

## The End of the Israelite Monarchy

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A biographical sketch of the eighteenth century evangelist George Whitefield claims: “His voice had the range of an organ and with it he could reduce grown men to tears by the mere pronounciation of the word ‘Mesopotamia’” (Hallo 1980: 1). Perhaps a Judean exile who sat down in the land “between the rivers,” hung his harp upon the willows and remembered Jerusalem (see Ps 137) would also be moved to tears at the mention of “Mesopotamia,” but not because of the word’s acoustic power. It was from this region, drained by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, that the Assyrians came to obliterate the northern kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians came to demolish the southern kingdom of Judah.

In terms of geopolitical ebb and flow, the Israelite monarchies were simply crushed by revived Mesopotamian superpowers (Bright 1972: 267). The Bible and Mesopotamian documents agree that the Israelites were defeated by superior military forces. However, the biblical record penetrates to a deeper level of causality: The Israelites were defeated by superior forces because they neglected and disobeyed YHWH (= Jehovah),<sup>1</sup> their God. Having forsaken him, despised His covenant and polluted His temple, they were forsaken by him.

According to Ezekiel, when YHWH’s temple was filled with abominations (Ezek 8), His glorious Presence departed in the direction of the Mount of Olives (Ezek 9:3; 10:4,18-19), the way David had gone when he fled from Absalom (2 Sam 15:23ff).<sup>2</sup> At the Mount of Olives, the divine Majesty lingered (Ezek 11:23) “as though loath to abandon the city altogether” (Greenberg 1983: 191). As He was leaving, the sound of the wings of the cherubim which bore him away was “like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks” (Ezek 10:5). The

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<sup>1</sup>YHWH, transliterating the unvocalized tetragrammaton, the personal name of Israel’s God.

<sup>2</sup>W. Shea interprets this passage within the context of an investigative judgment of Judah in Ezek 1-10 (1992: 15-23).

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unspoken message was the same as that pronounced by Jesus over half a millennium later when history repeated itself:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.” (Matt 23:37-38, NRSV here and in subsequent biblical quotations unless indicated otherwise)

Without YHWH, the temple and the city were soon destroyed.

The present paper explores the end of the Israelite monarchy in terms of political events, underlying spiritual causes connected with those events, and results of the fall of the monarchy for God’s people. The end of northern Israel is covered here to some extent, but the primary focus is on factors leading to the death throes of Judean independence.

### **Political Events**

The tumultuous final years of the monarchy are richly documented. Historical sources include especially (1) the biblical books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, (2) inscriptions from Syria-Palestine, Assyria, and Babylon, (3) accounts of Herodotus and Josephus, and (4) archaeological evidence. Although the sources differ in purpose and orientation,<sup>3</sup> they are complementary and there is a high degree of agreement between them in terms of what happened on the surface level (Stern 1975: 30; cp. Mitchell 1991a: 343). Some problems remain, such as the chronological relationship between Sennacherib’s invasion, Hezekiah’s last fifteen years, and the beginning of Manasseh’s reign.<sup>4</sup> But problems like this do not seriously affect our understanding of the period. After a period of prosperity for the independent kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south (Mitchell 1991a: 322), the beginning of the end came with the accession of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 B.C.) to the Assyrian throne. Because his campaigns in the west threatened Syria and Israel, they put their old animosities aside, made a defensive alliance and attempted to force Judah to join with them. To avoid fighting against Assyria without being replaced by a puppet ruler set up by the Syro-Israelite alliance, Ahaz of Judah sent a huge gift to

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<sup>3</sup>The Bible selects historical details primarily as background for conveying understanding of deeper spiritual realities. Inscriptions served purposes such as communication, record-keeping, and/or propaganda. Herodotus and Josephus were early historians who were somewhat detached by space or time from the political convulsions of sixth century Palestine. Archaeological evidence is concrete in the sense that it deals with material remains, but it is often ambiguous regarding the precise relationships between objects and events.

<sup>4</sup>If Hezekiah’s sickness, when he was promised another fifteen years (2 Kgs 20:6; Isa 38:5), occurred about the time of Sennacherib’s invasion, as the narrative suggests (2 Kgs 20:1—“In those days . . .”), we would figure that Hezekiah reigned fifteen years after about 701 B.C. But his reign would overlap with that of Manasseh. A co-regency between Hezekiah and Manasseh is a possible solution (Thiele 1965: 157-161). But some scholars do not accept this idea (see e.g. Miller and Hayes 1986: 351).

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Tiglath-pileser so that he would fight Syria and Israel (2 Kgs 16:7ff), which he probably would have done anyway (Bright 1972: 272).

Tiglath-pileser smashed the northern coalition, conquered the Galilee and Transjordanian regions of northern Israel, deported some of the population, and turned the territories into Assyrian provinces (734-733 B.C.). The remainder of Israel was saved when Hoshea murdered King Pekah, surrendered, and paid tribute. Tiglath-pileser then took Damascus and made Syria into Assyrian provinces (732 B.C.).

Soon after Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) replaced Tiglath-pileser, Hoshea gambled on independence, as shown by the fact that he called on Egypt for help and withheld tribute from Assyria. "This was Israel's suicide" (Bright 1972: 273). No help came from Egypt and Shalmaneser attacked. The capital city of Samaria held out through a long siege, but was taken about 722 B.C. Thousands of Israelites were deported to Mesopotamia and Media, where they were eventually absorbed into the local populations and lost their identity.

The decision of Ahaz about 734 B.C. to turn to Assyria for help, against the warning of Isaiah (Isa 7), brought Judah voluntarily within the orbit of the Assyrian empire as a satellite state. The Assyrians undoubtedly regarded Ahaz' "protection money" as committing him to vassal status (Mitchell 1991a: 333). Thus, when Hezekiah succeeded Ahaz, he inherited a kingdom which had lost full independence. However, when the Assyrian Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) died an untimely death on a distant battlefield and was succeeded by Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), Hezekiah took aggressive action as ringleader of an anti-Assyrian revolt. He had already begun to make extensive preparations for revolt, including equipping his army, storing up food,<sup>5</sup> and increasing the security of Jerusalem's water supply (2 Kgs 20:20; 2 Chron 32:3,5-6,28-30; Miller and Hayes 1986: 354). The remarkable Siloam water tunnel, commemorated by an inscription telling how it was constructed (ed. Pritchard 1969: 321), almost certainly dates to Hezekiah's preparation for a potential siege (Mitchell 1991a: 356).

