

CHAPTER 12

Judah's Decline and Fall

HEZEKIAH was succeeded by his son, Manasseh, who was distinguished for two things. His was the longest reign in either kingdom; and in the eyes of the writer of Kings, he was also an outstandingly wicked king. Admittedly, 2 Chronicles 33 gives us reason to believe that his later years were more righteous ones, but apparently there was only a relative improvement.

We have very little information about the internal affairs of Judah during his long reign. He was twelve years old when he came to the throne (2 Kings 21:1), probably in *c.* 696 B.C. as co-regent with his father Hezekiah (who may have lived another ten years after this),¹ and his death did not occur before *c.* 632 B.C. We do know, at least, that he remained a vassal of Assyria throughout that long period, whether he submitted passively or only with reluctance. There was unrest in the western Assyrian empire more than once during Manasseh's reign, and several times powerful Assyrian armies marched into and through Palestine. It was the revolt of Sidon in 677 B.C. which first brought the armies of Esarhaddon (680-669), Sennacherib's son and successor, into the general vicinity of Judah. In 671 Esarhaddon returned to Phoenicia in force, Tyre now the target, and from there he promptly marched south into Egypt — bypassing Manasseh's kingdom en route. Egypt was still ruled by the Tirhakah who has already figured in the story of Hezekiah's attempts to shake off the Assyrian yoke. Tirhakah had never ceased

1. The speculation that if Hezekiah had not prayed for and been granted a miraculous recovery from illness, he would never have lived to beget the evil Manasseh, is intriguing; but in fact the probability of a ten years' co-regency suggests that Manasseh had been born *before* the illness Hezekiah experienced 15 years prior to his death.

to use every endeavour to bolster up anti-Assyrian movements in the Palestine area, and Esarhaddon had responded by a variety of efforts to woo the Arab tribes of the Syrian desert regions. In 671 Esarhaddon considered the moment propitious to invade Egypt. Intelligible though this project was, and in spite of its immediate success, the Assyrians were by now over-reaching themselves. Egypt could be conquered but not easily held, and a mere two years later Tirhakah was able to foment a rebellion against Assyria.

Esarhaddon died (669 B.C.), en route for Egypt, and it fell to the lot of his son Ashurbanipal² to reconquer Tirhakah's realm. This he achieved brilliantly, and Tirhakah was again forced into exile; but once more the Assyrian victories proved difficult to maintain, and Ashurbanipal was compelled to put his faith in the garrisons he set up and in the fidelity of local Egyptian princes who bound themselves to him by oaths of loyalty. The weakness of the Assyrian position can be gauged from the fact that when the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Arvad rebelled in 665, Ashurbanipal felt obliged, though he conquered both with all the usual Assyrian efficiency, to treat both rebels very gently, since he was fully committed in Egypt and desperately needed peaceful conditions on other fronts. About ten years later Egypt broke free, however, and once again an Egyptian became master of his own country; the man who achieved this was named Psamtik (or Psammetichus I). All these events must have deeply impressed Manasseh and the citizens of Judah in one way or another, as they stood on the sidelines, so to speak.

Events further afield must also have come to Manasseh's ears. Ashurbanipal had many other frontiers to defend and territories to hold down, and peace was by now something Assyria knew all too little of. One notable event in the east was the revolt of Babylon in 652 B.C. Here Ashurbanipal's own brother, by name Shamash-shum-ukin, was king, and he had been loyal to Ashurbanipal since their father's death in 669. He apparently now felt that he could take over the hegemony from Nineveh, and he mustered a formidable coalition against his brother. The confederates included Phoenicians and Egyptians and Philistines — and perhaps Judah too. However, Ashurbanipal was still able to maintain his stranglehold; ultimately all the rebels were brought to heel, and Shamash-shum-ukin perished in the flames of his own palace in 648. Even so, Assyrian power was by now gravely weakened.

If Ashurbanipal's demonstrations of power outside his own realm were in reality rather hollow, one cannot say that Manasseh's foreign contacts were demonstrations of anything but humiliation. Manasseh figures a few times in the Assyrian records of the reigns of

2. His name appears in the Old Testament in the more abbreviated form "Asnappar" (or "Osnappar").

both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. He is listed with twenty-one other kings of the general Palestine area (called "Hatti-land" in Akkadian records) as having been commanded by Esarhaddon "to drag with pain and difficulty to Nineveh . . . supplies needed for my palace".³ Needless to say, he obeyed. Ashurbanipal leaves us a similar list of kings whom he lists as "servants who belong to me",⁴ from which it is clear that Manasseh was very careful to remain loyal to Assyria at the time of Ashurbanipal's campaigns in Egypt in the early years of his reign.

The tantalizingly brief note in 2 Chronicles 33:11 shows Manasseh in an even more humiliating situation — dragged in fetters to Babylon after an abortive revolt against "the King of Assyria". We are not told when or in what circumstances this occurred, nor even which king of Assyria was involved. The mention of Babylon rather than Nineveh, however, suggests that Manasseh must have given some support to the widespread revolt against Ashurbanipal organized by the king of Babylon in 652 B.C. The relative weakness of Assyria may be seen in the fact that Manasseh was restored to his throne, and permitted to strengthen the military defences of Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 33:14), presumably in face of possible threats from Egypt.

