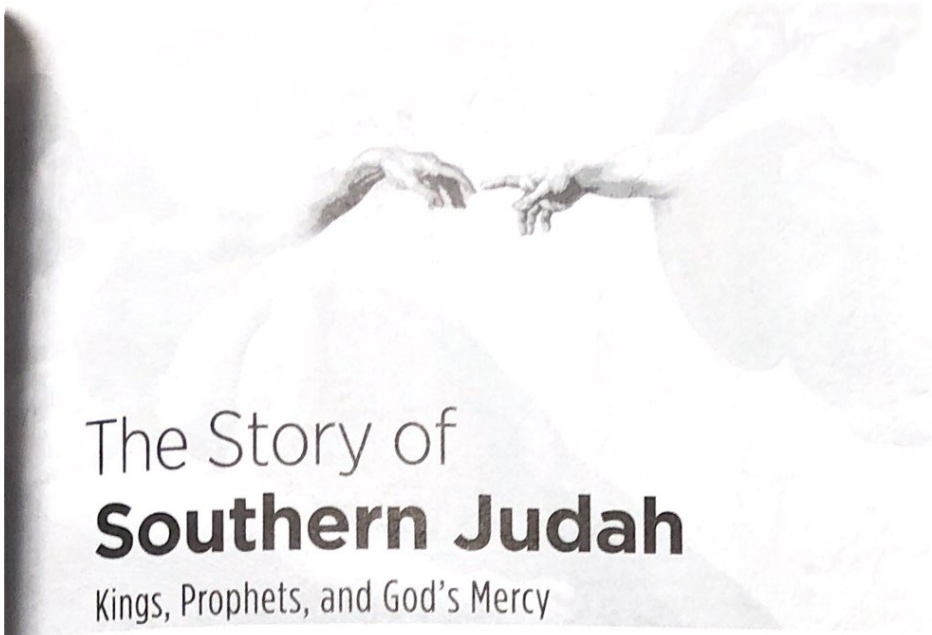




The Story of Southern Judah

Kings, Prophets, and God's Mercy

The Assyrian kings made fabulous and grotesque claims about what happened to cities and people who resisted their empire. The annals of these kings, as well as carved reliefs, lay claim to practices such as flaying nobles and laying their skins over city walls, and decapitating soldiers and stacking their heads like a tower in front of the conquered city. One particular battle report boasts:

I captured many troops alive. I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their leaders on trees around the city.¹

Sennacherib, an adversary with whom Judah will deal, surpasses his predecessors in the grisly detail of his conquests:

I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives [as one cuts] a string. Like the many waters of a storm, I made [the contents of] their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. My prancing steeds harnessed for my riding, plunged into their blood as [into] a river. The wheels of my war chariot, which brings low the wicked and evil, were bespattered with blood and filth. With the bodies of their

¹A. Kirk Grayson, trans., *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir II* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), 165.



READING ASSIGNMENTS

1 KINGS 15:9–24

2 KINGS 11–12

2 KINGS 18–23

ISAIAH 5, 7–8, 30–31

MICAH 1–7

KEY TERMS

Annals of the King: the written record of the king's accomplishments for each year of his reign

Exile: a forced migration away from a person's homeland and into a foreign country

Queen Mother: a powerful political position; often, but not always, held by the king's mother

Reformation: a religious movement to revive or restore the spiritual life of a group of people



Figure 11.1. “Two Assyrian Soldiers Attacking a City.” Original photograph by Author from the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

warriors I filled the plain, like grass. [Their] testicles I cut off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers.²

These horrific claims, surely exaggerated at least a little, served to frighten cities and nations into submission, as well as to make any state in the empire think twice, or even three times, before considering rebellion. A miscalculation of one’s power or the strength of an alliance made with other nations could prove to be much worse than fatal.

The Assyrian Empire and its claims interact with events in both northern Israel and southern Judah. In Chapter Ten, we studied the life and death of Israel by conducting a trial. We pressed charges of violating the covenant, especially the first two commandments, and then called witnesses from the Deuteronomistic History (DH), the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the prophets Hosea and Amos. By the end of the

trial, Israel’s guilt was established beyond any reasonable doubt. The only remaining question was punishment—though not really a question; the LORD had been warning Israel for years what would come, if the nation did not turn back. The capital city, Samaria, was destroyed and the nation taken into **exile**—all at the hands of the Assyrian Empire.

Awareness of Assyrian propaganda about what they do to those who resist makes it much easier to appreciate the struggle to trust the LORD, and only the LORD, when a treaty with Egypt, or any nation, would bring much-needed military support. This awareness also helps us understand why the city of Samaria held out for three years under siege (2 Kgs 17:5). King Hoshea, the army, and the nobles of the city could only imagine what waited for them if the Assyrians took

the city—and they did take it (in fact, two Assyrian kings both claim credit for the victory). We do not, however, have any records from Assyria or Scripture to tell us what happened when Samaria fell, other than that the people were exiled.

The Assyrian Empire that conquered Samaria in the late eighth century continued to expand under the direction of their kings, who set their sights on Palestine and Jerusalem. What happens with their invasion, however, is somewhat of a mystery. It is clear enough that the Egyptian army comes to the aid of the king of Judah (Hezekiah), but the Assyrians defeat

ASSYRIAN KINGS IN THE 8TH–7TH CENTURIES BCE

Tiglath-Pileser III	744–727
Shalmaneser V.....	726–722
Sargon II.....	721–705
Sennacherib	704–681
Esarhaddon	680–669
Ashurbanipal.....	668–612

Table 11.1. Assyrian Kings in the 8th–7th Centuries BCE

²Daniel Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–1927), 2: sec 254.

Egypt—sending them running for home. It is also without debate that Hezekiah paid the Assyrian king (Sennacherib) rich tribute to leave Jerusalem (see Table 11.1). Even so, it is unclear to historians what causes the Assyrian army to ultimately leave Palestine. Just as an Ethiopian army enters the land to confront the Assyrians, on the night before their battle, something causes the Assyrian army to withdraw in confusion (see Hezekiah below). The next Assyrian king made the conquest of Egypt his military aim, which he achieved for a short time in 671 BCE.

Though outer appearances suggest the Assyrian Empire to be as strong or stronger than ever, the empire was, in fact, beginning to show signs of weakness by the mid-seventh century (650 BCE), just as the Babylonians began a rebellion that the Assyrians could not stop. The Babylonians won battle after battle, decimating Assyria and sending shock waves throughout the rest of the ancient Near East—including Egypt. As the Assyrian Empire began to sink, the mice jumped off the ship; in other words, large pieces of the Assyrian Empire broke off and made a run for their own independence—including Judah. Then, with Assyria on life-support, Egypt sent them military help (616 BCE). Why they

did is anyone's guess. Even more inexplicable is Josiah's attempt to stop Egypt's effort to send more support to the Assyrian army, which led to his death in battle against Egypt (ca. 609 BCE). Whatever Egypt's motive may have been, their effort was too little and too late. The Babylonians kept pushing farther and farther north and west, taking Nineveh, Assyria's capital city, in 612 BCE.

Finally, at Carchemish (see Figure 10.2 on page 200), far north on the Euphrates River, Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian army in a surprise attack on the Egyptians and the remaining Assyrians. The Babylonian victory was decisive, driving the Egyptian army away and destroying what was left of Assyria. Consequently, the battle at Carchemish (605 BCE) marks a turning point in the history of the ancient Near East. With these obstacles out of the way, Nebuchadnezzar was ready to move on and claim all of Syria-Palestine for Babylon, but after the battle at Carchemish, he receives word that his father has died (King Nabopolassar). So, Nebuchadnezzar returns to Babylon to be crowned king.

After his coronation, Nebuchadnezzar leads a series of campaigns west and south of the Euphrates, including campaigns that reach into Judah. Some states accept Nebuchadnezzar's rule without a fight and begin to pay tribute to Babylon. Others resist, with the inevitable result



Figure 11.2. Map of Judah after the Fall of Northern Israel

of a siege that ultimately fell Babylon's way. The final years of Jerusalem/Judah will be spent in a tug-of-war between factions that support either siding with the Egyptians (still a western power) or accepting Babylonian rule. Eventually, Judah's poor choices will lead to a horrible three-year siege of Jerusalem and the fall to Babylon in 587 BCE.

