

The Last Kings of Judah (Jeremiah 21:11 - 23:8)



A. Kingdom or Republic?

- 1) The difference between modern and ancient royalty is huge. Ancient royalty wasn't for fashion magazines and Sunday Telegraphs. In those days kings actually ruled over their people. Their word was the law. They personally led their army into battles, made national policies, and arbitrated court disputes. Also, kingship was hereditary. A king was not voted in and voted out every few years, but passed down the line within the family. Therefore, they carefully kept the records of the royal family line. Note that the genealogy of the house of David was meticulously preserved.
- 2) This poses certain risks for the 'kingdom'. This meant either a great blessing or a great problem for the people living in the kingdom. *Since power and prestige went automatically down the royal bloodline, the king's character was not always guaranteed.* That is why the kings of Israel and Judah are categorised into two groups: (i) They did 'evil' in the sight of God; (ii) They did 'good' in the sight of God. The character of the king would set the nation up for either blessing or curse. The bad kings only thought of their own status and privilege, but the good kings recognised that their kingship was a sacred duty under God's kingship.
- 3) Jeremiah now had the privilege of talking to King Zedekiah, a prophet from the humble village of Anathoth, but sent by God to the big city and even to the temple court to openly preach. Although Jeremiah's words were largely ignored, now for the first time he had the ear of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. They now knew Jeremiah was a true prophet. His words were coming to pass! Zedekiah sent two men, Pashhur and Zephaniah, to ask for the word of the Lord. Zedekiah asked Jeremiah, 'Is the city of Jerusalem lost?'

B. Jeremiah's Answer to the King was Three-fold:

- 1) **Answer** - *'No, the city will not survive.'* (21:3-7)
- 2) **Advice** - *'God is against this city to destroy it. So, surrender to Babylonians. That is the only way to survive.'* (21:8-10) Jeremiah's advice was taken as treason and he eventually ended up in prison. But Jeremiah went even further.
- 3) **Admonition** - With holy boldness Jeremiah said, *'Zedekiah, you must see to it that 'justice' and 'righteousness' are executed in the morning,' i.e. 'as early as you can.'* (22:1-9) King's highest duty was to administer justice in the land. He was the guardian of justice. God looked for two main qualities in a king, justice and righteousness. He must be 'fair' and 'straight'. When the people at the top are not fair and straight, then the whole nation becomes corrupt and collapses. And God has a deep concern for those who can't fight for themselves - the migrant, the poor, the homeless, the orphans, the widows.

Jeremiah tells the King, *'Zedekiah, you must make these 'forgotten people' the top priority in your policy, and see to it that they get their justice. That's why you are given the position of privilege.'* He emphasises the verb 'do' or 'execute'. God is not interested in how smooth and well-presented politicians are. He is interested in their *action*, what they do with power in their hands.

All kings need to know that God sits above them, and brings ultimate justice over the rulers who are given to injustice and corruption. *'I will be like an unquenchable forest fire that devours godless rulers given to injustice.'* (21:14) The uncontrollable 'bush fire' is a vivid picture of God's sudden judgment. The kings and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were easily lulled into a false sense of safety because Jerusalem was built on the top of a flat rock surrounded by valleys on three sides, easy to defend against the enemies (21:13).

Now God sends Jeremiah to speak to King Zedekiah directly.

'Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David...Thus says the LORD: Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor...stranger, fatherless, widow, etc.' (22:2-5)

God is intensely concerned with the issue of justice for the weak. Even now, if Zedekiah would speedily establish justice especially for the weak, then God would 'extend' Zedekiah's reign. If Zedekiah ignores this final warning, then God would abandon Jerusalem and destroy it, and people would ask, 'Why did God let this great city to fall?' 'Because they have forsaken their God.' (22:8-9)

This is the *real cause* behind all problems. Jeremiah's prophecy here dates inside of 8 years before the siege of Jerusalem. This was the very last appeal from Jeremiah to Zedekiah.

How did Zedekiah respond? Wrongly. Zedekiah means 'The Lord is My Righteousness.' Unfortunately, it was a name without substance.