The general biblical repudiation of Manasseh is based on two things, his religious laxity in permitting idolatry on a widespread scale, revoking all Hezekiah's reforms, and the fact that he "shed so much innocent blood" (2 Kings 21:16). According to 2 Kings 21 he fostered all sorts of foreign cults, and even submitted his own son to an abominable heathen rite. 2 Chronicles 33 allows that in his later years he had a change of heart and suppressed some of the idolatry; this partial change in affairs may have been due to a combination of pressures from his more devout subjects and of a partial relaxation of the tightness of Assyrian control, towards the end of his reign.⁵

The statement that he shed innocent blood is not further elaborated in the Bible, though later Jewish tradition seems to have viewed the prophets as the chief victims. Isaiah is said to have been sawn in two, and it is conceivable that Hebrews 11:37 is an allusion to his martyrdom.⁶ This tradition is beyond proof, but it does seem to be true that the prophetic witness was virtually silenced during Manasseh's long reign. Equally speculative is the more modern suggestion that the Book of Deuteronomy was an "underground" production of his reign, which nobody dared to bring to light till the reign of his grandson Josiah.⁷ But however the prophets may have

3. *DOTT*, p. 74.

4. *ANET*, p. 294.

5. It is improbable in the extreme that the Apocryphal *Prayer of Manasseh* is historical.

6. For references and details cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (*NICNT*: London, 1964), pp. 340f.

7. See below, pp. 277ff.

fared, we may well believe that Manasseh's murderous acts extended to ordinary innocent folk as well. It is by no means impossible that he felt compelled to suppress anti-Assyrian movements at all costs, in order to preserve his throne.

Little need be said of the reign of his son Amon. It was a short reign (642-640),⁸ though long enough to indicate that he was no religious reformer, nor a rebel against Assyria. But his son and successor Josiah was to prove a very different man.

Josiah's thirty-year reign was by no means uneventful inside Judah, while all around Palestine there was political turmoil. At the time of Josiah's accession the Assyrian king was still Ashurbanipal, under whom the Assyrian empire had reached its greatest territorial extent; when Josiah died in 609, that mighty empire had utterly collapsed. Egypt, not long before overrun by the Assyrian armies, had achieved independence before Manasseh's death, and was to play an increasingly active military role as Josiah's reign progressed. Babylon too was about to play a major part in world events, and as Josiah came to the throne the whole situation in the Near and Middle East was in a state of flux. Small states like Judah must have watched the development of events in relative bewilderment. Though they were only pawns in the game, they were obliged to make vital decisions, whether to support this or that major power, or when to make a fresh bid for independence. The overwhelming national sentiment in Judah was utter hatred of the oppressor. Let Nahum, a prophet of this era,⁹ voice it for us: "Ah! Blood-stained city (i.e. Nineveh, the Assyrian capital), steeped in deceit, full of pillage, never empty of prey! . . . The dead are past counting, their bodies lie in heaps, corpses innumerable, men stumbling over corpses — all for a wanton's monstrous wantonness, fair-seeming, a mistress of sorcery, who beguiled nations and tribes by her wantonness and her sorceries" (Nahum 3: 1-4).

The Egyptians were shrewd enough to realize, in due course, that it might be a useful policy to give Assyria some support, in order to check the fast-growing power of Babylon; but Egypt had not suffered nearly so much at Assyrian hands as Judah had done, and to the citizens of Jerusalem the annihilation of Nineveh was but just retribution. Not that the prophets lacked realism; Habakkuk, whose prophecies date from the last years of Josiah's reign or shortly afterwards, was not blind to the menace Babylon presented. He described the Chaldaeans — now the ruling class of Babylon — as "that savage and impetuous nation, who cross the wide tracts of the earth to take possession of homes not theirs" (Habakkuk 1:6).

8. He died by assassination. See below, p. 126.

9. His ministry fell in the second half of the seventh century, but it is difficult to date it more precisely.

Probably the common people of Jerusalem, on the other hand, and even King Josiah too, failed to see in the Babylonians anything but the divinely-appointed scourge of Assyria.

Josiah was only eight years old when he became king, and naturally enough some years passed before he could formulate policies of his own. It was when he was about sixteen, according to 2 Chronicles 34:3, that he first showed his concern about the worship of "the God of his forefather David"; but four further years elapsed before Josiah felt secure enough to embark on a thorough-going policy of religious reform. It surely cannot be coincidence that his move came soon after the death of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668-627). By now the Assyrian grip on Palestine must have been very weak indeed. A year or two later the city of Babylon broke finally free from Assyrian control, under the kingship of a very able Chaldaean prince named Nabopolassar (626-605). Soon the Babylonians and their allies the Medes were exerting pressures on Assyria which she was too weak to resist. Her empire fell away, and her own cities began to fall. Asshur, the old capital, which had given its name to the country, was captured in 614, and Nineveh itself was conquered and laid waste in 612.

Josiah's religious reforms received their greatest impetus some nine years before the fall of Nineveh. In 621 B.C. a startling discovery was made in the Jerusalem temple — a literary discovery comparable with the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls in our own century for the excitement it provoked! During repairs to the temple structure, occasioned no doubt by the reforms already in progress, a scroll came to light which the Bible names "the book of the law" and "the book of the covenant". The workmen of course handed over their find to the high priest Hilkiyah, who was so impressed with it that he passed it on to the adjutant-general, Shaphan. He too read it, and in consequence brought it to the king and read it aloud to him.

The dramatic sequel is told in 2 Kings 22f. The scroll's contents were of such a character that Josiah, conscience-stricken, immediately tore his robes as a sign of distress and repentance, and then arranged to have the document publicly read at the temple, in the hearing of "the whole population, high and low". The people next pledged themselves to their God in solemn covenant, and the king proceeded to inaugurate yet more sweeping reforms. Every vestige of pagan religion was now outrooted from Judah; not only were specifically heathen shrines and cultic objects obliterated, but even sanctuaries dedicated to Yahweh, Israel's God, were systematically desecrated. The fact was that all too many of the country shrines had tolerated all sorts of syncretistic worship, the "official" worship having been adulterated by numerous popular superstitions. Josiah in his zeal for the purity of his faith now decreed that henceforth Jerusalem, and only Jerusalem, should be the place of

worship. Ordinary people must have been startled at the great changes taking place; and town and village priests were instructed to move bag and baggage into the capital, to carry on their duties at the one sanctuary still functioning.¹⁰ The climax of the reform seems to have been a joyous celebration in Jerusalem of the feast of the Passover, care being taken to observe it as the newly-found document prescribed. "No such Passover", the writer of 2 Kings 23:22 declares, "had been kept either when the judges were ruling Israel or during the times of the Kings of Israel and Judah".