Since we investigated Israel in Chapter Ten, it seems only fair that we also investigate southern Judah, if for no other reason than to answer a simple question: How does the south survive for so much longer than the north? Eighth century Judah was exposed to the same cultural forces (the worship of Baal and other gods) and external pressures (Egypt and the Assyrian Empire) that took Israel down, but Judah survives. In fact, Judah lives on as an independent state for another 135 years—through the eighth (700s) and seventh centuries (600s), into the beginning of the sixth century (500s). Judah not only outlasted Israel, but Assyria, too. Was Judah's longer life just a matter of God's support? Or did the south keep the covenant better than the north? By the end of this chapter, we should be able to answer these questions. We will continue in Chapter Twelve with Judah's final years, as she dealt with the Babylonian Empire from the late seventh century (ca. 609 BCE), until Jerusalem's fall to Babylon in 587 BCE.

Earlier we charged and convicted northern Israel on three counts:

1. Failure to trust the LORD, which manifested itself in an unstable government;
2. Corrupt spiritual leadership that led the people to worship other gods; and
3. Failure to hear (and obey) the prophets.

In the interest of fairness, we will examine each of these three areas in Judah's life during the eighth through seventh centuries, to see if charges should be filed against Judah at that time. So, we proceed with our investigation of Judah, raising the same charges under which northern Israel was indicted and ultimately found guilty. Our task, however, is somewhat different. We now operate as a Grand Jury to determine if these charges (or others) should become indictments and the basis of a trial. As before, the witnesses we will interview include the testimony of the DH and two eighth century prophets: Micah and Isaiah (we will hold the seventh century prophets until we examine Judah's fall to Babylon in Chapter Twelve).

Charge One: Political Instability?

Rehoboam was slow to recognize that the north meant what it said about reducing their load, or else. Only after they kill Rehoboam's supervisor of forced labor does Rehoboam realize he has a serious problem. Then, he raced home to assemble an army and go back to attack the north with 185,000 select warriors (on the large number, see Appendix V)—at least until another prophet comes with word from God: "Don't make war against your relatives, the Israelites. Go home, every one of you, because this is my plan" (1 Kgs 12:24). So, they went home.

The writers are interested in only two aspects or events in Rehoboam's reign (after losing the northern kingdom). First, they convey the depth to which the nation plunges into worshipping other gods (to which we will return in a moment). You name it and they are into it: they build

shrines and places to worship on the top of every high hill and under every green tree. They have “consecrated workers,” or “male temple prostitutes” (14:24 NRSV), and are just like the people the LORD drove off the land. In one sentence: “The sins they committed made the LORD angrier than anything their ancestors had done” (14:22). As if no one could possibly be worse than Jeroboam and what he is doing in the north, the south is on a steep downward plunge.

Second, not long into Rehoboam’s reign (five years), King Shishak of Egypt attacks Jerusalem. As the victor, Shishak takes the treasures of the temple (presumably the ark, unless it had been hidden), the king’s palace, and Solomon’s ornamental shields (14:25). Shishak is the first to plunder the temple for its treasure, but certainly not the last (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:18; 2 Kgs 12:18, 14:14, 16:8, 18:15–16, and 24:13).

Judah, however, experienced political stability as a result of national commitment to the LORD’s selection of David’s dynasty. With only two exceptions, every transition in the monarchy was a matter of identifying the king’s heir and anointing him as king—even if the heir was still a child (e.g., Joash, seven years old in 2 Kgs 11:1–2; and Josiah, eight years old in 2 Kgs 22:1–2). In these cases, it is obvious that someone else ran the country until the child-king grew up (most likely the high priest).

The exceptions to the normal father/son arrangement in David’s dynasty occur at two points in the nation’s history—both, times of political turmoil.

Exception one: The first exception requires a bit of backstory to understand. During Ahab and Jezebel’s reign in the north, Judah’s king (Joram or Jehoram) married their daughter Athaliah (2 Kgs 8:16–18), cementing a strong relationship between the two royal families. In time, Athaliah and Joram have a son (Ahaziah or Jehoahaz) who becomes king in Judah, with Athaliah serving as queen mother (8:25–26). By this time, Ahab and Jezebel’s son (Athaliah’s brother, *another* Joram or Jehoram) has become king in the north.

While Joram (king of the north) was recovering from battle wounds, Ahaziah (king of Judah) went to visit his uncle (8:29). During Ahaziah’s time with his uncle, Jehu’s rebellion and purge of the royal family in the north began, and Ahaziah was caught and killed, alongside his uncle (9:27–28).

Now the first exception in Judah occurs (you may follow the complicated relationships in Figure 11.3). When Athaliah, queen mother in Judah, learns of her son’s death, she seizes the throne of Judah and begins her own massacre of the royal family in Judah, including the royal children (her children and grandchildren?). Only one child escaped: Jehoash, a son of the late king Ahaziah (11:1–3). So it happens that a person outside the Davidic dynasty reigns over Judah: Queen Athaliah (see Figure 11.3, Table 11.2, and 1 Kgs 11:3). The high priest, however, cut her reign short. After six years, the priest executed a successful coup that put Jehoash, the descendant of David, back on the throne of Judah and Queen Athaliah in the grave (11:4–20).

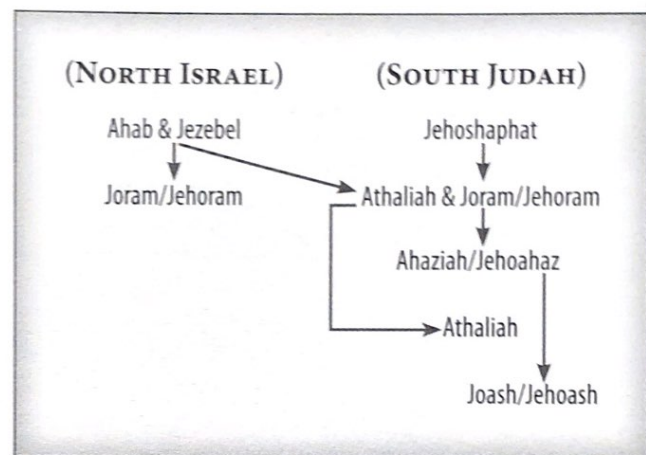


Figure 11.3. Kings of Judah and Israel: Athaliah and Joash/Jehoash

THE KINGS OF SOUTHERN JUDAH				
King (Relation to Previous King)	Queen Mother	Text	Years of Reign	End of Reign
Rehoboam (Son of Solomon)	Naamah	1 Kgs 14:21–31	17 Years	Natural Death
Abijam (Son of Rehoboam)	Maacah	1 Kgs 15:1–8	3 Years	Natural Death
Asa (Son of Abijam)	Maacah (Deposed)	1 Kgs 15:9–24	41 Years	Natural Death
Jehoshaphat (Son of Asa)	Azubah	1 Kgs 22:41–50	25 Years	Natural Death
Jehoram/Joram (Son of Jehoshaphat)	(unknown)	2 Kgs 8:16–24	8 Years	Natural Death
Ahaziah/Jehoahaz (Son of Jehoram)	Athaliah	2 Kgs 8:25–9:28	1 Year	Assassinated
Queen Athaliah (Mother of Ahaziah)	{None}	2 Kgs 11:1–3	6 Years	Assassinated
Joash/Jehoash (Son of Ahaziah)	Zibiah	2 Kgs 12:1–12:21	40 Years	Assassinated
Amaziah (Son of Joash)	Jehoaddan	2 Kgs 14:1–20	29 Years	Assassinated
Azariah/Uzziah (Son of Amaziah)	Jecoliah	2 Kgs 15:1–7	52 Years	Natural Death
Jotham (Son of Azariah)	Jerusha	2 Kgs 15:32–38	16 Years	Natural Death
Ahaz (Son of Jotham)	(unknown)	2 Kgs 16:1–20	16 Years	Natural Death
Hezekiah (Son of Ahaz)	Abi (or Abijah)	2 Kgs 18:1–20:21	29 Years	Natural Death
Manasseh (Son of Hezekiah)	Hephzibah	2 Kgs 21:1–18	55 Years	Natural Death
Amnon (Son of Manasseh)	Meshullemeth	2 Kgs 21:19–26	2 Years	Assassinated
Josiah (Son of Amnon)	Jedidah	2 Kgs 22:1–23:30	31 Years	Died in Battle
Jehoahaz (Son of Josiah)	Hamutal	2 Kgs 23:31–34	3 Months	Exiled to Egypt
Jehoiakim/Eliakim (Son of Josiah)	Zebidah	2 Kgs 23:34–24:6	11 Years	Natural Death or Assassinated
Jehoiachin (Son of Jehoiakim)	Nehushta	2 Kgs 24:8–12	3 Months	Exiled to Babylon
Zedekiah/Mattaniah (Son of Josiah)	Hamutal	2 Kgs 24:17–25:7	11 Years	Exiled to Babylon

