

Chapter 7  
"How Lonely Sits the City"  
Warfare and Destruction in the Southern Kingdom

Judah's life was to be longer. This southern kingdom, made up of the two small tribes of Judah and Benjamin, had borders that were quite constricted: the hill country stretching south from Jerusalem to the desert, an area of 100 by 40 miles at the very most. For 140 years this small country was the only focus of attention that we have in biblical history. Its history in those times was largely the history of four kings.

The first king of note was Hezekiah, who came to the throne in 715. He had succeeded his father Ahaz, who had ruled in Jerusalem during the time of the destruction of the Samaritans. Ahaz's policy had been a matter of trying to placate the Assyrians. When Hezekiah came to the throne following his father's death, matters changed in Judah: Hezekiah struck out for independence.

His declaration of independence centered around his reform of the Temple and its worship practices. Hezekiah removed from the Temple the pagan objects of worship that had been there for a long while and he closed down some of the pagan shrines in the small towns. He also stopped paying tribute to Assyria. The money mattered to the Assyrian king; the Assyrians had built their wealth on the tribute of conquered nations. But more importantly, they exacted tribute from their vassals as a sign of their superiority. For a nation to stop paying tribute to a conquerer was to assert independence from him.

This policy of Hezekiah's was not successful for long. Assyria moved to reassert itself over Judah and in 701 its ruling king, Sennacherib, attacked the area of Jerusalem. He captured forty-six of Judah's fortified cities, and he deported at least 2,150 persons into exile in the east. He shut Hezekiah and his troops up in the city of Jerusalem, "like a bird in a cage," he was to boast. Excavations have recently taken place in Lachish, one of the cities he decimated, and the bodies of over 1,500 soldiers were found dumped into a pit. In 688 Sennacherib again returned to Judah with his ferocious troops. Again Jerusalem was surrounded. But something unforeseen happened as the siege dragged on for a year and more: either a plague came, or a mutiny arose among the Assyrian troops, or word of rebellion at home reached Sennacherib in Judah. Whatever it was, he was forced to withdraw his armies and return home. Jerusalem was saved in a miraculous deliverance. Judah was to remember that; God had indeed by a miracle saved God's people from the enemy! The nation was jubilant, but its jubilation was

short-lived. Hezekiah died in the next year, and Judah itself had exactly one century of time left to it.

Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, was the next king of Judah. He began his rule in 687, and he ruled for over forty-five years. Whereas Hezekiah was remembered with favor, Manasseh always represented dishonor to the Jewish people. His father had fought for independence from Assyria; Manasseh reversed the policy and paid tribute all his life. Hezekiah reformed their religion; Manasseh went back to the religious practices of the pagan. The Book of Kings brands him as the worst king ever to sit on the throne of Judah and insists that his sin was so great that it could never be forgiven.

Manasseh was shortly followed by Josiah, who came to the throne in 640. He was a young boy at the time, only eight years old, but he was to grow into one of Judah's most unusual and successful kings.

Josiah's great aim in life was to restore his kingdom to the glories it had known under David and Solomon. This was his goal and was to become his obsession: he would give his energies to it, the resources of his nation, and, finally, his own life would be sacrificed for the accomplishing of this purpose.

Josiah began with a move to cleanse the Temple at Jerusalem of its foreign elements. We know what this meant. When one ancient nation took over another, the victor would place his own gods in the temple of the vanquished king. This was both a sign of the power of the sovereign kingdom and a center around which those of the vassal kingdom who acknowledged their power could worship. Josiah meant to erase all indications of Assyrian dominance from the Temple, and he further determined to cease paying tribute to Assyria. He set his workmen to returning the Temple to its original purpose of worshiping Yahweh. It was the clearest possible act he could perform to declare Judah's independence from Assyria.

