



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— November 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-2 Nov	Zedekiah rebels against Babylon; Two harlot sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem), judged	2 Kings 24:20b; 2 Chronicles 36:13; Jeremiah 52:3b; Ezekiel 23
3-4 Nov	Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem; Parable of the cooking pot; Ezekiel's wife dies	2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1; 52:4; Ezekiel 24
5-6 Nov	Ezekiel's prophecies against the Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Philistines	Ezekiel 25
7-8 Nov	Zedekiah sends men to Jeremiah to inquire of God; God will destroy Jerusalem by the Babylonians; Zedekiah will be taken	Jeremiah 21; 34:1-7
9-10 Nov	Zedekiah sends another delegation; The Babylonians break off Jerusalem siege to confront Egyptian troops; Jews reenslave freed slaves; Babylonian army will return	Jeremiah 37:1-10; 34:8-22
11-12 Nov	Jeremiah imprisoned in a dungeon, then moved to the prison court; Zedekiah seeks his counsel	Jeremiah 37:11-38:28
13-14 Nov	Ezekiel's prophecy of Egypt to be laid waste and scattered for 40 years, never to be a great empire again	Ezekiel 29:1-16
15-16 Nov	Pharaoh's strength broken and to be completely broken; Egypt to be felled like the great tree Assyria	Ezekiel 30:20-31:18
17-18 Nov	Prophecy against Tyre	Ezekiel 26
19-20 Nov	Lamentation for Tyre	Ezekiel 27
21-22 Nov	Proclamation against the prince of Tyre; Lamentation for the king of Tyre (Satan); Prophecy against Sidon	Ezekiel 28
23-24 Nov	Jeremiah buys his cousin's field; The people will return and enter into God's everlasting covenant	Jeremiah 32
25-26 Nov	Restoration of Israel and Judah; The righteous Branch; The continuity of the Davidic and Levitical family lines	Jeremiah 33
27-28 Nov	Fall of Jerusalem; Judah's nobility killed and Zedekiah blinded and taken captive to die in Babylon	2 Kings 25:2-7; Jeremiah 39:2-7; 52:5-11
29-30 Nov	Destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; Killing of important officials; Final deportations; Land to enjoy its Sabbaths	2 Kings 25:8-21; 2 Chronicles 36:17-21; Jeremiah 39:8-10; 52:12-30

Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Zedekiah Rebels Against Babylon

(2 Kings 24:20b; 2 Chronicles 36:13; Jeremiah 52:3b; Ezekiel 23)

November 1-2

As God had foretold in Ezekiel 17, King Zedekiah of Judah finally rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chronicles 36:13; Jeremiah 52:3b). As the rebellion is what provoked Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judah and siege of Jerusalem (see verse 4), which began in January 588 B.C. (compare Ezekiel 24:1-2), the rebellion must have happened immediately beforehand. This makes sense in light of international affairs, for at this time a new pharaoh came to the throne of Egypt. "The king of Judah foolishly relied on the Egyptians under Pharaoh Apries (or Hophra, Jer. 44:30) for help (see Ezek. 17:15-18). Apries had recently succeeded Psamtik II (594-588 B.C.) on the throne. He had great plans for Egypt's renewed glory" (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 24:20). But it was not to be, as we will later see.

A Tragic Tale of Two Sister Cities

(2 Kings 24:20b; 2 Chronicles 36:13; Jeremiah 52:3b; Ezekiel 23)

Nov. 1-2 Cont'd

Judah's break from Babylon and its renewed affiliation with Egypt is mentioned in the allegorical story of Ezekiel 23, narrowing the time frame for this chapter. Since chapter 24 is set at the time Jerusalem's siege begins, chapter 23 apparently is set between Zedekiah's rebellion and the siege.

Recall from Ezekiel 16 the story of Jerusalem portrayed as a rescued child turned murderous harlot as representative of the history of the nation of Israel. In the latter part of the chapter, Jerusalem, symbolizing the Jewish remnant of Israel, was said to be sister to Samaria and Sodom in the sense that God viewed them all as the offspring or legacy of the Canaanites in a cultural sense due to their idolatry and degeneracy. Ezekiel 23 contains a similar portrayal, with Jerusalem and Samaria, symbolizing the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel respectively, represented as two harlot sisters sharing the same ethnic heritage—"daughters of one mother" (verse 2), the mother being the formerly unified nation.

