

*Commentary for Lesson 5*

*March 29, 2020*

## **The People of Judah Are Exiled**

**Focal Passage: 2 Kings 25:8-21**

**Background Text: 2 Kings 23:34–25:30**

**Purpose: To understand that suffering comes in many forms**

**Note:** For those readers who use supplementary commentaries to prepare for each week's lesson, we will post downloadable commentary on AdultBibleStudies.com through the summer quarter. We will publish an annual commentary for purchase for Fall 2020–Summer 2021.

### **Introduction to 2 Kings 23–25**

Second Kings 23 (along with Chapters 21–22) covers the reigns of Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah. The writers of Kings emphasize the contrast between the religious policies of Manasseh and Amon as kings who displeased God, and Josiah, who pleased God. Manasseh and Amon were condemned as the worst kings ever to reign in Judah. Josiah was praised as the most faithful king. Biblical sources for this time in the history of Judah are 2 Kings 21–23; 2 Chronicles 33–35; Jeremiah 1–6; Nahum; Habakkuk; and Zephaniah. Assyrian and Babylonian records also provide information about these countries' dealings with Judah.

The history of Kings ended in approximately 560 BC, with Judah at the mercy of the Babylonians. Jerusalem was destroyed, thousands of Judeans were exiled in Babylon, and the people who remained in the ravaged land were at odds with one another. The last four verses of 2 Kings 25 add a footnote of hope concerning Judah's future, based on the improved treatment of the exiled King Jehoiachin by the Babylonians.

The books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel deal with this time in history of the people of Judah. Official records of Babylonian kings, called the Babylonian Chronicles, also provide valuable information about Babylonia's dealings with Judah.

### **The Reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:31-37)**

Jehoahaz was a younger son of Josiah, who apparently supported his father's anti-Egyptian policies. Pharaoh Neco took him as a prisoner to Egypt and put his older brother, Jehoiakim, on the throne in Judah. Jehoiakim paid the tribute demanded by Pharaoh by heavily taxing the people of Judah. Jehoiakim also built himself a new palace by increasing taxes and using forced labor from among his subjects. Judah, thus, faced the loss of a beloved king and the loss of her independence and also had to bear the burden of the new king's extravagance.

### **The Reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-7)**

The history of Jehoiakim's reign begins in 2 Kings 23:34 (also 2 Chronicles 36:1-8). Jehoiakim began his reign in 609 BC as a vassal of Egypt; but by 605, Egypt gave way to Babylon. Jehoiakim then had to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar (also called Nebuchadrezzar). According to the Book of Daniel, at this time, the Babylonian king also took Daniel and other Hebrew youths to Babylon to serve him (Daniel 1:1-7).

The Book of Jeremiah helps to illuminate the situation in Jerusalem during the years of Jehoiakim's reign, which led up to his rebellion against Babylon. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began in 627, during the reign of Josiah. Jeremiah apparently supported Josiah's reform efforts (2 Kings 23:4-28), though he probably had no official role in the reform program. Judging from some of Jeremiah's prophecies during Josiah's lifetime, however, the prophet became disillusioned with the reform effort, even before Josiah's untimely death (for example, Jeremiah 3:6-10; 6:16-21).

The reform focused on external changes, particularly the practices of worship and ritual, while the hearts of the people still went after "worthless idols" (NIV) or, as the NRSV puts it, "something that does not profit" (Jeremiah 2:11). Jeremiah had strong criticism for the priests, the guardians of the Law, false prophets, and other unfaithful leaders. Despite the enthusiasm and repentance brought on by Josiah's efforts, deep and lasting changes had yet to take place in the hearts and minds of the people of Judah.

The turmoil brought by Josiah's death and Egypt's interference in Judah's internal affairs undermined what good had come from the reform. Jeremiah's voice was raised again and again against the greed and dishonesty of Jerusalem's citizens, the false leaders who promised material and spiritual well-being to the dishonest, and the people who were unashamed of their idol worship and immorality.