Table 11.2. The Kings of Southern Judah

Exception Two: The second exception to the father-son succession of kings in southern Judah occurs in the final twenty-two years of the nation, when three of Josiah's sons become king. After Josiah's death on the battlefield against Egypt, the nation crowns Josiah's first son (Jehoahaz) king of Judah (23:31–34). Within three months, however, the Egyptian pharaoh (Neco) comes to Jerusalem and exiles Jehoahaz to Egypt (23:31–34). He then makes Josiah's second son, Eliakim, king, changing his name to Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:34). After the shift in power toward Babylon at Carchemish, Jehoiakim changed his loyalties to Babylon and paid tribute. Later, however, he rebelled against Babylon (24:1).

The record, however, is fuzzy about what happened next. Jehoiakim's rebellion was doomed for failure; and as his misjudgment became clear, he was most likely assassinated to save Judah from a horrible fate (recall from above how super-empires treat those in rebellion). So when Nebuchadnezzar finally gets to Jerusalem, Jehoiakim is dead and his son, Jehoiachin, who only has been on the throne for three months, quickly surrenders to the Babylonian king (2 Kgs 24:8–11). Nebuchadnezzar exiles Jehoiachin, his royal family, and many others to Babylon (24:12–16); he then takes Josiah's third son (Mattaniah) and installs him as king, changing his name to Zedekiah (24:17–19).

Be careful not to lose perspective with these two exceptions *and all these names*. We have just reviewed between twenty and thirty years (give or take five years) from a national history of 335 years. So, for three hundred years, the transition of authority was peaceful and without challenge—due to the nation's commitment to David's dynasty and the LORD's covenant with David. For only six years was there a non-Davidic ruler on the throne of Judah (Athaliah), and the priests and army rebelled as soon as it was reasonable to install the next king (when he had finally reached seven years of age). And even in the turmoil leading to the end of Judah, every king of Judah came from the family of David, even if three of the kings were all Josiah's sons.

Charge Two: Spiritual Leadership?

Southern Judah struggles with corrupt spiritual leadership that infects the population and leads them to violate both the first and second commandments. Much like Jeroboam in northern Israel, Rehoboam leads the south into all types of practices that break the very heart of the commandments. The DH writer summarizes:

Judah did evil in the LORD's eyes. The sins they committed made the LORD angrier than anything their ancestors had done. They also built shrines, standing stones, and sacred poles on top of every high hill and under every green tree. Moreover, the consecrated workers in the land did detestable things, just like those nations that the LORD had removed among the Israelites. (1 Kgs 14:22–24)

Spiritually, Judah is off to little, if any better start than northern Israel. Judah is also worshipping all of the gods in the Canaanite Yellow Pages—worship that remakes them into the image of the new gods who do terrible things.

Other southern kings are described in various ways. Like the Israelite kings, the official introduction to each of the kings of Judah provides the same vital information, with one additional element: the name of the queen mother, a political position with significant power (see Figure 11.4).

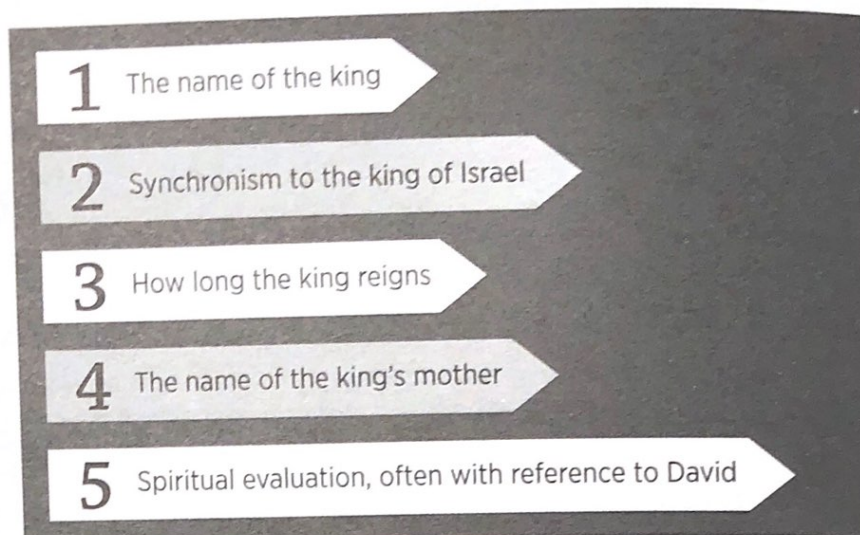


Figure 11.4. The Introductory Formula for Judean Kings

So for Rehoboam, the first king of southern Judah after northern Israel secedes, we read (1 Kgs 14:21–22; see Figure 11.5):

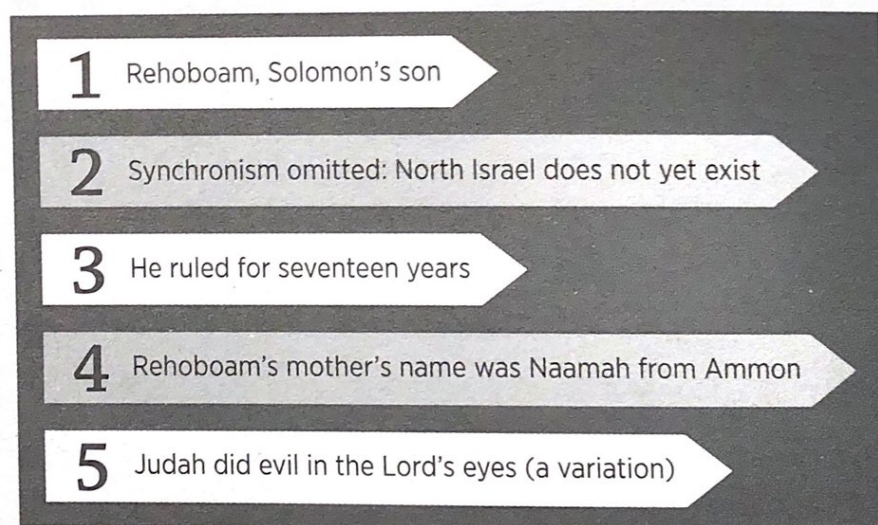


Figure 11.5. The Introductory Formula for Rehoboam

We take a final example three hundred years later for King Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:36–37) to demonstrate the resiliency of the formula (see Figure 11.6):

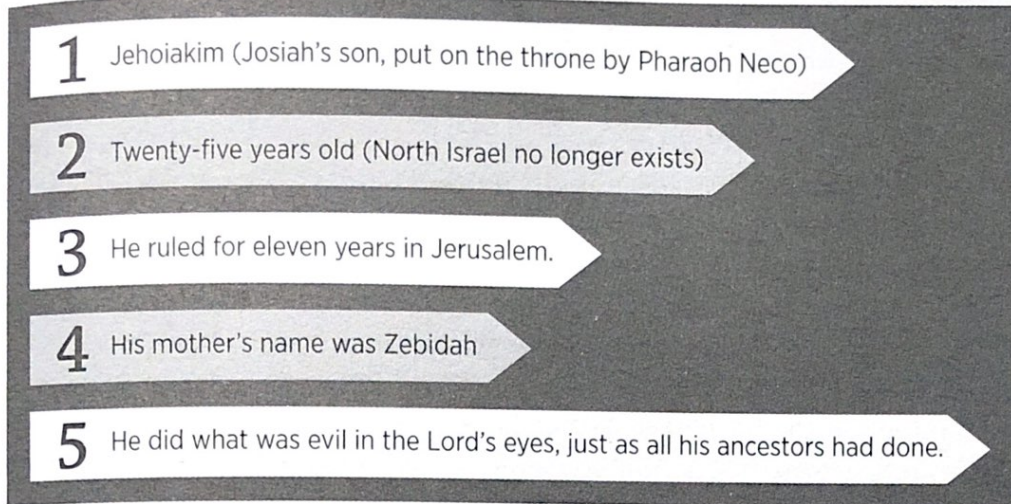


Figure 11.6. The Introductory Formula for Jehoiakim

And so the introductions go for every king in Judah, with the exception of Queen Athaliah, who took the throne by force (she had been queen mother; see 2 Kgs 11:1–3).

