

## CHAPTER IX

JUDAH

Now let us go back to the year 922 B.C.E.. The ten tribes broke away from Rehoboam, tearing the kingdom of David and Solomon apart. Their defection left Judah with a territory scarcely a third as large as that of Israel. It extended from the north of Jerusalem down to the Negeb, westward to the border of the Philistines on the coastal plain of the Mediterranean, and eastward to the shores of the Salt Sea. Main roads led along the watershed of the Judean hills and from the coast eastward past Jerusalem, down the difficult slopes to Jericho, across the Jordan valley, then up and on toward the desert. As neither route was conducive to travel by large caravans Judah never had the rich international contacts which her Northern sister Israel enjoyed.

However this comparative isolation was one of the strengths of Judah. In addition she had in Jerusalem the temple. This was a popular religious and political rallying point (which Israel lacked entirely) and her people believed loyally in the God-ordained dynasty of David. These were the factors that would enable Judah to endure.

Nevertheless there was still religious confusion among the people. Followers of the God of David were a small minority. They were surrounded by neighbors who thought and talked continually of magic and of angry idols. The "high places," leveled areas on hills or in valleys with an altar and poles or upright stones ceremonially arranged, were used for the worship of Baalism and Jehovah alike. Beliefs and superstitions could not be changed overnight by official decree. Any destruction by royal orders of pagan altars would have left the people gripped in fear of disaster and of retaliation by neglected gods.

In the palace the hypnotic influence of court life weighed on Judah's kings. There was the straining of religious factions, the pressures of political intrigues, and the adoration of those who saw their king as the embodiment of their god. All these tested the most ardent of the loyal kings. Very few came through unscathed. So the history of the little kingdom seesaws up and down for three hundred and fifty years. However, beneath the turmoil the priests and the prophets were slowly making their way upward to clearer understanding of God.

Rehoboam, raised in his father's court among idols, succumbed entirely to the old, pagan forms of worship. Like his father Solomon he was an enthusiastic builder. He established an elaborate system of strongholds. He trusted in them for Judah's protection. Before he had reigned five years however he was confronted by the ambitious Pharaoh Shishak. He saw in the break up of David's kingdom the chance to regain Egyptian influence in the corridor to Mesopotamia. Sculptured reliefs on the temple walls of Karnak in Egypt speak of the carnage, pillaging and seizing of captives both in Judah and in Israel. Shishak carried away from Jerusalem the rich gold and silver treasures of Solomon's temple and palace. He left Rehoboam to replace them as best he could with brass. However the distraught people of Judah saw only misfortune, not chastisement. They did not turn back to the protecting ways of David. Instead they drifted on in their muddled attempt to pacify all the gods.

### ASA

In the reign of Abijah's son Asa the fortunes of Judah swung upward. He came to the throne determined to bring back the pure worship of David's God. He removed the Baal altars from the cities and drove out the male prostitutes. He broke down the Asherah groves and even deposed the queen mother, his own grandmother, because she had set up an abominable image of the fertility goddess. He ordered it to be broken and dumped into the valley of the Kidron outside the city. He brought an end to the fighting with the ten tribes. This enabled his people in the bordering villages to enjoy a security unknown for years.

Asa wisely used those peaceful years to strengthen his fortified cities and build others. But he was not depending primarily on military might. When Zerah the Ethiopian attempted the subjugation of Judah with a host of "a thousand thousand,"

Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, it is nothing with thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on thee, and in thy name we go against this multitude .... So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa, and before Judah; and the Ethiopians fled.  
(2 Chronicles 14:11, 12)

Back again in Jerusalem the people held a great celebration and rededication:

And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and with all their soul; That whosoever would not seek the Lord God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman. And they swore unto the Lord with a loud voice, and with shouting, and with trumpets, and with cornets. (2 Chronicles 15:12-14)

To the Chronicler (author of Chronicles I and II in the Bible), writing long after these events, "Israel" remained always the full twelve tribes. He never recognized the ten as any but temporary rebels, and to him the Lord is always the God of all Israel.

During those prosperous years there was a growing influx into Judah. Many Israelites left their homes to be with the happier people of the Southern kingdom. To prevent this exodus Baasha, king of Israel, built a fort at Ramah blocking the main road south to Jerusalem.

Had success dulled Asa's clear insight? Rather than rest on his proven knowledge of God's care he grew fearful of attack. He gathered the treasures of the temple and the palace and sent them to the formidable king of Syria, Benhadad. He begged that he break his treaty with Baasha and attack Israel from the north. The ruse worked. Benhadad attacked. To protect his realm Baasha hurriedly left Ramah from which the people of Judah, conscripted for the purpose, quickly removed all the building materials. When

Hanani the seer reproved Asa for depending on Syria instead of on the Lord he was thrown into prison.

