

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

these noble captives were Daniel and three of his friends, about whom more later.)

It was possible that this shock might soften the people's hearts, so Yahweh made another appeal; He told Jeremiah to record all of the messages he'd been given about both Judah and the nations, then read them aloud in public. So Jeremiah dictated, and his secretary, Baruch, recorded everything. Then, because Jeremiah was under house arrest, they agreed that Baruch would take the scroll to the temple to read it on an opportune day when the people would be gathered there.

Their opportunity didn't come until the following winter (December, 604 BC). One December day found Baruch at a temple gate reading Jeremiah's scroll. The son of Jehoiakim's secretary of state heard him and ran to tell his dad what was going on. Jehoiakim's cabinet ministers were aghast when they heard Baruch's oration, and told him, "You and Jeremiah, go and hide. Don't let anyone know where you are." Then they told the king about the scroll. Jehoiakim had it read aloud, and every few minutes he sliced off the section he had heard and threw it in his fireplace. His officials begged him to take Jeremiah's words seriously, but he just sat in grim silence until the scroll had been entirely read and burned, then he sent some of his men to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch.

But the two were successfully hidden. After they had heard Jehoiakim's response, Yahweh told them to rewrite the scroll and add a word for the king: because of his contempt for Yahweh, his lineage would be cut off and his body unburied.

Babylon's Second Attack

So Jehoiakim and his people were unmoved. They played the role of an obedient vassal to Babylonia from 604 to 602. However, in 601 Nebuchadnezzar took on Egypt again but failed to break her. That encouraged Jehoiakim to rebel, even though Jeremiah warned against it. Babylonian troops and their allies arrived swiftly to quell the Judahite uprising with a series of raids.

When the raids failed to subdue Judah, Nebuchadnezzar himself arrived with his army to besiege Jerusalem. In 598 Jehoiakim died (cause unknown) just before the Babylonians completed

their siege. The city fell on March 16, 597. It was looted, and ten thousand people were deported this time. King Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim's son, was among the captives. Nebuchadnezzar put Jehoiakim's uncle (Zedekiah, a third son of Josiah) on the throne as his puppet king.

Jeremiah Versus the False Prophets

Zedekiah was as weak as Jehoiakim was spiteful. Jerusalem overflowed with "prophets" claiming that within two years Babylon would be defeated, the temple articles and captives taken by Nebuchadnezzar would be returned, and Judah would be restored. In 593, Yahweh told Jeremiah to wear an ox yoke around to drive home the point that the yoke of Babylon was there to stay. Eventually one "prophet" splintered the yoke in a public quarrel with Jeremiah, claiming that Yahweh was going to break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar within two years. Jeremiah accused that man of being a false prophet and announced he would die that year for preaching rebellion against Yahweh. Two months later the man was dead. For the time being, Zedekiah heeded Jeremiah and stayed loyal to Babylon.

That same year (593) he sent envoys to Babylon and even visited there for reasons unknown. Jeremiah sent a letter with the envoys to the Jews in exile, telling them to settle down and pray for the prosperity of their pagan towns, for they would be there seventy years. He warned them to ignore the prophets with the two-more-years prediction, but encouraged them, with words from Yahweh, that seventy years of exile was not forever.

"For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you . . . and will bring you back from captivity." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

A letter came back from a prophet in Babylonia to the chief priest in Jerusalem, demanding that he imprison Jeremiah

for telling the exiles that they would be gone seventy years. (The Babylonian contingent had its share of false prophets.) But Jeremiah was temporarily in favor as long as Zedekiah was inclined to loyalty, so the priest gave the letter to Jeremiah. And a second time Yahweh announced a false prophet's death.

Babylon's Third Attack

It didn't take long, though, for an ambitious new pharaoh to stir up a pro-Egyptian faction in Jerusalem. Zedekiah succumbed to it (despite Jeremiah's reproof) and revolted. So for a third and last time Nebuchadnezzar set out for Jerusalem, determined to swat this pesky city for good. He arrived on January 15, 588.

Zedekiah panicked and sent several of his officials to beg Jeremiah to seek information from Yahweh or ask Him to do what He did back in Hezekiah's time, a century earlier.

But Jeremiah retorted that Yahweh was now doing what he had been predicting for thirty-eight years. He added that anyone who resisted Nebuchadnezzar would die, but anyone who surrendered would survive. Yahweh would protect those who had been taken into exile, but those who stayed with Zedekiah He would reject. And if the king and his men really wanted help from Yahweh, let them show it by reforming the corrupt courts, ceasing to rub out their enemies, paying workmen fair wages, cutting back on their luxurious lifestyle, and giving justice to the many oppressed poor in the city. Jeremiah also denounced Jerusalem's prophets for simply telling her leaders what they wanted to hear. They were the worst of all, putting their own words into the mouth of the living God.

