EGYPT: THE NEMESIS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

SHIMON BAKON

From the time that Rehoboam succeeded King Solomon to the throne of Judah (931 BCE), Egypt was a constant source of trouble and anguish for Israel and Judah. Egypt, in all probability, is implicated in the unfortunate schism of David's United Kingdom. Egypt invaded the Kingdom of Judah three times, causing considerable damage. Even though these attacks themselves posed no existential threat to Judah, Egypt played a significant role in Judah's downfall. More ominous were the occasions when Israel allied itself with Egypt against Assyria and, later on, when Judah sought the support of Egypt against Babylon. Buffeted between warring empires to the north and south, both Israel and Judah made the fatal mistake of relying on Egypt who made promises and never delivered. Thus, Egypt the benevolent *handsome heifer* (Jer. 46:20) was the indirect cause of the destruction of both Israel and Judah.

THE SCHISM

King Solomon, intent on implementing his ambitious building program, especially the Temple, appointed Jeroboam to serve as the overseer of the unpopular corvée of forced labor. It was either the knowledge of performing the holy task of building the Temple, or the iron hand of Solomon, that held disaffection with the unwanted burden of corvée labor in check. Jeroboam, a crafty manipulator, stirred revolt and was condemned to death by Solomon. However, he managed to flee to Egypt where he was given asylum by Pharaoh Shishak (I Kgs. 11:40).

When, on Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam became king (931-913 BCE), the northern ten tribes seceded. It is not clear what particular role Jeroboam played in this initiating this schism. What is known is that on his return, Jeroboam became king of the new northern kingdom (Israel) (I Kgs. 12:20). While the unpardonable stupidity of Rehoboam was a direct cause of the unfortunate division of David's United Kingdom, Pharaoh Shishak's shady manipulation, though not recorded, was in all probability a contributing factor. For reasons unknown to us, Shishak (945-926 BCE) *marched against Jerusa-

Shimon Bakon, Ph.D., is the Editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.
lem and carried off the treasuries of the House of the Lord (I Kg. 14:25). The Book of Chronicles is more specific and records that Shishak with 1,200 chariots and 60,000 horsemen took fortified towns of Judah before turning to Jerusalem (II Chron. 12:2-9). It may be surmised that Shishak, weary of the growing power of the Israelites, as Jeroboam’s patron plotted against the United Kingdom by contributing to its division, and later by invading and weakening Judah.

Egyptian pressure against Judah did not stop there. Chronicles relates an invasion of Judah during the reign of King Asa (911-870 BCE) by the Cushite Zerah (II Chron. 14:8-14). It is not known exactly who this Zerah was but it is conjectured that he may have been Pharaoh Osorkon I, successor to Shishak.¹ King Asa successfully repulsed this invasion.

THE FALL OF SAMARIA

The second part of the eighth century BCE is marked by the ascendancy of the Assyrian Empire. Headed by three strong monarchs: Tiglath-pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sargon, the empire expanded, swallowing up minor kingdoms including the Kingdom of Israel. Egypt to the south, feeling threatened, encouraged rebellion against Assyria. During the fateful Assyrian expansion, history records three dynastic changes in Egypt and five pharaohs. In all probability Petobastis (745-721 BCE) was the pharaoh who was indirectly responsible for the fall of Samaria, as will be detailed later on.²

FROM PEKAH TO HOSHEA

Ephraim has acted like a silly dove with no mind. They have appealed to Egypt, they have gone to Assyria (Hos. 7:11). Confusion befell the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, regarding how to deal with the threat of Assyria. Both kingdoms had pro-Assyrian and pro-Egyptian parties. Neither kingdom paid heed to the warnings of the prophet Hosea and to his advice of neutrality and trust in the Lord in the struggle of the two giants.