And Asa ...was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians. And Asa slept with his fathers, and died in the one and fortieth year of his reign. (2 Chronicles 16:12, 13)

### JEHOSHAPHAT

In spite of Asa's backsliding the upward swing continued in Judah under his son Jehoshaphat. He brought to the throne a clear and scholarly analysis of his country's needs. He sent well qualified Levites throughout the countryside to teach the people and instructed the chieftains to assist in this mass education. He also revamped the judicial system, warning the judges:

...Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment ...for there is no iniquity in the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts. (2 Chronicles 19:6, 7)

Through his wisdom and ability Jehoshaphat gained the respect of the neighboring nations. They sent him gifts and messages of goodwill. There was peace with Israel and all seemed well.

Suddenly, scarcely fifty kilometers from the Holy City, scouts discovered a huge mixed army of Moabites, Ammonites and other traditional enemies already poised for an attack on Jerusalem! At the shock of this disclosure Jehoshaphat sent messengers to proclaim fasting throughout the land. The people hurried to Jerusalem to ask help of the Lord. As Jehoshaphat stood, praying before the congregation, the word of the Lord came to a certain Levite:

...Thus saith the Lord unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's. Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem:... (2 Chronicles 20:15, 17)

Jehoshaphat appointed trained singers to go out before the army, praising the beauty of holiness; and as they went out early in the morning, he stood and called to them:

...Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper. (2 Chronicles 20:20)

Like a religious procession Judah marched out to meet her foe. When her sentinels looked out toward the enemy camp the great army lay dead on the ground! Dissension had broken out among the mixed multitude. They had battled with one another to the death. Judah did not need to fight.

Jehoshaphat, in his wisdom, did much for his beloved Judah. Yet it was he who in strange folly nearly brought about her destruction.

Ahab, with his Baal-worshipping Jezebel, was ruler in the Northern kingdom at that time. Jehoshaphat not only kept peace with him but seemed strangely drawn to him. On one occasion he agreed to join forces with Israel against the Syrians at Ramoth-Gilead, a cause which had nothing to do with Judah's affairs. The tricky Ahab suggested that Jehoshaphat wear his royal robes into battle, but he himself went in disguise. The Syrian warriors had instructions to seek out the king of Israel. They naturally converged on the one who was royally attired. God rescued Jehoshaphat from this tight situation. On his return to Jerusalem a seer upbraided him,

Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the  
Lord? (2 Chronicles 19:2)

Later Jehoshaphat joined again with Israel. This time to build ships at Elath on the Gulf of Aqaba for a great commercial venture. The enterprise was totally unblessed. The storm-battered ships sank in the harbor.

Jehoshaphat chose the Israelite princess Athalia, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, as wife to his son Jehoram. This brought Judah lower than she had ever been before.

Athalia was as self-willed and vicious as her mother Jezebel. She brought into the Holy City the Baals and Asherahs of Tyre and Sidon with her own army of priests, and her mother's contempt for the common man. When Jehoram became king he bent to her will. He murdered all his brothers so there would be no rivals. Senseless cruelty and immorality became the royal way of life. The enlightened, progressive work of decades were swept away.

Edomites revolted in the South and set up their own king. This stripped from helpless Judah her mineral wealth and the strategic port of Elath. Then the Philistines, joined by Arabians, plundered Jerusalem. They carried off not only the temple treasures but the royal wives and children also, save Athalia and one of her sons, Jehoahaz. After eight years Jehoram died. Judah buried him without regret and this son became king.

Ahaziah was a mere puppet in his mother's hands. He was the king of Judah who was visiting his cousin when Jehu killed them both in an anti-Baalist bloodbath.

The Judah of Asa and Jehoshaphat lay in the dust.

## JOASH

Ahaziah's death gave Athalia her dearest wish. She immediately ordered the murder of every heir to David's throne and announced herself ruler over the stunned kingdom of Judah.

However the victory was not hers. In the midst of the slaughter of the princes a quick-thinking priestess grabbed a baby from among the king's sons. She hid him in an unused bedroom and later in the temple. For six years, in the inner rooms of the house of the Lord, Joash, son of Ahaziah, was surreptitiously raised and trained by Jehoiada the high priest. Joash was seven years old when Jehoiada called certain carefully chosen officials together. He solemnly swore them to secrecy and showed them the heir to David's throne. On a Sabbath, under heavy guard and in strict ritual conformance, young Joash was joyfully crowned king of Judah. Hearing the trumpets, the singing, the people running in the streets shouting, "God save the king!" Athalia hurried to the scene. She was quietly put to death outside the temple. Through alertness, loyalty and daring, the house of David returned to Jerusalem.

To Joash the priests had already delivered the "testimony," the constitution of the monarchy. Now Jehoiada made a threefold covenant between the Lord, the king and the people. The altars of Baal were destroyed and Joash was conducted in triumph to the palace.

