

“Survey of the Scriptures”

Session #4 – THE DECLINE OF THE HEBREW NATION

The second period of Hebrew history opened in splendor with the power and influence of Israel reaching far and wide. But the reign of Solomon, which began in the glory of God’s blessing, ended in spiritual darkness and was a foreshadowing of the future of the nation.

The monarchy of Saul, David and Solomon lasted little more than one hundred years, then the kingdom divided. The disputed northern throne of Israel was occupied by 19 kings before the land fell to Assyria. Descendants of David held the throne of Judah over a period of 345 years until the time of the Babylonian captivity.

The books of Kings and Chronicles relate to the rulers over God’s people – a story which begins in Jerusalem and ends in Babylon. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, included in this part of our survey, tell of the Jews who returned from captivity. In Esther we read of those who did not return.

This section of Hebrew history may also be divided into five parts as we study Solomon’s reign, the dividing of the kingdom, the Jews in captivity and their return from exile.

Solomon’s reign was outstanding for its building activities, for which logs of cedar and fir were brought from the Lebanon hills. Thousands of Canaanites and Phoenicians were employed in building the temple, Solomon’s palace, the Hall of Pillars and the Court of Justice in Jerusalem.

Solomon built up a vast trade empire. On the caravan routes he built store cities: Tadmor in the Syrian desert, Baalgad in the Lebanon valley, Gezer in the west. Ships for sea trade and smelters for copper were built at Eziongeber on the Red Sea.

From the spice kingdoms of Southern Arabia the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon at Jerusalem. Anxious to keep on friendly terms, she brought rich gifts for their trade talks. Recent archaeological discoveries indicate that Sheba was a rich and prosperous land, but its wealthy queen was overwhelmed by the splendor of Solomon’s court!

In I Kings 8 we read that God’s glory filled the temple Solomon built for the ark of the Lord. Yet within ten years he was building shrines for the pagan gods of neighboring peoples. Solomon’s heart was turned away from the one true God, and his reign ended in religious confusion and political unrest.

In a dramatic object lesson, the prophet Ahijah ripped a new cloak into twelve pieces and gave ten to a young warrior named Jeroboam. The kingdom would be split, the prophet said, the northern tribes choosing Jeroboam as their king, and Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, continuing as king of Judah and Benjamin.

Henceforth, the northern kingdom only was called Israel, and eventually its capital was established at Samaria. During Israel's 209 years, there were 9 dynasties and 19 kings – not one of whom was dedicated to serving the Lord Jehovah.

Jeroboam, the first king, set up golden calves at Dan and Bethel to take the place of Jerusalem as centers of worship. In the Bible record a brief descriptive sentence is usually linked with the name of Jeroboam: he was the “*man who made Israel to sin.*”

In spite of their idolatry and sin, the northern tribes were not left without a moral and spiritual witness – a prophet from God. First, there was Elijah, who stood up against Ahab and demonstrated God's power over the idolatrous systems of Baal. He was followed by Elisha, Amos and Hosea.

One of archaeology's most interesting treasures in the Black Obelisk. On it is portrayed Israel's tenth king, Jehu, prostrate before Shalmaneser, King of Assyria. The obelisk also pictures the rich tribute Jehu had brought as insurance against Assyrian invasion. For a time the cruel and greedy Assyrians were content with tribute.

“The Lord was gracious unto them and had compassion on them...because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...and would not destroy them, neither cast He them from His presence as yet.” Yes, God was patient even with the nation of Israel when they turned their backs on Him to serve idols. But at last the judgment fell.

First Shalmaneser, then Sargon II, waged war against Israel. Sargon recorded his deed on the walls of his palace in Assyria. *“I besieged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it.”* Former kings had exacted tribute; Sargon took the people themselves. The story is told in II Kings 17, together with a long sad record of the sins which brought about Israel's downfall.

The Assyrian king had an effective method of subduing conquered nations which he applied to Israel with great success. The Israelites were taken to other parts of the empire and captives from other conquered countries were brought to Samaria. In this way Sargon broke down nationalistic fervor which might lead to rebellion.

The beautiful city of Samaria in the heart of Israel and the rich country round about were occupied by aliens. The king of Assyria demanded that the new residents be instructed in Israel's religion, but they were never accepted by the people of Judah. We read in New Testament times the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans.

Much of the historical material given in Kings is repeated in Chronicles, believed to have been written by Ezra many years later. While the two books of Kings are occupied with kings and their thrones, the two books of Chronicles are written from a priestly viewpoint with details of the temple and its religious ceremonial.

