

# ZEDEKIAH: LAST KING OF JUDAH

## SHIMON BAKON

Zedekiah was the last King of Judah, in whose reign it collapsed under the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, on the Ninth Day of Ab in the year 586 BCE. We may gain some better understanding of this disaster if we summarize the cataclysmic events that preceded it.

A little less than 30 years earlier there had been two regional powers, Assyria to the north of Judah and Egypt to the south. The balance of power became disturbed when a new colossus began to stride across the entire Near East – Babylon. In 712, it destroyed Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. This was the beginning of the upheavals that led to the destruction of Judah. Egypt, deeply concerned about this new threat, moved northward to bolster the waning power of Assyria. It set on the march in 608, moving via Judah. Josiah, a truly righteous king, attempted to stop the Egyptian forces, and was mortally wounded in battle at Megiddo.

### KING JOSIAH AND HIS SONS

(Josiah killed in battle with Egypt in 608 BCE)



JEHOAHAZ (608 BCE) →  
(crowned by the  
*am-ha'aretz* in 608  
and deposed by Egypt the  
same year)



JEHOIAKIM (608-597)  
(crowned by Neco of Egypt  
but became vassal  
of Babylonia)



JEHOIACHIN (597) → ZEDEKIAH (597-586)  
Being a sympathizer (crowned by Babylon)  
of Egypt, he was  
deposed by Babylon)

The Judean *am-haaretz* – the landed gentry<sup>1</sup> – put Josiah's son Jehoahaz on the throne, but Necho, the Egyptian pharaoh, hurried to depose him and carry him off into captivity. The pharaoh crowned his brother Jehoiakim, who reigned from 608 to 598. However, in the year 606, the joined armies of As-

syria and Egypt were defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, forcing the Egyptians to retreat, and bringing the Assyrian empire to an end. Jehoiakim, who was pro-Egyptian, had now to transfer his allegiance to the dominant power of Babylon. Thereafter, he rebelled without incurring punitive action from Nebuchadnezzar. However, when he died and his son Jehoiachin was crowned king, Nebuchadnezzar made short shrift of Jerusalem. He ransacked the Temple, and exiled the young king and his retinue, the nobility, the army (7,000) and about 1,000 craftsmen to Babylonia. This was the first exile. And he set Zedekiah, another son of Josiah, on the throne.

#### THE RASHOMON SYNDROME

In the Japanese film *Rashomon*, an incident is observed by a number of witnesses who each gives a different interpretation of the event. The catastrophic events leading to the downfall of Judah and its last king, Zedekiah, is recorded in five different documents: II Kings, II Chronicles, the Lachish Letters, some passages of the Book of Jeremiah, and Ezekiel Chapter 17. As will be detailed later on, these witness accounts, in contrast to *Rashomon*, are not in conflict with each other. In fact, focusing on various aspects of the tragic fate of Jerusalem, they afford the reader a rather comprehensive picture of forces and major actors that led almost inexorably to the end of the first Judean Commonwealth.