In 701 B.C., when Sennacherib had subdued other parts of his empire, he lashed out against Syria-Palestine with devastating force and ravaged Judah. According to his annals, he took forty-six fortified towns, besieged Jerusalem, and made Hezekiah the Jew, "a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage" (ed. Pritchard 1969: 288). Sennacherib exacted rich tribute, but he does not claim to have captured Jerusalem. From a human point of view this is inexplicable, given the power of Sennacherib and the fact that Hezekiah was a ringleader of a revolt against him. The Bible, however, attributes the survival of

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<sup>5</sup>Some scholars suggest that many of the jars found by archaeologists which are stamped *lmlk*, "belonging to the king," were used to store provisions for defensive garrisons (Mitchell 1991a: 355; cp. Stern 1975: 49-53).

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Jerusalem to divine intervention: The angel of YHWH slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (2 Kgs 19:35).

Manasseh (697-642 B.C.) succeeded Hezekiah at the age of twelve and reigned 55 years, longer than any king in the entire history of Israel and Judah. He inherited a country ruined and impoverished by war, reduced in area and lowered in status to a vassal kingdom of Assyria. Although 2 Kgs 21:16 indicates that Manasseh's regime was a reign of terror for the people of Judah, his foreign affairs were peaceful. With Judah so weak, Manasseh was in no position to assert his independence against Assyria, which reached the height of its power during his reign (Gane 1997).

According to 2 Chron 33:11-13, at some point during Manasseh's reign he was captured by the Assyrians and brought to Babylon, where the Assyrian king may have been visiting (Mitchell 1991b: 374). Although Manasseh's arrest may have been due to his plotting against Assyria, he was released and restored to Jerusalem. While some have questioned the authenticity of this account, its plausibility is enhanced by a parallel experience of Neco I of Egypt. According to the Rassam Cylinder, Neco plotted against Assyria with other Egyptian vassal kings. They were arrested, bound by the Assyrians, and taken to Ashurbanipal (668-627) in Nineveh, where they were all put to death except Neco, who was pardoned and reinstated as king in Sais with a more favorable treaty than before (ed. Pritchard: 295). This may seem strange, but a vassal king redeemed from death in this way could subsequently be counted on to have undying loyalty to Assyria.

Manasseh was succeeded by his son Amon (642-640 B.C.), who was assassinated by Judean royal officials after two years. The "people of the land" executed those officials and put Amon's eight-year old son Josiah (640-609 B.C.) on the throne. His reign was affected by the collapse of Assyria after the abdication and death of Ashurbanipal (630 and 627 B.C.). As Assyria loosened its grip on Syria-Palestine due to wars between Ashurbanipal's heirs, Egypt moved to fill the vacuum (Miller and Hayes 1986: 388-390). Although Judah came within the orbit of Egyptian influence, Egypt's control was less tight than Assyria's had been. Consequently, Josiah was able to extend his border somewhat to the north into territory which had formerly belonged to the northern kingdom of Israel (Cross and Freedman 1953: 56-57; Malamat 1968: 137).

In 612 B.C. the Medes and Babylonians under Cyaxeres and Nabopolassar, respectively, conquered the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, an event heralded by the book of Nahum. Regarding the demise of the power which had so long made the world tremble, G. Roux comments laconically: "No one, as far as we know, sat on the ruins of Nineveh to write a lamentation" (Roux 1980: 347).

The remaining Assyrian army went westward to Haran, where they joined Egyptian forces, which were still loyal to them (Mitchell 1991b: 390-391). In 610 B.C. the Babylonians and Medes took Haran, but in 609 the Assyrians and Egyptians, now under the new pharaoh Neco II (610-595), counterattacked.

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However, in spite of Egypt's vigorous attempts to resuscitate Assyria, the empire died.

It appears that because Josiah wanted to get rid of the Assyrians, he was opposed to Neco II marching north to help them in 609 B.C. Therefore, he attempted to cut Neco off at Megiddo, but the Egyptians shot Josiah, mortally wounding him. The "people of the land" put Jehoahaz on the throne, but Neco removed him, sent him to exile in Egypt and made Eliakim king, changing his name to Jehoiakim (609-598).

The clash between Egypt and Babylon reached its climax at Carchemish, where the Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar II defeated the Egyptian army (605 B.C.) and shortly became master of Syria-Palestine (Hyatt 1956: 279-280). When Nabopolassar died in 605, Nebuchadnezzar took the throne. Daniel 1:1 provides evidence that during Nebuchadnezzar's accession year, before his first official regnal year began in the spring of 604 B.C., he besieged Jerusalem, took some vessels from the temple and exiled some people, including Daniel (cp. Josephus, *Against Apion* i. 19, citing Berosus, a Babylonian historian; ed. Nichol 1955: 747-748; Mitchell 1991b: 394).

While Jehoiakim preferred Egypt, which had put him in power, he found it expedient to become Nebuchadnezzar's vassal (604/603 B.C.). But the Babylonian Chronicles report that in 601/600 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar withdrew to Babylon after an unsuccessful attempt to invade Egypt (ed. Pritchard 1969: 564). Taking an apparent opportunity, Jehoiakim gambled on independence and withheld tribute. Nebuchadnezzar returned with a vengeance and besieged Jerusalem, which surrendered to him in 597 B.C. But by now Jehoiakim had died and his son Jehoiachin had succeeded him. Nebuchadnezzar exiled Jehoiachin and many leaders of Judah, including Ezekiel, and placed Mattaniah on the throne, changing his name to Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.).

A Babylonian administrative document referring to Jehoiachin as "the son of the king" (*mār šarri*) of Judah indicates that the Babylonians treated Jehoiachin as continuing his royal status (ed. Pritchard 1969: 308; Thomas 1950-51: 6; Malamat 1951: 81--82; cp. 2 Kgs 25:27). It appears that Nebuchadnezzar intentionally weakened Zedekiah's rule by not only removing political, military, and economic leaders from Judah, but also by maintaining the possibility that Zedekiah could be replaced by Jehoiachin. But this divisive and destabilizing policy backfired on Nebuchadnezzar and proved to be disastrous for Judah. Within Judah, there were now two factions. One group, including the false prophets, was opposed to submission to Babylon and wanted Jehoiachin to return (Jer 28:4). The other group, including Jeremiah, favored submission to Babylon and loyalty to Zedekiah as the best course for survival (Jer 29; cp. Malamat 1950: 224; 1951: 82-86).

It appears that Zedekiah wanted to remain loyal to Babylon. But he was under so much pressure from the anti-Babylon faction encouraged by the possibility of Jehoiachin's return (Malamat 1951: 87) that he finally gave in, made

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friendly contact with Egypt under Psammetichus II (595-689 B.C.), and broke his treaty with Nebuchadnezzar. Although Egypt had been defeated at Carchemish, it was still quite strong (Hyatt 1956: 280).

