

Lightening and Tempest

- the fall of Jerusalem to Babylonian exile

ISAIAH: 'HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL'

Isaiah of Jerusalem

While the tragic events in the northern kingdom of Israel are unfolding, there are prophetic voices sounding in Judah. The most distinctive of which is that of Isaiah. Of the 8th-century prophets, Isaiah stands supreme. The sheer volume of his prophecies, the range of topics, the independence of his thought, the unique modification of traditional themes – he is the 'theologian' of the prophets. His style is shaped by impressive and magnificent language; the loftiness and beauty of his speech and his forceful vivid images bring biblical prophecy to a peak.

Isaiah was an aristocrat by birth; he may even have had royal blood. He was certainly a member of the upper strata of Judean society. He is also a martyr prophet. He died early in the dark days of Manasseh, who Jewish tradition says had him placed into a log of wood and sawn in half (cf. Heb. 11:37).

Hallmark of holiness

'The year King Uzziah died' (742 BC), in the Temple precincts, Isaiah experienced the most vivid call of any recorded for a prophet (Isa. 6:1-13). The content of this call left its hallmark on the whole of his ministry. 'Holiness' (v3) was the theme of his call, and one of the imprints of the whole book. The unique phrase 'Holy One of Israel' occurs 26 times in his prophecy (13 in each half of the book). Yahweh's uniqueness is a requirement of his covenant people. He is drawn into the vision, gains a consciousness of his mission, makes a total response: 'Here I am; send me!' (6:8). His message is clear.

□ Jerusalem is secure

Jerusalem's security in the hand of God is an important theme, especially amid the political turmoil of the age. Early in Isaiah's ministry, during the reign of Ahaz, a Syrian/Israelite coalition attempted to whip Judah into line against Assyria. Isaiah says, 'Stand firm' and gives the 'Messiah prophecies' as a promise (7:1-17). But Ahaz pays tribute to Tiglathpilezer and loses the little freedom he had. Rejected, Isaiah remains silent until Hezekiah comes to the throne. During Hezekiah's reign Sennacherib shut up Jerusalem 'like a bird in a cage', but God speaks through Isaiah, 'Trust God.' The counsel was followed and the city was miraculously saved (36:1–37:38).

□ Social justice and the remnant

As with the other 8th-century prophets, this is a key theme; the greed of a few was destroying the social balance established by the covenant. Jerusalem, the city that had been a stronghold of covenant life, had become a harlot. Judgment was imminent because they had deviated from the right path, but beyond the judgment would be a new start. As with Elijah and Elisha, a key theme is 'remnant'. Again Jerusalem will become God's city, with righteous judges and a king after God's own heart making covenant life a reality.



□ Vision of the future

In his vision of the future, Isaiah sees present events as part of the great divine purpose of history, and not only Israel's but that of the nations. The plan reaches from the earliest beginnings, across the present and far into the future.

MICAH: 'WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD'

Micah of Moresheth Gath

Micah, a younger contemporary of Isaiah, speaks from the point of view of the country person on the lower hills near the Philistine plain, rather than that of the city-dweller in Jerusalem. We see the foreboding shadow of social decay moving towards the dark days of Manasseh's evil reign.

The scene is total gloom; everyone is guilty, not just the leaders. Micah's catalogue of sins highlights greedy landowners, cruel judges, false prophets, and all were supporting injustice for personal gain. Jerusalem would be completely destroyed (3:12); this brought some repentance.

There was real resistance to his message; his opening prophecy (1:2-16) is filled with puns; these were sustained throughout to gain and hold the people's attention.

Requirement and promise

Micah sums up Yahweh's covenant expectations in the key verse 6:8; this is also a beautiful summary of the key themes of the other 8th-century prophets:

'Do justice (Amos), show steadfast love (Hosea)
and walk humbly before your God (Isaiah: the requirement of holiness).'

Amid the tirade against sin and the proclaiming of inevitable judgment, Micah brings promise for the future; he speaks of 'the days of love' when God's rule of peace will be universal, focused in one who will possess 'the strength ... and majesty of the Lord God himself' (5:4).

LAST DAYS OF JUDAH

Reign of Manasseh

As Micah's voice falls quiet Judah passes into the long reign of Manasseh (687-642 BC), rejecting the prophet's voice she is to sow more bitter seed, the tragic harvest drawing ever closer.

During Manasseh's reign Assyria reached the height of her imperial power, Judah was in her grip. There was no distinction between politics and religion and so Judah was required to acknowledge Assyrian gods. Manasseh saw little option but to compromise. Assyrian religion involved star worship and so Judean culture was flooded with superstition, divination and magic (demonstrated by archaeology). The social evils identified by Isaiah and Micah increase.