In accordance with God's promise, David's dynasty was maintained, although the kings who ruled over the land of Judah for 345 years were good, bad and indifferent.

Outstanding among the good kings were the great reformers – Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah. Hezekiah was perhaps the greatest king of all and the prophet Isaiah was very influential during his reign. With God's help Jerusalem withstood the great armies of Assyria.

The strongly fortified city of Lachish, just south of Jerusalem, fell to Sennacherib during siege. According to the records of this Assyrian king, Hezekiah alone did not submit to Sennacherib's forces. God had promised that the invader would not come into Jerusalem because the Lord Himself would defend it.

Hezekiah's son Manasseh ascended the throne at the age of 12. His 55-year reign was filled with idolatry. In contrast was the good reign of young Josiah. The book of the law was found in the temple, idols were destroyed and there was a great revival. But for the most part, the revival was superficial and the people soon returned to idolatry.

Now the dark clouds began to gather over Judah. In the Mesopotamian Valley arose the great new empire of Babylon, crushing Assyria and reaching westward to the Great Sea. For years the prophet Jeremiah warned of coming judgment on Jerusalem. But the people thought this city would never fall to the enemy.

Nebuchadnezzar's invading armies took the best Judah had to offer: princes, soldiers and craftsmen, the gold and silver from the temple. The few Jews left under a puppet king tried to revolt but were soon put down. The history of this period is found in the closing chapters of both Chronicles and Kings and in Jeremiah 32 through 39.

God had warned that if His people turned from following Him to serve other gods they would lose their land. Now, Jerusalem was destroyed and Israel as a nation ceased to exist. The remnants which survived in captivity were chiefly from the southern kingdom of Judah, henceforth known as Jews.

The next period of history covers the time the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, and part of their story is to be found in the books of Esther, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. They entered into the civic and commercial life of the wealthy Chaldean nation but were never really assimilated.

When the first Jews were taken to Babylon, Jeremiah the prophet stayed in Jerusalem. He who warned them of judgment and suffering now wrote to encourage them: *"Thus saith the Lord...after seventy years...I will turn away your captivity and I will gather you from all nations."*

During their captivity, the Jews built synagogues in which they met to hear the reading of God's Word. Their religious life was strengthened rather than broken down. They

turned from idols and treasured the fragments of the law and writings which had been brought to this alien land.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return of the Jewish people from captivity. The power of Babylon was short-lived. Fifty years after Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus rose in power and swept out of Persia to take the Median and Babylonian empires.

The book of Ezra opens with Cyrus' proclamation read throughout his empire stating that all Jews in captivity were free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. About 539 B.C. the first contingent of 50,000 Jews began the 800-mile trek to their native land.

Under Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, the work of restoration commenced. First, the altar was rebuilt so that the Jewish form of worship could be revived. The first six chapters of Ezra describe the temple and the difficulties and delays encountered. The work was completed about 516 B.C.

Later Ezra returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to minister to the people and teach them in the ways of God. Ezra established synagogues both in the land of captivity and Judea. He was both priest (tracing his ancestry to Aaron) and scribe. With Malachi he is credited with gathering together the books of the Old Testament.

Nehemiah left the courts of Shushan in Persia to supervise the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. For twelve years, Nehemiah acted as governor, working without pay. Under his wise and unselfish leadership, there was a great spiritual revival, and through his book runs an undercurrent of joy.

While all this was happening in Judea, many Jews chose to remain in the lands of their captivity. Thousands were living in Persia, where events in the book of Esther occurred. Although the name of the Lord is not mentioned in the book, in His providence the Jews were wonderfully preserved. The events in Esther took place between the sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra.

Through the books of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, we have followed the Hebrew people from the time of splendor and power, through the dark valley of suffering and silence to the time when some returned to Jerusalem. They were never again as strong as in the time of David nor as rich and influential as in the time of Solomon, and seldom were they free. But they were God's chosen people through whom blessing would come to all mankind.

Even in the darkest pages of Hebrew history, there was always the light of God's promise. *"Yet the Lord would not destroy Judah for David His servant's sake, as He promised to give him always a light, and to his children."* The light was a symbol of the perpetuity of David's house.

At one time the light was almost extinguished when the wicked Queen Athaliah sought to kill all heirs to the throne. For six years little Joash – the sole descendant of David's line

– was hidden in the temple. When Joash was seven years old, the high priest brought him out and he sat upon the king’s throne.

At last, through this royal line and to the house of Judah came the “*light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel*” – Christ Himself, the Light of the World!

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