But as the siege wore on and things looked blacker and blacker, Yahweh began to give Jeremiah some hopeful messages. Yahweh was going to discipline but not destroy His people. Eventually He would punish their captors. Once again they would be in covenant relationship to their Bridegroom, their Father, their God. Yahweh spoke as He did to Isaiah in his latter years:

"I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have drawn you with loving-kindness.

I will build you up again
and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. . . .
The time is coming . . . when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah." (Jeremiah 31:3-4,31)

But these messages of hope were for future generations. To Zedekiah's face, Jeremiah's message was that Nebuchadnezzar would burn Jerusalem to the ground, but first Zedekiah had a chance to die and be buried honorably.

A Pause in the Fighting

A moment of respite came when Egypt marched out to aid Judah, and Nebuchadnezzar had to suspend his siege until he could beat off the Egyptians. Zedekiah begged Jeremiah to pray that the Babylonians wouldn't come back, but the seer said it was useless. In hopes of pleasing Yahweh and gaining some willing soldiers, Zedekiah declared that all Hebrew slaves in Jerusalem were free. At first his officials and the other slave-owners agreed to this, but afterward they changed their minds. (After all, Nebuchadnezzar was withdrawing. Maybe they could have their lives and their servants, too.) Jeremiah said this was just more proof that this people had no intention of obeying Yahweh (whose law required that Hebrew slaves be freed after seven years), and repeated his word of destruction.

Then Jeremiah took the opportunity provided by the lull in fighting to try to get to his hometown to settle some family matters. However, the captain of the guard arrested him at the gate, accusing him of trying to desert to the enemy.

Zedekiah's officials imprisoned him as a traitor, despite his protests. Zedekiah secretly released him for a private audience; the king wanted to know what Yahweh had to say, but he feared his officials, who hated Jeremiah. But all Yahweh had to say was, "You will be handed over to the king of Babylon." Zedekiah didn't dare release Jeremiah, but he did grant him a less miserable prison and a reasonable food ration until supplies in Jerusalem ran out.

However, Zedekiah's officials were still fuming that Jere-

miah was telling the people they would survive if they surrendered but would die if they resisted. The bureaucrats told the king that this was sheer treason and undermined morale, and finally convinced him to let them throw the prophet into a cistern (they wanted to kill him without overtly having his blood on their hands). The sixty-year-old prophet spent days up to his hips in mud in an abandoned well. But Zedekiah couldn't stick to anything when pressured, so another official persuaded him to have Jeremiah returned to his previous prison.

Promises

Nebuchadnezzar had soon dealt with the Egyptians and was back at Jerusalem's gate, as grim as ever. The defenders were tearing down their luxurious houses in order to hurl the stones at the builders of siege ramps; the grain ran out and people started eating anything they could find. Jeremiah sat in jail, once again receiving words from Yahweh that contradicted everything his senses told him.

For decades Jeremiah had heard messages of doom while Judah lounged at ease. Now when catastrophe was imminent, Yahweh instructed him to buy his cousin's field back home in order to keep it in the family. Jeremiah did what he was told, but asked what on earth Yahweh was thinking. "Ah, Lord Yahweh," he said, "You can do anything. You know everything that goes on in people's hearts. You've done miracles to keep Your covenant with us through thick and thin. You've been totally right to send these Babylonians to obliterate us. I know You can do anything, but—if You're going to destroy and exile us, why am I buying this field?"

Yahweh responded, "I am [Yahweh], the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" (32:27). Yes, in justice He was going to smash Judah, but because of His unearthly love He was going to forgive and restore His people, even transform their hearts so that they would be able to be faithful. Jeremiah might never get the use of that field, but his descendants would.

I am Yahweh who made the earth, He said. "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (33:3). Great and unsearchable things: how

He would heal His people, restore them to peace and security, and raise up an unending heritage of the royal and priestly lines. Above all, "a righteous Branch" would "sprout from David's line." Zedekiah's name meant "Yahweh is my righteousness," but he failed to live up to that name. But the Branch and his city would be called "Yahweh Our Righteousness" in truth (23:5-6, 33:15-16). The goal of all of this was the original plan: Yahweh would have the seed of a people passionate for Him, and "this city will bring me renown, joy, praise, and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it" (33:9). A faithful Jerusalem would be His bait to draw the nations.

The End

By July of 586 the famine was so bad in Jerusalem that mothers were cooking their babies. Jeremiah urged the king to save himself by surrendering, but Zedekiah was paralyzed with fear of both his officials and those Jews who had already deserted.

On August 14, 586, the attackers finally broke through the wall. Zedekiah tried a desperate escape, but Nebuchadnezzar caught and blinded him, executed his sons, and hauled him off to Babylon. The invaders burned the temple and every prominent building to the ground, took everything of value, smashed the walls, and took captive all but the poorest, who would keep the land productive so that it could be taxed.