Ammon briefly becomes king (642-640 BC) but brings no change.



Reign of Josiah

By 640 BC, when Manasseh's eight-year-old grandson Josiah came to the throne, the political tide had turned completely. Assyria's brutal strength had begun to sap.

By 629 Josiah began to purge idolatry from Judah in a manner more thoroughgoing than Hezekiah. He closed down all the local shrines (sources of corruption) and extended his influence north into Galilee. As Assyria's grip weakened Josiah's reform got stronger. During the repair on the Temple the 'book of the Law' (possibly an edition of Deuteronomy) was rediscovered and its commandments drove the reform to its conclusion.

Everything was centered on the shrine in Jerusalem, there may even have been dreams of reuniting Israel (the northern provinces) with Judah under a Davidic king; but all this was to be shattered in a moment.

Egypt's grasp

In 612 the Assyrian capital of Nineveh falls. By 609, Medes and Babylonians were tearing Assyria to pieces, and they saw Egypt rushing up the Palestine plain to join in the carnage and rich pickings. Josiah rides out to Megiddo to stop her, only to be slain by Pharaoh Neco.

Judah fell into Egypt's power, and to make the point clear Neco deposed Josiah's rightful heir and placed another son on the throne as a puppet, changing his name to Jehoiakim.

However, the vacuum left by the Assyrians was fast being filled by the Babylonians who, under the skilful leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, were rising upon the international political horizon.

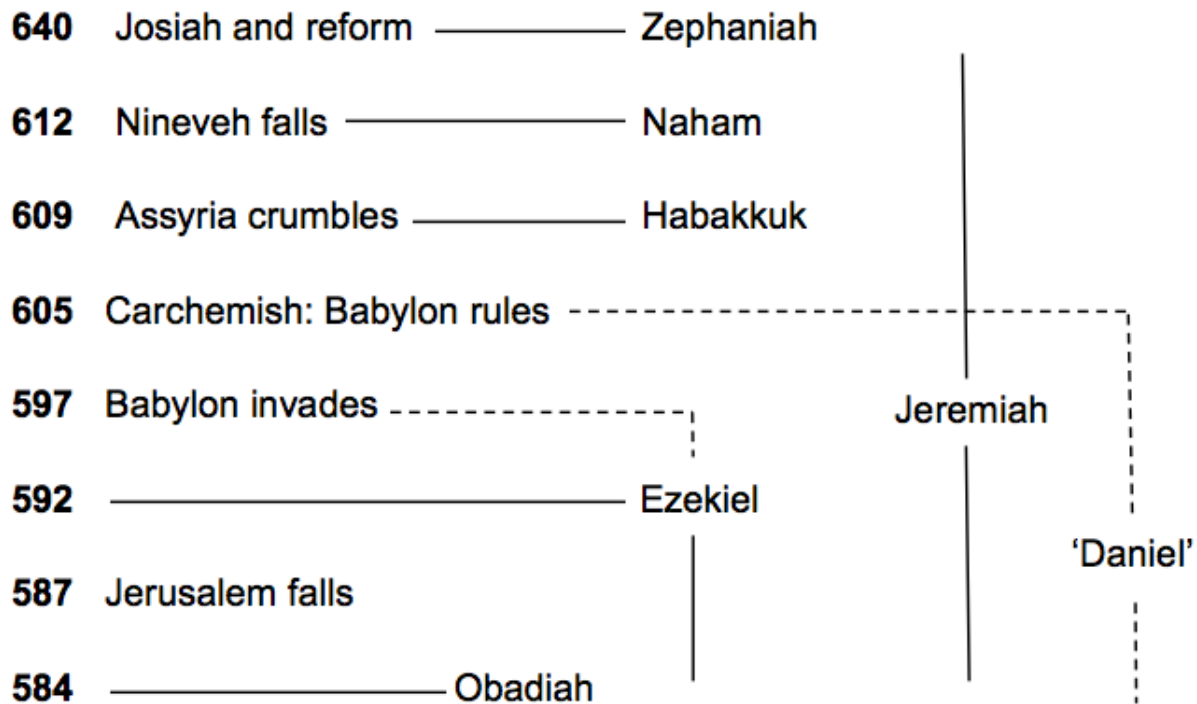
Babylon's power

As Nebuchadnezzar increased his influence and at Carchemish (605 BC) Egypt's grasp upon Palestine broke and Jehoiakim shifted his allegiance to Babylon. Vessels from the Temple and hostages (including Daniel) were taken to Babylon. However, during a lull in Nebuchadnezzar's advance, while he was regrouping for attack, the worthless Jehoiakim, misreading the signs, revolted. Within a year (597 BC) the Babylonians invaded Judah; Jehoiakim suddenly dies, perhaps assassinated in hope of lenient reprisals and his young son Jehoiachin is taken into exile along with the cream of the nation's leaders (Ezekiel is exiled as well).

Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah was placed as 'caretaker' of the Judean throne. This well-meaning man becomes a tragic figure, surrounded by foolish advisers; he is dissuaded from keeping allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar in the hope that Egypt will rescue the nation. The rebellion brings inevitable Babylonian reprisals. By 589 BC the Babylonians over-ran Judah and Jerusalem is besieged. Eventually at the end of July 587 BC Jerusalem falls; the city is reduced to rubble, Zedekiah sees his sons executed, is blinded and then dragged off to Babylon with thousands of others.

VOICE OF THE PROPHETS

While this turmoil of events was taking place the prophetic voice was far from silent. Here we see the way in which the voice of the prophets was engaging with all the critical events as the unfolded. So when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the nation was without excuse:



Zephaniah

This is the first clear identifiable prophetic voice to break the silence of Manasseh's reign (though it is not absolutely certain). He appears to have been from an important family, in fact possibly the great, great grandson of King Hezekiah.

Josiah's reforms were underway, but the catalogue of evils in the prophecy shows the decay that Manasseh allowed. The coming Day of the Lord means inevitable judgment upon Jerusalem. Corruption is so great that 'reform' will serve no purpose, only a 'remnant' of humble people will escape this judgment that will be international in its embrace, but it has as its final purpose the blessing of 'the humble and meek people' in the midst of whom Yahweh will rule.

Nahum

In 612 BC the great Assyrian empire and her capital city Nineveh, 'that bloody city', crumble into the dust of history. The prophet Nahum expresses the mood of satisfaction and joy that was felt at this demonstration of 'God the avenger of wrong within history'.

The triumphant words are probably spoken just prior to Josiah's tragic death. While the jubilation at Assyria's fall will be short lived it was a powerful testimony to Yahweh's justice at work in the world. His attributes are extolled, his power and nature proclaimed; therefore the final destruction of Assyria is certain.

In vivid pictures Nahum tells what the final attack upon Nineveh will be like; the atmosphere created is not unlike that found in Revelation 18, 'Babylon the great is fallen'.

Habakkuk

At an uncertain date during the period of Assyria's demise we are presented with the inner turmoil of Habakkuk. He begins by complaining to God about the iniquity and oppression he sees all around him, but God's reply is both unexpected and unbelievable. God is raising up the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as his instrument of judgment against the evildoers. 'But how can Yahweh use such an impure instrument for his judgment?' argues Habakkuk, they are as evil as the nation being judged!

But God is at work. Of course the Chaldeans will be judged, in fact 'only the righteous shall live' and that 'by faithfulness'. Habakkuk's concluding psalm (Ch 3) shows that his initial distress and perplexity at God's actions gives way to confidence in God no matter how terrible the conditions one has to pass through.

Obadiah

Sometime early after the fall of Jerusalem, during the exile but from upon Judean soil, the voice of Obadiah rings out. The message is again one of judgment, but not upon Judah, but instead upon her neighbour and archenemy Edom to the southeast.

Obadiah's anger burns hot, for Edom not merely rejoiced at Jerusalem's fall but actively took advantage of Judah's plight to loot the city and help the invader. Because of this she would be punished and defeated, her rock city of Petra would offer no security; she would be pulled down from her eagle's nest among the stars.

But God's judgment would be upon all nations that rebelled against him: the Day of the Lord is coming. However, he would bring his people home to Jerusalem from the corners into which they had been flung so that God's kingdom can be established.

JEREMIAH AND EZEKIEL

Jeremiah: the suffering prophet

□ Youth and call

The central prophetic voice within Judah during this time was that of Jeremiah; his message was to be significant not only for his contemporaries but also for succeeding generations. His ministry is unique because his personal life is such an integral part of his mission and often causes him so much suffering. His initial call comes (626 BC) while he is still young and he accepts it reluctantly. His protests are not accepted, God chooses him and also equips him, promising both to be with him and put the words in his mouth and give him strength.

He is shown an almond tree (Heb *shaqed*) and he is told to tell the people to be alert and watchful (Heb *shaqad*) because even though in the late winter the branch seemed dead and lifeless the sap was already rising in readiness for the spring; so Yahweh was awake and planning to deal with wickedness.



Jeremiah came from the country town of Anathoth, north of Jerusalem from a priestly family but the streets of the capital were the scene of his ministry where he appeared almost a century after Isaiah.