That the cities are meant to represent the people of the nation is clear from verse 3, which states that "they committed harlotry in Egypt," reflecting on the Israelites' worship of the Egyptian gods before the nation was delivered under Moses from its enslavement there. Throughout the Bible, God inspires the metaphorical comparison between adultery and spiritual unfaithfulness to Him. "It was during their stay in Egypt as youths that they had learned the trade of prostitution (v. 3; cf. 16:26; 20:7-8; Num 25:3-9; Josh 24:14; 2 Kings 21:15; Hos 1:2). Though the straightforward language of Israel's perverted 'sexual relations' with other countries [in a figurative sense] may be morally and culturally offensive to many today, God did not hedge in clearly and concisely describing the crudeness and perversion of wickedness and sin" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 23:1-4). Where the King James Version says Israel's bosom was "bruised" (verses 3, 8, 21), the New King James Version has "pressed," and other translations say "handled" or "caressed," creating a graphic image of their disloyalty to God.

God refers to Samaria (Israel) and Jerusalem (Judah) as Oholah and Oholibah respectively (verse 4). (The King James spelling is Aholah and Aholibah.) The names are significant. Oholah means "Her Own Tabernacle," while Oholibah means "My Tabernacle Is in Her." God's temple—in essence a fixed tabernacle—was located in Jerusalem. Throughout the divided kingdom era, Judah, despite periods of apostasy, remained the center of true worship. In contrast, the northern kingdom, since the time of Jeroboam, set up centers of false worship.

God refers to both sisters as "Mine" (verse 4)—that is, He took the nation as His own in the Sinai marriage covenant. And they bore Him "sons and daughters," that is, the people of the nation. Yet despite the covenant relationship, both sisters committed spiritual harlotry with other nations and their gods.

Verses 5-8 describe the harlotry of Samaria—the "older" or, literally, "greater" sister (verse 4). The northern kingdom of Israel sought "relations" with the Assyrians as "her lovers." This involved not only political alliances but Israel's worship of Assyria's gods (verse 7). God's judgment was to allow the Assyrians to invade Israel and strip her bare, taking the people captive or killing them (verses 9-10). This happened in the first Assyrian invasion and deportation of Israel in 733-732 B.C. and the second invasion and deportation at the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. (more than 130 years before Ezekiel wrote).

Verses 11-21 describe the harlotry of the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital, Jerusalem. She saw what happened to the northern kingdom, but failed to learn from its experiences (verse 11). As Jeremiah had written regarding God having put away the northern kingdom, “Her treacherous sister Judah saw it.... Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also” (Jeremiah 3:7-8). Indeed, Jerusalem was even “more corrupt” (Ezekiel 23:11). Judah defiled God’s own temple with idolatry and immoral practices. And, as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezekiel 16, there was also an important accountability factor. As the center of true worship, the responsibility for spiritual leadership and right conduct rested with Judah even more than with Israel.

Judah also pursued relations with the Assyrians (verse 12). And she, too, was left defiled by them (verse 13)—a reference to the spiritual defilement caused by idolatry and to the actual devastation caused by Sennacherib’s invasion in 701 B.C., in which the Assyrians took a large number of Jewish captives. Unlike what happened to the northern kingdom, though, God left a remnant of Judah in the land at that time. “But she increased her harlotry” (verse 14). She failed to learn the lesson.

Judah “then extended her prostitution to the Babylonians. She had inordinate affections for the Babylonian [Chaldean] rulers (cf. Jer 22:21), seeing images of them on walls [Ezekiel 23:14]. Bas-reliefs were common decorations in Mesopotamian palaces and temples. Perhaps this statement was an allusion to some Judean envoys who were sent to Babylonia and saw the witness of her great power demonstrated on such walls. Judah did send messengers to woo Babylonia into ‘relations’ with her, and Babylonia complied by entering into such ‘relations’ with Jerusalem (vv. 14-16...)” (note on verses 11-21).

Verse 17 explains that Judah became defiled with Babylonian immorality and then states that “she was defiled by them.” This latter phrase apparently referred to the Babylonians’ past few military invasions. Fed up with national humiliation and eager to win independence, Judah “alienated herself from them.” This is evidently a reference to Zedekiah’s rebellion against Babylon. God responds by alienating Himself from Judah (verse 18). For on top of Judah’s downward spiral into depravity, the nation’s betrayal of its allegiance to Babylon is a violation of an oath to God (see Ezekiel 17:15-20).

“As if Jerusalem had not learned her lesson, she turned away from Babylonia only to turn to Egypt for aid through ‘relations’ with that nation ([Ezekiel 23] vv. 19-21; cf. Jer 2:18; 6:8; 37:5-7; Lam 4:17). It was like striking up an old relationship. Jerusalem failed to learn from the distasteful relationship with Babylonia that security lay, not in men, but in the Lord. Egypt, of course, was extremely anxious to enter into ‘relations’ with Judah; for the Pharaohs were planning intervention in Asia. Such desire on Egypt’s part was portrayed by the figure of lustful donkeys and horses (cf. Jer 2:24; 5:8; 13:27), while Jerusalem equally desired to renew the sexual perversion of her youth with Egypt [with God likening this to the vileness of pursuing relations with animals]” (note on Ezekiel 23:11-21).

