

THE TRAGIC KING

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Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "tragic" as "circumstances involving death, calamity or suffering." By this definition, several kings of ancient Israel and Judah could be described as tragic, beginning with Saul, the first King of Israel, who was a heroic figure as well. There were other kings who were killed on the battlefield or were assassinated.

I suggest another nuance to this word. When "death, calamity or suffering" appear to be imminent, but a possibility arises of averting the disaster and it is ignored and not seized, this failure can also be described as "tragic."

If used in both of these senses, the adjective "tragic" can be applied to only one of the biblical kings, who was offered the opportunity of preventing a terrible fate from befalling himself and his people but turned his back on it. This was Zedekiah, the last king to reign in Jerusalem, at whose feet we must lay the responsibility for the destruction of the nation, the capital city and the Temple.

II

When King Josiah was killed in battle against Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo in 609 BCE, Judah lost its independence and the swift descent to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple began. The *am ha'aretz* [people of the land]¹ placed Jehoahaz,² third son of Josiah, upon the throne in Jerusalem. Jehoahaz was apparently more popular than his older brother Eliakim, for reasons we shall soon see. However, this choice did not please Pharaoh Necho, who now was in control of the region. After Jehoahaz had reigned for only three months, Necho deposed him and placed Eliakim on the throne, changing his name to Jehoikim as a sign of his vassalage. Necho took Jehoahaz to Egypt where he died (II Kg. 23:34). The reason for this preference is not given. We may surmise that Necho was afraid the older brother might launch a civil war in Judah in order to reclaim the throne since he was the

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rightful heir, a problem with which the Pharaoh had no desire to become involved.

Jehoiakim soon showed why he had been unpopular enough to be rejected by the people as Josiah's successor. Instead of devoting his energies and the royal treasury to the strengthening of the nation, he began building for himself a new palace, a project denounced by Jeremiah in the harshest of terms (Jer. 22:13-19). He was altogether extravagant and irresponsible. His reign lasted for 11 years and he died in 597 at the age of 36, apparently of natural causes. His 18-year-old son, Jehoiachin, ascended the throne.

During this reign, Nebuchadnezzar decisively defeated the Egyptians in battle at Carchemish in 605, and then succeeded his father, Nabopolassar, as King of Babylon. He soon made himself the master of Syria, Judah and the entire region as far south as the Egyptian border (II Kg. 24:7). Jehoiakim was now a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar, paying an annual tribute, but after three years he revolted against this domination (24:1). Nebuchadnezzar sent a force to Jerusalem that put the city under siege and, after the ascension of Jehoiachin, came to Jerusalem himself to take charge of the campaign.

What prompted Jehoiachin to take radical and decisive action at this juncture is not recorded, nor where he found the courage and the wisdom to do it. For he and his entire family and household, including the Queen Mother, surrendered themselves into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (24:12). This was, perhaps, a desperate risk, but it paid off in sparing the city for another 11 years. Jehoiachin's capitulation must have pleased Nebuchadnezzar for it saved him much time and fighting. This is perhaps the reason why he was so lenient with the city even though Jehoiachin, his household, 7,000 nobles and aristocrats, and 1,000 artisans and craftsmen were sent into exile to Babylon (24:15). Jehoiachin was held in Babylon for the rest of his life.⁴ Nebuchadnezzar designated Josiah's youngest son, 21-year-old Mattaniah, as the new King of Judah, changing his name to Zedekiah (24:17).⁵

III

Zedekiah was the wrong person to have to take the helm of the nation in those desperate and turbulent times, when the country was slowly being crushed like a walnut in a nutcracker between the two great powers, Babylon in the north and Egypt in the south. He was weak and irresolute. Since he was

Josiah's youngest son, it had not been anticipated that he would ever have a significant leadership role and so training for that role was probably neglected. Destiny decreed otherwise. He was propelled into the role for which he was totally unprepared.

Among the people who had first succumbed to domination by Egypt and were now subservient to Babylon, there was a yearning for independence, a desire to throw off the heavy burden of the annual tribute that was strangling the nation's economy. A patriotism that was blind to the geopolitical realities the nation faced fueled the fever of revolt against Babylon. The "hawkish" ruling class hoped that Judah, with a coalition of neighboring nations and the support of Egypt, could defeat the Babylonian. They had forgotten Isaiah's warning that Egypt was a *kaneh ratzutz* [a broken reed], not to be leaned upon (Isa. 36:6; 42:3).

There were those, encouraged by Jeremiah, who saw in submission to Babylon the road to national survival. Early in Zedekiah's reign the peace party seemed to have had the upper hand, for a delegation was sent to make obeisance to Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 29:3), and, in fact, Zedekiah himself visited him to pledge his loyalty in person (51:59). But soon the "hawks" gained control, spurred on by the prophecy of Hananiah ben-Azur, who proclaimed that God had broken the power of Babylon and in two years time the exiles would return together with Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah) who would then resume his rightful place upon the throne in Jerusalem (28:1-4). Jeremiah denounced Hananiah for prophesying lies and declared that he would die that year, which he did (28:16,17). Jeremiah then sent a letter to the exiles in Babylonia urging them to build houses and settle down for they would be there for a long time. The war party was not impressed. The nobles accused Jeremiah of treason for destroying the morale of the people by proclaiming the doom that would befall Jerusalem and suggesting they flee the city. They threw him into a slimy cistern (an echo of the story of Joseph), there to die (38:6). The King was unable to restrain them and was unaware of what they had done to Jeremiah. An Ethiopian eunuch discovered Jeremiah in the pit and told the King about it. Zedekiah found the courage to order the servant to pull the prophet out of the pit (38:7-13). Jeremiah was then placed in the court of the guard to be safe from the nobles and the mob, where he was free to receive people who would come to see him.

