CHAPTER 14

1 Kings 17—2 Kings 25

TALES OF PROPHETS AND THE END OF THE KINGDOMS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

In this chapter we examine stories of prophets in the last chapters of 1 Kings and in 2 Kings, including the stories of Micaiah ben Imlah, Elijah, and Elisha; what these tell us about the nature of prophecy and its relationship to the monarchies in north and south; the prophecy-inspired coup that brought Jehu to the throne; and the end of the northern kingdom and the fortunes of Judah in the Assyrian crisis.

The narratives in 1 Kings 17–22 and 2 Kings 1–9 are unlike the annalistic reports on the reigns of kings. They are legendary stories about prophets. These stories most probably circulated independently before they were incorporated into the Deuteronomistic History. They shed light on the place of prophecy in Israelite society under the monarchies.

MICAIAH BEN IMLAH

An impression of the normal context of prophecy may be gleaned from the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22. The kings of Israel and Judah agree to launch a campaign against the disputed city of Ramoth-gilead. The king of Judah proposes that they "inquire first for the word of the LORD." There is no mention of Baal here, as we might expect from the other narratives about the reign of Ahab.

The king of Israel assembles four hundred prophets. Most prophets were not isolated individuals, but were members of a guild. One of the functions of prophets seems to have been to whip up enthusiasm at the beginning of a campaign. Here the prophets hold a virtual pep rally for the king. Not only do they promise that God will give him victory but they symbolically act out the battle on the threshing floor in the gate of Samaria. The threshing floor was an open space like a town square, where public assemblies were held.

Later, in the prophetic books, we often find "oracles against the nations" proclaiming woes upon the enemies of Israel. First Kings 22 illustrates the *Sitz im Leben*, the setting in life, of such oracles.

The messenger who goes to fetch Micaiah is exceptionally candid: "The words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them and speak favorably." This is tantamount to an admission that the prophets as a group tell the king what he wants to hear. Micaiah, inevitably, does not. He claims to have had a vision of all Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd. The implication is that the king will be killed in battle.

We might have expected Micaiah to accuse the prophets of conspiring, as they surely had. To do so, however, might undercut belief in prophecy altogether. Instead, Micaiah reports an extraordinary vision of his own. He saw the LORD sitting on his throne. According to one strand of Israelite tradition, a human being could not see God and live (cf. Exod 33:20). Micaiah, however, represents a tradition in which prophets claim to have had visions of God (cf. Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1). We cannot fail to notice the similarity between the LORD on his throne, surrounded by his host, and the kings of Israel and Judah. The prophet hears the deliberations of the heavenly council. The LORD asks his heavenly courtiers: "Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" The LORD is setting the king up for disaster, just as he had set up the pharaoh in the exodus story by hardening his heart. The solution is provided by a "spirit" that volunteers to be a lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets. Micaiah does not deny that his fellow prophets are inspired. The problem is that the spirit of inspiration may be deceitful.

If inspiration can be deceitful, whom should the king believe? Both he and Micaiah adopt an attitude of "wait and see." The king does not have Micaiah killed on the spot but has him imprisoned, pending the outcome of the battle. Micaiah agrees that if the king returns from the battle, "the LORD has not spoken through me." In the event, Micaiah is vindicated, but it is too late by then for the king to do anything about it.

The story of Micaiah ben Imlah illustrates both the way prophecy worked in Israelite society and also the problems that were inherent in it. The prophets claimed to speak the word of the LORD, and this is what made their utterances powerful. But sometimes they disagreed and contradicted each other. How then could one decide which one was right? Ultimately, the only satisfactory way to know whether a prophecy was right was to wait and see, and that might well be too late. The king would have been better advised to decide whether to go to war on the merits of the case: was this a necessary war, that he should risk his life to pursue it?

ELIJAH

The stories about Elijah are closely related to those about Elisha. Each prophet performs a miracle on behalf of a widow by causing her store of oil to increase (1 Kgs 17:8-16; 2 Kgs 4:1-7). Each raises a child from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:18-37). The stories about Elijah, however, reflect a greater theological interest. Elijah is engaged in polemic against the worship of Baal, and he emerges as a champion of social justice, whereas Elisha

Elijah and Elisha Narratives

is more simply a wonder-worker. Accordingly, some scholars regard the Elisha stories as older than those about Elijah. There is some doubt about the historicity of Elijah. His name means "YHWH is my God," and the stories about him have obvious symbolic significance.