### *Deja vu*

Zedekiah relied on help from Egypt against a Mesopotamian superpower, just as Hoshea, the last king of Israel, had done. And he met with a similar result. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem. An Egyptian army sent into Palestine by Apries (Hophra, 589-570 B.C.), a new pharaoh, did distract the Babylonians temporarily. But after two years of siege the food in Jerusalem ran out and the wall was breached. Zedekiah fled, but was caught by the Babylonians, who slaughtered his sons, put out his eyes and took him bound to Babylon. A few weeks after the Babylonians captured the city they burned it, including the temple, and exiled much of its populace.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed a governor over Judah: Gedaliah, who was not descended from David. But Gedaliah was assassinated. Afraid of Babylonian reprisals for this, many Judeans fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. A further deportation of Judeans in Nebuchadnezzar's twenty-third year (581 B.C.; Jer 52:30) may have been punishment for Gedaliah's assassination.

Gedaliah's death did not change much. Judah had already lost her last vestige of independence. The era of the kings was over. Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was no more. Many of the people were gone. There was nothing left to do but lament:

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! . . . She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks. (Lam 1:1-2)

### **Underlying Spiritual Causes**

The Bible indicates that if the people of YHWH had remained loyal to their covenant with him, He would have protected them even from the mightiest military machines the world had to offer. The events of 701 B.C. show that YHWH's protection was not hypothetical. When Sennacherib invaded Judah and only the city of Jerusalem remained, there is no human reason why it should have survived when so many great cities were toppling before the inexorable Assyrian battering rams. But survive it did.

Even without the biblical record, we would be compelled to admit that some kind of miracle took place.<sup>6</sup> In spite of Sennacherib's penchant for propaganda as an extension of his monumental ego, neither in text nor in pictures does he claim to have taken Jerusalem. This glaring omission is worth a thousand words. The fact that he lined the walls of his "Palace without a Rival" with

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<sup>6</sup>M. Weinfeld, seminar on Isaiah 1-39 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986.

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reliefs vividly depicting his successful siege of the Judean fortress city of Lachish (see Shanks 1984) may be due to his need for a face-saving device. But for the grace of God, those reliefs would have shown Jerusalem instead.

Jerusalem survived in 701 B.C. because its king trusted in YHWH, believed His prophet and was faithful to His covenant. When Judah was connected to YHWH in this way, her enemies found themselves up against Ultimate Power.

The deliverance from Sennacherib shows that Jerusalem did not need to fall at all. Even though God's people had failed miserably in the past, YHWH was willing to forgive and help them if they would return to him and His covenant. But this deliverance in 701 B.C. also illuminates the real reason for its fall to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.: breach of YHWH's covenant rather than mere military inferiority.

Breach of YHWH's covenant involved a number of interrelated aspects which contributed to each other. These include royal insubordination to YHWH, false worship, ethical sins, and false hope combined with unwillingness to follow present truth revealed through prophets. The remainder of this section deals with these aspects.

#### **Royal Insubordination to YHWH**

After the unstable period of the "judges,"<sup>7</sup> the Israelites thought that stronger, more permanent and institutionalized human leadership was the solution to their problems.<sup>8</sup> The brief, disastrous reign of Abimelech (Judg 9) should have taught them differently. Nevertheless, they put intense pressure on Samuel to appoint a king (1 Sam 8:4-5,19-20). Samuel made it clear to the people that by taking a king they would reject YHWH as their king (v. 7; cp. 10:17-19) and they would lose their independence by becoming the king's servants (1 Sam 8:11-18). When the people persisted (vs. 19-20), YHWH gave Samuel permission to let them have their way (vs. 21-22).

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<sup>7</sup>Israel's problem during the period of the judges was lack of regard for the theocratic rule of YHWH, the divine king (Judg 8:23; cp. Num 23:21). The end of the book of Judges notes: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 21:25). YHWH's kingship was not guiding and restraining the people because they did not acknowledge his rule (Gane 1996: 84).

<sup>8</sup>There are significant ways in which the period of the kings parallels the earlier period of the judges. Both periods were defined by distinctive forms of leadership. Both involved downward spirals of decline from ideal times under Joshua and David, respectively. Both were punctuated by periods of reform which failed to permanently purify the nation from the contaminating influences of its neighbors. In the time of Samuel, the last judge, the ark was captured and the glory (*kābôd*) departed from Israel (1 Sam 4:22). In the time of Zedekiah, the last king, the glory (*kābôd*) left the temple (Ezek 9:3; 10:4,18-19) and the temple was destroyed. Jeremiah explicitly referred to a parallel between the late monarchy and the late period of the judges when he prophesied that the temple would become like Shiloh (Jer 26:6; cp. vs. 9).

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When Saul was crowned, "Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord" (1 Sam 10:25). Thus, while the people were responsible to the king, they and their king were still responsible to YHWH. YHWH maintained ultimate control and the king was His vice-regent (see Dumbrell 1980: 47), the mediator of the covenant between YHWH and His people (Robertson 1980: 235).

The reign of Saul, the first king, was paradigmatic for much of the history of the monarchy. Saul trusted his own judgment rather than obeying YHWH, his superior, whose will was conveyed to him through the prophetic role of Samuel. Because Saul was insubordinate, YHWH could not help him against his enemies, and the entire nation suffered the consequences.

In David, YHWH found someone He could use to make monarchy an instrument of His purposes. YHWH rewarded David for his loyalty by promising him a dynasty (2 Sam 7). Thus, whereas the Israelites had initiated the monarchy, YHWH took the initiative in pointing to David as the king whose relationship to himself subsequent kings were to emulate (see e.g. 2 Kgs 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 22:2). YHWH's covenant with David provided stability for Judah long after northern Israel had seceded from the union. Without such a covenant, northern Israel was frequently racked with strife over royal succession.

The Davidic covenant was not unconditional in the sense that it protected kings or their people from failure to enjoy YHWH's blessings when they were unfaithful to him (Dumbrell 1980: 45; McConville 1989: 34ff). Even in David's reign, 70,000 of his innocent Israelites died because of his sin in numbering Israel (2 Sam 24:15; 1 Chr 21:14). He was punished by losing his subjects. Because they had chosen to have a king, they suffered from his mistakes. Because Solomon turned to idolatry, he started to lose control of his mighty empire during his lifetime (1 Kgs 11:14ff) and the division of the kingdom left his son ruling only Judah in the south (1 Kgs 11:9-13,26-40; 12:1-24). When kings were arrogant, YHWH gave them less about which to be arrogant. Hezekiah foolishly showed Merodach-Baladan's envoys all his wealth and was rebuked by Isaiah, who told him that all his possessions would someday be taken to Babylon (2 Kgs 20:12-18). Josiah's disregard for God's will as spoken to him through Neco II (2 Chron 35:22) led to his death (vs. 23-24) and the further subjugation of Judah to Egypt (36:4). The fact that Josiah had led Judah in a sweeping reform (2 Kgs 23) did not exempt him from paying the price for his error any more than Moses' faithful service waived the consequences of his striking the rock at Meribah (Num 20:10-13). Notice that good king Josiah ended his life in the same way bad king Ahab did: shot by enemy archers while riding in his chariot (1 Kgs 22:34-37; 2 Chron 35:23-24).