Pekah became King of Israel in 732 BCE and entered into an alliance with Rezin, King of Aram (Syria) in an attempt to stem the tide of Assyrian aggression. King Ahaz of Judah, asked to join a pact with Pekah and Rezin, refused, whereupon Pekah and Rezin invaded Judah. The Book of Isaiah offers a clue for this invasion. Ahaz, who panicked, is calmed by the great
prophet Isaiah assuring him *Be firm and calm. Be not afraid and do not lose heart on account of these two smoking stubs of firebrands* (7:4) who threaten Judah saying: *We will set up as king the son of Tabeel* (7:6). Thus, the purpose of the invasion was to depose Ahaz and make the son of Tabeel king. As the Book of Proverbs states, *He who sows iniquity shall reap misfortune* (Prov. 22:8). The invasion, though causing severe damage to Judah, failed but had disastrous consequences. An infuriated Ahaz now requested Assyria's help against Pekah and Rezin. In 733 BCE, Tiglath-pileser complied and invaded the Kingdom of Israel. He occupied the Galilee, the coastal region and Gilead. Only Samaria was left.

Hoshea, who assassinated Pekah, was crowned King of Israel and submitted to Assyria. However, when Tiglath-pileser died (727 BCE), Hoshea made an unfortunate attempt to throw off the yoke of Assyria by asking Egypt for assistance. This is how it is recorded in II Kings 17:4-5: *But the King of Assyria caught Hoshea in an act of treachery: he had sent envoys to King So of Egypt, and he had not paid the tribute to the king of Assyria as in previous years. And the king of Assyria arrested him and put him into prison.*

This spelled the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the year 722 BCE. Samaria was captured and the populace deported to Assyria. The warnings of the prophet Hosea were not heeded by the rulers Pekah and Hoshea. The final blow came when King Hoshea, relying on Egypt for help, was left by them in his time of need thus causing the downfall of the Northern Kingdom.

HEZEKIAH, KING OF JUDAH (716-687 BCE)

The destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Shalmaneser was only a part of Assyria's larger strategy. In a sweep to the south, Assyria invaded Aram (Syria) and made Judah her tributary state.

When Hezekiah ascended to the throne of Judah, the supremacy of Assyria was being challenged by the last pharaoh of the 25th dynasty who stirred up a rebellion against Assyria near the Philistine town of Ashkelon. At first, Hezekiah adopted the policy of uneasy neutrality.

THE STAFF OF BRUISED REED
Later, Hezekiah joined this rebellion with a coalition of petty kingdoms. However, Sennacherib, the new and powerful king of Assyria, had no difficulty in defeating Egypt in 701 BCE and in establishing a stronghold in Lachish, threatening an invasion of Jerusalem.

King Hezekiah then sent a letter to Sennacherib in Lachish: *I have done wrong; withdraw from me and I shall bear whatever you impose on me* (II Kgs. 18:14). However, Sennacherib, not satisfied with imposing a heavy tribute on Judah, wanted unconditional surrender of Jerusalem as part of a strategy to facilitate war with Egypt. The Book of Kings records the words of Rabshakeh, sent by Sennacherib to negotiate the surrender of Jerusalem: *You rely, of all things, on Egypt, that splintered rod of a staff, who punctures the palm of anyone who leans on it* (II Kgs. 18:21).

*I AM ESCAPED BY THE SKIN OF MY TEETH (JOB 19:20)*

Strengthened by Prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah refused to surrender Jerusalem (Isa. 37:33-35). The unexpected retreat of the Assyrian forces is now part of history. The words of Rabshakeh regarding Egypt, as we have seen before and shall see later on, are found to be true.

The warnings of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah were ignored, leading to the fall of Samaria on the one hand and almost to the fall of Jerusalem on the other.

**JOSIAH**

At the time when Josiah became king of Judah (640 BCE), the balance of world power was disturbed by the growing might of the Babylonian empire. Already a force to be reckoned with at the time of Hezekiah, Babylon achieved preeminence when in the year 612 BCE it defeated Assyria and occupied its capital city Nineveh. It is possible that at this point, Egypt, exploiting a weakened Assyria, made an effort to reestablish control of lands up to the Euphrates River, a move that affected Judah. What now happened is recorded in two different versions in the Book of Kings and in Chronicles. *In his days, Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt marched to the river Euphrates. King Josiah marched toward him, but when he confronted him at Megiddo, (Neco) slew him* (II Kgs. 23:29).
Chronicles offers the following version: *King Neco of Egypt came up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out against him. (Neco) sent messages to him saying, ‘What have I to do with you, King of Judah? I do not march against you this day but against the kingdom that wars with me’. . . (II Chron. 35:20-21).*

From this account, one could conclude that Josiah was too hasty in refusing passage to Neco's army. In the ensuing battle at Megiddo in 609, Josiah lost his life. His son Jehoahaz, crowned king by the people of the land (II Chron. 36:1), was deposed after only three months by Neco, who now placed Jehoahaz's brother Eliakim (and changed his name to Jehoiakim) as ruler (609-598 BCE).

