaan became the Garden of Eden all over again. The Old Testament expectation did not have the kind of sudden change that comes with the New Testament concept of the second coming of Jesus.

So we see God prophesying the future in the language of the past. That is true for all the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi, even for Daniel. Some students of the Bible feel that Daniel is an apocalyptic prophet, and therefore sees the future with perfect clarity. And it is true, apocalyptic is a different type of prophecy than Hosea or Isaiah. But it still applies the language of the past to the future.

### **From Prophecy to Fulfillment**

With prophets like Haggai and Zechariah we come to the time of fulfillment, the time after the Exile. In many ways, the reality of fulfillment was quite a bit different than a reading of the prophets might have led one to expect. The drying up of the Euphrates River made the deliverance possible but they certainly didn't walk through it in sandals, as Isaiah had said. The connection between the language of the past and the actual event was creative to say the least.

There were a number of ways in which the reality of fulfillment was different than the expectation. Reading the prophets one might have expected millions of people streaming back from exile, in reality it was only 50,000. You would have expected great miracles--pillars of fire and a cloud--instead there was just a lot of hard work.

It's no wonder that in reading the post-exilic prophets you discover that the people of God became discouraged. Israel was still suffering persecution, Persia was still in control. The promise and the reality were so different that the people got discouraged. It became increasingly clear that this was not the best that God could do. The great, final deliverance was yet to come.

So, with the close of the Old Testament, you have a fulfillment of the prophecies about the Exile. But it's a disappointing fulfillment. When you come to the end of the Old Testament, the fulfillment is partial at best. That is why no one has ever built a religion solely on the Old Testament. It is incomplete in itself. It cries out for finishing. That's why the three great religions that base themselves on the Old Testament all have a "New Testament" of some kind: a Talmud, a Koran, or a New Testament.

You can't have a religion just on the Old Testament. The Old Testament simply roots us in the reality of where we are and in the hopelessness of that reality. And it points us to the incredible mighty act of God that is yet to come. So the Old Testament points both ways in the end. It points back to the rehearsal of the mighty acts of God in the past and forward to the greatest act that is yet to come. And that sets the table for the New Testament which we will turn to in the next chapter. But first, let's look at a couple of post-exilic texts. These texts give

us a sense of how things looked to them at that time.

Haggai 2:1-3: *"On the twenty-first day of the seventh-month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 'Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?"'"*

God is recognizing that to them, this isn't the real fulfillment. Things have not been transformed in the way that they expected.

Zech 2:4-5: *""But now be strong, O Zerubbabel," declares the LORD. "Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," declares the LORD, "and work. For I am with you," declares the LORD Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear."*

Was this the fulfillment? Yes, it was. But it was a disappointing fulfillment for them. They had read the prophecies and they were looking for more. But that is not all that He says.

Zech 2:6-9: *"This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty. "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the LORD Almighty. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the LORD Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the LORD Almighty."*

At the close of the Old Testament God is saying, "Everything is on track. My greatest,

mightiest act hasn't happened yet but don't get discouraged, everything's on track. I haven't lost control of the situation here." A great, mighty future shaking will yet be accomplished by His hand.

Zechariah 9:9-10 puts another spin on the same future. Zechariah 9:9-10: *"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. "I will take away the chariots from Ephriam and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."*

Now I ask you, can you blame many of the Jews for thinking that the Messiah would be a little bit more glorious than Jesus seemed to be? But what they missed, and it's easy to miss, is the spiritual aspect of the promise. It's easy to misunderstand a prophecy before its time. With the spiritualizing of the type as you move through the Old Testament, the fulfillment more and more came to the eyes of faith only. The fulfillment in Haggai was through the eyes of faith. But to the eyes of sight, it was a disappointment. It was a measly-looking fulfillment. Yet God said to them, "This is the fulfillment. This is where I'm at. You must see what I am doing, what I have yet to do."

In a way this was nothing new. Even in the Exodus, the majority grumbled and misunderstood what God was doing. So, when you come to the end of the Old Testament, you are tempted to cry out, "This couldn't be the best that God can do!" And you would be right. The best that God could do is waiting for us in the New Testament.