As long as Jehoiada lived Joash "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord." Chief among his accomplishments was the repairing of the neglected temple. Gifts from happy worshippers, cast into a chest beside the altar, provided more than adequate funds. Such was the goodwill and faithfulness of the workers that no accounting was called for.

Unfortunately, at the death of the venerable priest the picture changed. Fourteen years of militant paganism had taken their toll among the younger generation. Joash was soon persuaded by the young princes to turn to the more colorful and self-indulgent "freedom" of Baal worship. The sense of well-being in the kingdom vanished. When Zechariah dared to object, the king commanded he be stoned to death in the court of the house of the Lord.

Retribution came quickly. At the turn of that year a small band of Syrians came plundering through Judah to Jerusalem and Joash, severely wounded, and delivered to them the treasures of the temple. He was later murdered by his own servants in retaliation for the death of Zechariah. Nevertheless, the house of David was secure.

### AMAZIAH

Again Judah seemed to be on the upward way. When Amaziah, son of Joash, put his father's murderers to death,

...he slew not their children, but did as it is written in the law in the book of Moses, where the Lord commanded, saying, The fathers shall not die for the children, neither shall the children die for the fathers, but every man shall die for his own sin.  
(2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4)

The light of the mercy of God was at last dawning in Judah!

With God's recognized help Amaziah conducted a very successful campaign in Edom. However, unaccountably, he brought back to Jerusalem some of the conquered peoples' gods. He set them up as his own, burned incense and bowed face to the ground before them. Why bow down to defeated gods? When a prophet pointed out the fallacy, the king coldly warned him to hold his peace. Then, as though driven to self-destruction, he challenged the strong King Joash of Israel to war, because of certain depredations by Israelite soldiers. Joash replied condescendingly with the sort of nature parable that is always relished in the Near East:

The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, Give thy daughter to my son to wife: and there passed by a wild beast that was in Lebanon, and trod down the thistle.  
(2 Kings 14:9, 2 Chronicles 25:1, 8)

Then he added, not unkindly,

Thou hast indeed smitten Edom, and thine heart hath lifted thee up: glory of this, and tarry at home: for why shouldest thou meddle to thy hurt, that thou shouldest fall, even thou, and Judah with thee? (2 Kings 14:10)

But Amaziah would not listen. Joash finally marched to Beth-shemesh in Judah. He inflicted a crushing defeat and brought Amaziah captive back to Jerusalem. There he took down nearly two hundred meters of the city wall before leaving for Samaria with hostages and all the temple and palace treasures. Amaziah never recovered from the loss of face before his subjects. He was eventually slain by conspirators.

Once more pride had destroyed a king.

### UZZIAH

Though the people of Judah were angered at times to the point of murdering their ruler, they always looked for a direct descendant of their beloved King David as successor. Uzziah, sometimes called Azariah, was sixteen years old when he was chosen by the people to be king over Judah.

In him Judah had a ruler whose immense vigor was tempered by his sincere desire to "do right in the sight of the Lord." His long, careful reign brought prosperity and respect back to his people. His soldiers had the best of equipment with coats of mail, helmets and shields provided by the king. They were expert not only with the usual weapons, spears, bows and slings, but with the more sophisticated battering rams and ingenious (and mysterious) "engines ...to be on the towers and on the bulwarks, to shoot arrows and great stones withal."

With this efficient army, and with the acknowledged help of the Lord, Uzziah restored to Judah and rebuilt the valuable port of Elath and erected forts for the protection of the Negeb. He defeated and exacted tribute from the Philistine cities, establishing cities of his own in their territory. He developed and expanded agricultural facilities throughout Judah, digging wells and building cisterns, for he had a deep love of the land.

Yet after years of such illustrious accomplishments, he too succumbed to pride and arrogance.

Perhaps he felt that his successes had proved his special closeness to the Lord. One day, asking permission from no one, he went into the temple alone to burn incense on the holy altar. The temple staff jealously guarded the sanctity of the temple and the priestly office. To the priests God now seemed too holy, too far above man to be approached even by their king. Only they were the sanctified intermediaries! When Uzziah was seen entering the temple eighty priests rushed pell-mell after him. Their chief ordered his king to leave. Uzziah turned upon them furiously. As he raged leprosy broke out on his forehead. The uncleanness of leprosy in the temple! The scandalized priests hurried him out and he, unnerved, was eager to leave.

A leper for the rest of his life, he lived humbly in a house apart from the palace. His son Jotham served as his regent, carrying on in his father's footsteps after Uzziah's death.

### MICAH AND ISAIAH

It was in the days of Uzziah that the first "writing prophets" appeared, Amos and Hosea in the Northern kingdom and in Judah, Micah and Isaiah.

In the Southern kingdom idolatry and social injustice never gained quite as firm a foothold as in the North. Judah never had the exciting, disruptive international commerce.