In verses 22-35, God pronounces judgment on Judah. He would bring the nation’s former lovers against her: “The Babylonians, all the Chaldeans, Pekod, Shoa, Koa, all the Assyrians with them” (verse 23). According to *Expositor’s*: “The names Pekod, Shea, and Koa are taken by most scholars to refer to tribes located on the eastern borders of the Babylonian Empire. peqodh (‘Pekod’) is believed to be equivalent to the Assyrian *pukadu*, the name of a tribe in southeastern Babylonia. sho`a (‘Shoa’) is equated with the Assyrian *sutu* or *suti*, a term used of nomads east of the Tigris River. Originally these nomads lived in the Syrian desert according to the Amarna letters, but in the eleventh century B.C. they entered the eastern territory of Babylonia. qo`a (‘Koa’) finds its parallel in the Assyrian term *kutu*, a tribal group east of the Tigris River on the border of Elam and Median appearing in Assyrian inscriptions during the eleventh century B.C. and mentioned as part of Babylonia when conquered by Cyrus” (footnote on verse 23).

However, *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* says of these names: “Pekod...[is] not a geographical name, but descriptive of Babylon. [Meaning:] ‘Visitation,’ peculiarly the land of ‘judgment’.... Shoa...Koa—‘rich...noble’; descriptive of Babylon in her prosperity, having all the world’s wealth and dignity at her disposal” (note on verse 23).

The Assyrians, mentioned in the same context, are reckoned by most commentators to here be vassals of the Babylonians. However, most of the Assyrians had fled the region since their empire fell to the Babylonians. This may hint at some duality in the passage, as the final destruction of Judah and Israel at the end of the age will come at the hands of a power bloc comprising the modern descendants of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians. The prophecy at the end of the chapter makes this even more likely, as we will see.

God tells Judah of the enemies He will bring against her: “They shall judge you according to their judgments.... They shall remove your nose and your ears” (verses 24-25). This was evidently an ancient Middle Eastern punishment for adulteresses (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 22-27; *Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 22-27). Figuratively, Judah would no longer be beautiful and desirable—she would be disfigured and ugly. Because Judah has gone the way of Samaria, she will go the *whole* way of Samaria (verse 31)—being forced to drink from the same “cup of horror and desolation” (verse 33). God tells Judah, “Since you have forgotten me and thrust me behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution” (verse 35, NIV).

In the final section of the chapter, verses 36-49, God tells Ezekiel to pronounce judgment on Oholah and Oholibah—Samaria and Judah. From the wording of verses 45-49, it is clear that the decreed punishment was yet to come when Ezekiel prophesied. This is rather intriguing, as Samaria, the northern kingdom, had gone into captivity more than 130 years before Ezekiel received this prophecy. Here, then, is compelling reason for viewing this section as referring to the end time, when the descendants of the northern tribes will suffer the severest judgment ever—along with the modern-day descendants of Judah.

As in Ezekiel 20 and 22, God again indicts Israel and Judah for idolatry and Sabbath-breaking (23:36-39)—sins that are still nearly universal among the modern Israelites. The child sacrifice mentioned here could, as pointed out in regards to similar passages, apply in principle to the modern practice of abortion and to giving children over to the evil values and practices of society. Verses 40-41 show Israel again playing the harlot, getting made up and dressed up to entice others. The word “Sabeans” in verse 42, while possibly a reference to surrounding nomadic peoples, could also be translated “drunkards”—perhaps symbolizing other nations given over to the world’s false religious system (see Revelation 17:1-2) with whom Israel commits spiritual adultery.

In verse 45 of Ezekiel 23, God says that “righteous men” will judge Israel and Judah as adulteresses and murderesses. Some commentators equate these righteous judges with the enemy nations bringing the punishment in verses 46-47, as God said He would delegate punishment to such nations (see verse 24). In this sense, “righteous” is viewed not as characterizing the enemy nations as right before God but as carrying out His righteous judgment. *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, however, states, “*Righteous men* can hardly be Babylonians (cf. 7:21, 24); they are [rather] the few men of Jerusalem who remain faithful to Yahweh and condemn the national policy” (note on 23:45). This does make sense as judgment was committed to Ezekiel in verse 36.

In the last two verses of the chapter, God gives “four purposes in judging His sinning people. To end wickedness in the land; to instruct other nations [‘all women’] of the consequences of unrighteousness; to punish the two wicked cities [for the sake of justice]; to bring Israel and Judah to a saving knowledge of the Lord” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, note on verses 48-49). God’s great plan and purpose is to have us all come to detest evil, to love good and, with His help, to live accordingly—for our own sake and that of everyone else.

