

The Story (15) – The Fall of Judah

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I. Introduction

A. The united kingdom of Israel split into the two nations of Israel and Judah after Solomon's death in 931 B.C. Each kingdom had many kings who ruled one after the other. All the kings of Judah, with the exception of the usurper Athaliah, were descendants of David, whereas the kings of Israel came from a number of different families. Some of the kings of Judah were righteous, but all of the kings of Israel were unfaithful to God, some more than others.

B. The northern kingdom continued until it was conquered by the Assyrians, the final blow coming with the fall of Samaria, Israel's capital, in 722/721 B.C. Our guest speaker, Tony Johnson, discussed that last week. Today I want to review with you the story of Judah from that point until it was conquered by the Babylonians, the final blow coming with the fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C.

C. But let me start with the death of Azariah (Uzziah) in 740 B.C. This was the year of the Isaiah's great vision, the year he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Isa. 6:1). Recall that Azariah's (Uzziah) son Jotham began to reign as a coregent in 750 B.C. after the Lord struck Azariah with leprosy. After Azariah's death in 740 B.C., Jotham continued to reign until around 731 B.C. 2 Kings 15:34-35 states: ³⁴And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Uzziah had done. ³⁵Nevertheless, the high places were not removed. **The people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places.**

II. Judah from the Fall of Samaria to the Fall of Jerusalem

A. Jotham was followed on the throne by his son Ahaz/Jehoahaz.

1. The chronology of the reigns in this period is notoriously complex, and I cannot take the time to delve into the details. The bottom line is that Ahaz seems to have become a vice-regent of Jotham's in 743 B.C., even though Azariah was still alive, and then in 735 B.C. he became a *coequal* ruler with his father Jotham. When Jotham died in 731 B.C. Ahaz reigned by himself until 715 B.C.

2. 2 Kings 16:2b-4 says of Ahaz that he **did not do what was right** in the eyes of the LORD his God, as his father David had done, ³ but he **walked in the way of the kings of Israel**. He **even burned his son as an offering**, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ⁴ And he **sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree**. (See also, 2 Chron. 28:1-4.)

B. Ahaz was followed by the good king Hezekiah. He served as an assistant to this father from age 11 (729 B.C.) before assuming the sole reign on Ahaz's death in 715 B.C. He reigned alone from 715 B.C. until 696 B.C. and then coreigned with his son Manasseh from 696 until 686 B.C.

1. As sole ruler, Hezekiah promptly asserted his loyalty to Yahweh alone and took steps to restore the worship of Yahweh in Judah. He rebelled against the king of Assyria (2 Ki. 18:7), the dominant power in the ancient Near East at the time, which no doubt contributed to Sargon's incursion into Judah in 712 B.C. (Isa. 20:1). Assyrian records refer to Judah at this time as a tribute state, so perhaps Hezekiah was, at least temporarily, subject to Sargon. But for the remainder of Sargon's reign Judah was relatively free from Assyrian interference.

2. But that changed when Sargon's son Sennacherib came to the Assyrian throne in 705 B.C. With Egyptian encouragement, Hezekiah rebelled against Assyria (2 Ki. 18:13, 21), which led to Sennacherib besieging Jerusalem in 701 B.C. This is when God miraculously spared the city from capture by the Assyrians. 2 Kings 19:35-37 and Isa. 37:36-38 report that an angel struck down 185,000 Assyrians who were ready to assault the city.

3. Ironically, this great deliverance was turned by Israel into something negative in that many of them came to think that God would never allow Jerusalem to be conquered because it was his special dwelling place. In the words of Jeremiah 7:11, they came to see the temple as a "den of robbers" in the sense of a hideout, a place where the wicked could retreat to safety. They thought God's special identification with Jerusalem would provide some kind of mechanical or automatic protection against any enemies regardless of how they lived. The idea was that God would protect his "turf" no matter what.

C. Hezekiah was followed by his son the wicked king Manasseh, who reigned in Judah from around 696-642 B.C., the first eleven years of which was as coregent with Hezekiah. Perhaps his coregency was prompted by Hezekiah's earlier bout with a near fatal disease (2 Ki. 20:1; 2 Chron. 32:24; Isa. 38:1).

1. 2 Kings 21:1-9 says Manasseh **did what was evil** in the sight of the LORD, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. He **rebuilt the high places** that Hezekiah his father had destroyed and **erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah**, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He **built altars to foreign gods in the courts of the Lord's house, burned his son as an offering, used fortune-telling and omens, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers**. He made a **carved image of Asherah and set it in the Lord's house**. Verse 9 says Manasseh **led the people astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel**.