Whereas the gift of prophecy was rare during the period of the judges (Judg 6:8), monarchy under YHWH necessitated a continuous line of prophets to remind kings that they were responsible to YHWH. Even good king David needed the pointed testimony of prophets such as Nathan (2 Sam 12).



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The way in which a king treated a prophet showed his attitude to YHWH. Because Zedekiah was insubordinate to YHWH, failing to “humble himself before the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from the mouth of the Lord” (2 Chron 36:12), he broke the oath which he had made to Nebuchadnezzar in YHWH’s name (v. 13; Malamat 1968: 145) and brought a disaster of biblical proportions down on himself and his people.

From the perspective of hindsight, it is easy for us to condemn the kings of Israel and Judah for their political blunders. But in worldly terms they were not stupid. They were independence oriented opportunists who counted the cost of confrontation with foreign powers. The problem was that at crucial moments they counted wrong. It would have taken superhuman insight for them to accurately weigh the circumstances which would determine their future (cp. Malamat 1968: 141). But through the prophets they had access to such insight. Nevertheless, they deliberately chose to reject it. They did not trust YHWH enough to depend upon His word.

The reaction of Ahaz to Isaiah when the king was threatened by the alliance of Syria and Israel illustrates the crucial relationship between royal trust and obedience in YHWH and national well-being. Through Isaiah, YHWH assured Ahaz that his enemies would fail (Isa 7:3-9). But Ahaz would not even ask for a sign to help his faith when YHWH offered it to him (vs. 10-12).<sup>9</sup> YHWH gave him a sign anyway: A young unmarried woman (*’almâ*) would have a son and name him Immanuel, i.e. “God is with us” (v. 14).<sup>10</sup> This sign was double-edged: It signified that Syria and northern Israel would be destroyed (v. 16) as Isaiah had already said (v. 8), but it also signified that because of Ahaz’ faithlessness Assyria would come upon Judah (vs. 17-20). Rather than heeding the prophet’s encouragement to trust YHWH, Ahaz turned to Tiglath-pileser III for help (2 Kgs 16:7-9), thereby causing the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that Assyria would come to dominate Judah. From this time on, Judah was never able to extricate itself from foreign domination (Motyer 1993: 87). As Isaiah had said to Ahaz, “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established” (Isa 7:9, RSV).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Contrast Judg 7:9-14.

<sup>10</sup>Immanuel is a nominal sentence in Hebrew like many other names: “God is with us” rather than simply “God with us.”

<sup>11</sup>While it is clear that the birth of Immanuel was somehow relevant to the 8th century B.C. crisis, scholars have not succeeded in finding evidence that the prediction was fulfilled in Ahaz’ time (see e.g. Motyer 1993: 85-87). However, centuries later the incarnate Christ did signify that God is with us (Matt 1:23). More than ironically, he launched his ministry from Galilee, thereby fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy that the people of that region, who were the first to fall into darkness under the Assyrians, would see “a great light” (Isa 9:1-2; Matt 4:12-16). After centuries of domination by foreign powers, beginning with the time of Ahaz, Christ as Immanuel would bring relief by inviting his people into “the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 4:17).

**False Worship**

Idoltrous false worship was a major reason why YHWH gave up Israel and then Judah to destruction (2 Kgs 17:7-23; 2 Kgs 23:26-27; 2 Chron 36:14; Ezek 8). Throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles, value judgments on royal reigns are largely based upon actions of kings for or against idolatry. Ethical sins arising from weaknesses such as greed or lust violated YHWH's covenant law. But idoltrous worship rejected YHWH in a more direct sense by deliberately putting something in place of him.

State-supported idolatry of foreign deities was introduced at Jerusalem by Solomon, who built places of worship for his pagan wives (1 Kgs 11:1-8). When northern Israel broke away from Solomon's son, Jeroboam sponsored idoltrous shrines at Bethel and Dan so that his people would not maintain loyalty to Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:25-33). Thus, idolatry was introduced very early in the history of the monarchy.

It is true that the calf-shaped idols at Bethel and Dan were designed to honor YHWH. But because YHWH rejects material representations of Himself (Exod 20:4-6; cp. Deut 4:15-19), worship of an idol representing him is worship of the object alone, which he regards as another god. It was a short step from worshipping a material object connected with YHWH (1 Kgs 12:25-33; cp. Judg 8:27) to polytheistic worship of foreign deities such as Baal (1 Kgs 16:31-33; cp. Judg 8:33).

Except for a few periods of reform carried out by rulers such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah in Judah and by Jehu in northern Israel, the kings were tolerant of idolatry or actively promoted it. Idolatry was like cancer. Because it was never wholly eradicated, it survived occasional surgery and always returned with a vengeance.

Partly because northern Israel lacked the religious anchor to YHWH which the temple in Jerusalem provided for Judah, the northern kings led the way in corrupting the worship of their people. Influenced by his Sidonian wife, Jezebel, Ahab began worshipping Baal and built a temple of Baal in Samaria (1 Kgs 16:31-33). In Judah, Ahaz and Manasseh followed a similar course. 2 Kgs 16:3 states that Ahaz "walked in the way of the kings of Israel." 2 Kgs 21:3 says that Manasseh "erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done."

From reading the Bible, it is difficult for modern readers to understand the attractiveness of idolatry and polytheism to ancient people. But texts and cult objects discovered by archaeology have greatly illuminated the nature of non-Israelite worship and also the syncretistic practices of the Israelites, who attempted to blend pagan worship of other gods with worship of YHWH. It has become clearer that from a human point of view worship of deities such as Baal, Asherah, Shamash, etc. made a lot of sense. These gods were regarded as controlling forces which directly affected the people's physical well-being (see e.g. Oppenheim 1964: 194-197). There was plenty of evidence for the existence of

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the gods. The cycles of nature—springtime and harvest, periods of rain and dryness, fertility and barrenness—were all viewed as evidence of the activities of the gods. In an agricultural society, the forces of nature were the key to prosperity and wealth. That was the concern of the people: materialism, not spiritual or moral goodness.

Ancient people worshipped their gods by means of images. While they regarded the gods themselves as animate supernatural beings, the way they related to the gods was demonstrated by the manner in which they treated their idols.<sup>12</sup> To own an idol was to have access to some of the power of the deity, as if the idol had a kind of magic quality. This kind of thinking had already entered Israel by the period of the “judges.” Because a man called Micah had an idolatrous shrine with a levite as his priest, he was sure that YHWH would make him prosper (Judg 17:13). He was concerned with prosperity, not obedience to YHWH. For him, religion was viewed as a form of self-help which was valuable if it “worked for him.” Isaiah similarly describes the idolatry of his day. A person would make an idol in order to seek deliverance from some kind of distress (Isa 44:17), without reference to moral obligations. While modern Christianity is not tangled up with idolatrous worship of false gods such as Baal, the contemporary movement toward increasing materialism and self-help religion<sup>13</sup> shares some of the same basic attitudes found in ancient idolatry.

