

was always Israel's purpose. "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (56:7).

Yahweh knew already what the returnees would fall into; He described it at length to Isaiah: bloodshed, deceit, plots, avarice, corrupt courts—the same old song. He would raise up prophets like watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem to intercede for the city as Moses had done, but many of them would be lazy. So Isaiah's messages swing from hope to judgment and back again. But even though his last word details the agony of those who spurn Yahweh in the last days, the closing chapters as a whole ring with joy because vindication does not all depend on human faithfulness:

He saw that there was no one,
 he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
 so his own arm worked salvation for him,
 and his own righteousness sustained him. . . .
 The Redeemer will come to Zion. (59:16,20)

Whoever the Servant is, and whatever his followers do, one thing is certain. The Redeemer—the Kinsman who buys His people out of slavery (Yahweh Himself)—will come to Zion.

Strolling Toward Disaster

*2 Kings 21:19–23:27; 2 Chronicles 33:21–36:8;
 Jeremiah 7–20, 26;
 Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah*

Amon

Yahweh managed to catch Manasseh's attention toward the end of his life. Manasseh apparently got involved in a Babylonian rebellion against Assyria and was dragged off temporarily to Babylon. His time in prison led to some change of heart regarding Yahweh, and he prayed to the God of Israel for deliverance. After he was pardoned and sent home, he tried to take Yahweh more seriously and reduced his own pagan practices, but he did virtually nothing to reform his people.

He died at the ripe age of sixty-seven, and his twenty-one-year-old son, Amon, took over. Amon, who had not had the pleasure of walking to Babylon with a hook in his nose, had not seen the light about Yahweh. He was such a vile king that after two years his officials assassinated him and tried to take over, but the coup was put down and Amon's son, Josiah, was crowned.

Zephaniah

About the time eight-year-old Josiah became king, one of his older cousins began receiving some public prophecies. Zephaniah was a great-great-grandson of Hezekiah and familiar with

the court and current politics. Observing the wreckage left by Manasseh and Amon, he blasted Jerusalem with several brief oracles. His visions focused now on the atrocities committed by the leaders of his nation, now on the destruction they would reap, now on the Day of Yahweh at the end of the age. His poetry is stark:

“Their blood will be poured out like dust
and their entrails like filth.
Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of [Yahweh’s] wrath.” (Zephaniah 1:17-18)

Zephaniah saw the fate of Judah’s enemies — even Assyria — as well as that of Judah herself, since Yahweh played no favorites. He heard Yahweh’s astonishment that even the city where He had put His Name did not respond to His correction. Yet like most of his prophetic brothers, he closed with a song of triumph about the day when Yahweh would forgive and restore.

Josiah

Temporary relief was in sight, for like Joash two centuries earlier, Josiah had the benefit of virtuous tutors. At the age of sixteen he committed himself to seek Yahweh, and at twenty he launched a campaign to morally disinfect Judah and Israel. First he had his father’s and grandfather’s paraphernalia, such as phallic symbols and astrological gear, thrown on the garbage heap. He tore down the altars of child sacrifice and expelled the homosexual prostitutes from Yahweh’s temple. Then he traveled across his land and even to Samaria and Bethel desecrating shrines and slaughtering pagan priests. (He rebuked priests of Yahweh who were officiating outside Jerusalem, but he didn’t kill them.) At last he went home (to the relief of large sections of his people) and set to work repairing the temple, which had had no upkeep for a century.

Jeremiah

Twenty-year-old Josiah launched his religious purge in 627 BC. The following year when it was well underway, Yahweh called a

young priest (or priest-in-training) only slightly older than Josiah to be a prophet with an international portfolio. Jeremiah gave the stock response to a calling (Who, me? I’m no public speaker. I’m nobody!), and Yahweh gave His standard retort: Don’t be scared. I am with you.

Jeremiah had the distinction of receiving possibly the very worst assignment of any prophet. Many had to prophesy Judah’s destruction; Jeremiah got to do it for forty years, during most of which he endured death threats and imprisonment, and at the end of which he got to savor every bitter moment of famine and slaughter.

His first seventeen years were tolerable because Josiah was alive and working for the same ends. He made the job of restoring Judah’s integrity seem possible, and he protected Jeremiah from active persecution. Jeremiah could stand in Jerusalem’s marketplace and express Yahweh’s grief over His wanton bride, His sorrow that His people preferred to dig their own wells to slake their thirst for security and importance rather than drink from Yahweh’s fountain. Yahweh’s envoy was free to accuse Judah’s finest of murder and graft. Those were the years when Yahweh begged shamelessly, “return, return.” But few listened.