She had the buffer state of Israel between her and those more sophisticated pagan governments of Syria and Assyria. Above all she had the steadying twin influence of the temple and the divinely ordained house of David. Nevertheless her rulers, like wealthy classes everywhere, tended to interest themselves in gathering more wealth, power, elegant trinkets, and to tread upon the poor as they reached for their goals.

Micah, coming from a small town, cried out on behalf of the distressed peasantry:

They covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps,... (Micah 2:2; 3:10-12)

The aristocrats blindly amused themselves, confident that their unthinking offerings to a stylized God would protect them. Micah saw the dark clouds of empire-building gathering and advancing from the North. He was desperately aware that only true, heartfelt worship could claim the protection of the God of Israel.

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:7, 8)

Like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, Micah saw that the basic value of Judah's life in service of the true God, which only she knew, could not die. Growth must continue.

"The year that king Uzziah died" (740 B.C.E.) was a time of fear and political turmoil throughout the Near East. Under Tiglath-pileser III Assyria was expanding into the greatest empire the world had ever known. It was in this year that the young Isaiah, living among the aristocracy of Jerusalem, received in a vision a call to prophesy to his people. From the beginning he realized that Judah would not escape the pressures of Assyria. Why should Judah's God permit his people to be oppressed? The answer was the final, logical step out of the belief in a tribunal God. If the God of Israel was all-powerful, the only God, then all other nations belonged to him too.

...the Lord shall hiss (whistle) for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, (a cruelly biting fly), and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. (Isaiah 7:18)

The stinging armies of those other nations were to be used as goads to bring God's chosen, straying people back to true faith and worship. At their hands the worldly, self-satisfied rulers in Jerusalem must be purged, winnowed as they had never been before. But a remnant would return (repent). Then would come the culmination of Judah's being:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, the prince of Peace. And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 9:6; 11:1, 2, 9)

This was the banner of hope which Isaiah held high through nearly sixty years of service to his countrymen. While he heaped them with scorn, with anger, with earnest pleas for reform, he never let them forget their ultimate bright destiny and the fact of God's merciful, comforting ever-presence. If only he could make them understand the simple life of integrity, righteousness and fellowship that would open the way to safety and prosperity!

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. (Isaiah 1:16, 17; 26:3)

Though Micah and Isaiah would have tremendous influence in later years they failed to turn the tide of careless self-indulgence in their time.

### AHAZ

The chariots and horsemen of Assyria moved down the fertile crescent. King Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Syria formed a coalition. But when Abaz of Judah refused to join them they swept with both their armies into Judah. They intended to place a puppet king of their own in Jerusalem. The terror engendered by this attack is described by Isaiah:

...And his (Ahaz') heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind. (Isaiah 7:2)

Isaiah hurried to bolster the king's trust in the Lord. But Ahaz had never really believed in Judah's God. Isaiah begged him to:

Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth,  
or in the height above. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will  
I tempt (test) the Lord. (Isaiah 7:11, 12)

Then Isaiah replied, the Lord himself shall give a sign: a virgin (or a young woman) (Isaiah 7:14) shall bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel (God with us). Before the child is old enough to know good from bad both the kings will be removed. Isaiah spoke also of his own small son. Before the infant can say "My father" and "My mother" the riches of Syria and of Israel will have been carried away by Assyria.

Disregarding Isaiah's awful warnings Ahaz gathered great stores of treasures from the temple and the palace. He sent gold, silver, jewels and exquisite objects of art to Tiglath-pileser. He begged him to attack Pekah and Rezin who were hammering at Jerusalem's gates.

The Assyrian King, probably already poised for just such a campaign, quickly moved in. He killed Rezin, crushed the Philistines, and arranged the death of Pekah. All their territories, including that which they had just wrested from Judah, were annexed. Then he summoned Ahaz to him in Damascus to do formal obeisance as a vassal of Assyria. On his return Ahaz ordered a new altar set up in Solomon's temple so that he could worship the god of his overlord.

The devotees of ritual in Jerusalem were forced to accept change for their sacred altar. Still used for the people's sacrifices, it was moved to one side to make way for the new one. The imposing bronze bowl that had rested so majestically upon the twelve bronze oxen in the temple court now lay on a pavement of stones, for the oxen had been sent to Assyria. In the forlorn temple some of the great doors were permanently shut. For lack of fine oil, the flames of the golden lamps went out.

### HEZEKIAH

The people of Judah, proud and independent by nature, were humbled and heavily taxed. They watched their traditional treasures being drained away into Assyria. When Ahaz died and his God-fearing son Hezekiah called for reform the movement was instantly popular.

First came the cleansing of the temple. The priests gathered every unclean thing, every article associated with idols. They carried them out of the city to throw down into the ravine of the brook Kidron. Even the brazen serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness was broken up, for the people had burned incense to it. The doors were reopened. The lamps were relit with oil that was gladly contributed. With the sounds of

the priests' trumpets the sacred atonement offerings began. The musical ritual of David was followed as closely as they knew. The Levites played stringed instruments and cymbals, and choruses praised the Lord in the words of David while the congregation bowed down in worship. Then King Hezekiah sent letters and messengers from Beersheba to Dan inviting all the people to come to a great Passover celebration.