- If the new king's father and/or grandfather was evil, a king may be described as being *just like his father* or *just like his ancestors* (e.g., Abijam, Amnon, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah).
- Some are described as being *like Ahab* or *like northern Israel* (e.g., Joram, Ahaziah, and Ahaz).
- Worst of all, two kings are described as *doing things the nations had done that the LORD had driven out before Israel*: Rehoboam (cited above) and Manasseh.

For Manasseh (ca. 687–642 BCE), the indictments are long, and, if they are proven, carry a death sentence (2 Kgs 21:2–8):

- setting up altars for Baal
- setting up a carved Asherah image in the temple
- worshipping the stars
- building altars for the stars in both courtyards of the LORD's temple
- consulting sign readers and fortune tellers
- using spirit mediums and diviners
- sacrificing his own son

The writer summarizes, "Manasseh led them (Judah) into doing more evil than the nations the LORD had wiped out before the Israelites" (21:9).

The evidence we need to defend Judah comes in four names: Asa, Jehoash, Hezekiah, and Josiah, four kings in the south who led vigorous **reformation** movements—efforts absent in the north. The DH writers describe three of the four as doing what was right in the LORD's eyes, *just like their ancestor David* (1 Kgs 15:11; 2 Kgs 18:3, 22:2); the fourth, Jehoash, did what was right because the priest Jehoiada taught him (2 Kgs 12:2). The difference these kings make to the spiritual and political history of southern Judah warrants close examination of their lives and efforts to bring Judah back to her God.

1. King Asa. We know the least about King Asa (ca. 913–873 BCE, 1 Kgs 15:9–24). What we know presents a man who is not perfect, but serious about serving his God. On the one side, Asa is eager to rid the land of idols and those who enable and encourage others to worship idols. He removes the “male temple prostitutes” (14:24 NRSV) from the land, and deposes the queen mother, Maacah, because she promoted the worship of Asherah.³ He also takes away the idols his ancestors made and cuts down the image of Asherah and burns it (1 Kgs 15:12–13). Even more, Asa brings gifts back to the temple, gifts that his father and he had vowed to return (15:15). The writers summarize, “The heart of Asa was true to the LORD all his days” (15:14b), a high compliment and strong evidence for Judah's defense.

On the other side, the writer does not hide Asa's failures. His reform does not reach to the high places in the land (15:14a). Asa also relies on a political alliance with Syria (Aram) to stop the construction of a northern Israelite fortress at Ramah, only five miles north of Jerusalem. The alliance comes at the cost of all the gold and silver left in the treasury of the king's house and the treasury of the temple (15:16–19). Syria accepts the money and attacks multiple sites in Israel to divert Israel's attention away from building the fortress at Ramah, giving Judah time to deconstruct the fortress (15:20–22). If the prosecuting attorney reads this text without knowledge of Deuteronomy, she or he is apt not to see the problem, but credit Asa for a clever political move. But for those aware of Deuteronomy's concern for the king's political alliances, Asa's actions are questionable (Deut 17:17, see the discussion in Chapter Eight, page 155).

2. King Jehoash. Jehoash (ca. 837–800 BCE) is the only son spared from his grandmother Athaliah's purge of the royal family when she seized power (2 Kgs 11:1–3, see above). Saved when he was no more than a year old, he comes to the throne at the ripe old age of seven. The text concedes what we suspect: in the king's early years, the high priest is in control (12:2). So it comes as no surprise that the young king gives an order to collect money for repairing the LORD's temple in Jerusalem. And yet, some years later, when money has been collected—but no repairs made—the king summons his mentor and other priests to ask why repairs are not being made and to make changes to the system to keep the priests' hands out of the collection box (12:4–7). Consequently, Jehoash makes his greatest contribution to the worship of the LORD by putting changes in place to ensure donated money passes directly to the craftsmen, so that the temple is kept in shape (12:8–16). Like Asa, however, Jehoash also uses holy objects dedicated to the

³Maacah also served as queen mother during the reign of Abijam (1 Kgs 15:2). She may or may not have been Asa's “grandmother” (CEB).

temple to pay Syria (Aram) not to destroy Jerusalem (12:17–18). Perhaps angry with Jehoash's foreign policy, a faction within his officials conspires and assassinates him—a faction that may be in support of the political ideas of Jehoash's son, Amaziah. If so, however, they misplayed their cards. Once Amaziah is in control of the nation, his first order of business is to have them killed (12:19–21).

3. King Hezekiah. Hezekiah (ca. 715–687 BCE) is on the throne of southern Judah when northern Israel falls to Assyria (2 Kgs 18:9–12). Like Asa, Hezekiah leads an aggressive campaign to rid the land of objects used in the worship of other gods: shrines, sacred pillars, Asherah's pole, and the bronze serpent Moses made in the wilderness to direct the people's trust to the LORD—now used as an idol (see Num 21:4–9). Hezekiah matches this negative campaign with the positive: he trusts the LORD and does his best to follow the commandments (2 Kgs 18:5–6).

The chronology of the stories about Hezekiah in 18:7–19:37 is notoriously difficult for interpreters. The text presents nine units:

- **Unit 1.** Assyria (Sennacherib) marches against Judah and Hezekiah pays tribute for Assyria to withdraw (18:13–16).
- **Unit 2.** Assyria sends representatives to Jerusalem, demanding surrender or destruction (18:17–37).
- **Unit 3.** Hezekiah tears his clothes (a sign of mourning) and sends messengers to the prophet Isaiah, informing him of the situation and asking for him to pray for the nation (19:1–4).
- **Unit 4.** Isaiah instructs the messengers to tell Hezekiah that the LORD says, “Don’t be afraid of the words you heard. . . .” I’m about to send Assyria back home (19:5–7).
- **Unit 5.** The Assyrian representatives leave Jerusalem, to go back to their king (19:8).
- **Unit 6.** Assyria sends messengers to Hezekiah, warning him not to trust in his God and giving him letters from the Assyrian king (19:9–13).
- **Unit 7.** Hezekiah takes the letters and reads them. He then takes them to the temple, spreads them out before the LORD and prays (9:14–19).
- **Unit 8.** Isaiah sends word to Hezekiah, urging him to trust the LORD, who will protect the city: the Assyrians will not attack or set siege to the city (9:20–34).
- **Unit 9.** During the night, the LORD’s messenger kills 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (or 185 troops, see Appendix V). When the others wake up and see all the dead, they withdraw from Jerusalem and return home (19:35–37).

The question for interpreters of Hezekiah’s story is not only the order of events, but how many, if any, of the units are duplicates—retelling the same event? Is Unit 2 the same event as Unit 6? Is Unit 8 a duplicate of Unit 4? Is Unit 1 the result of Unit 2? Further evidence to consider comes from Sennacherib’s own account of his invasion of Judah in 701 BCE:

Because Hezekiah, king of Judah, would not submit to my yoke, I came up against him, and by force of arms and by the might of my power I took 46 of his strong

fenced cities; and of the smaller towns which were scattered about, I took and plundered a countless number . . . and Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates, so as to prevent escape. . . . Then upon Hezekiah there fell the fear of the power of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem with 30 talents of gold and 300 talents of silver, and diverse treasures, a rich and immense booty.⁴

Even though royal records tend to exaggerate the king's victories, here, Sennacherib admits setting siege to Jerusalem, but does not claim to have taken the city.

For our purposes, we continue to look for evidence of faith/trust in the LORD among the kings and people, versus the lack of faith. In other words, we want the theological meaning or assessment of the writers. So before you continue reading, I encourage you to stop for a moment, read 2 Kings 18–20, and reflect on which units and actions reflect trust, doubt, or some combination of the two.