In the time of Isaiah, even legitimate worship of YHWH was viewed selfishly as self-help. The people fasted, presumably on the Day of Atonement, which was the only fast day which YHWH had commanded (Lev 16:29,31). Then they asked YHWH: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (Isa 58:3). They thought that YHWH should bless them because they had obeyed His command. But Isaiah pointed out that on the day of the fast they were seeking their own pleasure (Isa 58:3), which probably means that they were working (cp. v. 13) and thereby breaking the command to keep sabbath on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29,31; 23:28,30-32). Furthermore, on the very day when their sins were being cleansed from the temple (Lev 16), they were adding to their sins and showing their disloyalty to YHWH by oppressing their workers and fighting (Isa 58:3-4). It is this kind of hypocrisy which explains prophetic denunciations of sacrifices. YHWH hated sacrifices offered by those whose hands were “full of blood” (Isa 1:15) because

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<sup>12</sup>A modern analogy is the way people in many countries honor their leaders by displaying photographs of them. To show disrespect to such a photograph would be to show disrespect to the leader himself.

<sup>13</sup>“Once stern and prescriptive in worldly matters, religion has become nothing more than a source of psychological uplifting, a tool of therapy that buttresses individual choice and lets people feel good about whatever code of conduct they choose . . . the faithful go about their lives ‘pretty much the same as those who have no faith at all.’” (*U. S. News & World Report*, September 26, 1994: 82).

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these rituals were not heartfelt expressions of devotion, gratitude, or remorse for sin.

The people were treating YHWH as if He were some kind of magical vending machine: By pushing the right buttons they expected good things to come. YHWH insisted that He be regarded as a divine being with free choice rather than as an impersonal force (see McConville 1989: 46-47).<sup>14</sup>

The prophets attacked idolatry not only on the ground that it constituted rebellion against YHWH; they argued that it was stupid because it failed to achieve the purpose for which it was intended: namely, self-help. Because deities other than YHWH did not exist at all, the only reality of an idol was the material from which it was made, which had no power to think, see or do anything at all, let alone save anyone (Isa 40:19-20; 44:9-20; 46:1; contrast 46:4).

It would be expected that after northern Israel had been extinguished for clinging to idolatry (2 Kgs 17:7-23), Judah would wake up. But Ahaz, the king who reigned at the very time when northern Israel fell, carried Judean cultic disobedience to new depths of depravity. Not only did he follow the example of the kings of Israel;

He even made his son pass through fire,<sup>15</sup> according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. (2 Kgs 16:3-4)

Ahaz was outdone by Manasseh, who enthusiastically bloodied his hands with every cultic and occult abomination he could find:

. . . he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole . . . worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them . . . He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord . . . He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. (2 Kgs 21:3-6; cp. 2 Chron 33:3ff)

Moreover, he put a sacred pole, i.e. a symbol/image of the goddess Asherah, in YHWH's temple, where YHWH had promised to put His name forever (1 Kgs 21:7)!<sup>16</sup> M. Haran points out that in an ancient near eastern temple, images or symbols of deities were placed in the inner sanctum. Thus, Manasseh probably put the Asherah in the holy of holies in place of the ark of the covenant (Haran

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<sup>14</sup>Cp. Joel 2:14: "Who knows whether he will not turn and relent . . ."

<sup>15</sup>Whether or not passing his son through the fire resulted in the child's death (see Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 266-267; cp. 2 Kgs 3:27; Mic 6:7), this foreign practice was explicitly forbidden by Deut 18:10. Not only was it a sin of idolatrous worship; it was a cruel violation of ethical morality.

<sup>16</sup>The forms of idolatry practiced in Judah during Manasseh's reign cannot be excused as the result of Assyrian imposition. It is true that vassal kingdoms were subject to some interference by Assyria in the area of religion (Spieckermann 1982: 307-372). However, 2 Kgs 21 and 2 Chron 33 do not mention Assyrian imposition of idolatry on Judah in the time of Manasseh (Gane 1997: 31). Furthermore, deities worshiped in Judah during Manasseh's reign were Canaanite and Aramean rather than Assyrian (Cogan 1993: 411; Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 272-273).

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1963: 50-51; cp. Mitchell 1991b: 373). The likelihood of such a direct affront to the God of Israel is reinforced by 2 Chron 35:3: Josiah later told the Levites to put the ark back in the temple.<sup>17</sup>

After Josiah's reform, idolatry rebounded again. Although the last kings were not as evil as Manasseh, when Ezekiel was carried in vision to the temple in Jerusalem, he saw Judeans carrying out abominations like those introduced by Manasseh (Ezek 8; see Smith 1975; Greenberg 1983: 168, 172). 2 Chron 36:14 describes all the leading priests and people at the time of Zedekiah as "exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem." The people had adopted the sins of Manasseh.

#### **Ethical Sins**

During the period of the monarchy, the Israelites broke all of the Ten Commandments which YHWH had given them as the primary stipulations for maintenance of His covenant with them (Exod 20; Deut 5). They broke the first four commandments, which addressed their duty to God, by embracing polytheism and idolatry (see above), taking God's name in vain (Jer 5:2; 2 Chron 36:13), and desecrating the Sabbath (Ezek 22:8; cp. Isa 58:13; Jer 17:19-27). They broke all six of the commandments which dealt with their duty to their fellow human beings by dishonoring their parents (Ezek 22:7), murdering innocent people (1 Kgs 21:5-14; 2 Kgs 21:16; Jer 22:17), committing adultery (Jer 23:14; 29:23), stealing (Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2), lying (Jer 29:23), and coveting (1 Kgs 21:1-4).

One of the most important functions of the prophets was to confront the people with ethical sins which separated them from YHWH. By mistreating other members of the covenant community, they were showing contempt for YHWH, the Lord and Protector of all Israelites. Sins against other people were sins against YHWH.

By means of "covenant lawsuits" communicated by the prophets, YHWH arraigned the Israelites for breaching their covenant with him. For example, in Isaiah 1 the prophet calls on heaven and earth as witnesses (cp. Deut 30:19; 31:28) to the fact that Israel was full of evildoing and had rebelled against its divine master (Isa 1:2ff; cp. 3:13; 41:21; Jer 2:9; Hos 14:1; Mic 6:2).