□ **Burden and burning**

Jeremiah was faithful to his calling, and for over 20 years he warns and admonishes his people. His prophetic burden brings increased suffering, difficulties bringing him to the point of collapse. His words of judgment not only shut him out from the community around him, but even his own family plotted to kill him. Silence offered neither safety nor solitude as his message burned like a fire in his bones. He expresses his feeling of isolation in lament, 'I sat alone, because your hand was upon me' (Ch 15:17); 'O Lord you deceived me and I was deceived' (Ch 20:7). But out of his suffering he testifies that God gave him the words in order to fulfill the task with which he was entrusted.

Jeremiah illustrates the relationship between Yahweh and his people as being like that between husband and wife. The wilderness period had been a honeymoon like that of young lovers. But the love was now 'lust' for other gods (Canaanite) - again he points her back to her origins.

□ **Traitor or truth**

The tough climax of Jeremiah's ministry was when the Babylonian forces marched to subdue Judah. 'Would God protect his city Jerusalem again, as he had done in the past, in the face of vast enemies?' Popular theology said that the city and the Temple were inviolable; but Jeremiah said, 'No', the Day of the Lord's judgment had arrived. God would not rescue the inhabitants of Jerusalem; instead he required them to surrender to the Babylonians.

Not only did such a message bring popular hostility, but the 'popular prophets' pitted themselves against Jeremiah with oracles promising swift deliverance. Both said 'thus says the Lord', who was right? The strain on Jeremiah was enormous. He was regarded as a defeatist and a traitor. A potsherd found in Lachish at this date refers to certain people in Jerusalem 'who weaken the hands of the country and the city' - precisely the accusation in Ch 38:4. Jeremiah was imprisoned, persecuted and not set free until the Babylonians marched in.

□ **Hope beyond judgment**

Jeremiah's words came true; Jerusalem had fallen (587 BC). Judah became a province of the Babylonian empire. But for Jeremiah this certainly was not the end. God had been at work and was still at work, amid the social catastrophe and beyond. Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon (Ch. 29) telling them to settle for a long stay, but that after 70 years God will be ready to begin a new chapter in Israel's history. Exiles will return home and a fresh start will be made in the land given to their fathers. God says, 'I know the plans I have for you ... plans for welfare and not evil, to give you a future and a hope'. To prove his confidence Jeremiah buys a field while Jerusalem is fallen to the Babylonians.

One of the ways in which Jeremiah sees the future is in terms of God making a 'new covenant', the conclusion and fulfillment of all the covenants, the promise and obligation of God. It will be a covenant written directly upon the heart of individuals so that it cannot be



broken. This gives momentum to the hope; God will not abandon people - they shall have a lasting and undisrupted relationship.

Jews wishing to escape further reprisals from Nebuchadnezzar eventually took Jeremiah and his faithful friend and scribe Baruch to Egypt, and presumably they died there.

Ezekiel: the priest-prophet

□ Shattered dreams

With Ezekiel we have a prophet whose ministry parallels that of Jeremiah [for the first part, until the fall of Jerusalem, at least], but from the perspective of the exiles in Babylon. Some 20 years younger than Jeremiah he and his family had been taken into exile with Jehoiachin. There is much truth in the saying, 'Jeremiah was a prophet who happened to be a priest, while Ezekiel was a priest who happened to be a prophet.' Torn away from his dream of serving as a priest in the Temple, God called him to serve his people in another, more important, way.

□ Preparing for judgment

Ezekiel's vision of God on the banks of the Chebar canal south of Babylon defies description. The rabbis rightly said, 'the person who understands Ezekiel's vision of God understands all the secrets of the universe!' But the symbolism of the chariot throne coming out of the great storm cloud makes it clear that Yahweh is in full control of the nations and of history. However, Ezekiel's task is clear, he is 'watchman' over the souls of the exiles, a pastoral prophet.

During the period up until the fall of Jerusalem Ezekiel prepares the exiles for what God is going to do. By bizarre activity; lying on his side in silence for long periods, eating the rations of a fugitive, laying siege to a model of Jerusalem, digging through the wall of his house, not mourning his wife's death etc, he brought the awesomeness of God's judgment home to the people, (judgment on rebellion and apostasy).

□ Proclaiming the future

After 587 BC Ezekiel was recommissioned. His prophecies of doom had been fulfilled. He now begins to paint a picture of a restored future; a future in which the rulers will be 'good shepherds' (Ch 34) in which the land will be restored (Ch 35-36) and though the people be like bleached bones on some ancient battlefield they too shall stand again like an army (Ch 37). The final prophecies are thrown into the final reaches of time symbolised as the perfect community in the form of a perfect temple and the final conflict of the ages.

Questions

1. What is the role of the prophet in God's purposes?
2. How might the message of Lamentations help people today who are wrestling with grief or despair?
3. What do these events teach us about the way God can use pagan rulers to fulfill divine purposes, particularly in judging or blessing people?



Reading and Resources

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