**FROM JEHOIAKIM TO THE FIRST INVASION OF BABYLON**

In the year 605 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon inflicted a decisive defeat on the joint armies of Egypt and Assyria at Carchemish. He then wrested control of Egyptian territory to the river Euphrates including Judah. Jehoiakim, vassal of Neco, now became a tributary of Nebuchadnezzar who bound him in fetters and carried him off to Babylon (II Chron. 36:6). Jehoiachin his son succeeded him but only for a period of three months. Judah, stirred up by Egypt to rebel against Babylonia, was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar who laid siege to Jerusalem. Jehoiachin surrendered (698) and he and the elite of Jerusalem, including the prophet Ezekiel, were brought to Babylon. The Egyptian response to the rebellion is recorded in the Book of Kings: *The king of Egypt did not venture out of his country again for the king of Babylon had seized all the land that had belonged to the king of Egypt, from the Wadi of Egypt to the River Euphrates* (II Kgs. 24:7).

**ZEDEKIAH (598-586 BCE)**

Both the Book of Kings and Chronicles give scant accounts of events during the reign of Zedekiah, son of Josiah, who was made ruler by the king of Babylonia. We learn more information from Jeremiah, the great prophet, whose warnings of an impending disaster are recorded in his book. His advice to the weak and vacillating King Zedekiah to submit peacefully to Nebuchadnezzar and not to rely on Egypt the handsome heifer (Jer. 46:20) was
ignored. Listening to the urgings of a powerful pro-Egyptian party, Zedekiah rebelled in 589/588 BCE against Babylonia.

FATAL TWO YEARS

Nebuchadnezzar now set out with an army to lay siege to Jerusalem. Thus reports Jeremiah: *The army of Pharaoh had set out from Egypt and when the Chaldeans, who were besieging Jerusalem, heard the report, they raised the siege of Jerusalem* (Jer. 37:5). The temporary retreat of the Chaldeans caused euphoria in Jerusalem. It justified the policy of the pro-Egyptian party, in spite of Jeremiah's prophecy: *Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel . . . the army of Pharaoh which set out to help you, will return to its own land, to Egypt. And the Chaldeans will come back and attack the city, and they will capture and destroy it by the fire* (Jer. 37:7-8).

Jeremiah 38:14-18 relates a secret meeting of Zedekiah with Jeremiah in which the king wished to know the whole truth. The prophet then assured the king in the name of the Lord that if he surrendered, his life would be spared and the city of Jerusalem not burned down. The pathetic response of Zedekiah, *I am worried that the Judeans who have defected to the Chaldeans might hand me over to them to abuse me* (Jer. 38:19), ruined the last chance of avoiding the impending catastrophe.

The acute and insightful assessment of Egypt by Rabshakeh (II Kgs. 18:21) sadly came true. Both Israel and Judah, who leaned on the *staff of this bruised reed* of Egypt, were mortally wounded.

To this day, Jews throughout the millennia remember that day of the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple, the Ninth of Av 586 BCE, as a day of fasting and mourning. Egypt, sometimes directly and more often indirectly, facilitated this destruction.

NOTES

1. There is no unanimity as to who Zerah was. The traditional view that he was Pharaoh Osorkon I or II is presented in the *Encyclopedia Biblica* and the *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

3. The name So is not known as a pharaoh. Of the various explanations offered, the one by Gordon's Commentary on Chronicles seems most reasonable. So was the military commander, highest in rank next to Pharaoh Osorkon I who, according to the reckoning of Erman (see footnote 2) reigned from 924 to 895 BCE, and fits the time frame of King Asa's reign (911-870).

4. Shalmaneser was indeed the Assyrian monarch who destroyed the Kingdom of Israel. However, it was Sargon, his successor, who exiled the ten tribes of Israel.