The prophets often vividly described and listed the sins of the people in order to impress upon them their moral sickness and need of YHWH. For example, Ezekiel laid bare the moral state of Jerusalem shortly before the Babylonians destroyed it:

Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are

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<sup>17</sup>This is the last reference to the ark in biblical history. When the temple was rebuilt after the destruction by the Babylonians, it had no ark.

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wronged in you. You have despised my holy things, and profaned my sabbaths. In you are those who slander to shed blood, those in you who eat upon the mountains, who commit lewdness in your midst . . . (Ezek 22:7-9; cp. Hos 4:1-2)

Zedekiah, whose name ironically means “YHWH is justice,” made a last-ditch attempt at social justice by calling on the people to free their Hebrew slaves as commanded in the laws of Moses (Jer 34:8-10; cp. Exod 21:2-11; Deut 15:12-18). But in spite of the fact that Nebuchadnezzar’s army was at their doorstep, they broke their commitment to obey YHWH by taking their slaves back into servitude (Jer 34:11).

Through sacrifices at the sanctuary, YHWH continually offered the people forgiveness. But this remedy required willingness to return to him and turn away from evil. Without repentance, expiatory rituals and prayers were hypocritical and worse than meaningless (e.g. Isa 1:11-15; Amos 5:21-27). As Samuel had said to King Saul, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). So the prophets appealed to the Israelites to cleanse their lives and make positive practical efforts to help others in need (e.g. Isa 1:16-17).

**False Hope Combined with Unwillingness to Follow Present Truth**

In Jeremiah’s famous Temple sermon, he told the Judeans that if they would not listen to YHWH, obey His law and heed the messages of His prophets, He would make the temple like Shiloh and make Jerusalem a curse (Jer 26:4-6). But the priests and (false) prophets and all the people seized Jeremiah and condemned him to capital punishment for prophesying against their capital (vs. 7-11).

Jeremiah was saved by some leaders who argued that the prophet Micah had given essentially the same message (Jer 26:18-19; cp. Mic 3:12). Thus, Jeremiah’s message was shown to be consistent with that of Micah, whose prophetic authenticity was beyond dispute and who prophesied in the time of Hezekiah, the king who reigned when Jerusalem was delivered.

The leaders who saved Jeremiah understood that their assurance of YHWH’s protection was conditional. It was true that YHWH had promised through Isaiah that Jerusalem would not be captured by the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:20-33; Isa 37:21-35). But it was also true that this promise was given when Hezekiah showed himself to be loyal to YHWH and thereby led His people out of the punishment prophesied by Micah. Jeremiah was holding out the same conditional hope to his audience at the temple:

Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. (Jer 26:13; cp. v. 3)

Jeremiah answered the false confidence of the priests and prophets, who clung to the earlier promise that Jerusalem would not be destroyed, as if that

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promise and the promises of the Davidic covenant were unconditional (see e.g. Jer 28:11; Overholt 1967: 245-246). Some modern scholars also claim that the Davidic covenant was unconditional because YHWH did not make any stipulations when He promised David a dynasty (see e.g. Weinfeld 1970: 189; cp. 2 Sam 7 and Ps 89). But this view overlooks the fact that the Davidic covenant was set up within the framework of the Sinaitic covenant, which was clearly conditional (cp. Overholt 1967: 245; Dumbrell 1980: 46).<sup>18</sup>

It is true that God's covenant promises are unconditional in the sense that He brings His purposes to ultimate fruition regardless of human cooperation (Walton 1994: 109). Thus, the promise to David is fulfilled in Christ, the "son of David," who is to reign eternally. But it is also true that each covenant phase is conditional in the sense that human beings must cooperate with God if they themselves are to enjoy the benefits of the covenant (Ps 89:29-32; Robertson 1980: 247; McCarthy 1982: 87; Dumbrell 1984: 150; Walton 1994: 113, 118). If God cannot work with a person or group of people, He finds others to take their place as His "remnant."

The assumptions of the Judeans regarding the covenant lulled them into false security, so that their natural sinfulness was unchecked by accountability to YHWH and His law of love:

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. (Jer 6:13-14; cp. Jer 8:11; Ezek 13:10)

The leaders who sided with Jeremiah at the temple quoted Micah 3:12, which indicts the same groups of leaders who wanted to lynch Jeremiah: Priests and prophets were untrustworthy because they preached messages of human devising and were more interested in shekels than in the Shekinah. Judah's spiritual state had reverted to what it was at the time of Micah's prophecy before the reform of Hezekiah. Because history had repeated itself, present truth had come full circle, and again Jerusalem stood under judgment.

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<sup>18</sup>Several factors indicate that the Davidic covenant functioned under the Sinaitic covenant. For example: (1) The covenant with David was analogous to the covenant with Phinehas (Num 25:12-13) in the sense that an individual was chosen on the basis of loyalty to God to have his line of descendants fill an existing institutional position of national leadership. (2) At least since the covenant with Noah, ratification of major covenants which defined phases of salvation history involved sacrificial ritual (Noah—Gen 8:20; Abraham—Gen 15; Israel—Exod 24). But no ritual was involved in the ratification of the Davidic covenant. (3) Deut 17:14-20 recognized the possibility of kingship and regulated this institution under the Deuteronomic restatement of the Sinaitic covenant. (4) Covenant reform/renewal during the monarchic and post-exilic periods meant primarily returning to faithful observance of the Sinaitic Covenant (2 Chron 29-31; 2 Kgs 23; 2 Chron 34-35; Neh 8-10).

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The sentence of judgment was even more serious in the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel than it was in the days of Micah. The main reason was Manasseh, Hezekiah's prodigal son, who led his people to unprecedented depths of apostasy. It is true that when he was arrested by the Assyrians he humbled himself before YHWH (2 Chron 33:12), and when YHWH restored him to Jerusalem he undid some of the evil which he had caused (v. 13-17). But the results of his earlier years continued to have a disastrous effect upon Judah.

YHWH's reaction to the intensely wicked part of Manasseh's reign had been to sentence Judah and Jerusalem to destruction (2 Kgs 21:10-15). Even after Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, began to repair the temple and humbled himself before YHWH when the "book of the law" was read to him, the prophetess Huldah confirmed that the evil described in the book, i.e. the covenant curses (see Deut 28:15-68; cp. 29:16-28; Lev 26: 14-39), applied to Judah (2 Kgs 22:16-17). This is not so surprising. But even after Josiah subsequently carried out the most sweeping reforms in the entire history of Judah, the country was still doomed:

Still the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. The Lord said, "I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there." (2 Kgs 23:26-27)

The persistence of the sentence of doom on the basis of the sins of Manasseh raises a serious problem of theodicy (= divine justice; Smith 1975: 12-14), as recognized by the Judeans themselves. They repeated a proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer 31:29; Ezek 18:2). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel answered this proverb with a message vindicating YHWH's justice: Sinners die, i.e. suffer unnatural death as punishment, for their own sins (Jer 31:30; Ezek 18:3-29; cp. Deut 24:16). After devoting an entire chapter to detailed exposition of this principle, Ezekiel called upon his people to repent so that they would live (Ezek 18:30-32).