An initial review of the evidence reveals a mixture of faith and doubt:

- **Unit 1.** Hezekiah follows Asa and Jehoash in using Temple resources to pay off a stronger nation (recall Deut 17). A lack of faith.
- **Unit 3.** Hezekiah asks the prophet to pray for the nation. A sign of trust.
- **Unit 4.** The prophet Isaiah replies with words of assurance that challenge Hezekiah to trust—the LORD will resolve the threat. A challenge to trust.
- **Unit 7.** In a remarkable scene of trust, Hezekiah has the threatening letters spread out before the LORD, so the LORD can see the threats and respond.
- **Unit 8.** Isaiah again sends word for Hezekiah to trust in the LORD's protection.

The text records one final story about Hezekiah: a story of illness, near death, healing, a miraculous sign, and an envoy from Babylon with a "*We are so glad you didn't die!*" gift (20:1–12).

Hezekiah plays the role of a proud host and shows the Babylonians everything—*everything* (20:13). When Isaiah hears about what has happened—he *goes ballistic!* He predicts a time when Babylon will be the one who takes everything, including the people, into captivity (20:14–19). But we are left, sitting in the bleachers, wondering what just happened on the field to make Isaiah call and assess such a drastic penalty. What is the problem? Look carefully at the list of items Hezekiah showed the envoy from Babylon:

Hezekiah granted them an audience and showed them everything in his treasury—the silver, the gold, the spices, and the fine oil. He also showed them *his stock of weaponry* and everything in his storehouses. (20:13, emphasis mine)

⁴James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 287.

Now we see it—Hezekiah is not just being friendly, he is negotiating a treaty alliance with Babylon against Assyria; putting his trust in . . . ?

Isaiah urges Hezekiah over and over again not to be afraid of Assyrian conquest (19:5–7, 20–34), not to make military alliances with other nations—not with Egypt against Assyria (see Isaiah below), and not with Babylon against Assyria (20:12–18).

4. King Josiah. Josiah (ca. 640–609 BCE) begins his reign at the age of eight (22:1–2)—then the text goes silent for eighteen years, until Josiah is twenty-six years old and orders repairs on the temple (22:3–7). In the process, workers discover an “Instruction Scroll” (22:8). In a short time, the high priest and Josiah’s secretary read the scroll and realize the king must be informed. So they bring and read the scroll to Josiah, who reacts with alarm (22:10–11): “The LORD must be furious with us” (22:13). Josiah has the authenticity of the scroll verified by a local prophet, Huldah, a female prophet living in Jerusalem. Many scholars today believe that what was found was an early version of the middle chapters of Deuteronomy. She tells Josiah that the LORD is indeed furious with Judah because “they’ve desecrated me and have burned incense to other gods, angering me by everything they have done” (22:17), and so “I am about to bring disaster on this place and its citizens” (22:16); but as for Josiah, because of his broken heart, he will go to his grave in peace (22:19–20).

Josiah, however, is not about to let things be and accept punishment as the LORD’s final word for Judah; he knows the LORD too well to do that. Instead, he initiates one of the most aggressive and far-reaching reform movements in the Bible. Josiah knows that God’s declaration of punishment can be changed—if the people will change (Jer 18:1–10, see discussion in Chapter Ten). So he begins with a public reading of the scroll and makes his own covenant with the LORD, vowing to obey all the commandments with all his heart; the people respond by also accepting the covenant (23:1–3). Then Josiah cleans house.

From the temple, he removes and burns

- all objects made for Baal, Asherah, and the stars (23:4)
- the Asherah image (23:6)
- the shrines for the male and female prostitutes (23:7)
- the altars Manasseh built in the courtyards (23:12)

Outside the temple, he defiles and/or burns:

- the shrines in all of Judah’s cities (23:8)
- the shrines in Jerusalem’s city gates (23:8)
- the place for people to burn their children alive to the god Molech (23:10)
- the chariots pulled by horses in honor of the sun (23:11)
- the altars on the palace roof, built by Ahaz (23:12)
- the shrines built by Solomon on the hill across from and facing Jerusalem (23:13)
- he also smashes sacred pillars and cuts down sacred poles (23:14)

Josiah even goes north into land that was once part of Israel:

- he tears down the shrine Jeroboam made (23:15)
- he burns the sacred pole for Asherah (23:15)
- he digs up bones and burns them on the altar in Bethel, desecrating it (23:16; see 1 Kgs 13:1–3)
- he tears down the altar in Bethel (23:15)
- he then destroys the shrines on the high hills throughout Samaria (23:19)

Along with all this physical destruction, Josiah also dealt with the people supporting these places:

- he got rid of the priests appointed to serve in Judean cities (23:15)
- he got rid of the male and female temple prostitutes (23:7)
- he killed the priests to the shrines at high places in Samaria (23:20)
- he killed and burned those who consulted the dead, as well as the spirit mediums for household gods (23:24)

Then, on the positive side, Josiah led a celebration of the Passover (23:21), which had either not been kept since the era of the judges or it had not been kept on such a wide and powerful scale since the judges (23:22). By the end of describing Josiah's efforts to turn the nation around, all the writer can say is,

There's never been a king like Josiah, whether before or after him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, all his being, and all his strength, in agreement with everything in the Instruction from Moses. (23:25)

It is difficult to imagine anything Josiah could have done that he did not do. But his efforts apparently still failed to reach the hearts of his people. The writer tells us,

Even so, the LORD didn't turn away from the great rage that burned against Judah on account of all that Manasseh had done to make him angry. The LORD said, "I will remove Judah from my presence just as I removed Israel. I will reject this city, Jerusalem, which I chose, and this temple where I promised my name would reside." (23:26–27)

As soon as Josiah is gone, everything goes back to "normal"—just as it was before Josiah. The shrines are rebuilt and idols brought out from hiding, dusted off, and polished. And the people resume their steady transformation into becoming like these other gods, with their values in favor of riches and power over destitute, strong over weak, and oppressor over oppressed.

Charge Three: Judah's Response to the Prophets

The LORD also sent prophets to Judah. The narrative of 2 Kings has already introduced Isaiah, who supported King Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19:1–7, 19:20–31, 20:14–19), and Huldah, who supported

King Josiah (2 Kgs 22:14–20). Table 11.3 below provides a visual image of other prophets who lived and originally spoke to Judah. In the last part of this chapter, we keep our attention on the eighth century prophets of Judah: Micah and First Isaiah (see below). In Chapter Twelve, as we work through Judah's final years, we will supplement the DH with an examination of representative prophets from the seventh through sixth centuries.

THE PROPHETS LINKED TO JUDAH	
8th Century 800–700 BCE	Established by the book's introduction or contents
	First Isaiah (Isaiah 1–39)
	Micah
7th Century 700–587 BCE	Zephaniah
	Jeremiah
	Ezekiel
	Habakkuk
In the exile (Exilic; 586–536 BCE) or after the exile (Post-Exilic)	Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55)
	Haggai
	Zechariah
	Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66)
	Malachi
OTHER PROPHETIC BOOKS, IN THE TRADITIONAL ORDER OF PROTESTANT BIBLES	
	Daniel
	Joel
	Obadiah
	Jonah
	Nahum

Table 11.3. Prophets Linked to Judah

1. **Isaiah** was part of the royal establishment and a special encouragement to King Hezekiah when the Assyrians were threatening to take down Judah, along with northern Israel (2 Kgs 18–19). The book associated with Isaiah's name addresses this and other events from eighth century Judah (Isa 1–39). The book, however, also speaks about and to Judean exiles at the end of their captivity, encouraging exiled peoples to return home (Isa 40–55). Still not finished, the book also speaks to people living in Jerusalem during the Persian era (Isa 56–66). Consequently,

the Book of Isaiah is frequently designated as First Isaiah (Isa 1–39), Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55), and Third Isaiah (Isa 56–66).

While interpreters widely agree on this division of the material, they do not agree on the composition history of the text. Some argue that the eighth century prophet Isaiah is responsible for all of the material, including chapters that address people and situations far in the future (Isa 40–66) through the gift of prophecy (as prediction). Others argue that prophets most often speak to people and their needs, much like pastors in our churches do. So, while not denying the possibility of prophetic prediction, these scholars think it is more likely that others who continued to speak in the tradition of Isaiah (perhaps even disciples of Isaiah) are responsible for Second and Third Isaiah.

Isaiah's testimony is substantial (thirty-nine chapters) and it is not possible here to summarize all he has to say. Instead, we will introduce key themes found in Isaiah 1–39 and provide references for those who want to prepare themselves to cross-examine all that he has to say about Judah.