#### II CHRONICLES 36:11-21

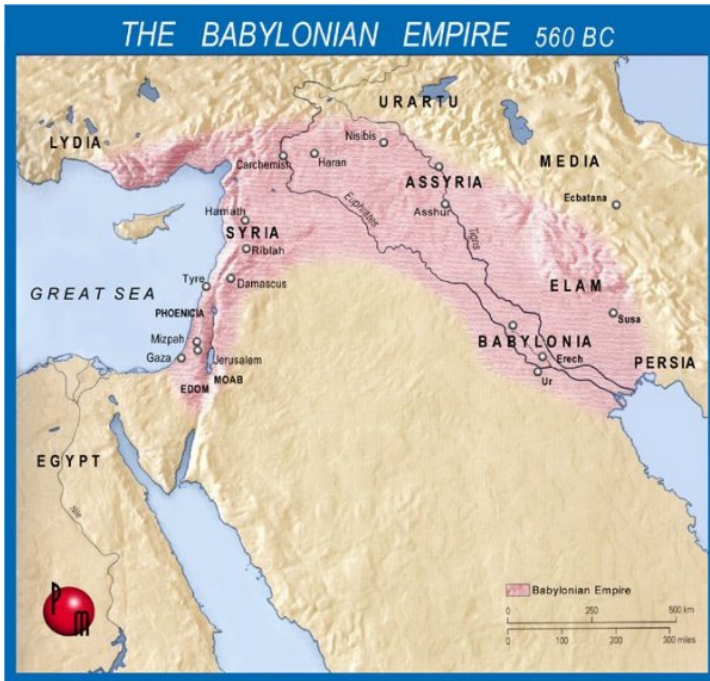
After a short and precise resumé of the events from Jehoahaz to Jehoiachin and the first Babylonian Exile, the Chronicler devotes no more than three verses to Zedekiah. He accuses him of apostasy, displeasing to the Lord, of not accepting the warnings of Jeremiah, and of rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar who made him take an oath by God. It would seem that this refers to an oath of fealty that Nebuchadnezzar made him swear by the Lord, an oath later broken by Zedekiah. The Chronicler then decries the offenses of the priests and the people who polluted the Temple and adopted the abominable heathen practices, resulting in God's wrath against His people beyond remedy. In verses 18-21, he describes the tragedy of massacres, the burning of the Temple, the tearing down of the walls of Jerusalem, and the exile of survivors to Babylon. Ignoring what happened to the King and his family, the

record ends on an optimistic note of the Cyrus Proclamation, a fulfillment of the word of the Lord given through the mouth of Jeremiah.

*And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished*

*That I will punish the king of Babylon (25:12).*

*For thus saith the Lord: 'After seventy years are accomplished by Babylon I will remember you . . . bring you to return to this place' (29:10).*



Indeed, the Babylonian empire coming into being in 605 after the defeat of the joint armies of Egypt and Assyria in the battle of Carchemish, lasted 70 years, and collapsed after the onslaught of the Persian juggernaut in 538. In that same year, 42,360 Judean exiles, along with 7,373 bondservants, led by Sheshbazaar, son of Jehoiachin, returned to Judah.

II KINGS 24: 17-19, 25

The account in II Kings of the sins of Zedekiah and the men of Judah and Jerusalem is in basic agreement with that given in II Chronicles. True to one

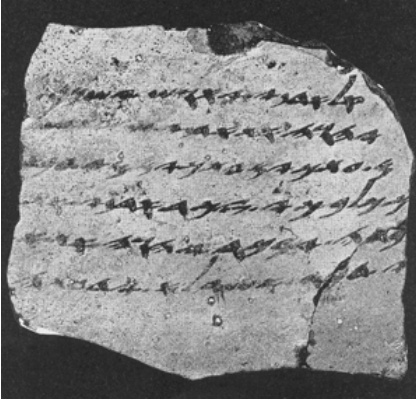
of the basic tenets of biblical theology, grave sins, breaking the terms of the Covenant between God and Israel, lead to severe punishment. This time, Nebuchadnezzar is designated to lay Judah waste. In the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar sent forth a large army that besieged Jerusalem until Zedekiah's eleventh year (586). Finally, there was no more food in the city, and soon after the walls were breached and the Temple was burned. After the burning of the Temple, the walls of Jerusalem were torn down. *But some of the poorest in the land were left by the chief of guards to be vine-dressers and field hands* (II Kgs. 25:12).

In contrast to II Chronicles, that has nothing to report of what happened to Zedekiah, II Kings is quite specific about him. When the walls of Jerusalem were breached, the King and his soldiers fled through *the gate between the double walls* (25:4) but, pursued by the Babylonians, he was caught near Jericho and taken before Nebuchadnezzar. His sons were slaughtered – *shahatum* – in his presence, and his eyes were put out. In this state of utter defeat and degradation he was brought to Babylon in chains, never to be heard of again.

This narration, like the one in II Chronicles, also ends on a note of hope. The next King of Babylon, Evil-Merodach, released Jehoiachin, 37 years after he had been taken prisoner, and treated him with kindness. This happened approximately in the year 560 BCE. Thus, a direct descendant of David was kept alive, sparking hopes and expectations of restoration of the Davidic dynasty.