The extent to which these stories were edited by Deuteronomists is disputed. The charge against Ahab in chapters 17–19 is that he "followed the Baals," not that he walked in the sin of Jeroboam. Elijah offers a burnt offering on Mount Carmel, despite the Deuteronomic restriction of sacrifice to Jerusalem. Some have suggested that the Elijah cycle was incorporated into 1 Kings later than the Deuteronomistic edition of the work. But the stories surely originated in northern Israel before Josiah's reform. Ostraca found at Samaria show that "Baal" was a common element in proper names, and this supports the view that his worship was widespread. It is clear from the prophet Hosea that Baal worship continued to flourish in the eighth century, down to the end of the northern kingdom. The strongest case for a Deuteronomistic insertion can be made in chapter 19, where Elijah goes to "Horeb the mountain of God" and takes on the character of "a prophet like Moses" (cf. Deut 18:15).

The conflict between the cult of YHWH and that of Baal comes to a head in 1 Kings 17 because of a drought, which Elijah interprets as a punishment on Ahab because of the worship of Baal. Baal was a storm-god, the "rider of the clouds," and was supposed to provide rain, which made fertility and life possible. In the words of the prophet Hosea, the dispute in Israel concerned which god provided "the grain, the wine, and the oil," YHWH or Baal (cf. Hos 2:8). This is also the issue in the Elijah stories.

The challenge posed by Elijah is that "the god who answers with fire is indeed God." The prophets of Baal use various techniques to whip themselves into ecstasy. Elijah mocks them and suggests that their god is asleep. The story is polemical, and is not concerned with fair representation of the opponents. The manner in which Elijah produces fire, by pouring water on the offering and in a trench, makes one suspect that some trickery (involving a flammable liquid) is involved. But we do not know whether there is any historical basis for this story. The narrator wished to give the impression that a decisive test was carried out, which proved beyond doubt that YHWH was God. Elijah seizes his advantage by having all the prophets of Baal slaughtered.

Elijah is impelled by the hand of the Lord, which imbues him with strength and enables him to outrun the king's chariots. He manifests a kind of charismatic religion, such as we saw in Judges. The massacre of the prophets is in the spirit of the total slaughter that was commanded on some occasions in Joshua and 1 Samuel, and of which the Moabite king Mesha boasted. (In later tradition Elijah was remembered as a figure of zeal and was even identified with Phinehas, the paradigmatic zealot of Numbers 25.) This readiness to slaughter one's opponents in the name of God is hardly a religious ideal that we should wish to emulate in the modern world.

One other aspect of Elijah's contest is troubling. He and the prophets of Baal agree that "the god who answers with fire is indeed God." Is this an adequate criterion for identifying God? YHWH was originally worshiped as a god who manifested himself in fire on a mountain, not unlike the Canaanite storm-god Baal. In the Bible, however,

YHWH differs from Baal above all by his ethical character. This difference is not apparent in the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18.

This story, however, is followed immediately by another one, in chapter 19, that serves as a corrective, and that is at least in part the work of a Deuteronomistic editor. Elijah has to flee from the wrath of Jezebel, and he betakes himself southward, to the wilderness. He is fed miraculously in the desert, as Israel was during the exodus. Then he proceeds for forty days and forty nights to "Horeb the mountain of God." The forty days and nights correspond to the forty years spent by the Israelites in the wilderness. The motif is picked up in the New Testament story of the temptation of Jesus.

At the mountain, Elijah has an experience similar to that of Moses in Exod 33:21-23. Moses was not allowed to see God's face but only his back. Elijah does not see God in human form, but he does experience his presence. The Deity, we are told, was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire that were the typical trappings of a theophany, even in the account of the revelation on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. Instead, God was in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12). God must not be confused with the forces of nature. The word translated "sound" also means "voice." In Deuteronomic theology, Israel at Horeb "heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut 4:11-12). The theophany to Elijah in 1 Kings 19 corrects the impression that might have been given by chapter 18, that God is manifested primarily in fire or in the power of nature. Instead, God is manifested primarily by the voice and the words of commandment.