A. Trust. We begin with the familiar. Just as in the DH, Isaiah emphasizes trusting the LORD over trusting in military alliances. During the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis, Isaiah begs King Ahaz to trust the LORD, rather than sending for help from Assyria: "Be careful and stay calm. Don't fear, and don't lose heart over these two pieces of smoking torches [the kings of Israel and Syria]" (Isa

The Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis

In ca. 733–732 BCE, Syria (Aram) and Ephraim (Israel) invaded Judah in an attempt to replace King Ahaz with a king who would join their military alliance in a rebellion against Assyria (2 Kgs 16:5–16:20).

7:4; chs. 7–8). Despite Isaiah's efforts to persuade, Ahaz appeals to the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser, for help—by sending gold and silver from his palace and the temple (2 Kgs 16:7). As a result, not only does the Assyrian king come with an army that conquers Damascus (capital of Syria/Aram) and sends its people into exile (16:9), but Assyria also influences (or perhaps *takes charge of*) the religious practices in Judah (16:10–18). Isaiah now warns Ahaz that, since he has rejected the LORD's peace, he will be overwhelmed by Assyria (Isa 8:5–8a). And yet, the LORD is still with Judah and will ultimately protect them from this new threat (8:8b).

Later, Isaiah speaks out in opposition of the decision to form a military alliance with Egypt against the Assyrians; most likely King Hezekiah's decision during an Assyrian invasion in 703–701 BCE (see 2 Kgs 18:13–19:37):

Doom to you, rebellious children, says the LORD,
 who make a plan, which is not mine;
 who weave a plot, but not by my spirit, piling up sin on sin;
 setting out to go down to Egypt without consulting me,
 taking refuge in Pharaoh's refuge and hiding in Egypt's shadow.
 Pharaoh's refuge will become your shame,
 hiding in Egypt's shadow your disgrace. (Isa 30:1–3)

And again, Isaiah passes the LORD's judgment on Jerusalem's short-sighted decision to trust Egypt:

Doom to those going down to Egypt for help!
 They rely on horses,
 trust in chariots because they are many,
 and on riders because they are very strong.
 But they don't look to the holy one of Israel;
 they don't seek the LORD. . . .
 Egypt is human and not divine;
 their horses are flesh and not spirit.
 The LORD will extend his hand;
 the helper will stumble,
 those helped will fall,
 and they will all die together. (Isa 31:1, 3)

The LORD promises to be the one who will save Judah (35:3–4), but I suppose Isaiah's counsel is next to impossible to accept—even with the mysterious, wonderful victory over the Assyrians in 722 BCE when the army woke up one morning only to discover *they were all dead* (2 Kgs 19:35–37 and Isa 37:36–38; for further study of this theme see Isa 2:6–8; chs. 7–8; 28:14–18; 30:1–7; 31:1–9; and 35:3–4).

B. Pride, Perversion of Justice, and Failure of Leaders. Isaiah's other concerns may be folded together because of the close relationship between the three: pride, the perversion of justice and righteousness, and the failure of the leaders. We take Isaiah 5 as a case study in the interrelationship of these themes. The LORD begins with the parable of the vineyard, in which he sings a love song for the vine he took from Egypt and transplanted as a master gardener (5:1–7). But instead of good grapes, the vine grew rotten grapes, even though God did everything he could for the vine. Now, all that is left to do is remove the protective hedge so that it is destroyed—all because “God expected justice, but there was bloodshed; righteousness, but there was a cry of distress” (5:7). Doom is coming to those who are rich, acquiring one house after another, one field after another, until they own everything (5:8–9). Doom is coming to those who do nothing more than drink and party with their music (5:11–12). They even think God will never do anything to them; so they taunt the prophet, telling him, *Bring it on!* (5:19). Doom is coming to those who deliberately confuse what is right and what is wrong, who think they are so clever (5:20–21). Doom is coming to those who are utterly corrupt, who don't care about justice at all—only the bribes they can get (5:22–23). These people care only for themselves, every thought is about themselves (pride); they don't care about the outcome of trials, other than their profit in bribes (injustice); and they lead only to expand their own wealth. Little wonder the LORD is furious and bringing a nation from far away to exact punishment (5:25–30; on pride, cf.: 2:9–18, 22; 3:16–26; 5:8, 15; 32:9–13; on injustice: 1:21–28; 3:5; 10:1–4; 29:18–21; 32:1; 32:16–20; on leaders: 9:16; 10:7; 32:1–8). But it will not be the Assyrians who finally destroy southern Judah, but the Babylonians, on whom the

kings of Judah begin to depend for help against Assyria. The Babylonians will take the people of Judah into exile, leaving only a few in the land (Isa 39:1–7; 2 Kgs 20:12–18).

C. Hope. Isaiah 1–39 is filled with oracles of hope set side-by-side with judgment oracles—far too many texts to list here or put in a footnote. The message, however, comes through with great strength: there is hope for God's people, but only through the cleansing power of judgment: an unpopular message in an era of the rich getting richer and the poor getting nothing—then, and now.

2. Micah, our final witness to interrogate, is from the country (1:1), not a city man with royal connections, like Isaiah. Consequently, the country preacher sent to the city has a different perspective about what's wrong with Judah—and what's wrong starts at the top: the upper class, the rich and powerful, along with God's designated leaders for Judah (e.g., priests, prophets, judges). These are the people with money and power who are on the lookout for more of both, and regard the poor, the widows, and resident aliens as easy targets. Micah portrays the rich as people who fall asleep while dreaming of how to get more, and then wake up to execute their plans; they are oppressing the family farmer, until they drive him away and get his ancestor's land (2:1–2). Meanwhile, those who should enforce justice are in on the take; they don't care about the oppressed, just what they will get in the bribe (3:1–2, 11; 7:3). Micah describes them as cannibals, who feed on the flesh of the people they should be helping (3:3, 9–10). The religious leaders (priests and prophets) are no better; they teach only for the money they get (3:11) and they certainly don't want any of what Micah has to say (2:6). So Micah takes a verbal stab at the power-hungry and their religious leaders by suggesting that the best preacher for these people would be someone who talks about wine and liquor (2:11). These are the topics these people are most interested in—the practices they want to improve. The leaders—all of them—have failed the people, the nation, and God.

Terrible punishment is coming because of their sins (3:12, 4:9–10, 5:10–15, 6:9–16, 7:4–6); and yet, Micah provides some of the most memorable images of hope in the Bible—hope that may or may not escape punishment, but will come after God's people turn back:

God will judge between the nations
and settle disputes of mighty nations,
which are far away.
They will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war. (Mic 4:3)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity,
overlooking the sin of the few remaining for his inheritance?
He doesn't hold on to his anger forever;
he delights in faithful love.
He will once again have compassion on us;

he will tread down our iniquities.

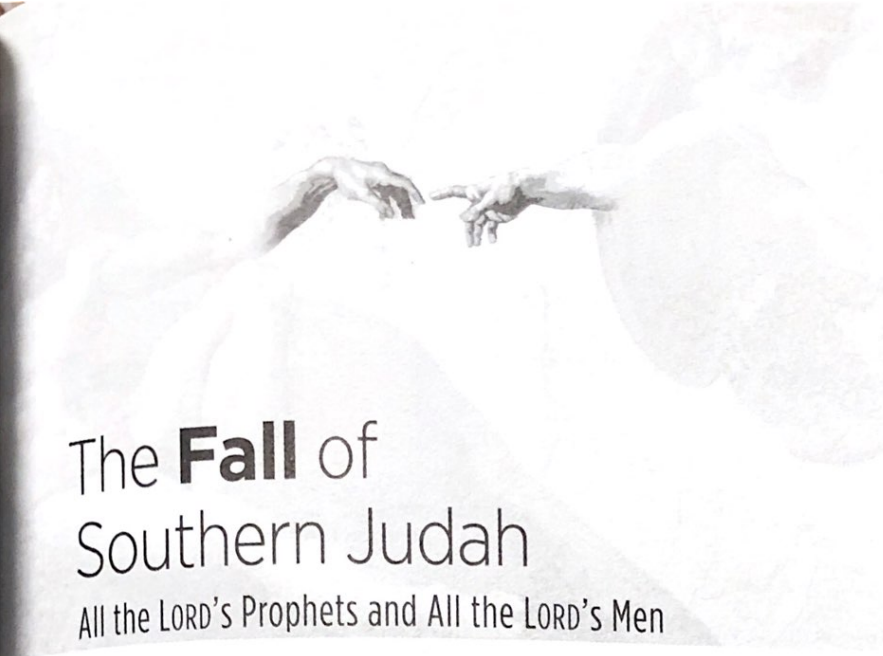
You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic 7:18–19)

Micah speaks of a Judge who is willing to take cases proven to be true beyond a shadow of a doubt and hurl them into the sea or crush the clay tablets holding our charges until there is nothing left of them. This is the Judge in whose court we come to argue Judah's case.