Thousands streamed into Jerusalem, many from Samaria, for a celebration rivaling even those of Solomon. Afterwards, in high religious fervor, the people spilled out into the countryside to throw down the Baals and Asherahs in all the high places.

Isaiah, watching sadly, saw only the excitement of mob action, not the thoughtfulness of consecration. He reports a message from the Lord:

...this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:...  
(Isaiah 29:13)

### THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM

During this time Assyria had been too occupied with distant campaigns to take notice of little Judah. Hezekiah was dreadfully aware of the fate of the Northern kingdom. Its capital had been scarcely sixty kilometers from his own. He strengthened the fortifications and developed the water supplies of his cities. For a distance of over five hundred and twenty meters he tunneled through the rock beneath Jerusalem (the tunnel is still there.) This send the waters of the Gihon spring into the pool of Siloam inside the city walls.

Egypt had regained prosperity. She dreamed of conquest in Mesopotamia and now offered to help the states of the Palestinian corridor. Rebellion against the cruelty of Assyria was encouraged. Isaiah warned earnestly against alliance with Egypt:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay (rely) on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord! (Isaiah 31:1)

Nevertheless Judah looked with some hope toward the South. In 701 B.C.E. Sennacherib of Assyria swept down the Mediterranean coast to impose his unquestionable authority. Biblos, Ashdod, Moab and Edom surrendered and paid tribute. An Egyptian army marching north was soundly defeated at Eltekeh. This ended all hope of help from that source. Hezekiah sent messages of surrender and heavy tribute to Sennacherib at Lachish. The Assyrian's own records claim that he conquered forty-six walled cities in Judah. He left Hezekiah shut up in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage."

Bible students believe that two campaigns have been telescoped into one in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings' chapters 18 and 19. If so, it was some fifteen years later that Assyria again came storming down the coast among her ever-rebellious vassals. Again the unfortunate cities of Judah were sacked and Sennacherib sent his officers to demand the surrender of Jerusalem. Standing close to the wall they shouted in Hebrew so that the citizens on the wall might understand and tremble:

Let not Hezekiah deceive you: Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord, saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city shall not be delivered unto the hand of the king of Assyria. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered at all his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? (2 Kings 18:29, 30, 33)

A letter along the same lines was delivered to Hezekiah. It shadowed with doubt the light of faith he had so earnestly sought to bring to his people. He took it into the temple and spread it before the Lord.

And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said, O Lord God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, thou are the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth. Now therefore, O Lord our God, I beseech thee, save thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the Lord God, even thou only. (2 Kings 19:15, 19)

Arrogant conqueror that he was, Sennacherib's outlook was pagan. In his ignorance he had gone too far. He had challenged not the mythical god of a superstitious people but the Creator of all the earth. To Isaiah there came the calm sureness of the emptiness of such defiance. He sent word to Hezekiah:

This is the word that the Lord hath spoken concerning him; The virgin the daughter of Zion hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? ...the Holy One of Israel. (2 Kings 19:21, 22)

That night a mysterious scourge fell on the Assyrian army. Some legends claim it was the plague, some say mice gnawed the bow strings. Sennacherib, unable to continue the campaign, withdrew to Nineveh where he was soon murdered by his sons.

The courage and firm faith of Isaiah and Hezekiah had tapped the power of the Creator in a never to be forgotten test. Be still and know that I am God:

I will be exalted among the heathen; I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalms 46:10)

So sang the psalmist in a hymn generally attributed to that wonderful occasion. Unfortunately, to the less consecrated citizens, that night's events proved only that no harm could come to Zion. They rested in the assurance that the Lord would preserve Jerusalem under any circumstances.

Hezekiah died soon after that miraculous deliverance. Although he left a diminished kingdom and though the flattery of Babylonian diplomats beguiled him briefly into worldly pride, he is counted as one of the great kings of Judah.

### MANASSEH

Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, had neither faith nor heart for the brinkmanship of convictions. He promptly surrendered to Assyria. He brought into Jerusalem a host of strange idols, bands of magicians and worshippers of the heavenly bodies. In the sorely harassed countryside bewildered peasants hastened to rebuild the high places and reinstate the old pagan rituals. They probably did so in the name of Jehovah. The dimming memory of the God of David was scarcely separable now from the more immediate local gods.

In vain the prophets warned of the consequences of such apostasy:

Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle...and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.  
(2 Kings 21:12, 13)

Manasseh filled the streets of Jerusalem with blood. The voices of the prophets were stilled. The venerable Isaiah who had been an important figure in the courts of four kings drops from sight. The tradition that he died at Manasseh's hands may be unfounded.