The Siege of Jerusalem Begins

(2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1; Jeremiah 52:4; Ezekiel 24)

November 3-4

As historian Alfred Edersheim notes, when King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon (2 Kings 24:20) “his punishment came quickly. Nebuchadnezzar advanced with his army, and pitched his camp at Riblah—significantly, the same place where Jehoahaz had been cast into bonds by Necho (2 Kings [23:] 33). Riblah remained the headquarters of the Babylonian army, as being a convenient point whence to operate against Palestine and Tyre on the one side, and on the other against Ammon and Moab (Ezek. [21:] 19, 20, 22, 28; [26:] 1-7). Presently all Judea was overrun. Indeed, it was entirely defenceless, with the exception of the fortified towns of Lachish, Azekah, and Jerusalem (Jer. [34:] 7). Against Jerusalem itself Nebuchadnezzar and his host now laid siege. This was the tenth day of the tenth month of the ninth year of Zedekiah (2 Kings [25:] 1; Jer. [39:] 1)” (*Old Testament Bible History*, 1890, Vol. 7, p. 207)—corresponding to January of 588 B.C.

For about four and a half years, Ezekiel had been warning of the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. Jeremiah had been warning of it for around 38 years. Now it was really happening. Ezekiel was told to record the date that later became a memorial day, being remembered by an annual fast (compare Zechariah 8:19). Indeed, Ezekiel’s revealing of the exact date the siege began would soon confirm him as a true prophet. Bear in mind that there was no instant communication between ancient Judah and Babylon. A message of the siege beginning would take several weeks to deliver. Thus, once word came, the exiles would know that Ezekiel actually *had* received an instant communication—a supernatural one, from God.

Symbolizing what was happening to Jerusalem, God gives the parable of the bronze cooking pot or cauldron (Ezekiel 24:3-14). This imagery is repeated in certain respects from Ezekiel 11:1-13, where the people considered themselves protected within Jerusalem's walls from outside trouble as meat in a cauldron is protected from the flames of a cooking fire. In the earlier passage God had said the city's populace would not remain protected but would be "dumped out" of the cauldron, representative of coming captivity. Now God explains that the time in the pot will not be so protected as the people imagine. Rather, as the pot reaches the boiling point, the meat inside—the people of Jerusalem—will cook and simmer (24:5). As verse 6 explains, the cuts of meat will be tossed out (into captivity) "piece by piece" (as individuals are apprehended)—"on which no lot has fallen" (not by special divine selection but as part of God's general judgment on the populace). Those who are not taken out into captivity will be cooked to a crisp, totally burned up (verse 10). Indeed, the bronze pot itself will be burned and melted down (verse 11), representing the burning and razing of Jerusalem and the death of many people.

As in Ezekiel 22:2, the city is again referred to as "the bloody city" (24:6, 9)—guilty of the shed blood of her own people. In this context, mention is made of "scum" or "encrusted deposits" (v. 6) on the pot. Verses 7-8 imply that these 'deposits' represented the violent bloodshed of this 'bloody city,' which was like blood poured on a bare rock and not covered with dirt. Jerusalem had done nothing to cover (or to atone for) her bloodshed as required by the Mosaic covenant (Lev 17:13). Uncovered blood evoked God's vengeance (cf. Gen 4:10; Isa 26:21). The Lord declared that he had put Jerusalem's blood on the bare rock and would not allow it to be covered so that his wrath might be poured out on her" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 24:3-8). An important scripture in this regard is Numbers 35:33: "So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it." Failure to execute murderers brings guilt on the whole country.

The "filthiness" of the pot (verse 11) also includes lewdness (verse 13), the Hebrew word for which "denominates the worst kinds of impurity: adultery, incest, and the purpose, wish, design, and ardent desire to do those things" (*Adam Clarke's Commentary*, note on verse 13). God laments, "I have cleansed you, and you were not cleansed" (Ezekiel 24:13). "This probably refers to the deportations of 605 and 597 B.C., whose cleansing effects were incomplete" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 13-14). This time the purge would be complete.

It should also be recalled that the siege of Jerusalem is presented earlier in the book of Ezekiel in a dual sense—as signifying literal events of Ezekiel's own day but also to represent the fiery destruction that will come on all of Israel in the end time. No doubt that was also meant here. Certainly, it is easy to draw parallels between the immorality of ancient Judah and that of all the Israelite nations today.

Ezekiel Loses His Wife

(2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1; Jeremiah 52:4; Ezekiel 24)

Nov. 3-4 Cont'd

The next part of Ezekiel 24 (verses 15-24) is quite shocking to read. God's prophets were called on to do many hard things, but Ezekiel was about to be given one of the hardest tasks of all. God was going to take away his beloved wife. He "spoke to the people in the morning" (verse 18)—evidently giving them the parable of the cooking pot to describe the siege of Jerusalem that commenced that day. And at the end of the same day, when "evening" or sundown came (same verse), his wife would die "with one stroke" (verse 16)—the Hebrew term used elsewhere of plague or disease (see Exodus 9:14). Yet in the face of this devastating personal blow, Ezekiel was not to mourn. We catch a very small glimpse here of Ezekiel's private life when God calls his wife "the desire of your eyes" (verse 16). This was to be no easy task.