But what exactly *was* this powerful document? The description of it as "the book of the law" (2 Kings 22:8) might suggest that it was the complete Pentateuch (i. e., Genesis-Deuteronomy inclusive); but the alternative title, "the book of the covenant", is a phrase which occurs in Exodus 24:7f., where it seems to designate no more than the preceding three or four chapters (specifically, Exodus 20:22-23:33). The most widely-held view of the matter is that Josiah's document was either the Book of Deuteronomy or a substantial part of it. This view is very old, dating back to Chrysostom and Jerome, and is today widely, though not universally, advocated in circles both conservative and otherwise.¹¹ While the separate features of Josiah's reforms could undoubtedly have been based on biblical passages outside Deuteronomy, it is striking that in the compass of a few chapters Deuteronomy provides a basis for Josiah's entire programme. In chapter 12 we find an attack on pagan religion, and the command to establish a single sanctuary; in chapter 16 Passover regulations are given, and they specify that the feast should not be observed in every town and settlement; and chapter 18 refers to Levites coming to the one single sanctuary. Finally, the very strongly worded curses and warnings of chapter 27f. could readily explain the distress and alarm displayed by Josiah on his first acquaintance with the newly-discovered scroll.

Josiah's religious reforms were not without their political effects and overtones. The show of independence and the eradication from Judah of everything foreign would have been viewed with deep suspicion in Nineveh; but by the year 621 the Assyrians were much too concerned with events nearer home to pay any heed to such minor affairs in a minor subject state. Even so, the mention in 2 Kings 23:8 of Geba and Beer-sheba, which were probably the traditional northern and southern boundary cities of Judah, may well imply that Josiah now re-incorporated the territory which

10. In point of fact, this measure was one of the first of Josiah's reforms to be disregarded. It must have been a most unpopular decree — much as if all churches and chapels throughout Britain were to be closed down, and worship permitted only at Canterbury Cathedral, by act of Parliament.

11. The prohibitive size of any scroll containing much more than, say, Deuteronomy renders it unlikely that Josiah's "book of the law" comprised the whole Pentateuch.

Sennacherib had wrested from Judah in the time of Hezekiah. Be that as it may, Josiah showed even greater boldness and enterprise when he decided to implement his reforms in the old Northern Kingdom, long since an Assyrian province, as well as in Judah. Bethel, just north of the Judaeian frontier, was his first target; meeting no opposition there, he proceeded to desecrate shrines and execute idolatrous priests all over the province of Samaria, even as far north as the old tribal territory of Naphtali (cf. 2 Chronicles 34:6f.). It is evident that Josiah was free to act with impunity, and that he in fact reunited Judah and Israel under his kingship.¹²

The optimists — and Judah had plenty at this period — must have thought that a new golden age had dawned for the people of Israel, that Josiah was another David. But the realists knew otherwise; the prophetess Huldah had already given a grim warning of what future Judah could expect (2 Kings 22:14-20). The reality was that the steady collapse of the Assyrian empire was leaving a power vacuum. In David's era no major state had been powerful enough or ambitious enough to seek to control Palestine; but now both Babylon and Egypt were anxious to rule Syria and Palestine, and Judah was a match for neither of them.

The weakness of Judah was exposed a mere five years after Josiah's major reforms. The Egyptian king (still Psamtik I) had already realized the political necessity of bolstering up the Assyrian forces as a brake on the growing power of Babylon, and in 616 he sent an army to help the Assyrians, as we know from Babylonian records.¹³ A glance at the map suffices to show that an Egyptian army could not have reached Mesopotamia without marching through Josiah's territory. The route followed was no doubt "the Way of the Sea", the road up the Philistine coast, through the pass of Megiddo into the Valley of Jezreel, and so across the Jordan, and away to Damascus and the north east. We have no way of knowing what action, if any, Josiah took; but at least it is certain that the Egyptian army was not stopped or turned back.

As far as Assyria was concerned, Egyptian assistance merely prolonged her death-throes. The climax came in 612, with the fall of Nineveh; but even yet the Assyrians fought back, moving their headquarters into Syria, where the last Assyrian monarch, Ashurbanit II, set up court at Haran. Two years later the Babylonians and their allies drove him from there, across the Euphrates. In the following year came the end for Assyria; the Assyrians, again supported by an Egyptian army,¹⁴ recrossed the Euphrates and

12 For details of the size of his realm, cf. *LB*, pp. 348-351.

13. Cf. *ANET*, p. 304.

14. Note that 2 Kings 23:29 must be translated as in modern translations, and not as in AV or RV; the Egyptians were supporting, not attacking, the Assyrians.

assaulted Haran, hoping to recapture it, but all in vain. The attempt failed miserably, and from now on all mention of the Assyrian regime drops out of the picture; the struggle was now a simple two-sided one, the Egyptians based on Carchemish on the west bank of the Euphrates, the Babylonians maintaining their position east of the river.

This was the situation which developed in 609, the year in which Psamtik was succeeded by his son Necho II as king of Egypt. Necho immediately set out with his armies for Carchemish, to join the fruitless Assyrian assault on Haran; but on this occasion Josiah chose to act, by blocking the pass of Megiddo against the passage of the Egyptian troops. The result is told in a laconic sentence in 2 Kings 23:29: "Josiah went to meet him; and when they met at Megiddo, Pharaoh Necho slew him." The wording almost suggests a parley, but the very name Megiddo, site of so many historic battles, implies more than that. 2 Chronicles 35:20-24 confirms that a battle did take place, and gives a few details of the affray; further confirmation has probably been provided by archaeologists: signs of damage to the walls of the city of Megiddo are visible,¹⁵ and though one cannot date the destruction precisely, the events of 609 B.C. seem the most probable historical context for it.