For half a century Manasseh governed Judah. To the author of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings his reign was abominable. But the Chronicler (33:11) tells us that he was taken captive to Assyrian Babylon. There he humbled himself before the God of his fathers and then returned to cast out the false gods from Jerusalem.

It is apparent that wise men gathered secretly to study the nature and will of Israel's God. Patriots, priests and thoughtful citizens became bold enough to assert themselves. The pendulum of religious progress swung up again in Judah.

### REPETITION OF THE LAW

Manasseh's pagan son Amon was slain by conspirators soon after his father's death. The murderers were put to death. Josiah, the last noteworthy king of Judah, began his reign in 640 B.C.E.

It was a time of radical national and cultural upheaval throughout the Near East. Gone were the days when small, long established kingdoms nagged at one another for supremacy. Mighty empires were slowly building up. They swallowed their smaller neighbors and eventually engulfed one another. In the resultant fear and uncertainty national leaders cast their thoughts back to the shores of the past. Egyptian scholars turned to the study of the Pyramid Age and Ashurbanipal of Assyria gathered in Nineveh his invaluable library of ancient Mesopotamian knowledge. Quite naturally young king Josiah of Judah turned for guidance back to the days of David. In the thirteenth year of his reign he was joined by one of Judah's staunchest guardians of her faith, Jeremiah the Benjaminite.

Jeremiah was a young lad when he was called. He tells us in his memoirs that he objected:

Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.  
(Jeremiah 1:68,10)

Time and again in the years to come Jeremiah would bewail his fate. Sometimes he even complained to God himself for having cast him into such a lonely, beleaguered role. Yet he confessed,

But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.  
(Jeremiah 20:9)

Into Josiah's court he came, proclaiming in words well understood in this arid country:

Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:12, 13)

During the next forty years, in spite of discouragement, insults, beatings and imprisonment, the mighty prophet Jeremiah would be found warning, exhorting, guiding and above all teaching his people to rely not on temple ritual but on an individual sense of responsibility.

Josiah, studying the works of David, set about cleansing the idols from Jerusalem. He abolished the high places as Hezekiah had tried to do a hundred years before. One day, when repairs were being made in the temple, Shaphan the scribe went to pay the workmen. The high priest put into his hand a scroll found in the temple. The secret work of the priests during Manasseh's reign had come to light!

By custom it was written as though by the authority of Moses. This brought to remembrance the radical loyalty to the Lord God which the wilderness days had required, before the temple-oriented royal religion of David and Solomon. It is known to Bible students as the "D" document. It is the core, though not in its present form, of our book of Deuteronomy. The name means Second telling of the Law.

There were the Ten Commandments, basic laws of harmony in human affairs, and the recitation of God's loving care in the desert wanderings. There were the almost forgotten laws of morality, of justice to the fatherless, the widow and the stranger, and the community laws of the early settlement of the land. There was that law which would be proclaimed to be the greatest of them all:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5)

How far Judah had drifted from the stern covenant of the children of Israel with their God! Josiah tore his garments in distress and sent the scroll by a delegation of priests and scribes to Hulda the prophetess. She confirmed that the work was genuine. Then he called together all the elders of the people and read the book to them.

Josiah and Jeremiah caused the covenant to be renewed before the Lord. With frightened vigor, hoping that they might still avert the destruction and curse which the covenant so explicitly threatened for disobedience, the people took up the task of casting out the foreign modes of worship and of restoring the old ways. The revival reached even into the former Northern kingdom. At long last the offensive calf shrine, which Jeroboam had set up nearly three hundred years before, was torn down. The bones of its prophets were burned on the altar as the ultimate desecration.

In Jerusalem the temple was cleansed. Josiah ordered a tremendous celebration of the Passover. He contributed thousands of sacrificial animals. Other wealthy men followed his example. The aroma of incense pervading the narrow city streets. This was overlaid with delicious odors of boiling and roasting meat.

Jeremiah watched the festivities with a sinking heart. As so often before the inspired, clear-sighted rules of right conduct which had come to light in the book of the law had fallen unnoticed in the excitement of self-righteous business about the temple.

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these. But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth:... (Jeremiah 7:3, 4; 9:24)

As Amos and Hosea had realized in the northern country a century earlier, so Jeremiah saw that Judah too was hastening to her destruction and he concluded sadly:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?  
then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.  
(Jeremiah 13:23)

Passionately Jeremiah warned all who would listen of the desperate need for true, personal repentance. Then, faced with angry threats from the self-confident priests, he wrote down his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem. He had friends witness it and then laid the writing aside.

For nearly twenty years Judah enjoyed freedom from foreign interference. Assyria was busy fighting for her life against the insurgent Medes and Babylonians. Down in Egypt the Pharaoh Neco recognized that a weakened Assyrian buffer state would be far more advantageous to his own country than the formidable Babylonian empire that was coming into being. So almost overnight the traditional enemies, Egypt and Assyria, became allies.