But while the Deuteronomist corrects the theology of the traditional story, there is no correction of the ethics of Elijah. The virtue of his (murderous) zeal is affirmed, and he is given a new mission, to anoint a new king in Syria and to anoint Jehu as king of Israel. In fact it is Elisha who anoints Jehu, but Elisha derives his authority from Elijah. As we learn in 2 Kings, Jehu acts with the same kind of zeal as Elijah in slaughtering the enemies of YHWH. Elijah is also told to anoint Elisha as his successor. He is not actually said to anoint the younger prophet, but he casts his mantle over him, which has the same effect. The act of anointing does not have to be taken literally. He confers authority on Elisha and appoints him to the task of prophecy.

A different kind of story is told about Elijah in 1 Kings 21. Here the issue is not Baal worship but social injustice. Ahab wants the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. When Naboth refuses to sell it, Jezebel has him murdered. The situation is reminiscent of David and Bathsheba. There also the king was confronted by a prophet. There is a striking contrast, however, between the approach of Nathan and that of Elijah. Nathan induced David to condemn himself by appealing to values that the king shared. Such an appeal may not have been possible in the case of Ahab. Elijah makes no attempt to win the king over but pronounces a judgment, in effect a curse, on both Ahab and Jezebel. In fact, the coup that terminated Ahab's line came not in his lifetime but in that of his son. The Deuteronomist explains this by saying that Ahab humbled himself and was given a reprieve.

The end of Elijah's earthly career is described in 2 Kings 2. His affinity with Moses is underlined when he parts the waters of the Jordan. Then he is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Because Elijah had not died, it was believed that he would come back to

earth "before the great and terrible Day of the Lord" (Mal 4:5). According to the New Testament (Mark 9:11; Matt 17:10), Elijah is supposed to come before the Messiah. In Jewish tradition, a place is set for Elijah at the Passover in anticipation of his return.

ELISHA

Some of Elisha's miraculous deeds are very similar to those of Elijah. Nonetheless, the careers of the two prophets are quite different. Elisha is not engaged in conflict with the cult of Baal, and he never fights for social justice, as Elijah did in the case of Naboth's vineyard. Some of his miracles are, at best, amoral. He curses small boys who jeer at him, so that they are mauled by she-bears (2 Kgs 2:23-25). He makes an iron axe float on the water (6:1-7). He prophesies that the Lord will enable the kings of Israel and Judah to ravage Moab, although there is no evident moral issue at stake. He also discloses the secret plans of the king of Aram and performs various miracles to aid the Israelites in battle against him. These stories are concerned with manifestations of supernatural power with little concern for moral issues.

Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. The second panel down shows Jehu of Judah kneeling before the Assyrian monarch. Now in the British Museum, London.

JEHU'S COUP

The career of Elisha reaches its climax in 2 Kings 9 in the story of Jehu's coup. King Ahaziah of Judah is killed as well as Joram of Israel. Jezebel's fate is gruesome. In the end, Jehu kills all who were left of the house of Ahab and everyone who was associated with the royal house. He also slaughters the kin of Ahaziah of Judah, whom he meets on the way. Finally he kills every worshiper of Baal in Samaria. This whole bloodbath is justified by "the word of the Lord that he spoke to Elijah" (10:17). In view of the way that Jehu's actions are justified by appeal to prophecy, it seems quite plausible that the prophetic stories were edited at the court of one of his descendants. (Four of his descendants

reigned in Samaria, and the dynasty lasted a hundred years.) The Deuteronomistic editor added only a characteristic note of disapproval: even though Jehu allegedly stamped out the worship of Baal, he still walked in the sin of Jeroboam (2 Kgs 10:29). The "sin of Jeroboam" was not an issue at all in the stories in 1 Kings 17—2 Kings 9.

Even in northern Israel, the attempt to justify Jehu's bloody coup was not entirely successful. About a hundred years afterward, toward the end of Jehu's dynasty, the prophet Hosea announced that God would punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel. This judgment did not bespeak any sympathy for the house of Omri but acknowledged that the way in which Jehu carried out his coup was blameworthy.