Conclusion

So, despite all of the evidence and the witnesses, hope remains for God's people. The only question is how or when hope will come to life. If Judah will decide that the LORD is her God, confess that they have messed up in the past by chasing every popular god that came along, and acknowledge that they have not loved other people the way God does and the way God teaches in his most basic commandments—if only—then Judah's hope may be realized now, before the necessity of conquest and exile. Again, as strange as it may seem and as marvelous as it really is, Micah testifies before a God who is not only Judah's Judge, but also Judah's defense attorney. So, while they may be as guilty (and foolish) as two criminals who post their self-recorded crime video on the web, the LORD can still get the charges dismissed, pardoned, and thrown into the sea.

But time is running out and their window of opportunity is closing fast. The good news, we learn later in the book of Jeremiah, is that Hezekiah does respond to Micah's message and the LORD does suspend judgment (Jer 26:17–19). The other good news is that Hezekiah will not let the people kill Micah because of his preaching. The not so good news is that a hundred years later, when Jeremiah's defenders appeal to Micah's case to keep him from being killed and convince the nation to listen to Jeremiah, they will save Jeremiah, but national matters will not turn out so well. To this era we turn in Chapter Twelve.



The **Fall** of Southern Judah

All the LORD's Prophets and All the LORD's Men

Judah spent its life as the middle-makings of a sandwich—the good part that everyone wants to eat. To the east was the Arabian Desert and to the west was the Mediterranean Sea; the two, together, blocked direct movement west or east. Instead, traveling in either direction required a detour on one of the roads through or near Judah from south to north (or vice versa). As a result, the small kingdom of Judah floated through the dreams of every king determined to establish a great empire—Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, and even Buford Hercules (my Basset Hound).

In terms of the first three rules of real estate—(1) location, (2) location, (3) location—Judah could not possibly have been better situated. The problem, however, was that it was too good. Every empire wanted their land. So, with due respect, we have to wonder about God's real estate broker. Wouldn't other places with less risk have been better? Given forty years wandering in the wilderness, something else must have become available in the area.

The Fall of Judah

In our last episode of “Who controls Judah?” the Assyrian Empire was going down in flames to the Babylonian Empire—the next big thing in the ancient Near East. Babylon, however, was no new kid on the block. The Babylonian civilization began a little before 2000 BCE, with the world-famous King Hammurabi and his law code (ca. 1792–1750 BCE). In his time, Hammurabi was famous for conquering surrounding

12



READING ASSIGNMENTS

2 KINGS 25

JEREMIAH 1, 7:1–8:3, 26:1–24

EZEKIEL 1–3, 37

JEREMIAH 39–44

KEY TERMS

Lament: a form of prayer (or psalm) in which the person appeals to God regarding their troubles and asks for God's help

Speech-act: a message (from God) presented through some physical action (e.g., dressing like a person going into captivity to warn that captivity is coming)

Yoke: a wooden harness for joining animals (e.g., oxen) to plow the ground

city-states, so that a unified political entity of Babylon could emerge. After Hammurabi, Babylon went into a slow decline. . . .

Due to space constraints and not wishing to bore the reader into a coma, we rejoin our story just over 1,000 years later.

. . . The Neo-Babylonian Empire (626–539 BCE) has Assyria on the run, conquering one city after another, including the capital of Assyria, Ninevah, in 612 BCE. Assyria continues to fall back and try to regroup; Egypt even races to their side—a strange move; but more mysterious, Josiah, king of Judah, tries to stop the Egyptians, and loses his life in the process (ca. 609 BCE). His servants return his body to Jerusalem for burial and make one of Josiah's sons king (Jehoahaz; 2 Kgs 23:30). Pharaoh, however, punishes Judah for Josiah's actions. He demands a high annual tribute and imprisons the new king (23:31–33). The Pharaoh then places another of Josiah's sons, Eliakim, on the throne and changes his name to Jehoiakim (23:34).

A few years later, Babylon ends the confusion over who is the next superpower at the Battle of Carchemish, far north on the Euphrates River. Babylon wins a decisive victory that kicks Egypt back to the Nile River and finishes off what little is left of Assyria (605 BCE).

The ancient Near East now lays wide open before Nebuchadnezzar (see Figure 12.1). After the battle, however, news reaches him that his father has died. So Nebuchadnezzar hurries home to be made king of Babylon. Then, like an eager pit bull, he runs back to Syria-Palestine to establish Babylonian rule, including the submission of King Jehoiakim of Judah, who pays tribute to Babylon for three years (2 Kgs 24:1b). Fiercely confident, King Nebuchadnezzar decides to invade Egypt—his first major tactical blunder. The Egyptian army fights the Babylonians to a draw; Nebuchadnezzar cannot overcome the Egyptians. So finally, his brain cells take control of his testosterone—he cuts his losses and returns home (601 BCE).

The Babylonian “loss” to Egypt has a profound effect on the western states in the empire who had seen the hope of a successful rebellion against Babylon, especially if Egypt promised their support. King Jehoiakim, along with Judah's pro-Egyptian faction, became part of the frenzy, eager to tell Babylon, *“If you want my tribute, just come try and get it”*—or something like that (24:1). A little later in the chapter, the prophet Jeremiah condemns this rebellion and tries to get the king and nation to stop before it is too late. But Jeremiah does just as well to argue with one of Jehoiakim's donkeys, for all the good he accomplishes.

It takes Nebuchadnezzar time to rebuild his army; nonetheless, by ca. 598 BCE, he is back to conquer Jerusalem. But by the time he arrives, his work has been done for him. Though the text is silent, it is not hard to imagine with some confidence that the anti-Babylon faction in Jerusalem had seen the trouble that King Jehoiakim brought on the nation and city of Jerusalem:

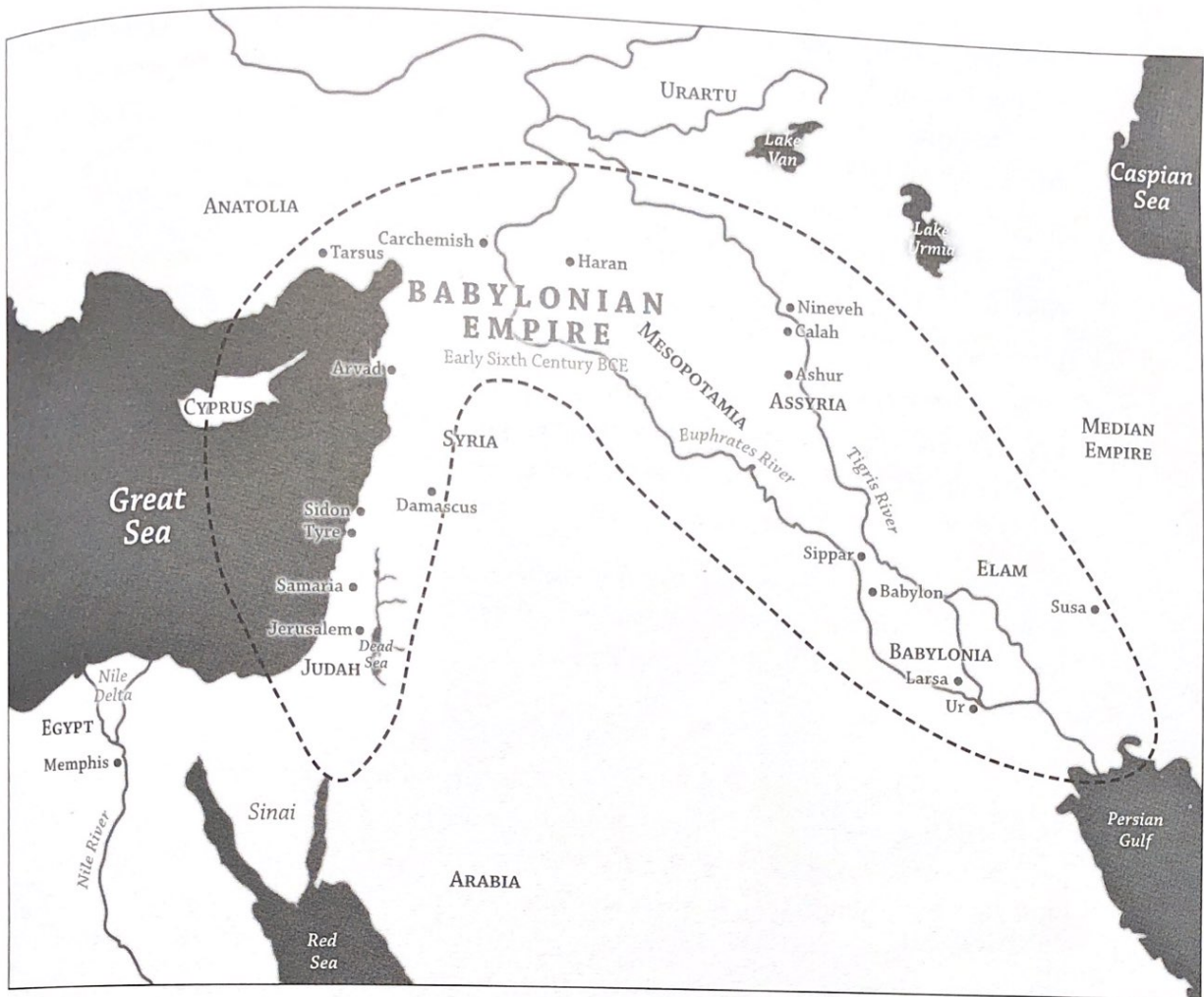


Figure 12.1. The Babylonian Empire

so, they assassinate him and place his son Jehoiachin on the throne, in hopes of sparing their city and their lives. This is the best hypothesis for what Nebuchadnezzar finds once he arrives at Jerusalem. The new king (of only three months) and all his servants come out to surrender to the Babylonian king (24:1–12); and the plan works.

Nebuchadnezzar spares the city, but he takes the king and his royal household, his servants, and many city leaders as captives back to Babylon (597 BCE). Among these leaders is the prophet Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar takes all of the political officials and all the military leaders, including skilled metalworkers. He also clears out anything of value from the LORD's temple and the king's palace. Then he installs Josiah's third son as king (Mattaniah)—of course, changing his name to Zedekiah (24:17)—a king who no doubt promises to support Babylonian rule.

Promises, promises, promises. In time, Zedekiah is persuaded by those who trust Egypt's power and reliability to help fight against Babylon; so he rebels against Babylon—*again*. And Nebuchadnezzar comes, *again*, capturing town after town, and treating the citizens with mercy (perhaps to encourage Jerusalem to surrender instead of fight). Left with no options, the Babylonian

army sets siege to Jerusalem, with the prophet Jeremiah inside urging surrender. Egypt does come to help, but Babylon easily turns them back (Jer 37:5). Jerusalem is in trouble. *Big trouble.*

The siege of Jerusalem continues for three years and conditions inside turn savage. Finally, when Babylon breaks through the city wall, the king makes a run for safety through a secret gate, but he is caught and brought to Nebuchadnezzar. Judah's king, Zedekiah, is forced to watch as his sons are murdered, and then he is blinded; *the last thing he ever sees is the death of his children* (25:4–7).

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar's right-hand man goes about important tasks:

- destroying and burning the temple and other important structures (25:9);
- tearing down the wall that surrounds and protects the city (25:10); and
- exiling even more people, leaving only the poorest of the poor to tend the land (24:14, 25:12).

Now Nebuchadnezzar appoints a governor in charge over the land: Gedaliah (25:22–24). *Judah now has a governor, no longer a king, not even a puppet king.* Judah is no longer an independent state, just a province in the Babylonian Empire.

The Prophets

The LORD refused to let Judah go quietly into the night, not without a fight for Judah's life. Like North Israel, the LORD sent prophets to Judah and Jerusalem (for more on Isaiah and Micah, see Chapter Eleven, pages 232–236). The most significant of these prophets during Jerusalem's final years was Jeremiah (in Jerusalem) and Ezekiel (among the exiles). Both men come to have lengthy books associated with their ministries: the Book of Jeremiah (fifty-two chapters), and the Book of Ezekiel (forty-eight chapters). Consequently, we are in no position to survey all the contents or themes in either book (a good Bible dictionary or commentary can help you with that task). Instead, our aim is more modest: a brief portrait of each man and close look at one or two oracles from their work. In this way, we hope to provide background material for reading more texts from these books with confidence.

Jeremiah

The man

Jeremiah lived in Anathoth a few miles north of Jerusalem, and was a priest—but from the ousted line of Eli and Abiathar, who were no longer in charge at the temple (see Jer 1:1 and 1 Kgs 2:26–27). Even so, the LORD called Jeremiah into service at a young age (Jer 1:5–7)—young enough that Jeremiah

- complains he is too young for what the LORD is asking him to do (1:3–8).
- is not yet married and the LORD tells him “not to marry or have children” because of the sorrows coming on Judah and Jerusalem, especially for those with spouses and children to worry about (16:1–6).

- has a ministry that spans over five decades: from Josiah's thirteenth year (ca. 627; Jer 1:2), until well after the fall of Jerusalem (ca. 587; Jer 41–44).

When God calls Jeremiah into service, the LORD shoots straight about the essence of the message Jeremiah will proclaim—"to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant" (1:10; 66 percent destruction, 33 percent hope). God also explains to Jeremiah why he is to proclaim judgment on the people: "... for abandoning me, worshipping other gods, and trusting in the work of their hands" (1:16). So Jeremiah had best prepare himself for a fight (1:17) and for the punches to be thrown at him (1:19). His life will not be easy or his "best life now." No, his work will be hard and ultimately unsuccessful. The people will not listen and Jerusalem will fall to Babylon. Jeremiah's faithfulness will be measured by the truth of his message, not the number of people who follow him or the amount of money given to his ministry.

All that God promises to give is his presence (1:19b; an echo of God's call of Moses in Exod 3–4), to make Jeremiah strong (1:18), and to rescue him (1:8)—which implies Jeremiah will need to be rescued more than once. At times, Jeremiah seems to enjoy the task God gave him, such as when he says,

When your words turned up, I feasted on them; and they became my joy, the delight of my heart, because I belong to you, LORD God of heavenly forces. (15:16)

He also has some optimism at first that his work might make a difference. The LORD sends him to find a single person in Jerusalem who "acts justly and seeks truth that I may pardon her [Jerusalem]" (5:1). How hard can that be? Jeremiah begins his search among the common and poor people, and fails to find a single person who lives with justice and seeks truth. Jeremiah reflects and decides it must be because they do not know better (5:2–4). So he turns to the rich and powerful who have access to teachers and time to know the LORD's teaching (5:5), only to be disappointed (5:6). Not a single person acts with justice or even tries to seek the truth. Jerusalem has become just as bad, maybe even worse than Sodom.

As Jeremiah's ministry progresses, few believe his warnings (25:3, 44:16). Instead, people refuse to listen (6:10), curse him (15:10), and harass him (17:15). Jeremiah becomes the butt of jokes in Jerusalem (20:7): *Knock, knock! Who's there? Jeremiah!* Jeremiah who? *Jere-my-ya own business!* Far more serious, his calls to surrender to Babylon led people to brand Jeremiah a traitor (37:13). So it's no surprise that the response to Jeremiah also went far beyond words. Jeremiah was barred from going into the temple (36:5) and forced into hiding for his life (36:19). He was beaten and arrested (37:14–15),

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH
Chapters 1–25 "Baruch's Scroll" Oracles and Sign-Acts of Judgment
Chapters 26–29 Jeremiah's Life: Biographical Narratives
Chapters 30–33 The Book of Comfort
Chapters 34–45 Narrative of Jerusalem's Fall and Biographical Narratives
Chapters 46–51 Oracles for the Nations
Chapter 52 Epilogue: The Fall of Jerusalem

Table 12.1. The Book of Jeremiah