2. 2 Kings 21:16 adds: ¹⁶ Moreover, Manasseh **shed very much innocent blood**, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. In 2 Ki. 21:11-12 the Lord declared: "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations and has done things **more evil than all that the Amorites did**, who were before him, and has **made Judah also to sin with**

his idols, ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.

3. The Chronicler relates that Manasseh's stubborn refusal to heed the word of the prophets led to his being taken to the city of Babylon by the Assyrians. It seems that late in his reign he violated his obligations to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and was taken away in humiliation. This led to his repentance and faith, and the Lord graciously brought about his return to Jerusalem and restoration to the throne (2 Chron. 33:10-20). From Ashurbanipal's perspective, he may have concluded that Manasseh had been duly chastened and would no longer be a problem. See Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 435. Manasseh's late repentance did not undo the wickedness he had unleashed on the society, and thus he is cited as a cause of God's judgment (2 Ki. 23:26, 24:3).

D. Manasseh's son Amon reigned in Judah for two years. He **did what was evil and walked in all the way in which his father walked and served the idols that his father served and worshiped them.**

E. Amon's son Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign (around 640 B.C.), and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem (2 Ki. 22:1). He was a good king (2 Ki. 22:2) who embarked on a program of serious religious reform, but it was insufficient to stave off God's judgment. Daniel Block says of Manasseh (p. 2):

[T]he kingdom of Judah never recovered from the spiritual degradation to which he had brought the nation. After [fifty]-five years of court-sponsored paganism, Judean apostasy was so deeply entrenched that the sweeping reforms of the good king Josiah (640-609) could do no more than scratch the surface, but not for lack of trying.

1. Zephaniah prophesied during Josiah's reign and warned of God's coming judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. For example, he declared in Zeph. 1:4-6: ⁴ "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests-- ⁵ those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the LORD and who also swear by Molech, ⁶ those who turn back from following the LORD and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him."

2. The ancient kingdom of Babylonia began a new rise to prominence with the ascension of Nabopolassar to the throne in 626 B.C. In 612 B.C. the Babylonians, assisted by the Medes, destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, as Nahum had prophesied almost 40 years earlier. When the Babylonians and their allies took Haran in 610 B.C., the Assyrian Empire essentially was finished. The issue at that point was whether Egypt or Babylonia would rule Palestine and Syria.

3. In 609 B.C. the newly-crowned Pharaoh Neco II was leading his troops through Palestine on his way to assist the Assyrians in their effort to regain Haran (2 Ki. 23:29; also 2

Chron. 35:20). You may recall that king Josiah confronted the Egyptians at that time and was killed near Megiddo in 609 B.C.

F. After killing Josiah, Pharaoh Neco continued northward on his military campaign in northern Syria. The people made Josiah's son Shallum king of Judah (with the throne-name Jehoahaz) (2 Ki. 23:30; 2 Chron. 36:1). He **did what was evil** in the sight of the Lord and reigned only three months (2 Ki. 23:31-32).

G. On his return from Syria, Neco deposed Jehoahaz and deported him to Egypt. Neco replaced Jehoahaz with Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, and renamed him Jehoiakim (2 Ki. 23:31-34; 2 Chron. 36:3-4; Jer. 22:10-12). So Jehoiakim becomes king of Judah in 609 B.C. at the direction of Pharaoh Neco.

1. We know from Jeremiah 22 and 26 and 2 Kings 24 that Jehoiakim oppressed the people through forced labor and murder and persecuted those prophets who opposed him. It was probably early in Jehoiakim's reign, between 608-605 B.C., that the prophet Habakkuk voiced his complaint:

² How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? ³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. ⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

2. Habakkuk questions why God has not intervened to deal with the evil, violence, and injustice that are rampant in Judah. And God tells him in essence, "I got this." He is already in the process of raising up the Babylonians to be his instruments of punishment of Judah. It only appears from Habakkuk's limited perspective that God is ignoring Judah's wickedness. He is not.

3. In 605 B.C., the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, while still crown prince, soundly defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, establishing Babylonia as the undisputed controller of Palestine. That famous battle is recounted in the Babylonian Chronicle, which archaeologists have recovered, and also is referred to in Jer. 46:2. Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylonia that same year.

