

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

D. Dissolution and Restoration

10. March Towards Destruction

We continue our overview of the redemptive-historical story of the Old Testament with the account of Israel's dissolution and restoration: Today, the continuing problems that Israel faced as a divided kingdom—their march toward destruction.

The first sign that the miraculous events on Mt. Carmel did not mark the end of Israel's trouble was Jezebel's response. Rather than submitting to the Lord's justice, she resisted it, venting an unholy hatred against Elijah and vowing to take his life. The Bible doesn't say what Ahab's reaction was to this, but if he did not agree with his wife, he was at least unwilling to stick his neck out for God or his prophet.

In fact, later events in Ahab's reign showed his disregard for God and his covenant with Israel. One event in particular, was telling about how lightly Ahab regarded his duty to lead his people in continuing service to God. It involved some property belonging to an Israelite. Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard and tried to buy it. But Naboth, quite properly, was unwilling to give up the piece of the Promised Land that had been given to his ancestors in the time of Joshua.

An Israelite's inheritance, after all, was more than property; it was a sign of his participation in God's covenant. As Israel's leader, part of Ahab's duty was to encourage and support his citizens in their appreciation for God's provisions. Instead, Ahab became angry over Naboth's refusal, and then aided by Jezebel, perverted justice by bringing false accusations of blasphemy. In the end, Naboth was executed, with the result that Ahab seized the vineyard he coveted. Although the king repented of his actions after a word of judgment from the Lord, that did not give Naboth his life back. Besides that, Ahab's repentance was very short-lived.

But, let's go back to Jezebel's earlier vendetta against Elijah. She didn't even feel a need to conceal her blatant attempts to oppose the Lord's prophet. However, she was apparently not strong enough to carry out her threat immediately; if she had been, she wouldn't have wasted time sending a messenger to tell Elijah of her plans. Most likely she was just trying to strike fear into Elijah's heart.

It worked. Elijah ran for his life. Sometimes flight is an act of faith and obedience. Elijah's departure from Israel right after the drought began had been just that. But his flight here was purely out of concern for his own survival. He ignored the fact that the authority of the Lord had been tied up with his own activity, and that for him to flee now was to make the Kingdom of God give way in the mind of Israel, to the kingdom of Satan.

But Elijah was tired of the battle and profoundly discouraged. "I am the only one left," he complained; "it's too much for me." However, in running away, he found no freedom, but just increasing discouragement. He even prayed that he might die.

But God answered Elijah's need rather than his request. He sent an angel to give him energy to travel on to Horeb, the mountain of the Lord, where he spent the night in a cave. There, after listening to his complaints, God gave Elijah an unmistakable revelation of his presence and sent him back into the battle. He was to anoint three men to carry out a series of judgments upon Israel.

- One of God's agents of judgment would be Jehu, who would eventually ascend to the throne of Israel and kill off Ahab's descendants as well as Jezebel.
- Another agent was Elisha, who would succeed Elijah as prophet and also put to death the guilty who had escaped the sword of Jehu.

Still the judgments did not mean that God was giving up on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. God informed Elijah, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." Although the people of Israel as a political and national entity were to be destroyed, the covenant itself would continue. For God would preserve a remnant of true Israel, the faithful, who would be heir to the covenant and promises of God. With this fresh look at the Lord's plans, Elijah understood and once again, became committed to his mission as God's prophet.

God found a way to make his kingdom come—in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness and Elijah's retirement plans. He found a way that would ultimately result in his victory over the evil opposition to his kingdom. This was no small matter, for "the conflict between Jezebel and Elijah was more than a dramatic episode in a battle between two powerful people. It was an episode in that age-old battle [first mentioned in Gen 3:15 - *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers...*] In Jezebel Satan struck out at God himself, at the saving work of the promised Messiah and at Lord's anointed prophet, one of those who was preparing the way for the Christ to come. That's why Elijah's obedience was so important.