If YHWH would be true to His own principle of justice, how could He punish Judah for the sins of Manasseh after he was dead and after they had experienced corporate repentance under Josiah? Connected with this, scholars have perceived a discrepancy between 2 Kgs 23:25, where Josiah is highly praised for his reform, and verses 26-27, where Judah's fall already appears irrevocable in the time of Josiah due to Manasseh's sins. Furthermore, such irrevocability seems contradicted by prophetic messages after Josiah's death such as Jer 26:3,13, where the people could still escape calamity if they repented.<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>19</sup>T. R. Hobbs finds that judgment for the sins of Manasseh was delayed just as judgment on Hezekiah for showing his possessions to the Babylonian envoys was delayed (Hobbs 1985: 338; cp.



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complex of problems is so serious that some scholars can deal with it only by postulating conflicting strands of authorship in the books of Kings (see e.g. Cross 1973: 274-290) and/or by supposing that Ezekiel justified the punishment of Judah in the time of Zedekiah by falsely attributing the wickedness of Manasseh's time to subsequent generations (see e.g. Ezek 8).<sup>20</sup>

While the difficulties just raised are indeed challenging, they are not insurmountable. The early messages of Jeremiah, dating to the reign of Josiah (see Jer 1:2), indicate that while the reforms initiated by this king were wide in scope, they did not deeply affect the spiritual lives of the people (Keil 1952: 492; Kent 1981: 11). This is confirmed by the rapidity with which they slid back into apostasy after Josiah died. Jer 44 is especially revealing in this regard. After the fall of Jerusalem and the assassination of Gedaliah, the refugees to Egypt said to Jeremiah:

“As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we are not going to listen to you. Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine.” (v. 16-18)

Thus, the people actually blamed their troubles on the interruption of their idolatry!<sup>21</sup> It appears that they were true believing pagans all along. This helps to explain 2 Kgs 23:26-27. The reform of Josiah was not enough to turn aside the punishment of the nation which it had incurred during Manasseh's reign.

We have already found that the Judeans adopted the practices of Manasseh to the extent that at the very end, in the time of Zedekiah, these evils flourished even without the level of aggressive royal sponsorship which Manasseh provided. By not turning away from the sins which their forefathers committed in the time of Manasseh, later generations continued to reap the results of these sins.

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2 Kgs 20:16-19). But the punishment for the sins of Manasseh is much greater in scope, involving the entire nation and thus raising the question of YHWH's fairness.

<sup>20</sup>For references to arguments of C. C. Torrey, Y. Kaufmann, and M. Greenberg, see Smith 1975: 11-12.

<sup>21</sup>M. Smith argues that the interruption of idolatry referred to in this passage does not fit the reform imposed by Josiah, as scholars such as M. Greenberg have held, because this reform was followed by a period of prosperity. He explains the suspension of idolatry as a result of the siege of Jerusalem, when incense and sacrificial materials became impossible to obtain (1975: 15-16). Thus, Smith suggests that private practice of idolatry continued throughout the reign of Josiah and only ended at the time of the siege (1975: 16). However, Smith's argument is weakened by the fact that in Jer 44:16-18, the cessation of idolatry is viewed as the cause rather than the result of troubles such as the siege of Jerusalem.

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YHWH had warned of this dynamic in the second of the Ten Commandments, which deals with the chief sin of Manasseh's time, namely, idolatry:

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me. (Exod 20:5)

At first glance, this law seems to conflict with Deut 24:16, which states: "Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death." But the difference is that in the second commandment, those who suffer the consequences of the sins of their ancestors are those who reject YHWH. If people turn from the ways of their evil parents, love YHWH and keep His commandments, He promises to treat them with "steadfast love to the thousandth generation" (Exod 20:6).

2 Kgs 23:26-27 does not contradict Ezek 18, but complements it in the same way that Exod 20:5 complements Deut 24:16. Although it is true that people are punished for their own sins and they can escape punishment by turning from their sins, it is also true that those who continue the rebellion of their ancestors suffer the accumulating consequences of disobedience. Thus, to reverse the effects of Manasseh's reign would require a much stronger reformation than that which was needed earlier in the time of Isaiah and Micah. The people needed to follow the present truth which YHWH revealed to them through Jeremiah and Ezekiel rather than thinking that they could get by with the earlier prophets alone.

Jeremiah preached his Temple sermon at the twilight of the monarchy. The captivities of 605 and 597 B.C. had already occurred. Whereas the people were inclined to resist these judgments, Jeremiah appealed to them to submit to God. In a letter to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah told them to build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children, and seek the welfare of Babylon (Jer 29:5-7), because their exile would not end for 70 years (vs. 10-14). The main purpose of the letter was to counter the false hope of the false prophets, which would lead the people to make decisions counterproductive to their well-being and survival (cp. Overholt 1967: 247).

False hope had disastrous results:

1. Because they thought God was with them, the people pressured Zedekiah into rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem.

2. The people ignored their real problem, namely, unfaithfulness to God which separated them from His protection:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called

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by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer 7:9-10)

3. The people ignored the voice of God through the true prophets, thereby resisting His leading and renouncing loyalty to him (Jer 29:17-19; contrast 2 Chron 20:20).

In their refusal to follow YHWH through changing circumstances (Overholt 1967: 245), the Judeans paralleled the experience of their ancestors at Kadesh. When the people accepted the report of the ten spies and were overcome by rebellious unbelief (Num 13:27-29,31-33; 14:1-4), YHWH sentenced them to what they had chosen: more years of wandering in the wilderness (Num 14:28-35). But when Moses told this to them, they attempted to undo their fate by obeying the earlier message to take the land immediately. By attempting to follow that message, which no longer applied, they rejected present truth and rebelled against YHWH again. The result was a humiliating defeat (Num 14:39-45).