THE END OF THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

There was rapid turnover of rulers in the last years of Israel. Six kings ruled in the space of just over twenty years. Four of these were assassinated. Menahem (745–737) had to deal with a new factor in Israelite history, the encroachment of the Assyrian Empire. Menahem paid a heavy tribute to the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, and in return was confirmed on his throne (2 Kgs 15:19). Menahem's son, Pekahiah, was assassinated by one Pekah, son of Remaliah, who is mentioned in Isaiah 7. During his reign, Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria

Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser. Stone panel dating from 728 B.C.E., from the Central Palace in Nimrud; now in the British Museum, London.

captured territory in the north of Israel, in Gilead, Galilee, and Naphtali, and took the people captive to Assyria. Shortly thereafter Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea, the last king of Israel. He ruled for nine years, paying tribute to Assyria, but in the end he made the disastrous mistake of conspiring with Egypt and withholding tribute. In 722 Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians, and the area was placed under direct Assyrian rule. The numerous Assyrian inscriptions from this period often mention Israel. Sargon II states:

> *I besieged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. The town I rebuilt better than it was before and settled therein people from countries which I myself had conquered. I placed an officer of mine as governor over them and imposed upon them tribute as is customary for Assyrian citizens.*
>
> (*ANET*, 284–85)

The account in 2 Kgs 17:5-6, 24, is essentially in agreement with this, but it is astonishingly brief from a historical point of view. The Deuteronomists were primarily interested in a theological explanation: "This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God" (17:7), by worshiping other gods and by having high places, complete with pillars and poles. Most of all, "Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord" (17:21) by promoting sacrificial worship outside Jerusalem. The disaster had been foretold by the prophets. In reality, many other factors were involved, primarily Assyrian expansionism and military power.

The biblical account and the Assyrian records agree that people from other places were settled in Samaria. According to 17:33, "they worshiped the Lord but they also served their own gods." The editors insist: "They do not worship the Lord and they do not follow the statutes or the ordinances or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob" (17:34). In the view of the Deuteronomistic editors, the new inhabitants of Samaria were not legitimate descendants of ancient Israel. This judgment on the people of Samaria would be a source of conflict after the Babylonian exile, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and would complicate relations between Jews and Samaritans in the Second Temple period.

JUDAH IN THE ASSYRIAN CRISIS

In Judah, Hezekiah conducted a reform that was similar to the one later carried out by Josiah. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred poles. He even destroyed the bronze serpent, Nehushtan, that had been made by Moses in the wilderness (Num 21:6-9). It is difficult to judge the scope of Hezekiah's reform, or even the point at which it took place. According to 2 Kgs 18:1, Hezekiah began to reign in the third year of Hoshea, and Samaria fell in the sixth year of his reign. This would require a date around 727 B.C.E. for his ascent to the throne. But Sennacherib's invasion, which is known

to have taken place in 701, is said to have been in the fourteenth year of Hezekiah (18:13). This would place his accession in 715. Moreover, he is said to have been 25 when he began to reign (18:2) although his father, Ahaz, is said to have died at age 36, and so would only have been eleven when Hezekiah was born! Some of these figures are evidently mistaken.

We know from archaeology that the size of Jerusalem was greatly expanded during Hezekiah's reign. There was presumably an influx of refugees from the north. The suppression of the high places can be understood as part of a strategy of centralization and tightening control in light of the Assyrian threat. But if Hezekiah attempted to suppress the high places he had little success. All these cults were flourishing a century later when Josiah undertook his reform.