So Josiah died in battle — not yet forty years of age, despite the length of his reign. In him died Judah's last king of any ability; and with him died any hope of Judah's remaining independent. If Necho declared before the battle of Megiddo that he had no quarrel with Judah, it was a different matter afterwards. His intention was to make Judah and the other small states in the area part of a new Egyptian empire; in the event, his empire was to be of very short duration, but for the next four years Judah was firmly controlled by him. In Jerusalem, Josiah's youngest son Jehoahaz¹⁶ succeeded to the throne, but after a mere three months as king he was deposed by Judah's new overlord, Necho. It appears that Jehoahaz had to go to Necho's Asiatic headquarters, Riblah, to have his kingship confirmed (cf. 2 Kings 23:33); that would have been humiliation enough, but Necho demonstrated his power over Judah by deposing and deporting him and replacing him by his older brother Jehoiakim. It is not clear why popular opinion in Judah had preferred the younger brother as king, and it is equally uncertain why Necho's choice fell on the older man. Perhaps Jehoahaz had been expected to maintain an anti-Egyptian policy, whereas Jehoiakim may well have been taking a pro-Egyptian stand. Certainly Jehoiakim was an unscrupulous and self-serving man; on the other

15. Cf. W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Harmondsworth, 1960 edn.) p. 130.

16. His personal name was Shallum, cf. Jeremiah 22:11. Jehoahaz was his throne-name. He was the youngest of four brothers.

hand, the record indicates that he was consistently loyal to Egypt. He did not allow the fact that he was merely a puppet-king to deter him from putting on a show of royalty; in spite of the tribute his citizens had to pay to Egypt, he burdened them with taxes and worse to finance a brand new palace for himself, at Beth-hakkerem, just outside Jerusalem.¹⁷ Such wanton luxury amounted to the oppression of his people, and the prophet Jeremiah was not slow to condemn it:

Shame on the man who builds his house by unjust means
and completes its roof-chambers by fraud,
making his countrymen work without payment;
giving them no wage for their labour!
Shame on the man who says, 'I will build a spacious house
with airy roof-chambers,
set windows in it, panel it with cedar
and paint it with vermilion'!
If your cedar is more splendid,
does that prove you a king?

(Jeremiah 22:13ff.)

Necho's control of Judah lasted four years. During that time, the Babylonian armies never relaxed their struggle for supremacy over the Egyptians, and in 605 B.C. they gained the upper hand. A new and vigorous soldier came on the scene in that year, as commander-in-chief of the Babylonian forces. He was the crown prince of Babylon, son of the aging Nabopolassar. His name was Nebuchadrezzar.

As we have noted, Carchemish had been for some years the Egyptians' advance camp for operations in north Syria, while the Babylonians had remained poised on the eastern banks of the Euphrates. In 605 Nebuchadrezzar led his troops across the river, advanced on Carchemish and inflicted a heavy defeat on the forces of Necho (cf. Jeremiah 46:2). Routed there and again at Hamath, the surviving Egyptian soldiers fled homewards, hotly pursued by the victorious Babylonians, who set about annexing the territory to the south — including Philistia and Judah. The Babylonian army might have pressed on further than they did, but news arrived of the death of Nabopolassar, and Nebuchadrezzar immediately returned to Babylon for the important ceremony of accession to his father's throne.

Thus, without any choice in the matter, Judah exchanged Egyptian control for Babylonian control. "The King of Egypt did not leave his own land again, because the King of Babylon had stripped him of all his possessions, from the Torrent of Egypt to the

17. Modern Ramat Rachel. Cf. Y. Aharoni, *BA* 24 (1961), p. 118.

river Euphrates" (2 Kings 24:7). It must be added, however, that the Egyptian rulers were not by any means reconciled to this situation, and Egyptian intrigues at the court of Jehoiakim and his successors were to pay no small part in the fate of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadrezzar took all necessary steps to ensure the internal security of his realm, paying special attention to the newly-acquired territories such as Judah. He records that in 604 and again in 603 he marched into "the Hatti-land" (the regular term used in Akkadian documents to embrace Syria and Palestine), and that "he took the heavy tribute of the Hatti-land back to Babylon".¹⁸ The Babylonian Chronicle does not specify any of the states or kingdoms except Ashkelon, conquered in 603; but 2 Kings 24:1 notes explicitly that Jehoiakim became Nebuchadrezzar's vassal, perforce. If the first paragraph of the Book of Daniel refers to these events, we may conclude that Nebuchadrezzar's plunder was accompanied by hostages, of whom Daniel was one.¹⁹

Nebuchadrezzar's name is synonymous with the sort of arrogant pride which the Greeks called *hybris*. He had ample cause for satisfaction. In a few years the roles of Syria and Babylon were reversed, and Babylon had recovered the position, which she held a millennium before, of mistress of an empire. Babylonian armies had been everywhere successful; of her only two potential rivals, the one (Media) was friendly, the other (Egypt) humbled. Nebuchadrezzar had begun a long reign which would be for the most part peaceful and prosperous.