4. Daniel 1:1-2 informs us that Nebuchadnezzar (or possibly subordinates acting under his orders) came against Jerusalem in 605 (under one way of reckoning the years of a king's reign), presumably because Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian (having been put on the throne by Neco), and took tribute from Jehoiakim in the form of people and various religious articles. That is when Daniel and his compatriots went into captivity. Jehoiakim himself was threatened with captivity (2 Ch. 36:5-8).

5. Between Josiah's death and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586, the prophet Jeremiah warned the people of Judah repeatedly of the terrible judgment God was going to bring on them and suggested that even now there was hope if they would repent, but they would not.

H. Jehoiakim rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 24:1), which led to a massive invasion in 598/597 B.C. Jehoiakim died somewhere during that time and was succeeded by his son Jehoiakin (2 Ki. 24:6). Within just a few months of becoming king, Jehoiakin surrendered to the Babylonians without a fight in order to avoid complete annihilation of Jerusalem. He, the royal family, and a large portion of the Judean elite, including Ezekiel, were led into exile (2 Ki. 24:14), and more treasures from the temple and royal palace were carried off.

I. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Jehoiakin's uncle Mattaniah to be the new king of Judah, giving him the name Zedekiah.

1. From captivity Ezekiel prophesied repeatedly of the severe judgment that is about to befall Jerusalem. The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel are filled with predictions and warnings of the catastrophe that is coming as God's punishment for wickedness and include appeals for repentance. In chapter 23, for example, he tells the story of the two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, representing Israel and Judah, a main point of which is that despite seeing the punishment imposed on Israel Judah continued on the same course.

2. 2 Kings 24:19 says that Zedekiah **did what was evil** in the sight of the LORD, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. 2 Chron. 36:12-16 says: ¹² He **did what was evil** in the sight of the LORD his God. He **did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet**, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. ¹³ He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He **stiffened his neck and hardened his heart** against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were **exceedingly unfaithful**, following all the **abominations of the nations**. And they **polluted the house of the LORD** that he had made holy in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they **kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets**, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

III. The Fall of Jerusalem

A. Zedekiah eventually rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, as Jehoiakim had done, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C. and further exile of its inhabitants. The fall of Jerusalem is reported in 2 Ki. 25:1-21, 2 Chron. 36:17-21, and Jer. 39:1-10 and 52:1-30. The emotional toll of that destruction is painted in Lamentations.

B. Archaeological notes

1. Lachish Ostraca

a. Jeremiah 34:7 refers to Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Judah in 587 B.C. and mentions that Lachish and Azekah were the only fortified cities in Judea other than Jerusalem still holding out against Nebuchadnezzar's assault. Azekah is 18 miles southwest of Jerusalem, and Lachish is 11 miles south of Azekah.

b. In 1935 and 1938, British excavator J. L. Starkey discovered in the ruins of Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir) 21 ostraca, which are broken pieces of pottery. On some of these ostraca messages had been written during the time of Jer. 34:7 when Nebuchadnezzar's army was advancing on Jerusalem. Most of the Lachish letters appear to be dispatches from a Jewish subordinate named Hoshaiiah to his commander Yaush in Lachish (though there is some dispute about his location). Hoshaiiah apparently was stationed at an outpost and was responsible for interpreting the fire signals from Azekah and Lachish during that time. Lachish Ostrakon IV includes: "And let my lord know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we do not see Azekah."

2. Babylonian Prism – 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 39-41, 43, and 52 mention Nebuzaradan as the captain of the Babylonian guard. A prism found in Babylon and published by E. Unger in 1938 lists Nebuzaradan (Nebuzeriddinam) as a member of Nebuchadnezzar's court. The Hebrew term for the office he occupies is a loan word from Akkadian that literally means "cook," but in some contexts the activities of this person are the functions of a high state official, so something like "captain of the guard" is correct.

3. Nebo-Sarsekim Tablet – Jeremiah 39:3 is best translated as saying that Nebo-Sarsekim (NIV, TNIV, NET, ESV), a chief officer of Nebuchadnezzar, was present at the fall of Jerusalem.¹ In 2007 Michael Jursa, an associate professor at the University of Vienna, was searching in the British Museum for Babylonian financial accounts. He deciphered the cuneiform inscription on a small tablet that had been uncovered in the 1870s and acquired by the museum in 1920. It was a receipt dated to the 10th year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, which makes it 595 B.C. The receipt was for a gift of gold made to a temple in Babylon, located about a mile from modern Baghdad. The donor identified in the receipt is Nebo-Sarsekim, Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch.

¹ See comments in Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 84-85. This reading is confirmed by Jursa's discovery.