Rage and Weeping

Two poems express the breadth of prophetic response to the calamity of 586 BC. Obadiah denounced the Edomites for gloating at Jerusalem's destruction and aiding her enemies. His rebuke stands as a permanent warning to those who watch others suffering Yahweh's discipline: "You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune" (Obadiah 12), for your own discipline may not be far behind.

Jeremiah (or possibly another eyewitness) responded by painstakingly shaping his grief into five poems; in the first four, each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The book of Lamentations begins with a look at Jerusalem weeping like a destitute queen, now a hideous wretch.

See, O [Yahweh], how distressed I am!
 I am in torment within,
 and in my heart I am disturbed,
 for I have been most rebellious.
 Outside, the sword bereaves;
 inside, there is only death. (Lamentations 1:20)

The prophet wails his grief in tightly crafted verses, but finds the "Yet" of David. Surveying smoking rubble, starving infants, corpses everywhere, he writes:

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
 the bitterness and the gall.
 I well remember them,
 and my soul is downcast within me.
 Yet this I call to mind
 and therefore I have hope:
 Because of [Yahweh's] great love we are not consumed,
 for his compassions never fail.
 They are new every morning;
 great is your faithfulness. (3:19-23)

His closing is a mix of confidence, questioning, and humility, knowing that only Yahweh could bring such a people to real repentance:

Restore us to yourself, O [Yahweh], that we may return;
 renew our days as of old. (5:21)

To Egypt

The commander of the Babylonian imperial guard, who was in charge of cleanup operations, had heard of Jeremiah. Both he and Nebuchadnezzar knew the prophet had been counseling submission for years, and they suspected that here was a man of great character, if not even of divine appointment. So when the commander found Jeremiah in prison awaiting deportation, he freed him. He offered the old man hospitality in his own home in Baby-

lon, but Jeremiah, loyal to the end, insisted on staying with the survivors in Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar had appointed as governor a Judan named Gedaliah who, like Jeremiah, had long advocated nonresistance to the Babylonians because their conquest was a judgment from Yahweh. The commander committed Jeremiah to Gedaliah's protection. Gedaliah set up an office in Mizpah, a few miles north of Jerusalem, and urged the farmers to gather the harvest that was just coming ripe—in short, to resume business as usual.

But a surviving relative of Zedekiah's assassinated Gedaliah and more than a hundred of his supporters, took captive the rest of Gedaliah's group (including Jeremiah), and tried to flee to Ammon. Another group of Jewish army officers intercepted the assassin and freed the prisoners. Then, terrified of Babylonian reprisal, they begged Jeremiah to ask Yahweh what they should do next.

Yahweh promised to protect them if they stayed in Judah and took care of His land. He also promised that if they fled to Egypt because they didn't trust Him, the death they feared would come upon them there. Sure enough, the officers had no intention of trusting Yahweh and staying in Judah; they had already made up their minds and were only hoping for someone to justify their decision. They had the gall to accuse Baruch of inciting Jeremiah to say the wrong thing. Then they forced Baruch, Jeremiah, and the rest of the remnant to go with them to Egypt.

Poor Jeremiah. It wasn't long before the new arrivals in Egypt met earlier Jewish fugitives and all were practicing a mix of Jewish, Egyptian, and Babylonian religion. In particular, they were making cakes in the shape of Ishtar, the Babylonian Queen of Heaven, and burning incense to her. Hadn't they learned anything from the cataclysm they had just been through, Jeremiah wanted to know. Yes, they said, we've learned that things started falling apart back home when we stopped worshipping Ishtar, and we're not going to make that mistake again. Jeremiah threw up his hands and prophesied the murder of the current pharaoh as a sign of the eventual annihilation of the Jewish community in Egypt.

A Prophet in Exile

*Ezekiel***Postscripts**

In 561 BC, some twenty years after Jeremiah's death, a new king of Babylon declared an amnesty for the Judan captives there. He released Jehoiachin from prison and assigned daily rations from the royal household to support Jehoiachin and his five sons. The lineage of David was hanging on by a hair.

The Exile was Yahweh's judgment on His people, but as in the time of Moses, He was able to use such tragedy productively. These few generations did more to transform Judaism (the faith of the people of Judah) than all the centuries since Joshua. A few key people spearheaded the transformation; the prophet Ezekiel was one of them.

Ezekiel's Call

A handful of Jews were taken to Babylon in 605 BC, but thousands went in 597. (See map, page 342.) For the decade until Jerusalem was crushed, these clung to the hope that any day now, Yahweh would work a miracle and bring them home. They huddled in holding patterns and eked out livings in their makeshift settlements along the canals of the Euphrates River. They were also largely unwilling to face any responsibility they may have had for their sufferings.

Among these exiles of 597 was a priest-in-training named Ezekiel. Four years later, on his thirtieth birthday, he was eligible to be anointed as a full-fledged priest. But in Nippur, a Babylonian city a thousand miles from Jerusalem, there was not much