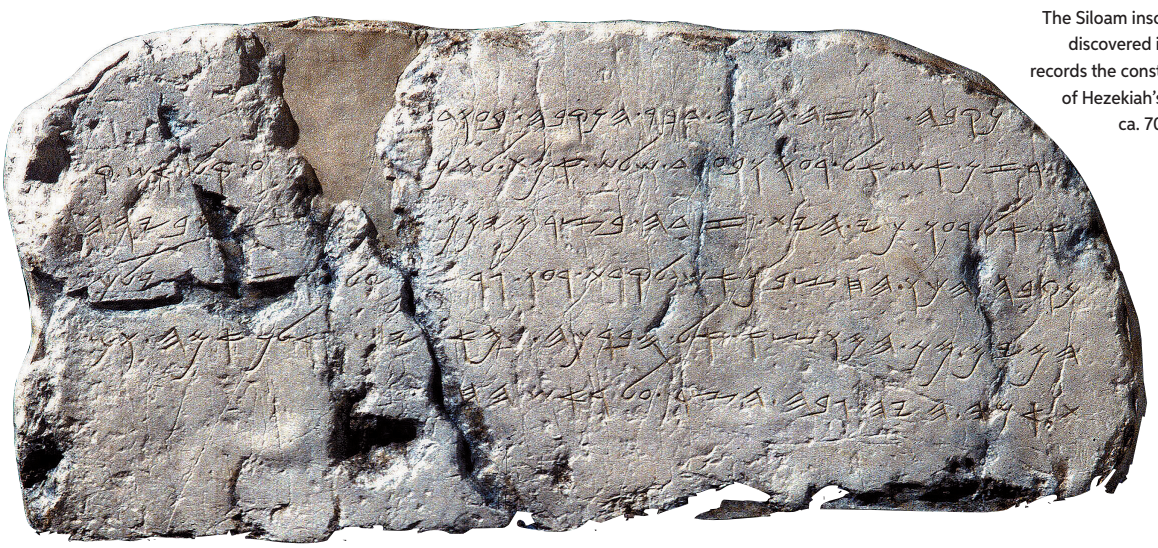
Assyrian Empire

Sennacherib's Invasion

It is uncertain whether Hezekiah was already on the throne at the time of the destruction of Samaria. Jerusalem escaped destruction at that time, presumably by paying tribute. Sargon II, who resettled Samaria, claimed in an inscription to be "the subduer of the country of Judah which is far away" (*ANET*, 287). The main narrative in 2 Kings is concerned with events after the death of Sargon in 705 B.C.E. Hezekiah had made preparations for rebellion. This included the construction of the Siloam tunnel, to bring the water from the Gihon spring to a more secure location (the construction of the tunnel is the subject of a famous inscription; *ANET*, 321). He also formed an alliance with other kings in the area. Inevitably, the rebels relied on Egyptian support. The new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, had to attend to rebellions in various areas, including Babylon, but in 701 he turned his attention to Syria-Palestine. The campaign is described in his inscriptions (*ANET*, 287–88) and in 2 Kings 18–19. The account in Kings is repeated in Isaiah 36–37, although the first paragraph, 2 Kgs 18:13-16, is not found in Isaiah.

The tribute included thirty talents of gold, eight hundred talents of silver, and Hezekiah's own daughters, concubines, and male and female musicians. The biblical account says that Hezekiah paid thirty talents of gold and three hundred talents of silver (2 Kgs 18:14). Hezekiah gave the Assyrians all the silver that was in the house of the LORD and in his own palace, and stripped the gold from the doors and doorposts in the temple. There is, then, reasonable correspondence between the Assyrian account and 2 Kgs 18:14-16. The Assyrian records also confirm that Hezekiah was neither killed nor deposed and that Jerusalem was not destroyed.

The biblical account continues, however, with a colorful and problematic narrative. Assyrian emissaries come up to Jerusalem from Lachish and taunt the king. The gods of other peoples had not been able to rescue them from the god of Assyria. Faced with humiliation and disaster, Hezekiah consults the prophet Isaiah. This is a rare mention of a canonical prophet in the historical books. (Jonah is mentioned briefly in 2 Kgs 14:25.)



The Siloam inscription, discovered in 1880, records the construction of Hezekiah's tunnel ca. 701 B.C.E.

Since this material is repeated in the book of Isaiah, I shall discuss Isaiah's response in that context, in light of Isaiah's whole career.

The manner of the deliverance is miraculous. The angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. Sennacherib had no choice but to return home. What are we to make of this as a historical report?

It is certainly surprising that Sennacherib did not destroy Jerusalem. Various explanations are possible. An epidemic in the Assyrian army might have given rise to the tradition that the angel of the Lord had intervened. Another possibility is suggested by the words of Isaiah in 2 Kgs 19:7: "I will put a spirit in him so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land." No doubt, Sennacherib could have conquered Jerusalem, but it would have taken time. He may have had pressing affairs back home. Timely submission by Hezekiah may have saved the city and his own life.