"By no means did this signify that God was insensitive to Ezekiel's grief. Just the opposite is true. God's own grief at having to punish His people and reject the sanctuary where they worshipped Him would have been a mirror for Ezekiel's actions, and the Israelites' grief at being driven from the home they loved was parallel to it as well. Here, however, God's grief is not actually mentioned—the focus is limited exclusively to the grief of Ezekiel and the coming grief of the people of Israel" (*Mastering the Old Testament*, Vol. 18: *Ezekiel* by Douglas Stuart, 1988, p. 241).

The Nelson Study Bible notes: "This solemn command of God may be one of the hardest ever given to one of His servants. The picture of Ezekiel's wife dying and Ezekiel not being allowed to grieve illustrated God's pain over the death of His wife—Jerusalem—and His...[necessity of not mourning to demonstrate that] the nation deserved punishment. Ezekiel was called by God to 'be a sign to the exiles' by demonstrating what they should do [or, perhaps, *would* do since they might be

prevented by their circumstances from public ritual mourning and thus would have to mourn privately] (see vv. 21-23) in response to the ‘death’ (destruction) of their desire and delight—their nation and its capital city. What Ezekiel was commanded to accept and do illustrated the degree of personal sacrifice and separation from ordinary life that the prophetic ministry often required. A long period of mourning was the normal, ritual response to the death of a loved one in the ancient Middle East” (note on verses 16-17).

Ezekiel writes in verse 18, “At evening my wife died; and the next morning I did as I was commanded.” Two things should be noticed here. First, the brevity and matter-of-factness of the comment no doubt concealed his deep sorrow—just as God told him he was to “sigh in silence” (verse 17). Second, as difficult as the command was, Ezekiel obeyed God. No doubt Ezekiel understood the truth of the future resurrection of the dead, as other prophets had foretold and as he himself would later proclaim. This would have given him hope. Nevertheless, the pain for the time being was of course overwhelming—as it would be for anyone but especially for Ezekiel, who, set apart as he was, may not have had any other close relationships. Ezekiel surely prayed that God would strengthen him in his great anguish—to give him the necessary spiritual power to obey. And God did. Ezekiel’s faithful obedience to such a difficult command provided a great contrast to the faithless disobedience of the Jewish nation in regard to all of God’s commandments.

As to the issue of why God would take His servant’s wife in death, all the reasons are not revealed. We know He was using the situation as an object lesson. Yet that still does not explain why He would go to such lengths to make a point. Perhaps God knew or determined that she would die soon or in this general time frame anyway for some other reason—and He decided to cause her death to coincide with the siege date by either slightly prolonging or shortening her life. Frankly, we *never* know all the reasons that God allows our own loved ones to die at a particular time. God is working out a great plan for all humanity. As Creator and Sovereign, it is His right to take anyone’s life whenever He decides to. Whatever the case or circumstances, we can be confident that God has the best interests of His servants at heart and will ultimately make all things work out for the good of those who love Him (see Romans 8:28).

The exiles ask Ezekiel about his bizarre reaction—or, rather, lack of reaction—to his wife’s death (Ezekiel 24:19). “Ezekiel’s reply to the people’s inquiry,” states *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “was an explanation of this picture lesson (v. 20). The delight of the exiled people’s eyes was the pride (2 Chronicles 36:19 Lam 1:10-11) and affection that they had in the temple at Jerusalem ([Ezekiel 24] v. 21; cf. v. 25). [Indeed, the citizens *boasted* that God’s holy temple and holy city provided protection from destruction.] However, the Lord would defile the temple and slay the Judean children in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (v. 21b). Ezekiel was to be a sign to them (v. 24a). They were to respond to the destruction of the temple and the death of their children in the same manner that Ezekiel responded to the death of his wife (vv. 22-23). Just as the delight of his eyes (his wife) was taken, so the delight of their eyes (the temple and their children) would be taken. Why should they not mourn? Because Jerusalem’s fall had been foretold by many of the prophets, especially Ezekiel. This judgment [a just judgment from God] should have been expected!” (note on verses 20-24). However, as noted earlier, Ezekiel’s sign may have been more concerned with what the Jews simply *would* do because of their circumstances rather than any command from God as to what they *should* do. As *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* notes on verse 23: “They could not in their exile manifest publicly their lamentation, but they would privately ‘mourn one to another.’”