The historiography of the final days of the kingdom of Judah has not been kind to Zedekiah, beginning with the historian who painted him with the same brush with which he painted many of the other Davidic kings, describing them as *having done that which was evil in the sight of the Lord*. From the record in Jeremiah, which the historian does not bother to include in his story in II Kings, it is clear that Zedekiah was in favor of maintaining a peaceful, though subservient relationship with Babylon. He appreciated Jeremiah's prophetic mission in spite of the prophecies of doom and destruction, saved his life, as we have seen, and turned to him for advice rather than to the other prophets (37:17). This was during the first of two clandestine meetings that Zedekiah had with Jeremiah.⁶

In the second meeting, Zedekiah swore by the God of Israel that he would not hand Jeremiah over to the nobles to be killed, and that the latter should speak the truth (38:16). Then Jeremiah made a statement which, in view of his previous prophecies, is truly astonishing:

This is what the Lord, God of Hosts, The God of Israel has said, 'If you will only give yourself up to the king of Babylonia's generals, your life will be spared and the city will not be put to the torch, you yourself will live and your household. But if you will not give yourself up, then the city will be handed over to the Chaldeans and they will burn it to the ground, and you yourself will not escape their clutches' (38:17-18).⁷

When Zedekiah expressed fears and hesitation, Jeremiah repeated the offer, and the terrible consequences that would follow if the King did not take this advice.

Here Zedekiah showed himself as merely a tragic figure in the Aristotelian sense. Trapped by his flaw of a vacillating nature, Zedekiah did not – could not? – heed this advice, and the opportunity to avert the disaster was not grasped. His catastrophe was not long in coming. When the Babylonians breached the wall of Jerusalem and entered the city, the King, his family and an entourage attempted to flee the city in the direction of Jericho.⁸ The Babylonians captured them and brought them to Nebuchadnezzar at his headquarters in Riblah in Syria. Zedekiah was forced to witness the execution of his sons and then his eyes were gouged out. He was put in chains and taken to Babylon where he died.⁹

This was Zedekiah's double tragedy: His failure to avail himself of the opportunity to escape tragedy and the tragic consequence to himself and everyone else. But why? He surely remembered the experience of his nephew, King Jehoiachin, and the generous treatment he and his family had received. Was he gripped by fear and a sense of helplessness or, as in a Greek tragedy, did he simply abandon himself to his fate? The text does not answer these questions.

William H. McNeill, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Chicago, wrote in a provocative article:

What if Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had conquered Jerusalem in 701? Jerusalem's preservation from attack by Sennacherib's army shaped the subsequent history of the world far more profoundly than any other military action that I know of.¹⁰

We might well ask the "What If" question in regard to Zedekiah: How would Jewish history and the history of the world have been changed had Zedekiah taken Jeremiah's advice? There would have been no Babylonian Exile, no Deutero-Isaiah, the nation and the Temple would have continued to function, and David's descendants to rule. What would Professor McNeill say? We can only ponder the vagaries of history.

NOTES

1. Some scholars say that this phrase refers to the nobility active at court; others believe it means "the populace" or "public acclaim."
2. According to Jeremiah 22:11, Shallum was his birth-name and Jehoahaz his regnal name. In the genealogy of I Chronicles 3:15, Shallum is last in the list of Josiah's four sons. The first, Johanan, is mentioned only here, perhaps because he died young. The chart below will aid the reader in following the chronology of Judah's last kings.

| <u>King</u> | <u>Age at Accession</u> | <u>Length of Reign</u> |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Josiah | 8 | 31 years |
| Jehoahaz (Shallum), born when Josiah was 16: | 23 | 3 months |
| Jehoiakim (Eliakim), born when Josiah was 14 | 25 | 11 years |
| Jehoiachin, born when grandfather Josiah was 32 | 18 | 3 months |
| Zedekiah, born when Josiah was 29 | 21 | 11 years |

3. The prefix *Jeho* and the suffix *Yah* or *Yahu* are short forms of the name of Israel's God. It might appear strange that the Egyptian king should confer a theophoric name that does not honor an Egyptian god. The reason may be that the vassal swears allegiance to the suzerain by his own god, the oath probably taking place at a formal public ceremony.

4 I Chronicles. 3:16,17 lists the names of seven sons of Jehoiachin who were probably born during his captivity in Babylon. See the Anchor Bible edition of I Kings by Jacob M. Myers,

THE TRAGIC KING

p.18, Note 17. If any of them were born in Jerusalem, they would have been too young to become king.

5. From the chart in Note 2 we can see that a period of 13 years elapsed between the births of Josiah's third son, Jehoahaz (Shallum) and his fourth son who was appropriately named Mattaniah, [A Gift from God]. There may have been daughters in the interim, or sons who died in childhood.

6. Some scholars see these two meetings as two versions of one meeting.

7. Translation by John Bright, *Anchor Bible Book of Jeremiah*.

8. According to legend, there was a tunnel from the king's palace to Jericho, and someone informed the Babylonian about it. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. IV, p. 293.

9. A comparison between King Saul and King Zedekiah would make a most interesting study.

10. "The Greatest Might Have Been of All," in his book *What If?* Excerpt quoted from *The New York Review of Books*, September 23, 1999.

QUESTIONS **from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book** **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. What special place does the building of the Tabernacle (Ex. 35) have in the Sabbath laws?

2. "...Man does not live by bread only, but by all that proceeds from the Lord's mouth does man live" (Deut. 8:3). What does this refer to in the context of Moses' present discourse? What broader religious significance can be attached to the phrase?

3. Which modern legal terms parallel the following terminology used by the Torah in Deuteronomy 17:8 (Old JPS):

a. Between blood and blood.

b. Between plea and plea.

c. Between stroke and stroke.

ANSWERS ON PAGE: 189