The Book of the Covenant

One day during the temple renovations, the priest in charge was fetching money to pay the workmen. In a back storeroom he discovered a scroll, which he passed on to Josiah’s secretary. Josiah was appalled when he heard the scroll read, for it turned out to be some or all of Moses’ writings — the Book of the Covenant with its commands, blessings for obedience, and curses for treachery. It was obvious to Josiah that Samaria lay in ruins and his own nation was barely hanging on against crop failures and the ever-present threat of Assyria all because they had thumbed their noses at their King.

The book of Moses made it quite clear that crimes on the level of Manasseh’s and Amon’s would lead to destruction. (It’s a hint of how low things had fallen that Moses’ writings were utterly unknown in Josiah’s day.) Josiah dispatched four of his officials to a prophetess to inquire what Yahweh was going to do

about these crimes and curses.

She reported that, yes, Yahweh was indeed going to obliterate Judah for its villainy, but because Josiah had humbled himself before Yahweh, He would take the king's life before the destruction took place so that he would not have to suffer through it.

Wonderful news. Josiah called a mass meeting of the elders of Judah and the entire population of Jerusalem to renew the covenant. He had the book of Moses read and made the people pledge to obey it. Then he threw the greatest Passover celebration in history: 41,400 animals were cooked or burnt.

No doubt Yahweh appreciated Josiah's attempt, but He knew His fickle people were simply following their leader to avoid his wrath and would revert to their old ways as soon as they had a more compliant king. So Yahweh continued to move nations into position like chess pieces for His checkmate of Judah. For Jeremiah, the visions and sounds of an army swarming toward Jerusalem were like nightmares. He obediently reported what he saw; but he also wept:

Oh, my anguish, my anguish!
I writhe in pain.
Oh, the agony of my heart!
My heart pounds within me,
I cannot keep silent. (Jeremiah 4:19)

Yahweh told him He would save Jerusalem if Jeremiah could find one honest man in the city. But as hard as he looked, he failed. Yet daily, it seemed, other prophets were coming out with grandiose pronouncements of Yahweh's favor and protection, and the priests spoke pious platitudes.

Nahum and the Rise of Babylon

Nahum was one of the few true prophets of this period who had something popular to say. He had the job Jonah wanted: he received a technicolor preview of Nineveh's fall. The city had abandoned its earlier repentance and reached new heights of brutality in the 640s and 630s. Nahum's staccato style throbs

as Nineveh, soaked in blood and sorcery in its lust for gold and power, is crushed, then blown away like locusts in the wind.

Josiah's magnificent Passover was in 622 BC. In 612 Nineveh fell to an alliance of Media and Babylonia. (See map, page 342.) The surviving Assyrian forces regrouped, but after three years of fighting they were pushed west across the Euphrates. The Egyptians (who wanted to be rid of Assyria for good) allied with Babylonia and began to march north to squeeze the Assyrians from the other side. Josiah feared Egypt would swallow Judah up if Assyria were defeated, so he led his army out to cut Egypt off. But as He had promised, Yahweh let the thirty-nine-year-old monarch die in battle. Egypt and Babylonia, under the brilliant general, Prince Nebuchadnezzar, cut down the remains of the Assyrian army. The neo-Babylonian Empire was dawning.

Josiah's First Two Sons

When a bleeding Josiah arrived in Jerusalem and later expired, the whole nation mourned bitterly. Jeremiah composed laments for the lost king that were national treasures for centuries. But times were tense; Jehoahaz, Josiah's second-oldest son, was quickly chosen as his successor.

However, the Egyptian pharaoh paused on his way home from smashing Assyria to arrest Jehoahaz, imprison him in his military headquarters in Syria, appoint his elder brother king, impose a stiff vassal tribute upon Judah, and carry Jehoahaz back to Egypt to die.

Jehoiakim, Josiah's eldest, reigned eleven cruel years. Dishonesty, oppression, ambition, and injustice were the order of the day, along with renewed idolatry and debauchery. For the first four years Jehoiakim was a vassal of Egypt.

Habakkuk

The prophet Habakkuk was disgusted with the way Judah behaved during the late years of Josiah and the early ones of Jehoiakim. It looked to him as though Yahweh was going to let the rich nobility squeeze the life out of the poor forever. Habakkuk finally got fed up with praying for justice and complained to Yahweh: "Why do You tolerate wrong?"

Yahweh coolly responded that He was about to punish Judah's wickedness by overrunning the land with an even more ruthless people: the Babylonians.