C. Jeremiah reminds Zedekiah of the dreadful end of his predecessors.

This could be the collection of Jeremiah's earlier prophecies to the kings before the reign of Zedekiah. Two of them were his brothers and one was his nephew. Altogether five kings are named, beginning with Josiah who was the last good king of Judah.

Josiah had at least three sons. (i) Jehoiakim (Eliakim); (ii) Shallum (Jehoahaz); (iii) Zedekiah. Coniah (Jechoniah) was Jehoiakim's son.

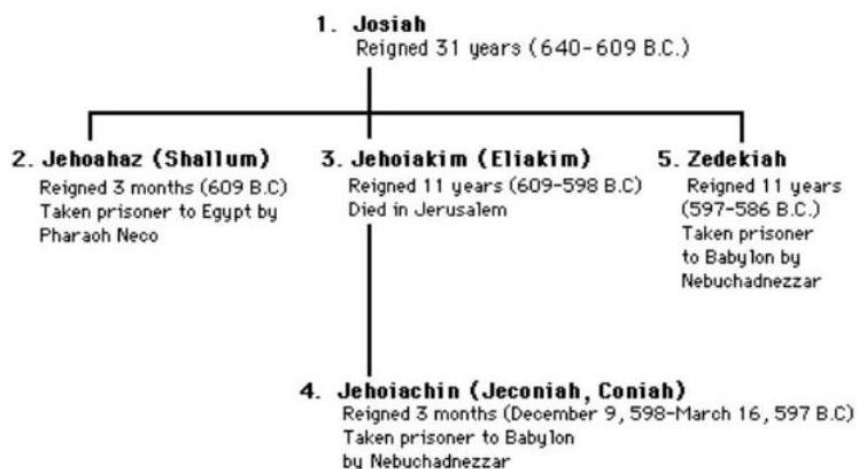
However, the actual order of succession broke the rules. (1) Josiah; (2) Jehoahaz (Shallum, 2nd son); (3) Jehoiakim (Eliakim, 1st son & rightful heir); (4) Jehoiachin (Jeconiah, son of Jehoiakim); (5) Zedekiah (3rd son).

Two of them, Jehoahaz (Shallum) and Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) cut in illegally. They were not the eldest or the nearest to the throne. So, God removed them within the first three months of their illegal reign.

Jeremiah reminds Zedekiah about the rise and demise of the last three kings before him.

- 1) Josiah was Zedekiah's grandfather, a good king who ascended to the throne at the age of eight. He reformed the nation. However, he made one fatal mistake when he entered an unnecessary battle. The threats to Israel always came from the south (Egypt) or the north (Syria). Syria's power was crumbling, and the king of Egypt, Neco II began marching north with his army. When he came to the famous cross-section called 'Megiddo' (Armageddon), the site of many famous battles in history, Josiah went down and attacked the Egyptian army. He did not want any Egyptian army there, and he was killed in the battle.
- 2) The next king in line should have been Jehoiakim, but the people didn't want him. So, they did a soft coup and elected Shallum (Jehoahaz). Perhaps he was a handsome young man. But God said he had no business being a king, and within three months he was taken to Egypt and he never came back. Jeremiah said, 'Do not weep for your father Josiah, but weep for yourself, Shallum, because you will never come back home. You will become the first exiled king from Judah, and you will finish your days as the prisoner of Egypt.' (22:10-12 c.f. 2 Kings 23:33ff; 2 Chr. 36:4)
- 3) Then the Egyptians put Jehoiakim the rightful heir on the throne, but with a condition to pay heavy taxes to Egypt (22:10-23). But Jehoiakim didn't want to be a puppet king, and in an effort to be a 'big man' he built the biggest palace in the Middle East (22:13-17), using forced labour and heavy taxation. It rivalled the palace of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh with cedar and vermilion (c.f. 2 Kings 23:35; 24:3). Jehoiachin didn't even pay proper wages to the workers. It was 'oppression' and 'injustice' (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14). Jeremiah said, 'Jehoiakim, you won't be buried like a man, but you will be collected like a donkey.' (22:18-19) He lived in a big palace, but he would not have a state funeral befitting a king (C.f. 2 Kings 24:6). Why did he come to this end? God says, 'Jehoiakim, when I prospered you, you didn't listen to Me.' (22:21-22) 'So the wind will eat up your rulers and you shall be humiliated.'