God ends chapter 24 with a positive message for Ezekiel (verses 25-27). “In 3:25-27 Ezekiel had been made mute [that is, he was only able to preach publicly when God specifically told him to].... Now the Lord was announcing that Ezekiel’s muteness would be removed when the siege of Jerusalem was completed. On the day Jerusalem fell, a fugitive would escape to bring the news of Jerusalem’s collapse to Ezekiel in Babylon (vv. 25-26). On the day that the fugitive would arrive in Babylon, approximately three months following the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel’s mouth would be opened; and he would have the freedom to move among his people and proclaim continually the message [not of judgment only but] of hope for the future (v. 27a). He would once again intercede before the Lord on their behalf. This fulfillment would be described in 33:21-22 (cf. 2 Kings 25:8)...[after] which Ezekiel would deliver his great message of hope for Israel ([Ezekiel] 33:31-39:29). The removal of his muteness would be another affirmation of Ezekiel’s prophetic gift to the exiles. When they saw the fulfillment of the Lord’s messages through his prophets, then the exiles would know that the Lord...[whom Ezekiel credited as the source of his prophecies, was truly God]

(v. 27b)” (note on verses 25-27). And God inspired His prophet to record all this so that we today would know it too.

Judgment on Judah’s Neighbors (Ezekiel 25)

November 5-6

It is not known exactly when God gave Ezekiel the prophecies of this chapter, though it is reasonable to assume that they were given prior to the next chronologically dated section of the book. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says: “The four short oracles against Judah’s immediate neighbors are a continuation of Ezekiel’s dated judgment message that began at 24:1 and concludes at 25:17. This, therefore, was originally a singular series of messages, all delivered at the same time according to Ezekiel’s normal chronological notices. The messages in this series announce judgment on Judah [our previous reading] and then turn to denounce the surrounding nations that had rejoiced over Judah’s downfall and had hoped for personal spoil and gain. God announced judgment on these nations lest their gleeful taunts continue and the exiles question his faithfulness to his promises” (note on verses 1-7).

The siege of Jerusalem had begun but the city would not fall for more than two years. However, much of Judah had no doubt been devastated rather quickly with the invasion of the Babylonian forces. Recall also that the Chaldeans had invaded a few times before—stripping the temple of treasure and deporting many people. The Ammonites and Moabites had actually taken part in one of these invasions during the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-2). Though this was part of God’s judgment on Judah, these ancient enemies rejoiced in Judah’s calamity not for any righteous reason but out of envy and their undying hatred against God’s people. This provides some background for the prophecies of Ezekiel 25.

God says to the Ammonites that they will suffer His judgment “because you said, ‘Aha!’ against My sanctuary when it was profaned, and against the land of Israel when it was desolate, and against the house of Judah when they went into captivity” (verse 3). This might seem to apply to their attitude after the fall of Jerusalem, and certainly God could have foreseen this even before it happened. Indeed, prophecies often portray things that are yet future in the past tense, demonstrating the certainty of their fulfillment. Nevertheless, the statement could just as well describe what had already happened by the early stages of the siege—the period in which we are chronologically placing this section. God’s temple was profaned when, as already mentioned, it was twice stripped of treasure by the Babylonians. In fact, “profaned” seems to go much better with that than with the ultimate razing of the temple—which was much more than defilement. The desolation of the land of Israel could apply to what happened much earlier to the northern kingdom. It could also apply to the last item mentioned in verse 3: the massive deportations Judah had already suffered, including any carrying away of people that happened early in the current invasion.

Moab and Seir (the latter denoting the territory of Edom) are to be judged for saying, “Look! The house of Judah is like all the nations” (verse 8). Essentially, they are mocking the concept of Judah being some special nation. It’s like saying, “So they think they’re the ‘chosen’ people of the ‘true’ God, do they? Well look at what’s happening to them now. They’re going the way of all other nations by being conquered and carried away. Guess they’re not so special after all!” Such sentiments, in fact, mocked God, as He had revealed through His inspired servants that Judah and Israel were indeed His special, chosen people.

As punishment, Ammon and Moab would be given into the hands of “the men of the East” (verses 4, 10). “The ‘people of the East’ are not identified specifically anywhere in Scripture. The phrase was used to refer to any peoples living east of another people. However, the immediate context, parallel passages...and ancient history all argue for the designation of Babylonia as Ezekiel’s contemporary people of the East. Moreover, Josephus (*Antiquities*) of the Jews, [Book 10, chapters 180-81, sec. 9] recorded that Nebuchadnezzar brought Ammon and Moab into subjection in the fifth year after the Fall of Jerusalem (c. 582/581 B.C.)” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 1-7).