Jehoiakim proved to be faithful to God, as well as unwise in his dealings with the Babylonians. The people turned their backs on their covenant faith and clung to the belief that God would never allow Jerusalem, the Temple, and the nation to be destroyed. Jeremiah acknowledged that God lent the divine presence to the Temple and gave the Promised Land to the people of Israel. He declared, however, that the people of Israel had revoked these agreements by their wickedness. It was in this atmosphere of unfaithfulness and false security that Jehoiakim looked for his chance to establish Judah's independence from Babylon.

**Verses 1-2.** In 601 BC, Egypt again challenged Babylon, but neither side gained a clear victory. Nebuchadnezzar was occupied elsewhere for the next few years, and Jehoiakim decided that that was the time to withdraw tribute and make his move toward independence.

Nebuchadnezzar first responded by sending raiding parties into Judah from neighboring countries that he controlled (Jeremiah 35:11). In December 598, Nebuchadnezzar moved against Jerusalem in force. Jehoiakim died at that time, assassinated by enemies in Judah or in a military skirmish.

**Verses 3-7.** In verses 3-4, the writers of Kings give their evaluation of Judah's situation. They relate the destruction of Judah by Babylonia to the sins of King Manasseh (2 Kings 21:1-18). Jeremiah related the coming destruction directly to Judah's unfaithfulness and rebellion against God during his lifetime.

Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah and Coniah) assumed the throne of Judah with no possibility of help from Egypt or anyone else against the Babylonians.

### **The Reign of Jehoiachin (24:8-17)**

In March 597 BC, Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians. According to the Judean dating system, 597 was Nebuchadnezzar's eighth year. According to the Babylonian dating system, it was his seventh year (Jeremiah 52:28).

The royal family, court officials, artisans, soldiers, and leading citizens were deported to Babylon. Among this group of exiles was the prophet Ezekiel. He was a priest when he left his homeland and was called to prophesy by God in 593 in Babylon. In contrast to Kings, the number of exiles given in Jeremiah 52:28 may include only adult males. Regardless of the exact numbers, the population of Judah was drastically reduced, being perhaps only half of the estimated 250,000 living there during the eighth

century BC. Before the surrender, many people died in the fighting and from disease and hunger. After the Babylonian victory, thousands were deported, and many were executed.

### **Zedekiah Begins His Reign (24:18-20)**

Zedekiah's years on the throne were full of political intrigue and religious failure in Judah. He was not well-equipped to deal with the complex situation that faced him. On the one side were the Babylonians, whose strength the Judeans had no cause to doubt, and the prophet Jeremiah, who said that the Babylonians were God's instrument of punishment to which the people of Judah had to submit. On the other side were Judean leaders who were still pro-Egyptian and who plotted rebellion against Babylon. Zedekiah must also have dealt with the fact that Jehoiachin, though in exile, was still recognized by some people as the legitimate king of Judah.

Added to this is the fact that some leaders in Jerusalem sought to profit from the property left behind by their brothers and sisters who were taken into exile. Many people also still clung to the belief that God would never desert or destroy Jerusalem because the Temple was the residence of God's name and because the royal line of David was always to remain on the throne of Judah (for example, 1 Kings 8:15-20, 25-26).

Zedekiah did seek God's word through Jeremiah (for example, Jeremiah 21:1-7; 37:16-21), but he did not stand up to his leading nobles when they advised rebellion. In 594/593 BC, representatives from other countries met with Zedekiah in Jerusalem to coordinate plans for rebellion (Jeremiah 27:3). The plot never materialized, and Zedekiah had to go to Babylon to reassure Nebuchadnezzar of his loyalty (Jeremiah 51:59).

During those years, Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Ezekiel in Babylonia condemned the idolatry, corruption, and false hopes of the Jews still in Jerusalem and those living in exile. They announced God's punishment on the people of Israel for their sins and warned that rebellion was futile (for example, Jeremiah 35:12-17; 37:9-10; Ezekiel 7:23-27). Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles advising them to seek their welfare in the welfare of Babylon because it was by God's will that they were there (Jeremiah 25:1-9).

### **The Second Siege of Jerusalem (25:1-7)**

Despite his oaths of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:13; Ezekiel 17:13-14) and against Jeremiah's warnings, Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon in 589/588 BC and kept the city under siege for 18 months.