Centuries later, when Christ came, he would have some of the same frustrations Elijah had with Israel. One place he expressed this is recorded in Matt. 23:37: *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! But where Elijah had stopped, Christ continued. He found a way to show them the highest love, placing himself before God's judgment in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice. By doing that, Christ won the victory.*

After Ahab, the northern kingdom, with its capital in Samaria, continued its march to destruction for another century until God allowed it to be conquered and its people deported by the Assyrians. 2 Kings 17:7-23 rehearses the reasons for their failure; vs. 15 is a good summary: *They rejected his [the Lord's] decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors and the statutes he had warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, "Do not do as they do."*

In the meantime, the spiritual decline of Judah (the Southern Kingdom, headquartered in Jerusalem) was not as uniform or fast. There were actually some kings of Judah who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, even though others more closely imitated the kings of Israel. One of the former was Jehoshaphat, a contemporary of Ahab. Jehoshaphat sometimes acted unwisely and was reproved by God for it, but for the most part, was judged by God to have done what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

Jehoshaphat's lack of wisdom in one matter, however, almost put an end to the Davidic dynasty. The seeds for this were laid when Jehosphaphat allowed an alliance between his house and the house of Ahab—his son Jehoram married Ahab's daughter Athaliah.

Athaliah seems to have been much like her mother Jezebel. A few years after both her husband and son had been killed, she seized control of Judah's throne and did her best to kill off her own grandsons—the legitimate heirs to Judah's throne. She missed only one infant—Joash. But, by the grace of God and the actions of certain faithful covenant-keepers in Judah, Joash escaped with his life. Athaliah was killed a few years later, and replaced by seven-year-old Joash, who, like his great-grandfather Jehoshaphat, again did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

There were always many political challenges for relatively small nations like Israel and Judah—and spiritual challenges too, especially since God had forbidden them to be as flexible as the surrounding nations in their worship practices. These challenges only grew as Assyria became a world power and expanded its influence in their direction. The prophets became particularly active at this time. Amos and Hosea brought their message to the Northern Kingdom while most of the others ministered mainly to Judah. Their messages were graphic in various ways, meant to help God's people recognize and repent of their infidelity to Yahweh. I'll just give some representative illustrations of this.

- Hosea used his marriage and family life to convey what God had in mind. He married a woman who prostituted herself to other lovers, as Israel had done spiritually, but took her back to illustrate the willingness of the Lord to take back his unfaithful people.
- Micah drew a word picture of a courtroom in which God was the prosecutor, the people of God were the defendants, and the mountains and hills were the witnesses. In Micah's story the people protested their innocence of the charges laid against them by pointing to the sacrifices they had made. Micah then made clear what God really wanted (6:8). *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*
- Habakkuk's prophecies took the form of a dialogue between himself and the Lord. He questioned the Lord's failure to punish the wickedness rampant in Judah. And when told that this would be punished by violence at the hands of the Babylonians, he wondered how it could be that God would use such a wicked nation to punish a people more righteous than themselves. Then, when God gave his assurance that Babylon's wickedness would be punished as well, and faithfulness would be rewarded, Habakkuk concluded by expressing his confidence and trust in the Lord.
- Jeremiah and Ezekiel both used a lot of symbolism to drive their messages home. Besides using common objects such as a useless belt and smashed jar, Jeremiah conveyed the coming loneliness and lack of comfort in store for God's people by his own failure to marry and have children and to grieve at funerals. But, as a sign of confidence that the Lord would restore his people after a long time of desolation, Jeremiah also brought a field in his hometown at a time when Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of Babylon was imminent.
- As for Ezekiel, he was called to lie on his left side for 390 days to represent the sin of the house of Israel and on his right side for 40 days to represent the sin of the house of Judah. And, in one of his other demonstrations, he was told to cook his food in a way that would represent the coming years that God's people would have to eat the defiled food of the nations to which they would be exiled.

The prophets thus tried to help the people recognize the enormity of their sin against Yahweh in order to encourage their repentance and return to wholehearted service. They let them know that God had to judge their sin but also offered the assurance that he would not reject them forever. But they also frequently offered specific advice about what to do in the particular difficulties they faced. Isaiah, eg, went to two kings of Judah to help them decide how to deal with the Assyrian threat in the face of God's call for them to trust him and keep their covenant with him. The first of these kings was Ahaz and the year was 735 BC.

Judah's closest neighbors, Syria and Israel had banded together to resist Assyria and they wanted Judah to join their coalition. Ahaz refused, with the result that Syria and Israel had invaded his country and attacked Jerusalem. So far, the attack had been unsuccessful, but Ahaz was so worried that Jerusalem would be overrun that he was thinking about asking Assyria for protection from his neighbors. Of course, as Ahaz knew, Assyria would not offer this help for nothing; they would require a lot of money as an incentive.