#### THE LACHISH LETTERS

A third and contemporary source for the desperate situation shortly before the *hurban* are the Lachish Letters, consisting of 18 ostraca – inscribed potsherds – found in archeological excavations at Lachish. They were written by Hoshaiiah, the commander at Lachish, addressed to his superior Yaosh. After the fall of Azekah, Lachish was the last fortified city outside of Jerusalem, still desperately holding back the crushing forces of Nebuchadnezzar.



Letter No. 4 informs of the fall of Azekah, the only other bastion left before Jerusalem: "I will send for him tomorrow at daylight. And let it be known to my master that we will be looking for the signals from Lachish, according to the instructions which he has given, for no signals from Azekah have been seen."

This historic event confirms Jeremiah 34: 6-7:

*Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah of Judah in Jerusalem when the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah, for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.*

#### THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

By far the most important document regarding the troubled reign of Zedekiah is the Book of Jeremiah. In its various passages we learn of significant incidents not recorded in either II Kings or II Chronicles, while personal encounters between King and prophet offer us insights into the personality of Zedekiah. Already in Chapter 24:8 we note some contempt for Zedekiah and his advisers in Jeremiah's vision of the *good and bad figs*: The exiles, including Jehoiachin, are the good figs, while Zedekiah and the princes are the bad ones.

The King, it seems, had three options on how to cope with the turbulent situation facing him. Installed by Nebuchadnezzar as vassal king, he could continue in this status. This was the course of action advocated over and over again by the prophet. Or he could ally himself with other minor nations in an attempt to shake off Babylonian overlordship. Indeed, such an attempt is recorded by Jeremiah in Chapter 27. The kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Sidon, and Tyre sent envoys to Zedekiah. On hearing of it, Jeremiah told:

*Make for yourself thongs and bars of a yoke and put them on your neck. And send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king*

*of the Ammonites, and the king of Tyre and the king of Sidon, by envoys who have come to king Zedekiah . . . and give them this charge to their masters . . . . [But] the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the kings of Babylon, and serves him, will be left by Me on its own soil – declares the Lord – to till it and dwell on it (vv. 2-4, 11).*

The third option was to ally himself with Egypt. Both the accounts in II Kings and II Chronicles agree that Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Only in Jeremiah is it recorded that this occurred when Zedekiah allied himself with Egypt (called contemptuously by Ezekiel a *mishenet kanah* [staff of reed]) (29:6).

In the years 590/589 Hophra became the pharaoh of Egypt. Intent on regaining hegemony or presence in Judah, he induced Zedekiah to join forces with him. Infuriated by the defection of Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar sent an army to besiege Jerusalem. Apparently Hophra sent an army to the assistance of Zedekiah, leading to a temporary retreat of the Babylonians. This temporary retreat, which occurred in 588, may have sealed the fate of Judah. The *bad figs*, the inexperienced leaders, the false prophets, were jubilant, but Jeremiah warned: *Behold, Pharaoh's army . . . shall return to Egypt . . . and the Chaldeans shall return . . . and they shall take it and burn it (37:7,8)*. His warnings were ignored by the weak King and his retinue, leading to the final disaster.

*LIKE STUBBLE DRIVEN BY THE WIND (PSALMS 83:14)*

In three direct encounters between King and prophet, Zedekiah emerges a weak, vacillating, almost pathetic man. In the 10th year of Zedekiah's reign, when Jerusalem was already under siege, Jeremiah was shut up in the court of guards by the King's orders. The reason for Jeremiah's imprisonment: *'Wherefore do you prophesy . . . "I will give this city into the hands of Babylon"' (32:4)*. It is not stated whether Jeremiah was released from custody, but a short time after, when the siege of Jerusalem was temporarily lifted due to Hophra's intercession, Zedekiah sent a delegation to Jeremiah with the request: *'Pray now unto the Lord our God for us' (37:9)*. However, Jeremiah sent word back to the King that Pharaoh's army will retreat to Egypt and the Chaldeans will burn the city. In Chapter 37:12-21 the following incident is

recorded: Jeremiah, leaving Jerusalem for Anatot, his hometown, was stopped at the gate and arrested on the charge of defecting to the Chaldeans and was put in prison. *Then king Zedekiah sent for him and the king questioned him secretly in his palace: 'Is there any word from the Lord?'* (37:17). In spite of the truthful response: *'Thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylonia,'* the King gave instructions to have Jeremiah removed from the dungeon and to be lodged in the prison compound, where he was given a daily ration of bread.