But it does not take much imagination to appreciate that Nebuchadrezzar's satisfaction was matched by a great deal of sullen resentment in Jerusalem. Assyria and Babylon's reversal of roles meant little to the Judaeans; both Assyrians and Babylonians came from "the Far East" as far as they were concerned, speaking (literally) the same language, and pursuing identical policies. There was no reason at all why Judaeans should prefer Babylonian rule to Assyrian domination; moreover the memory was green of some years of independence and success, under Josiah's leadership. Small wonder, then, that Jehoiakim and many of his subjects looked to Egypt for aid against their new Mesopotamian overlords. Jeremiah took an opposite view; he was shrewd enough to realize that Nebuchadrezzar's victory over Necho was no accident, and that the Babylonians were immeasurably more powerful than the Egyptians. His council was meek submission to Nebuchadrezzar (27:9ff.); but that advice was too bitter a pill for most of his fellow-countrymen, and consequently the prophet began to proclaim the inevitability of

18. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 79.

19. Cf. D. J. Wiseman in D. J. Wiseman and others. *Notes on some problems in the Book of Daniel* (London, 1965), pp. 16ff.

utter disaster for Judah. Here again we may see how in the prophets political realism, or to be more accurate a sure prescience of events, went hand in hand with a religious message: Jerusalem would fall, not because Nebuchadrezzar was all-powerful, but because Judah's sins invited divine retribution. Jeremiah, however, was not the only man wearing the prophet's mantle; other men gave opposite advice in the name of Yahweh, and we may well imagine that many Judaeans did not know whom to believe — until the very course of events proved that Jeremiah's opponents were the false prophets. It is particularly interesting to notice how Isaiah's proclamation that Jerusalem would not fall in Hezekiah's reign, almost a century earlier, had now become a sort of national dogma; the false prophets never tired of proclaiming that Jerusalem was impregnable to human armies. No doubt many were convinced by their arguments, since human nature is so prone to wishful thinking.

By the time of Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah had already been exercising a prophetic ministry for many years. Though not uncritical, he had had no open quarrel with Josiah; but at the very outset of Jehoiakim's reign the prophet took dramatic action which almost inevitably infuriated the new monarch. He entered the very temple court and proclaimed that the temple was destined to fall, exactly as the Shiloh sanctuary had done long before (Jeremiah 7:1-20). The temple personnel, priests and prophets alike, were enraged by this sermon, so very different from the false optimism of their own public utterances, and before long Jeremiah found himself on trial for blasphemy. His judges, however, had imbibed something of the spirit of Josiah's reform, and they gave him a fair trial and acquitted him. Jeremiah was fortunate to have some influential friends; another prophet of the day, Uriah by name, who preached precisely the same message as Jeremiah, was harried into exile, only to be dragged back to Judah and murdered — by royal command (chapter 26). Even Jeremiah did not escape a flogging and the indignity of a night spent in the stocks (Jeremiah 20:1f.).

In the year following the Babylonian victory at Carchemish Jeremiah decided to reinforce his message, by compiling a scroll of all his sermons to date, and having them read publicly at a major festival in the temple, when crowds of Judaeans were present. His secretary Baruch both wrote the scroll and gave the public reading of it. The temple authorities soon got to hear of it, and the scroll was seized and taken to the king. Friends rushed both Jeremiah and Baruch into hiding, while Jehoiakim had the scroll read aloud to him. Contemptuous of its contents, he chopped it to pieces with a penknife and burned it section by section. He made some endeavour to locate Jeremiah and Baruch, but otherwise proceeded, unmoved, to pursue his own policies (chapter 36). Jeremiah, equally unmoved by the royal threats, set about producing a second edition of his

prophecies; it comprised the full contents of the first scroll, "and much else . . . to the same effect" (Jeremiah 36:32). The word of God was not easily stifled; his warnings might be ignored, but they could not be annulled or frustrated.

For three years, at any rate, Jehoiakim had no option but to pay tribute and remain subservient to Nebuchadrezzar (2 Kings 24:1); the grim fate of Ashkelon in 603 B.C., with its destruction and the deportation of many of its citizens, was incentive enough to be submissive. He then revolted, by the simple expedient of refusing or neglecting to pay the annual tribute. He judged the moment to be right because the Babylonian army had just (601) suffered a defeat or near-defeat on the Egyptian border; probably rumour had it that the Egyptians had won a handsome victory. The sequel clearly shows that both sides suffered heavy losses,²⁰ and needed some time to recoup and reorganize. Jehoiakim's revolt, therefore, was not immediately crushed; but it was only a matter of time. In the following year (600) "the King of Akkad (i.e. Nebuchadrezzar) stayed in his country. He organized his chariots and many horses".²¹ In 599 Nebuchadrezzar moved into the Palestine area, but his first campaign was against the Arab tribes of the semi-desert regions. It was at the end of 598 that he finally assaulted Judah and besieged Jerusalem. In the meantime, however, Jehoiakim had been harassed by "raiding-parties of Chaldaeans, Aramaeans, Moabites and Ammonites" (2 Kings 24:2). Of these the Chaldaeans were such detachments of Babylonian troops as were in the area, while the remaining forces were drawn from the old enemies that were now under Nebuchadrezzar's domination.

There is some obscurity about the end of Jehoiakim's reign. We know that he ceased to be king at the very beginning of the siege of Jerusalem, since the siege lasted three months (December 598-March 597), and it coincided with the three month reign of Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin.²² 2 Chronicles 36:6 is ambiguous about the fate of Jehoiakim; according to the New English Bible and the Jerusalem Bible the verse states that he was taken in fetters to Babylon, but other English Versions (including the Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version) are probably more correct to leave the matter an open question, and state merely that he was put in fetters preparatory to being taken to Babylon. It may be that he was assassinated, by his own people. It is intriguing that 2 Kings 24:6 records the mere fact of his death, but says nothing about the circumstances nor where he was buried (a detail which is supplied for most of the kings); however, we find in Jeremiah 22:19 the

20. Indeed, Babylonian records admit the fact: "they clashed in open battle and inflicted heavy losses on each other" (*ANET*, p. 564).