In the year 609 B.C.E., with the principal Assyrian city, Nineveh, already lying in ruins (as the prophet Nahum had predicted) Neco hurried northward to come to aid of his new ally. Josiah felt impelled to prevent him, siding with Babylon. Egyptian ambassadors warned him to stay out of the way because Neco was under command of God. The expedition in no way menaced Judah. Nevertheless Josiah went out to withstand him in the plain of Megiddo and was slain. Judah became a vassal of Egypt.

Josiah's death brought deep disappointment and confusion,. It was the beginning of the end for Judah. His son Jehoahaz had reigned only three months when Neco returned from his unsuccessful attempt to save Assyria. He sent Judah's young king in chains to Egypt. The king's brother Eliakim was placed on Judah's throne, demanding heavy tribute.

### JEREMIAH CARRIES ON

The reform that had been Josiah's life work faded quickly. Jehoiakim was a man of small stature and no convictions, bent only on self-gratification. The priests of the old high places pointed to the failure of Josiah's God to protect him. They soon restored themselves to power.

Only Jeremiah remained to raise the unpopular voice of warning. For his steadfast denial of the priests' favorite theme, the invincibility of David's city, he was forbidden to enter the temple. Determined to make himself heard he sent his faithful secretary, Baruch, to the temple. Baruch had with a collection of his discourses to read them to anyone who would listen. His messages of earnest exhortation came eventually to the ears of certain straight thinking men who respectfully borrowed the scroll and took it to King Jehoiakim.

The king was sitting in his winter palace, a fire burning nearby. He listened languidly as they read Jeremiah's foresighted imploring for true reform. Then, as each section was finished, he hacked it off with his knife and tossed it into the flames. When Baruch returned empty-handed Jeremiah dictated the discourses again and put the roll away. This roll is probably the basis of our present book bearing his name.

Jeremiah, like Hosea, depended on the wagging of tongues to disseminate his wisdom. On divine inspiration, he bought an earthenware jug and shattered it before a group of citizens, explaining:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that if cannot be made whole again:... (Jeremiah 19:11)

For this offense against the dignity of the city he was beaten and put in the stocks for a night.

As it had been clear to Hosea so it was to Jeremiah that the continuing unveiling of the character of God could not be stopped. The only people on earth who could carry on the work were those whose best efforts, for a thousand years, had been along that line. Though changed in form, Israel must endure. Jeremiah went to a potter's shop and watched while the wet clay was shaped, corrected and reshaped by the artist's skilled hands. As he stood there, the word of the Lord came to him:

O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. (Jeremiah 18:6)

Like other prophets Jeremiah also perceived the loving-kindness of God and the consequent brightness of the future:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them:... (Jeremiah 31:31, 34)

### THREE MINOR PROPHETS

Jeremiah was not alone in his distress over Jerusalem's sin-induced weakness. His clear insight was shared by a prophet of whom we know neither ancestry nor home. However from his interest in music we surmise that he was a temple singer. Habakkuk foresaw the inevitable southward push of the Chaldeans. It was "that bitter and hasty nation" whose "horses were swifter than leopards and more fierce than the evening wolves." Was the God of Israel helpless? Could there be any power beside him? Habakkuk was firmly confident of the omnipotence of Israel's God.

Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One?  
We shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment;  
and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction.  
Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity:... (Habakkuk 1:12,13)

When their mission as a scourge for Israel had been accomplished, the Chaldean nation was destined for destruction. Their own pride and cruelty guaranteed their downfall

...the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14)

Within the span of a few years Habakkuk was joined by two other minor prophets, Zephaniah and Nahum. The former prophet wrote,

The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly,  
even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry  
there bitterly. And I will bring distress upon man that they shall  
walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord:...  
(Zephaniah 1:14,17)

Even this devastation is to be survived by a nucleus of the Lord's people:

Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with  
all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord thy God in the  
midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with  
joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.  
(Zephaniah 3:14,17)

Nahum the Elkoshite used the intricacies of an elaborate alphabetical form and a pen dipped in anger. His message foretells the inevitable destruction of Nineveh of Assyria, which had for so long oppressed the Lord's people. Only a few verses shine with reassurance to Judah:

Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off. (Nahum 1:15)

### THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

While these prophets sounded their earnest warnings military pressure continued to build up north and east of Palestine. The distant Egyptian outpost at Carchemish on the upper Euphrates fell to the growing strength of Babylon. The small states of Palestine, Judah included, were forced to transfer their tribute and their loyalty to the Mesopotamian empire. However Judah's allegiance always leaned toward the south. When Babylon failed to win a battle at the Egyptian border King Jehoiakim took hope and withheld the tribute. Jeremiah denounced this shortsighted move in the strongest terms. He was a far wiser student of international affairs than were the king and his officers. They accused him of sedition and very nearly put him to death.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, busy elsewhere, took no notice of Judah's rebellion for nearly three years. Then in 598 B.C.E. his army, with all its machines of war, appeared before Jerusalem. Jehoiakim was dead and his young son Jehoiakin had reigned only three months. As the enemy approached he hurried out of the city with "his mother and his servants, his princes and his officers" to surrender to the Babylonian monarch.