That's when God sent Isaiah to talk to him (Isa. 7). He told Ahaz that what he feared (the fall of Jerusalem) would not happen. He concluded: *"If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."* Despite this word of God to him (cf 2 Kings 16:7), Ahaz failed to trust God; he went ahead with his plan to ask Assyria for help. And along with that request he sent much silver and gold from both his palace and from the Lord's temple.

Afterwards, Assyria did come to the rescue by attacking both Syria and Israel and sending many of their people into captivity. That was the end to Israel as a nation. But Assyria didn't stop there. Eventually, it would turn on Judah and treat it as it had Judah's enemy neighbors. So, as it turned out, Ahaz robbed God's own temple and the wealth of his country to get temporary help from a nation that would become an even bigger enemy. Fortunately for Ahaz, this trouble did not come in his lifetime, but when his son Hezekiah was reigning over Judah.

And that brings us to the story of Isaiah's meeting with Hezekiah. Isaiah was 34 years older than he had been when God sent him to Ahaz. Judah was again surrounded by enemies. This time it was the so-called ally whom Ahaz had hired to fight against Syria and Israel. For some reason Assyria had now turned against Judah and conquered many of her cities, and now was threatening Jerusalem. Isa 36:2-5, 14-17

The Assyrian field commander met Hezekiah's representatives at the same spot Isaiah had met Ahaz years before. He spoke in Hebrew and loudly enough for the defenders on Jerusalem's walls to hear. He went on at some length saying that no one should listen to Hezekiah's promise that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem because Assyria was certainly strong enough to take the city.

The field commander must have had some familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures too because he promised that anyone who surrendered would *eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own — a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.*" Isa 36:16-17

His promise was intentionally very similar to God's promise that if his people would keep covenant with him he would make their land a place where every man could live at peace beneath his own vine and fig tree, at peace and unafraid, rather like the happy condition of God's people in the time of Solomon. *"All the people lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree .* 1 Kings 4:25

Hezekiah was just as afraid as his father Ahaz had been so many years before. But his fear did not drive him to distrust God; rather, it drove him to prayer. Unlike his father, Hezekiah believed Isaiah's message that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from Assyria. And God did; Scripture tells us that *The angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp... So Sennacherib king of Assyria... returned to Nineveh* (where he was assassinated by his own sons). Isa. 37:36-38

Scripture gives many more details, good and not so good, about Hezekiah's reign, but we move on to his son Manasseh, who was perhaps the most wicked king Judah ever had. He worshiped idols and even built altars to them in the Lord's own temple. He practiced sorcery and divination and sacrificed one of his own sons in a pagan ritual. In Manasseh's time, there was little to differentiate Judah from any of the surrounding nations who had not been set apart for service to the Lord. According to 2 Chron 33, Manasseh repented late in life and tried to undo some of his evil, but was only moderately successful in doing so.

Manasseh's grandson Josiah, on the other hand, was devoted to the Lord and did his best to undo the work of his grandfather. He tore down the pagan altars and had a covenant renewal ceremony in the temple. He outlawed or killed the pagan priests, mediums, and spiritists. Scripture records this verdict on him (2 Kings 23:-25-27): *Never before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses. Nevertheless, the Lord did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. So the Lord said, I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, "There shall my Name be."*

That's just what happened in 597 BC shortly after the death of Josiah's son Jehoiakim, whose reign was marked by oppression, dishonesty, violence, and the shedding of innocent blood. He even dared to put a prophet of the Lord to death. Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin followed his father as king, but only lasted three months, after which he and his mother were taken captive to Babylon, along with most of the other influential people and leaders. Nebuchadnezzar placed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah on the throne as his puppet king. But that only lasted until Zedekiah rebelled. Then Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and Judah, as a nation, was finished.

Thus it was that God's project—begun with Abraham—of a people dedicated to serving him in their own land, and being a light for the nations—God's project seems to have failed. Yet the book of Kings ends on a bit of a positive note. Because there is still a descendant of David left alive—Jehoiachin, who, 37 years after the exile was released from prison and allowed to eat at the table of Babylon's new king. Jehoiachin's release at least implies that God will continue to fulfill his promise to David (2 Sam 7:16): *"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."*