21. Cf. *ANET*, p. 564.

22. *Ibid.*; 2 Kings 24:8-12.

prediction that he would be "buried like a dead ass, dragged along and flung out beyond the gates of Jerusalem".

But if he was assassinated, who perpetrated the deed, and why? One plausible explanation is that he was murdered by the pro-Babylonian party in Jerusalem, in an effort to appease Nebuchadrezzar; if so, his son Jehoiachin sided with the pro-Egyptian party, and continued to resist.²³ Alternatively, it is not at all impossible that Jehoiakim decided to submit to Nebuchadrezzar — which would explain how he came to be captured before his capital fell — and was assassinated by the pro-Egyptian party, who then put pressure on Jehoiachin to resist Nebuchadrezzar. (This second possibility finds a measure of support in the history of Josephus.)²⁴

One thing is certain, and that is the fact that by now the kings of Judah were puppets not only of the great powers controlling the area, but also of the various political parties and pressure groups within their own realm. Since the time of Hezekiah each king had represented one particular political viewpoint within Judah; Hezekiah and Josiah had been "nationalists" (and it must not be overlooked that their religious reforms were part of a nationalistic policy), while Manasseh and presumably Amon had been "collaborationists", pro-Assyrians. Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian. But whereas the stronger kings no doubt imposed such policies on the state they ruled, by now the king was to a large extent governed by the strongest political party in Jerusalem. The death of Amon, Josiah's predecessor, as described in 2 Kings 21:23f., illustrates the point; some sort of palace revolution led to his overthrow and assassination, but a popular uprising occurred immediately, in which the conspirators were executed, and the youthful Josiah made king, obviously under the control of regents.

Jehoiachin,²⁵ then, was completely at the mercy of circumstances when he became king. One cannot but feel sympathy for a king who, at the age of eighteen, inherited as a kingdom a beleaguered city; and who three months later was taken into exile where he remained until his death, at least thirty-five years later.²⁶ Of his personal character we know little. 2 Kings 24:9 indicates that "he did what was wrong in the eyes of the LORD", which probably means that he did nothing to discourage idolatry; but on the whole the biblical writers treat him gently, and it may be significant that Ezekiel dated his prophecies by the year of Jehoiachin's exile, ignoring totally Jehoiachin's successor in Jerusalem, Zedekiah. Many Judaeans, evidently, long retained their allegiance to their king-in-exile.

23. Jehoiachin very swiftly decided to submit to Nebuchadrezzar, and it is not impossible that this was his intention from the outset.

24. *Ant.* x, 6, 3.

25. Biblical texts give two other forms of his name — Jeconiah and Coniah.

26. He lived longer than Nebuchadrezzar (605-562 B.C.), cf. Jeremiah 52:31-34.

Jerusalem opened its gates to Nebuchadrezzar in March 597 (see plate 9 facing p. 176); it could have held out much longer, as events a decade later were to prove, so we must assume that Jehoiachin or his counsellors now decided that submission was the prudent course of action. Such submission served to preserve the city from destruction and save many lives; moreover, it enabled Judah to retain its status as a kingdom. Nevertheless, having proved a disloyal vassal, Judah could not hope to escape scot-free. The Babylonian Chronicle sums up in a sentence the retribution that was exacted by Nebuchadrezzar: "He appointed therein (Jerusalem) a king of his own choice, received its heavy tribute and sent them to Babylon".²⁷ The new king was Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah (yet another son of Josiah), who took the throne, with the regnal name of Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:17). There is some evidence that his realm was reduced in size, and that the southern territories (the Negeb and Shephelah) were detached from it;²⁸ it is safe to assume that Judaeans control of Samaria had ceased with Josiah's death.

Jehoiachin was deported, and many other men of substance with him; his family, leading officials, military commander and troops, and even skilled craftsmen were taken.²⁹ Ezekiel was exiled, but Jeremiah, who had proved himself so pro-Babylonian, was not. Thus Nebuchadrezzar hoped to decimate the pro-Egyptian and nationalist parties in Jerusalem, and to shore up the pro-Babylonian party under Zedekiah's leadership. It must be said, however, that the Babylonian measures were rather clumsy; Judaeans hopes that Jehoiachin would return to the throne were kept alive by the fact that the Babylonians themselves seemed to acknowledge that he was the legitimate king of Judah. Texts discovered in Babylon explicitly refer to him as king of Judah,³⁰ while jar handles found in Palestine indicate that the crown property, in whole or part, still belonged to him.³¹ It may be, of course, that if the pro-Babylonian party had gained the upper hand in Judah, and if Judah had shown signs of accepting Babylonian suzerainty, Nebuchadrezzar would have released and reinstated Jehoiachin. But Nebuchadrezzar underestimated both the extent of nationalistic feelings in Judah and the effectiveness of Egyptian propaganda, and in effect he undermined Zedekiah's authority, reducing his status virtually to that of regent. It appears that Zedekiah was no very strong character, but in any case, he had no opportunity to be strong.

27. *DOTT*, p. 80.

28. Cf. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, pp. 355f.

29. The exiles numbered 3,023, according to Jeremiah 52:28: the figures given in 2 Kings 24:14ff. would appear to be inclusive of later deportees. Possibly Jeremiah's figure excludes women and children, on the other hand.

30. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 86.

31. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 224.