The Babylonian army probably focused its attack on the north wall of the city because the slope leading up to this wall was not as steep as on the other sides. They also probably used strategies of attack that were typical of siege warfare at this time in history. Ditches and moats in the line of attack were filled in, and ramps were built so that siege equipment could be moved close to the city walls. Wooden tracks were built for the battering rams and archery towers.

When their equipment was in place, the actual attack began. The battering rams attacked the walls and gates. Archers and slingers aimed arrows and stones at the defenders in support of the rams. Catapults were also used to hurl stones and fire at the defenders.

For their part, the defenders shot arrows, slung stones, poured boiling oil on the attackers, and tried to disable the battering rams with chains and grapnels. They had the protection of the city walls and their shields, but the advantage was with the attackers who had access to food and water.

The citizens of Jerusalem were near starvation by the time the Babylonians broke through the walls in June 587 (Lamentations 4:9-10). Zedekiah tried to escape, but Babylonian forces overtook him. They took terrible revenge on him and his family before taking him in chains to Babylon, where he died (Jeremiah 52:11).

### **The Destruction of Jerusalem (25:8-21)**

Jerusalem and the Temple were sacked and burned. Temple treasures—including the great bronze pillars, basin, and lampstands that were constructed for King Solomon (1 Kings 7:15-47)—were carried to Babylon.

The religious and civil leaders named in verses 18-21 were executed by Nebuchadnezzar for their part in the rebellion. The country was left in ruins, with only the "poorest of the land" (verse 12) remaining to try to put their lives back in order and feed their families.

### **The Governorship of Gedaliah (25:22-26)**

The nation of Judah was no more. Judah was now a province of Babylonia. Gedaliah, a member of a prominent Judean family, was appointed governor under Babylonian control. He tried to restore order in the land and encouraged the people to resume their normal lives (Jeremiah 40:7-12).

Gedaliah, however, was assassinated by a zealous member of the Judean royal family who had been living in exile in Ammon (Jeremiah 40:13–41:18). The Babylonians reacted by taking even more captives to Babylon from Judah in 582 (Jeremiah 52:30), while some Judeans fled to Egypt, taking an unwilling Jeremiah with them (Jeremiah 42:18–43:7).

Much, if not all, of Judah's territory was incorporated by the Babylonians into the province of Samaria.

### **King Jehoiachin in Exile (25:27-30)**

The historians of Kings added this encouraging note concerning King Jehoiachin, who was still in exile. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC and was succeeded by Evil-merodach. Jehoiachin was released from prison and allowed a place of honor in the king's house, along with other vassal kings. He no doubt swore an oath of loyalty to the new Babylonian ruler in exchange for such considerate treatment. Archaeological excavations in Babylon have uncovered records of rations that were paid to Jehoiachin and his sons by the Babylonian government.

The presence of this note at the end of Kings indicates that the final editing was done on the book sometime after 560, perhaps around 550. Thus, the writers of this record of the people of Israel may end their history with a sign of hope for the future of their people. Though Jehoiachin was not on the throne in Judah, he was a legitimate heir in the line of David and was recognized by the Babylonians as the king of Judah. A possibility for the rejuvenation of the nation of Judah was still alive.

### **Conclusion**

The writers of 1 and 2 Kings explained the changing fortunes of the people of Israel by how faithful they and their leaders were to God. The writers believed strongly in the concept of reward and punishment: Loyalty to God brings success, and disloyalty brings disaster (for example, Deuteronomy 28). They testified to the workings of God and the destiny of the chosen people. The historians of Kings had an

awareness of a future for God's people in which the people would have another chance to be faithful and obedient.

We must, however, turn to the prophets of this time to find the true measure of Israel's hope for the future. Jeremiah and Ezekiel are often remembered for their messages of punishment for God's people. They also, however, spoke of a time when God and God's people will live in harmony and righteousness with one another. They were able to do this because they knew that Israel's covenant with God was the basis for her punishment and the ground of her hope. God is just but also merciful. According to their prophecies, what sort of future could the people of Israel expect?

The Exile, though long and bitter, was not permanent. Atonement would be made for Israel's sins. A remnant of the people would survive destruction. The people of Israel could look forward to peace, security, and fruitfulness in their homeland and to a renewed relationship with God. The message of judgment is, in the long run, a message of salvation.

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