Of the Edomites, God said they “greatly offended” by taking vengeance on His people. While Edom did this at the time of Judah’s fall, it had a long history of such action: “The transgressions most characteristic of Edom were its perpetual animosity and repeated, vindictive acts of violence against Israel. The Hebrew words rendered *greatly offended* (‘be guilty’) may indicate continuous or repeated rather than intensive behavior” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 12).

In verse 14 God surprisingly declares, “I will lay My vengeance on Edom by the hand of My people Israel.” This certainly did not happen in Ezekiel’s day. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “Other passages in the O[ld] T[estament] indicate that...[Edom’s] punishment would be executed by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 9:26; 25:21; 27:1-11). Certainly Ezekiel 32:29 and Malachi 1:2-5

assume that Edom's desolation was past. However, God also declared that he would execute his vengeance on Edom in return for its vengeance on Judah and would do so *through the instrumentality of Israel*. The historical context of Ezekiel's day precluded this event from happening at that time. However, Ezekiel and other prophets declared that Israel would possess Edom *in the end time* as well (cf. 35:1–36:15; Isa 11:14; Dan 11:41; Amos 9:12; Obad 18)" (note on Ezekiel 25:12-14, emphasis added).

Observe that God punishes the Ammonites, Moabites and Philistines so that they will come to know He is the true God (verses 5, 7, 11, 17)—and consider that they will not come to truly understand this until the time of Christ's return. Of course, it should be remembered that the rulers of these peoples in Ezekiel's day would have understood it in a limited sense—as God had warned them through Jeremiah that they would either submit to Nebuchadnezzar or suffer sword, famine, pestilence and the yoke of slavery (see Jeremiah 27). Nevertheless, none of these peoples really came to understand who the true God was at that time.

In Ezekiel 25, God does not mention the Edomites coming to know Him as the true God. Rather, He simply says, "They shall know My vengeance" (verse 14). In an end-time context, this may be because Edom will apparently be completely destroyed, with no survivors left, when Christ returns (see Obadiah 18). (The Edomites will apparently have to wait for the second resurrection mentioned in Revelation 20:5 to be given their opportunity to turn to God in sincere repentance.)

As mentioned in previous comments in the Bible Reading Program, the modern descendants of Edom are likely to be found among the Turkish peoples, the Palestinians and other Middle Eastern groups. Indeed, today's Palestinians, who are concentrated in Jordan and Israel, appear to be a blending of all the peoples mentioned in Ezekiel 25—Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Philistines—along with others. For centuries virtually all of these peoples have been Muslims, convinced that Allah is the one true God and that the worship of Jews and Christians is corrupt. Only after Jesus Christ returns and establishes true Christianity as the religion of the world will these people—and all other Muslims worldwide—come to know and worship the true God of the Bible.

The chapter ends with God declaring vengeance to befall the Philistines (or Cherethites, as the Philistines or a major part of them are also called). "God's great vengeance against the Philistines was a judgment 'in kind' for their revengeful attitude and actions against Judah. His destruction of Philistia would be complete, even consuming the remnant of them that were on the coast.... Though the time of this punishment on Philistia was not stated, the context assumes time in harmony with the three verdicts executed on Ammon, Moab, and Edom by Babylon (cf. Jer 25:20; 47:1-7). The ultimate fruition of this judgment would be realized when Israel possesses Philistia in the end time (cf. Isa 11:14; Joel 3:1-4; Obad 19; Zeph 2:4-7)" (note on Ezekiel 25:15-17). Interestingly, today's Palestinians are actually named after the Philistines—and many Palestinians live in the Gaza Strip on the southern Israeli Mediterranean coastline, the region of ancient Philistia. This land will eventually be returned to the Israelites.

Zedekiah Sends a Delegation to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 21; 34:1-7)

November 7-8

The prophet Jeremiah had warned incessantly of Babylonian invasion, calling on the nation of Judah and its leaders to repent. God, in fact, decreed through him that the nation should submit to Babylon. Zedekiah had not heeded. Instead, he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, prompting swift retaliation, as we've seen.

In chapter 21, with the siege of Jerusalem underway, we see Zedekiah sending a delegation to Jeremiah to ask that he inquire of God regarding the outcome of the siege (verses 1-2). This delegation consists of Zephaniah the priest (earlier shown to have been sympathetic to Jeremiah in 29:24-28) and a certain Pashhur son of Melchiah (or Malchiah). He is not the same as Pashhur son of Immer, mentioned in Jeremiah 20, who long before had placed Jeremiah in the stocks. As we continue the story in the next few readings, we will find the king making further inquiries—yet, as we will see, he just cannot bring himself to do what he should.

Instead of giving Zedekiah the answer he wants here, the message to the king is that God will fight against Jerusalem Himself (verses 4-6). God had shown immense mercy over many generations, always correcting His people and then blessing them again as they repented. But many in Judah, including the king, showed that they were hardened against God's way. There was no room left for minor corrective measures. God would now have to deal a final, decisive blow to their rebellion.