While this rebuilding was taking place, a most important event occurred. The workmen discovered a book that had been hidden in the Temple. It was the book of the Law. The workmen brought the book to the priests who read it and brought it to the king. The king read it and realized that he and his people were not abiding by the precepts of the law. Josiah called all the people together and had the law read to them.

From that moment Josiah's reform was to grow in intensity. He destroyed all the shrines outside the city of Jerusalem, tore down their altars and drove out the priests. He brought the inherited wealth of these shrines to Jerusalem and forced the people to bring their tithes and offerings to the Jerusalem Temple; this increased the wealth of his nation by a considerable margin. This new source of income provided the money to rebuild his armies and fit them with chariots. With these armies he moved north out of Judah to purify the shrines of Bethel and Samaria, and he then extended his power all the way to Dan at the northern edge of Galilee. Religious reform was the basis of Josiah's policy. But this had resulted in fiscal reform, a change

in Judah's foreign policy, the rebuilding of Josiah's military might, and the assertion of the independence of his nation. The restoration and regeneration of Judah and indeed of the northern kingdom of Israel as well had been Josiah's goal, and it appeared to be close to realization.

It ended precipitously in 609. In that year the Egyptians marched north once more, and at the city of Megiddo Josiah and his army met them in battle. The armies of Judah were beaten, the king was killed, and Judah's bid for independence was ended.

On the northeastern pole of the Fertile Crescent, meanwhile, a number of important changes had taken place. The Assyrian kingdom of Sargon II, who ruled when Samaria was destroyed in 722 was itself tottering. After a century of dissension and decay, Ninevah, the ancient capital of the Assyrian empire, was placed under siege in 612 by Babylon and taken in three month's time. Two years later under Babylonian pressure, the last Assyrian army was destroyed, and the Assyrian empire disappeared in 610, now replaced on the eastern terminus by the renewed power of Babylon.

With the fall of Assyria, Egypt, who had allied herself with Assyria against the Medes and the Babylonians, had to go it alone, and tried to do so under Pharaoh Neco II. With dreams of world empire in his head, Neco made a treaty with Judah to join with Egypt against the Babylonians, but Babylonia set out on its own course of empire. Her armies moved relentlessly west along the old route of battle the Assyrians had followed many times. In 605 BC: Carchemish, another bloody battle in that city and the Egyptians were routed. In 604: Babylon in Philistia, moving up and down the coastal plain of Canaan. In 601: Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, at the very doors of Egypt itself. In 597: the attack on Judah. The Babylonians surrounded the city of Jerusalem and forced a surrender. In this year of 597, the king, his mother, and other high officials from the realm were deported to Babylon. The King's uncle, Zedekiah, was made ruler.

Zedekiah ruled for ten years, from 597 to 587, and he was the last king of Judah. These were turbulent years. Hopes for independence, promises of Egyptian support, yearning for national power, rumors of rebellions in Babylon played a part in the rebellious attitude of the people of Jerusalem. Finally, in the ninth year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month of that year, Babylon lost her patience with Judah. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar laid a siege to Jerusalem that lasted a year and a half. In August of 587 (586 depending on how you count it) a breach was made in the wall of Jerusalem. King Zedekiah and his court tried to escape to the east through the wilderness of Judah but were captured by Babylonian troops as they crossed the Jordan valley near Jericho. Zedekiah was taken to central Syria, to the headquarters of King Nebuchadnezzar. The punishment of Judah's king was severe. He had to witness his sons being slaughtered one by one. Then he was blinded, so that the last thing he ever saw on earth was the death of his sons. He was then led to Babylon in chains. He died soon after. Conquered Jerusalem was plundered by the victorious enemy. The city was set on fire, and on the seventh day of the fifth month, about a month after the breach in the wall, the royal palace and the Temple went up in flames. With the Temple went the ark, the ancient symbol of the worship of Yahweh. The

ruling classes were deported to Babylon. The city wall was pulled down so that Jerusalem could never rise again to challenge Babylon. Note the date, the next to fix firmly in mind: the destruction of Jerusalem.