The experiences of the ancient Israelites should teach us the importance of accepting and following the light given for our time by the latest of the prophets, even if her writings are not canonical, just as the writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were not canonical when they had their most immediate application. We are responsible not only for the truth revealed to our ancestors, but also for the additional truth entrusted to us.<sup>22</sup>

In a stupendous effort to save His people, YHWH appealed to them through the prophets by means of remarkable oratory which was vivid, impassioned, poetic, dramatic, startling and at times of such soaring literary quality that it has few rivals in any language (see e.g. Isa 40-66; Ezek 19; Brownlee 1972: 93). Moreover, YHWH had the prophets do highly unusual things in order to arrest the people’s attention. For example, He told Ezekiel to make a model of the siege of Jerusalem and act out siege conditions by eating “bread” made of bits and pieces of various ingredients (Ezek 4:9-10). In the third century A.D., some Jews experimented by following Ezekiel’s recipe for siege bread. Not even a dog could eat it (Babylonian Talmud *Erubin* 81a; see Greenberg 1983: 106). But not only did YHWH command Ezekiel to eat these miserable morsals; He told him to bake it in public on human dung (Ezek 4:13,9-13). When the prophet protested, YHWH allowed him to use cow’s dung (vs. 14-15). If this episode was humiliating to the prophet, he really suffered when YHWH took his wife from him without letting him mourn her death, as a sign to the people that the tem-

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<sup>22</sup>“Greater light shines upon us than shone upon our fathers. We cannot be accepted or honored of God in rendering the same service, or doing the same works, that our fathers did. In order to be accepted and blessed of God as they were, we must imitate their faithfulness and zeal,—improve our light as they improved theirs,—and do as they would have done had they lived in our day. We must walk in the light which shines upon us, otherwise that light will become darkness” (White 1948: 262).

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ple would be destroyed (Ezek 24:15-27)! Through such drastic means of communication YHWH cried out to His people to repent before it was too late.

YHWH kept on trying to win back His people until no further hope remained. In his love-song concerning YHWH's vineyard, Isaiah quotes YHWH as lamenting: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" (Isa 5:4). These are ominous words. In the next verses, YHWH says that He will destroy the vineyard (vs. 5-6). Isaiah was presenting a powerful warning. But because this and many other prophetic messages were not heeded, YHWH could do nothing more for the Israelite monarchy, so its probation closed. In the end, Chronicles had to report:

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy. (2 Chron 36:15-16)

The very next verses recount the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians (vs. 17-21). The terrible "day of the Lord" had come for the Jewish people (cp. Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:14-18).

### **Results**

Even though His people were in exile, God encouraged them by giving to Ezekiel and Daniel visions of Himself upon His throne (Ezek 1; Dan 7:9-14). He was still in charge, watching over their destiny. Although He allowed Judah to fall, He controlled circumstances so that God's people would not be blotted from the face of the earth, but a purified remnant could arise from the ashes of the great conflagration and revive the nation. The following factors involved in the fall of the monarchy contributed to the survival of the nation and/or its purification:

1. Judah fell to the Babylonians rather than the Assyrians. If Judah had been completely conquered by the Assyrians in the time of Hezekiah or Manasseh, it is likely that her population would have been scattered, absorbed, and replaced according to the Assyrian policy which vaporized the national identity of conquered peoples such as the northern Israelites. There would have been no Jewish nation into which the Messiah could be born. The fact that Judah fell more than a century later to the Babylonians, whose tactics were different, made possible a return from captivity.

2. If the nation had fallen in the time of Manasseh, it is possible that the remnant who survived Manasseh's depredations would not have been strong enough to carry the nation through the crisis. The reform of Josiah strengthened the faithful remnant before Judah fell.

3. YHWH addressed royal insubordination, which had led the nation into apostasy, by removing the monarchy. But the prophets outlived the monarchy and continued to guide the people.

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4. YHWH dealt with idolatry and hypocritical worship at the temple by allowing the temple to be destroyed and His people to be carried far from it where they could interact with him only through sincere prayer (e.g. Dan 6:10). The effectiveness of the captivity in removing idolatry, even of the kind which was practiced by the common people at their homes, is shown by archaeology. Ephraim Stern reports that thousands of cult figurines representing various deities have been found all over Palestine, all of them dating to pre-exilic periods. But not a single cultic figurine has been found which dates to the Persian period, after the exile (Stern 1989: 53-54). This does not mean that idolatry posed no threat after the exile. The main thrust of Ezra's reform was to do away with mixed marriages which were causing assimilation of foreign culture and thereby paving the way for re-introduction of idolatry (Ezra 9). However, there is no question that the captivity had dealt idolatry a deadly wound.

5. In much of their preaching and writing, the prophets gave the people life-preserving hope by pointing them to a new dawning in the future, a time when YHWH would comfort His people and feed His flock like a shepherd (Isa 40:1,11). His messianic suffering "Servant" would bear their griefs, carry their sorrows and take the punishment for their iniquities (Isa 53:4-6). He would establish a new covenant with them, based upon forgiveness (Jer 31:31-34), and give them hearts of flesh instead of stone (Ezek 36:26). He would revive and unite their nation (Ezek 37) and give them a new temple (Ezek 40-47). He would restore their land, as shown by Jeremiah's purchase of a field at Anathoth during a lull in the final siege of Jerusalem (Jer 32; Kent 1981: 16). Without prophetic hope, the people could easily have given up.

6. The searing indictments of Jeremiah and Ezekiel sounded harsh. But harshness paved the way for hope. When prophecies of doom turned out to be reliable and realistic, there was basis for belief that prophecies of restoration would also come true. If true prophets had only emphasized good times as the false prophets did, the people would have lost all hope before those times came. The pointed testimonies, guidance, and foresight of the prophets was not appreciated by many while they lived. But the effect of these messages was to preserve the nation's identity by taking a remnant from a state of denial and anchoring them in reality, especially the reality of their relationship with YHWH.

### **Conclusion**

For the people of Israel and Judah, the late monarchy was a time of bewildering complexity, radical paradigm shifts and accumulating stress in all areas of life. Powerful internal and external forces threatened to obliterate the covenant and its community. Leaders and people pulled each other in various directions. Conflicting theologies were espoused by credible individuals who claimed to have messages from YHWH (Overholt 1967: 241). Greed and misery fought in the streets. In their daily struggle for survival and identity, some puffed the deadly vapors of vain euphoria and others withered in despair.

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Through it all, YHWH was there, waiting for His prodigal people to come home after tasting the bitter alternative to His benevolent rule (see Hosea; cp. Lk 15:11-24). Even after He left the temple and the Judeans were in captivity, He Himself was a sanctuary to them (Ezek 11:16). His prophets stayed with their people--weeping over them (Jer 9:1; 13:17), thundering at them (Jer 25), persecuted by them (Jer 37-38), but going with them into exile (Jer 43:1-7; Kent 1981: 17).

When the Assyrians and Babylonians rampaged across the stage of history, many little peoples like the Israelites were trampled into the dust and vanished. But the Israelites survived and were transformed. In spite of all the suffering and perplexity, the visions of hope which awaited their time were trustworthy and the just did live by faith (Hab 2:3-4). It is true that the Jews had many problems after the exile, but the fact that they survived at all is a tribute to the faithfulness of the few who obeyed when it was popular to disobey and who spoke when nobody seemed to be listening. But even more it is a tribute to the love and power of the Most High, who "rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will" (Dan 4:17,25; cp. 5:21).

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