The book of Jeremiah affords us many a glimpse of life in Judah and Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah. The prophet himself consistently supported pro-Babylonian policies, wisely enough, and the king was disposed to heed his arguments. But there were many in Jerusalem who denounced such policies as defeatist and unpatriotic, and sought only the opportunity to rebel against Nebuchadrezzar yet again. Such counsellors Jeremiah dismissed scornfully as "bad figs", asserting that all the "good figs" had been taken into exile (chapter 24); Jeremiah thus put his finger on one disadvantage of the Assyrian and Babylonian deportation policies — to remove the top men in an administration is tantamount to putting influence if not power in the hands of second-rate and upstart statesmen. One of Jeremiah's bitterest opponents was Hananiah; as a prophet, he too could claim that he spoke the oracles of God, and could allege that Jeremiah was the false prophet (chapter 28). Among the exiles, another prophet, Shemaiah by name, was contradicting Jeremiah's warnings and preaching an absurdly optimistic message; Jeremiah felt it appropriate to send a letter making the realities of the situation clear (chapter 29). Before long, however, one of the exiles, Ezekiel, received the call to be a prophet, and he was to preach among the exiles the same sort of message that Jeremiah was proclaiming in the homeland. Neither man saw the slightest basis for optimism.

The battle of words in Jerusalem was of course punctuated by events. One event of interest occurred in 594, when representatives of a number of small states in the area gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the possibility of concerted action against Babylon (Jeremiah 27:3); it is highly probable that Egypt was represented at the meeting, even if it had not engineered it. The background to this meeting was a revolt against Nebuchadrezzar in Babylonia itself (December 595-January 594); but Nebuchadrezzar soon restored order, and was to be found in Syria later in the year, receiving tribute from his western vassals. The would-be rebels among the latter decided therefore to bide their time.

A further four or five years elapsed, and then Zedekiah took the final and fatal step of rebelling. Records for the reign of Zedekiah are scanty, and we do not know the precise circumstances which led to the revolt. It was not completely spontaneous, for it seems that both Tyre and Ammon supported the suicidal enterprise,³² and there can be no doubt that Egypt had promised strong military aid. It was certainly no sign of weakness on Nebuchadrezzar's part that occasioned the rebellion. Possibly the spark which set the revolt ablaze was the accession of Hophra to the throne of Egypt *c.* 589 B.C.; it

32. After the fall of Jerusalem, Nebuchadrezzar went on to besiege Tyre for 13 years. Ammon's involvement seems a natural inference from Ezekiel 21:18-22.

appears that he was rather more ambitious to recover lost ground in Asia than was his predecessor Psamtik II.³³ Whatever the external circumstances may have been, however, the real cause of Zedekiah's ill-fated revolt was internal pressures within Judah. The king's hand was forced by short-sighted noblemen and popular clamour, expressing the pent-up resentments at Babylonian oppression, coupled with burning nationalistic fervour and a coherent but specious theology (which maintained that Jerusalem could not fall). Such a combination of deep human emotions — hatred, pride, patriotism, and religious convictions — could not be permanently repressed.

Nebuchadrezzar's reaction was swift and sure. The Babylonian armies marched into Judah and proceeded to invest and reduce all the fortified towns and cities; Jerusalem itself found itself besieged towards the end of 589 B.C. (cf. 2 Kings 25:1). Before the end of the following year, only three cities were still holding out, Jerusalem itself, Lachish and Azekah (Jeremiah 34:6f.).

Lachish was a major city of ancient Judah, but it proved difficult to identify its site in modern times.³⁴ In the 1930s, however, an archaeological team excavated a mound called Tell el-Duweir, and some documents were found which seem to have settled the question. The documents are known as the Lachish Ostraca; most of them are letters written on potsherds, and they date from precisely the period we have now reached.³⁵ One letter addressed to the military governor of the city, Yaosh, testifies to the military liaison with Egypt. Another bears witness to the fact that not everyone in Jerusalem was whole-heartedly in favour of the rebellion. Of special interest is the fact that these letters, secular and military as they are, repeatedly name the sacred name of Yahweh; clearly the military officers were in no doubt that Zedekiah's revolt had God's blessing.

It appears from one letter that Azekah had just fallen, that its signal-beacons had been extinguished. Only Lachish and Jerusalem now remained; and Lachish did not last much longer. Its major buildings were deliberately burnt, its walls broken down. It was in the remains of the burned-out guardroom under the gate-tower of the city that most of the ostraca were found in 1935.

Jerusalem had one brief respite, when the Babylonian army raised the siege in order to confront an Egyptian army which was marching northwards to honour Pharaoh Hophra's promises to Zedekiah (Jeremiah 37:5). The citizens of the capital — Jeremiah excepted — were overjoyed, and convinced themselves that their problems were over. Even at this point of time, when the downfall of Jerusalem was

33. Cf. K. A. Kitchen in *NBD*, p. 346.

34. Cf. *AOTS*, pp. 296f.

35. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 212-7; *ANET*, pp. 321f.

a matter of months away, they exhibited a materialistic and immoral self-interest which effectively demonstrates why the prophets had long been clamouring for social justice. Before the Babylonians had raised the siege, all slaves in the city had been set free by their owners; but as soon as Nebuchadrezzar's army moved off to confront Hophra's expeditionary force, the owners promptly re-enslaved them (Jeremiah 34:8-11). Jeremiah rebuked the immoral deed and also the blind faith in Egypt which engendered it, in no uncertain terms. He stated emphatically that the Babylonian troops would soon return and conquer the city (Jeremiah 37:9f.). He then prepared to leave the city, on a matter of private business; but his enemies interpreted his intended departure as a sign that he was going over to the enemy. He was arrested, flogged and imprisoned, in spite of his hot denials (Jeremiah 37:11-16). Even there his sane voice was not silenced, and his enemies took even more drastic measures, throwing him into a filthy dungeon, where he would have died of thirst and starvation but for the intervention of a palace official, who rescued the prophet at the king's instigation (chapter 38). But he remained in custody till the city fell.