The Last Five Kings of Judah



Jehoiakim's prosperity would not last. He was bankrupt. The rich spiritual credit which he inherited from his father Josiah was now depleted (22:15-17). There would be no burial for Jehoiakim. Josephus wrote that Nebuchadnezzar had Jehoiakim's body thrown before the walls without any burial. (Antiquities 10:6:3)

- 4) Coniah (Jehoiachin) was chosen after Jehoiakim (22:24-30) even though Zedekiah was next in line. Coniah's mother was the powerbroker behind him. Coniah cleverly tried to align himself with Babylon, but God said, '*Coniah, even if you were the signet ring on My hand, I will throw you out.*' (22:24) 'You and your mother will be taken to a foreign land together to die there.' (22:25-27) Coniah was taken to Babylon after three months, and after 37 years in a foreign land he died as a homesick man.

Then there is the curse pronounced on Coniah that he will have no descendant of his to sit on the throne of David. Not one of Coniah's sons ever became a king. Zerubbabel was a governor, not a king. Coniah appears in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, which is the royal legal line traced through Joseph. But Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, therefore Jesus doesn't come from Coniah's bloodline. Luke's gospel shows Jesus' physical and biological line through Mary, which bypasses Coniah's line but traces Jesus' physical bloodline through another son of David with Bathsheba - Nathan. This is where Jesus inherited His human bloodline.

D. The Shepherd King who is Coming

Having given a long admonition to Zedekiah which wasn't heeded, in ch23 Jeremiah looks forward to the future when finally, God would raise up a good King in Israel. Jeremiah puts together the role of a 'king' and the role of a 'shepherd' into one (23:1-8). This was very unusual because the king was at the very top of the social ladder and the shepherd at the very bottom. It would normally be an offence to combine the two, but these two roles would become one in a good king one day, and Israel will enjoy enduring peace and prosperity. God likes 'shepherd kings' as we can see from David and even Moses. It is hard and thankless work to look after sheep in the field. God's kings are to have deep humility and intense regard for those at the bottom of the social ladder.

- 1) Jesus had the shepherd's heart. He had compassion for the people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus' birth was announced to the shepherds in the field and to the wisemen. God will Himself 'attend' ('judge', 23:2) to the shepherds who do not attend to the need of the sheep, and only enriching themselves.

Jeremiah gives a very clear prophecy of the Messiah here, the Good Shepherd under whom God will bring back all the remnants of the scattered sheep. A little shoot from David will rise up and this Shepherd King's name will be 'The Lord is our righteousness.' This name is almost the same as Zedekiah. But this shepherd will truly be a humble king who will be righteous, not in name only like Zedekiah. This is fulfilled in Jesus the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11).

Jeremiah finishes with a brilliant word of hope. Zedekiah will be cut down in a foreign land (21:7), but from the stump, a new tender shoot will grow (c.f. Isa 11:1), and God will begin His holy work with Israel all over again. They will be regathered from the 'north country' and from 'all the countries' (23:8). Israel shall be saved, and they shall dwell in their own land again.

- 2) What has all this got to do with us?

There is an unresolved contradiction (23:1-8). 'I will raise up shepherds (plural)' and 'I will raise up a king (Messiah)'. Does God mean one or many? Jesus called the twelve disciples, and He promised that they will sit on thrones and judge Israel. Paul said to believers, '*If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with him.*' The book of Revelation tells us that the faithful people of God will reign with Him as kings and priests.

By God's grace, we have become heirs to the heavenly throne. God's royal family will reign with Christ for 1000 years, just for a start (Rev 20:4). This life is a preparation to rule with Christ. What do the heirs to the throne have to learn? To live justly and righteously. We have to learn to reign over ourselves before we reign over others. This is precisely the message of the New Testament to the saints of God who are in training in this life to reign with Christ in eternity. Amen.