That's worse! Habakkuk protested. You're the Rock, the Holy One. "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, You cannot tolerate wrong." How can You let such vicious people who worship themselves be Your instruments of justice? How can You let the wicked triumph?

This question was burning in the minds of more than one prophet who had heard the predictions about Babylonia. So Habakkuk stationed himself like a watchman to hear what Yahweh wanted him to tell the rest about this complaint.

Yahweh was not the least offended that His servants were challenging His methods. He told Habakkuk to take a memo and save it for later generations who would also wonder about His justice. Yahweh's reply was to detail both the Babylonians' offenses and the judgment He would impose. Habakkuk would have to be patient, but in due time the wicked would get theirs.

Like Job, Habakkuk stood in awe when Yahweh actually showed up to answer his complaint. He composed a song exalting Yahweh's power as a deliverer. He concluded, looking around at the way aristocrats were raping the land and looking forward to even worse devastation when the Babylonians arrived:

I heard and my heart pounded,
 my lips quivered at the sound;
 decay crept into my bones,
 and my legs trembled.
 Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
 to come on the nation invading us.
 Though the fig tree does not bud
 and there are no grapes on the vines,
 though the olive crop fails
 and the fields produce no food,
 though there are no sheep in the pen
 and no cattle in the stalls,
 yet I will rejoice in [Yahweh],
 I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Habakkuk 3:16-18)

Jeremiah's Complaints

We don't know whether Jeremiah got to hear this interchange between Habakkuk and Yahweh, but we do know that he was asking rather the same questions early in Jehoiakim's reign.

Here's why: Yahweh told him to stand in the doorway of the temple and rebuke the worshipers for coming there after making shady business deals all week. He added that both temple and city would be ravaged because of this behavior. The priests and others whose livelihoods depended upon the temple demanded that Jeremiah be executed. The crowd agreed vehemently at first, until some elders argued that Hezekiah hadn't executed Micah for saying essentially the same things. Jeremiah was released—a close call since Jehoiakim had another prophet hunted down and executed at about this time. And shortly thereafter, Jeremiah heard of a plot among his fellow priests—his relatives—to murder him.

Jeremiah was devastated. Yahweh had ordered him not to pray for this worthless nation, but Jeremiah just couldn't bring himself to stop. He wept and wrote heartrending laments about the sufferings he saw coming to Judah. He couldn't understand why he was being treated like a traitor. So he said, You know, Yahweh, I'd like to have a word with You about Your justice: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?" (Jeremiah 12:1). And Yahweh's incredible response was, You think it's bad for you now? Just wait! Later, when Jeremiah complained again, Yahweh promised that the day would come when Jeremiah's enemies would come crawling to him for counsel. But He also added that Jeremiah had better give up the pity parties. The only real comfort Yahweh had to offer was the honor of a noble mission and His old promise: *I am with you.*

Incredibly, as Jeremiah continued to pour out his pain, he also continued to draw enough strength from Yahweh's presence to see his galling job to the end. He both yelled and trusted when a priest had him beaten and restrained overnight in the temple.

His offense that time was gathering a crowd at the Potsherd Gate, smashing a clay pot, and declaring that Yahweh would smash the nation just like that. Yahweh was continually giving

him these bits of theater, like the time when he had to bury a linen belt until it rotted to symbolize how pure-white Judah, which had been the belt around Yahweh's waist, would be ruined.

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Babylon's Triumph

*2 Kings 24:1-25:30; 2 Chronicles 36:9-23;
Jeremiah 21-25, 27-52; Lamentations; Obadiah*

Babylon's First Attack

Jehoiakim was a smug vassal of Egypt from 609 until 605 BC. In that year, Jeremiah announced that for twenty-three years he had been warning Judah, and now the warning period was over. Judah was about to begin seventy years of captivity in Babylon.

At about the same time, Jeremiah got a series of words predicting the same judgment on Judah's neighbors: Egypt, Philistia, Edom, Moab, Ammon. And he got a long, spectacular preview of Babylon's end after the seventy years were up. None of this comforted him much.

That year, 605 BC, Prince Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt soundly (at the same place where the two nations had fought as allies against Assyria four years earlier). Just as he was sweeping south to absorb Samaria and Judah (see map, page 342), news arrived that his father had died and he was now king of the Babylonian Empire. To assert himself as the new overlord, Nebuchadnezzar confiscated some of the holy objects from the temple and some of the young men from royal and noble families. The latter would be trained to serve in the growing Babylonian bureaucracy that administered the empire. (Among