The Egyptian army was soon repulsed, and the Babylonians resumed the siege. The end was not long delayed: "The siege lasted till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. In the fourth month of that year, on the ninth day of the month, when famine was severe in the city and there was no food for the common people, the city was thrown open" (Jeremiah 52:5f.). Thus Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian armies in August 587 (or perhaps 586); a month later Nebuchadrezzar gave orders that the city should be systematically destroyed — city walls, houses, royal palace, and temple alike (Jeremiah 52:12ff.). The ancient sign of Yahweh's presence, the ark of the covenant, probably went up in flames with the temple which housed it — at least, it is never heard of again. Many other of Jerusalem's treasures were plundered.

As for the survivors, only "the weakest class of people" was left as vine-dressers and labourers (Jeremiah 52:16). Jeremiah records that 832 people were now deported to Babylonia (Jeremiah 52:29); this figure seems surprisingly low, and probably includes only adult males.³⁶ Some of the military commanders were put to death, together with the high priest and his deputy (Jeremiah 52:24-37). As for King Zedekiah and his entourage, they succeeded in escaping from Jerusalem, and went eastwards at top speed, hoping perhaps to get help and shelter with the Ammonites, Judah's ally in the revolt. But all in vain; the Babylonians overtook them in the vicinity of

36. The NEB emends Jeremiah 52:28 to mean that Nebuchadrezzar now took two batches of deportees, amounting to nearly 4,000 people, quite apart from the exiles removed to Babylonia a decade before.

Jericho, and Zedekiah was brought to Riblah, Neduchadrezzar's headquarters in Syria. Nebuchadrezzar pronounced sentence: Zedekiah's sons were killed in front of him, and then his eyes were put out. From Riblah the hapless ex-king went in chains to a prison in Babylon; and there he died, perhaps soon afterwards (Jeremiah 52:7-11).

Jeremiah, now at least sixty five years old, survived the holocaust, escaping his Judaeans' vindictiveness, death by starvation, and also Babylonian swords. Nebuchadrezzar had given special orders to show him favour and consideration, and the prophet was able to serve the new administration (Jeremiah 39:11-14). Nebuchadrezzar brought Judah into the Babylonian provincial system, and appointed as its governor Gedaliah, formerly a high palace official at Zedekiah's court. Gedaliah's administrative capital was Mizpah, some miles north of Jerusalem, which was of course too badly damaged to remain the capital. Jeremiah chapter 40 records that Judaeans who had taken refuge in neighbouring countries began to come back to Judah, when they learned of the new administration. Before long, however, nationalistic intrigues began once more, and the moderate Gedaliah (whose grandfather had been a leading supporter of Josiah's reforms, and whose father had befriended Jeremiah in Jehoiakim's reign) was assassinated. The conspiracy against him was led by a member of the royal family named Ishmael, and had the support of the Ammonites, who were still resisting the Babylonians. Some Babylonians were assassinated too, and Ishmael took good care to flee to Ammon, out of harm's way. It was natural to expect that Nebuchadrezzar would exact vengeance, and those Judaeans who had supported Gedaliah were apprehensive that the Babylonian king's anger might fall on them, innocent though they were. Accordingly, they fled to Egypt, taking with them the aged prophet, Jeremiah, who protested vehemently but in vain (chapters 40-43). Thus the whole Mizpah administration collapsed, and it was probably as a consequence of these events that Nebuchadrezzar, c. 582 B.C., exiled yet another group of Judaeans, 745 in number (Jeremiah 52:30). Jeremiah seems to have ended his days in Egypt.

Thus Judah was left in ruins, her population decimated.³⁷ Many of her people were in exile, whether perforce in Babylonia or voluntarily in Egypt and elsewhere, and many others must have died amid the horrors of warfare. Large parts of the country were depopulated, so much so that the Edomites (themselves under pressure from Arab tribes) had no difficulty in overrunning much of

37. The Negeb, in the far south of Judah, seems to have been the one area to escape serious Babylonian reprisals.

For an estimate of the population of Judah, and a perspective on the deportations, see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: its Life and Institutions* (ET London,² 1965), pp. 65ff.

southern Judah and taking permanent hold there. The temple was destroyed, its long cultic ritual brought to an end. Above all, the throne had perished; David's family who had held that throne through all the vicissitudes of more than four hundred years, were now deprived of royal status. David and Zion were alike ruined.

The story of Judah did not of course terminate at this point. The exiles would return, Jerusalem and the temple would rise again, the Jewish faith would be purged and purified; and far in the future another scion of David's line would be born, King of a realm "not of this world". But that story must be left for others to tell.

We seem to be leaving the history of Israel and Judah on a note of almost unrelieved gloom. Yet it was precisely at this point of history that the ancient biblical author (or authors) of the Books of Kings broke off. We cannot imagine that it gave him any pleasure to recount the grim details of his country's downfall. What was his purpose in writing, then? A careful study of 1 and 2 Kings reveals that these books constitute an examination of the causes of the decline and fall of God's ancient people. If the future were to mean anything, the survivors of 587 B.C. must be able to ascertain and analyse those causes, for the lasting benefit of future generations. Besides, was there not one obvious lesson to be learned? The history of Israel and Judah had revolved around three personages — prophet, priest and king. In physical terms, all three had now been swept away, although it was true that all three might one day be restored. But in spiritual and moral terms, had not the prophet been vindicated? The king had been unable to save his kingdom; the priest had become a lackey of the royal court, voicing pious platitudes instead of the living oracles of God; but the very fall of Jerusalem itself had authenticated the true prophetic message, silenced the false prophets, and given every intelligent Judaeon cause to go back and re-examine the recorded words of the prophets of many generations. Thus while we are familiar with the terms "Kings" as a title for two Old Testament books, we should not overlook the truer perspective of those ancient Jewish rabbis who recognised that the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings belong collectively in the category "the Prophets".

We have now outlined the history of the Hebrew monarchy, concentrating attention on the figure of the king and on political events; it is now high time we sought a wider perspective, following the example of the Old Testament historians themselves.