The leading men of Jerusalem, government officials, smiths, carpenters, weavers and musicians were herded out of the city. They were listed by the Babylonian scribes, as were the cattle and the objects of art, and marched down the weary road to distant Babylon. The young prophet Ezekiel, perhaps a student under Jeremiah, was one of those deported but Jeremiah. Because he had advocated surrender he was permitted to remain in Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar placed Mattaniah, Jehoiakin's uncle, on the throne to rule as best he could with the inferior officers left him.

The priests of Jerusalem maintained that Jehoiakin would be back within two years. Jeremiah denounced them bitterly as wicked prophets whom the Lord had not sent. His words were met with scorn, derision and cruel punishment. All Palestine was restless beneath the new Babylonian yoke. Ambassadors from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon met in Jerusalem to discuss revolt. Anxiously, Jeremiah implored them not to resist. He walked through the streets wearing a wooden yoke as token of the servitude that must be endured. Finally one of the priests angrily broke the yoke and threw it off.

Although the king and some of the elders were torn with uncertainty, in the eyes of the priests' denial of Zion's invincibility labeled Jeremiah as traitor and he was imprisoned.

From within the prison walls he stubbornly continued to denounce the false prophets. They could not discern between spiritual obedience and temple ritual. They led the people to believe in lies.

Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord. Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. (Jeremiah 23:1,5,6)

As proof of his confidence in Judah's future Jeremiah bought a parcel of land from his uncle's son. He directed his secretary, Baruch, to take the two clay records,

...this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days. (Jeremiah 32:14)

Still he begged for acceptance of the Babylonian yoke. Whoever would obey would live he said. For those remaining within the city, refusing the inevitable, there was nothing but famine, sword and fire. For undermining the morale of the defenders of the city he was thrown into a dungeon. There he would surely have died had not the King Zedekiah permitted an Ethiopian friend to draw him up. He used ropes padded with old rags from the palace storehouse to prevent wounding his gaunt, weakened body.

As Jeremiah warned, ten years after the first deportation, the Babylonian army again swarmed over the hills about Jerusalem. They came with horses and chariots and the hated bowmen with their distinctive, peaked caps. For eighteen months the slowly starving city withstood the siege. Then, in July of the year 587 B.C.E., the battering rams were wheeled up the finished ramps against the city walls. The ramparts broke and Jerusalem fell.

All but the poorest and most insignificant were dragged away to Babylon. The great bronze bowl and the two massive bronze pillars that had stood by the temple door since the days of Solomon were broken up and removed. Then the city was systematically put to the torch.

Jeremiah met with respectful, even kindly treatment at the hands of the conquerors. He was permitted to remain with the struggling remnant of his people under the courageous rule of Gedaliah. But a treacherous member of the royal house soon brought an end to the successful little settlement at Mizpah. He murdering Gedaliah and many of the people. Jeremiah begged the survivors to remain. He warned that famine,

sword and pestilence awaited those who fled. Nevertheless the men about him hurried down to the fancied safety of Egypt, taking him with them.

One more time Nebuchadnezzar combed the area for leaders and potential rebels. He left the land of Judah completely broken and desolate.

Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous:... My tabernacle is spoiled, and all my cords are broken: my children are gone forth of me, and they are not: there is none to stretch forth my tent any more, and to set up my curtains. For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the Lord: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.  
(Jeremiah 10:19-21)

### DESOLATION

How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! How is she become a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks:...  
(Lamentations 1:1,2)

So mourned the writer of Lamentations, grieving at the punishment of Jerusalem. The eyewitness account of the piteous, starving children, the cruelty and the crime in the fallen city bears Jeremiah's name, not because he wrote it, but because the author's skill seemed worthy of the prophet's name.

Misery was not confined to the royal city. Among the battle-scarred hills of Judah the stunned peasants struggled to pick up the threads of life. Among their looted granaries and ruined towns they mourned for kinsmen slain in Nebuchadnezzar's terrible siege. Edomites quickly overran unprotected property in the South. In the North Samaritan aristocrats annexed fields and vineyards at will. In desolate confusion, many families turned completely from the worship of Yahweh to seek safety in the worship of the local Baals.

Nevertheless a few weeks after the Babylonian forces had withdrawn, the winding roads to Jerusalem were again dotted with pilgrims. They trudged with deep faith to the harvest feast of Tabernacles. Among the blackened, fallen stones of Solomon's temple the remaining attendants apparently set up an altar and conducted the ancient ceremony as best they could. Zion, though wounded, remained the rallying point and spiritual center of Judah.