Sennacherib describes his dealings with Hezekiah as follows:

> As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth)ramps, and battering-rams brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered (them) booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate. His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mittini, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and to Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute.
>
> (*ANET,* 288)

There is no doubt that Judah was brought to its knees by the Assyrians, but the more remarkable thing was that the city was not destroyed. This unexpected deliverance is celebrated in the story of the angel of the Lord. It contributed to the myth of the inviolability of Zion. According to Ps 46:5, "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns." Psalm 48 tells how kings who came up against Jerusalem were seized with panic and fled. It is possible that these psalms were inspired by the fact that Sennacherib did not destroy Jerusalem. More probably, the belief that the city was protected by YHWH was older, but it was powerfully reinforced by this deliverance. A century later, the confidence inspired by this myth would prove to be false—when the city was destroyed by the Babylonians.

The End of the Kingdom of Judah

The "good" King Hezekiah is followed in 2 Kings 21 by Manasseh, who reigns for 55 years and does everything of which the Deuteronomists disapprove, restoring the high places that Hezekiah had torn down, erecting altars for Baal, and even making his son "pass through fire" as a burnt offering. The Deuteronomists paint Manasseh in lurid colors, in part to explain why there were so many abuses when Josiah came to the throne, and in part to explain the fate that ultimately befell Judah, despite the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. According to 21:10-15, it is because of the sins of Manasseh that the Lord resolves to destroy Jerusalem.

I have already discussed the reforms of Josiah in connection with the book of Deuteronomy. The account indirectly gives a vivid picture of religion in Judah before the reform, with widespread worship of Baal and Asherah. The reforms represent the climax of the Deuteronomistic History. We might expect that the reform would earn Judah a reprieve in the eyes of the Lord, but this is not what happens. Josiah is killed by the pharaoh at Megiddo. The parallel account in 2 Chron 35:20-24 makes clear that Josiah went to fight the pharaoh. The account in Kings is ambiguous. The pharaoh may have had him executed. The premature death of the reforming king confounds the expectations of Deuteronomic theology. The editors, however, provide an explanation. Josiah is to be spared the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The problem with this explanation is that death at the hands of the pharaoh was hardly a peaceful demise.

> *Year 7, month of Kislimu: The king of Akkad moved his army into Haddi land, laid siege to the city of Judah, and the king took the city on the second day of the month Addaru. He appointed in it a (new) king to his liking, took heavy booty from it and brought it into Babylon.*
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> (*Babylonian Chronicle*, trans. A. Leo Oppenheim; *ANET*, 564)

The actual account of the destruction of Jerusalem is quite terse. (An even terser account is found in the Babylonian Chronicles.) Babylon now replaced Assyria as the invading power, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar II. Josiah's son Jehoiakim submitted for a while, but then revolted. He died before he could be punished. His son Jehoiachin promptly surrendered, and was taken prisoner to Babylon in 597 B.C.E., together with thousands of the upper echelon of Judean society. Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, was made king in his place. He served Babylon for a time, but eventually succumbed to the temptation to rebel. His punishment was brutal. His sons were killed before his eyes, and his eyes were then put out. Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple burned down. The Babylonians allegedly carried into exile "all the rest of the population," except for some of the poorest people, who were left to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil (25:12).

The Deuteronomistic explanation of these disastrous events is simple, even simplistic: "Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh" (24:3). Babylonian policy and Near Eastern politics are of little account. It was a merit of this explanation that it encouraged the Jewish people to look to themselves for the cause of their misfortunes rather than to pity themselves as the victims of history. But, ultimately, this explanation of history would not prove satisfactory. It placed too much blame on the victims.

The Deuteronomistic History, however, ends on a positive note. After thirty-seven years of exile, King Jehoiachin was released from prison and treated with respect by the king of Babylon. Life would go on. Jewish exiles would return to Jerusalem. The destruction of the states of Israel and Judah would set the stage for the emergence of Judaism as a worldwide religion.

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