However, the officials, declaring that Jeremiah was demoralizing the people, requested the King to have Jeremiah executed for treason. This is the fickle King's response: *'Behold, he is in your hands, for the king can do nothing against you'* (38:5); whereupon, Jeremiah was cast into a pit full of mire. When Eved-melech, an Ethiopian, in all probability a secret admirer of the prophet, heard of it he petitioned the King to save Jeremiah, who was likely to die of hunger. Again, by orders of the King, Jeremiah was taken out of the pit and brought to a special chamber near the Temple for a secret meeting with Zedekiah.

#### A PATHETIC ZEDEKIAH

There, he asked Jeremiah to hide nothing from him. Only when Zedekiah swore that he would not kill the prophet or turn him over to those who sought his life, Jeremiah told him the bitter truth, yet advising: *'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city won't be burned down'* (38:17). The King's reply reveals some fact not evident in the other documents presented. Zedekiah fears that, surrendering to Nebuchadnezzar, he would be delivered into the hands of Judeans who had defected to the Chaldeans. This would indicate that there must have been a militant pro-Chaldean faction in Judah, which might explain the assassination of Gedaliah later on. Zedekiah's final words with Jeremiah reveal much of the vacillating relationship between King and prophet. He advises that, should Jeremiah be questioned by officials wanting to know what had transpired at their meeting, he should pretend that he had merely petitioned the King to be held in custody in the prison compound.

#### EZEKIEL

The prophet Ezekiel is our last witness to the tragic final years of the Judean kingdom. In Chapter 17, he is commanded by God: *Son of man, put forth a riddle and speak a parable unto the House of Israel. The riddle and the parable is about a great eagle with great wings and long pinions, full of feathers and diverse colors. This eagle is Nebuchadnezzar. But there is another great eagle, also with great wings and many feathers, obviously Hophra, Pharaoh of Egypt. One will note that this eagle is missing long pinions, a subtle indication that this eagle, though mighty, is inferior to the Babylonian one. Now follows: And he took the seed royal and brought him under an oath, that his might be a lowly kingdom, that might not lift up, but that by keeping this covenant it might stand. But he rebelled against him by sending ambassadors to Egypt (13-15).*

In these three verses Ezekiel details the terms of Zedekiah's oath of fealty to Nebuchadnezzar. Judah is not to rebel, but is to be a minor kingdom vassal to Babylonia. The prophet denounces Zedekiah primarily for violating a solemn oath to the Lord, omitting the grave sins attributed to him by the other witnesses.

As a true prophet, Ezekiel predicts a brighter future. The *lofty twig of the cedar* which Nebuchadnezzar had cut off, the Lord Himself will *plant it upon a high mountain and eminent . . . In the mountain of Israel will I plant it (22).*

#### SUMMARY

From biblical records, each complementing the other, we gain a clear and vivid picture of the last stormy years of the Judean kingdom. We note the power play of mighty empires, impinging on tiny Judah until it falls prey to Babylonia. This tragedy, in characteristic biblical historiosophy, is interpreted as the wages of irredeemable sins committed by the Judeans. Much of the guilt for the destruction of the Judean kingdom is laid on the unfortunate Zedekiah, portrayed as a weak and fickle young King, surrounded by an intractable pro-Egyptian faction of *sarim* [high officials] and false prophets. And, in keeping with the Judaic notion of God in history, the records end on a hopeful and promising note.

In a dirge in Chapter 19, the most beautiful song of his work, Ezekiel laments