"The metaphor of the outstretched hand and mighty arm had been used many times (Deut 4:34 et al.) of God's miraculous intervention on Israel's behalf in Egypt. But now it is used to express God's opposition to his people. Their doom was inevitable and the defeat total. Jerusalem would be

crowded with refugees who, with their cattle, will have fled from the surrounding areas” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 5). God is incredibly patient with human weakness, but the Bible makes very plain that He will not tolerate prolonged rebellion against Him. The fact that there is indeed a “last straw” of human sin that exceeds the limits of God’s patience and willingness to extend mercy has ominous implications for today’s sin-riddled societies. (Of course, even in His punishment God is showing mercy since the real cruelty would be to let humanity continue to grow more and more corrupt.)

God gives His people an ultimatum—choose life or death—defect or remain in the city (verses 8-10). To remain was too painful to imagine—famine and disease and then, weakened, to wage war to the death.

The royal house is then addressed with an appeal, even at this late stage, that the justice system be reformed—that the oppressed among the populace be delivered (verses 11-12). Otherwise God’s judgment would fall (same verse). The clear implication is that a turn to righteous judgment, even now, would avert calamity. But a real turn doesn’t come.

God says He is against the “inhabitant of the valley” and “rock of the plain” (verse 13)—references to Jerusalem. “In reply to the claim that ‘rock of the plain’ (KJV, RSV) is not suitable for Jerusalem [which sits on a hill], it can be shown that the Hebrew may be rendered ‘level rock’ or ‘rock of the level place,’ since *misor* denotes ‘plateau’... (cf. Ps 27:11 {‘straight path’}; 143:10 {‘level ground’}). It would refer, then, to the level ‘rocky plateau’ (so NIV) on which Jerusalem stood. The valley could be the Tyropeon, between Mount Zion and Mount Moriah, an appropriate designation in that the royal residence was located on Mount Zion... [One] early archaeologist... understood the ‘rocky plateau’ to be Mount Zion, where there is a level tract of considerable extent. Finally, because the city was surrounded by high hills, it could appropriately be called a valley (Isa 22:1). Thus the words of the text are explicable” (*Expositor’s*, footnote on verse 13). It should also be considered that, figuratively speaking, the land of Judah was, in terms of its political power at this time, a valley between the two mountains, or great kingdoms, of Babylon and Egypt.

Sadly, even in the face of actual siege, the people of Jerusalem remain foolishly confident that God will not allow His holy city to be breached (verse 13). They are, of course, gravely mistaken (verse 14).

In chapter 34, God sends Jeremiah to deliver the message of Jerusalem’s fall to Zedekiah in person (verse 2). The king himself was not to die in the battle, but would be taken captive to later die in Babylon.

The Macmillan Bible Atlas says of this period: “The cities of Judah were destroyed one after the other. In various excavations, such as at Ramat Rahel, Beth-zur, Beth-shemesh, Lachish, Arad, and En-ge-di, absolute destruction is apparent. The last of the fortified cities of Judah to fall were Lachish and Azekah (Jer. 34:7) The sentence: ‘We are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah,’ in one of the Lachish Letters (no. 4), was obviously written after the fall of Azekah [which was soon to come]” (Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, 1977, p. 105).

The “Lachish Letters” were military communications inscribed on potsherds—a common means of recording messages at the time—uncovered in 20th-century excavations of the Jewish stronghold of Lachish. They provide dramatic archaeological corroboration of the biblical account of this tumultuous time. Regarding what they document about this period, *Expositor’s* adds: “Evidence for the Fall of Azekah (Letter IV), written soon after Jer 34:7, is particularly revealing. As well the report of Judah’s sending of a high army official to Egypt (Letter III) and of the unrest in Jerusalem (Letter VI) are illuminating, as is the mention of ‘the prophet’ (= Jeremiah? Letter VI)” (footnote on 2 Kings 25:2).

Egypt will respond to Judah’s call for help, as revealed in our next reading.

Another Delegation When Egypt Intervenes (Jeremiah 37:1-10; 34:8-22) November 9-10

In chapter 37, Zedekiah sends another delegation to Jeremiah, asking him to pray for Judah and its leaders (verse 3). Spiritually blind people commonly think that the prayerful intervention of a known righteous person will cause God to turn a threatening situation around. They fail to realize that they need to change their behavior and that no other human being can do that for them (Acts 8:22-24).

This time, Zephaniah the priest is again sent, along with an official named Jehucal, an associate of the Passhur sent in the previous delegation (see Jeremiah 38:1, where the official's name is spelled Jucal).

(Jeremiah 37:4 mentions the fact that Jeremiah will later be put in prison, an episode we will soon read about in 37:11–38:28.)

The current inquiry is evidently occasioned by a major change in events—the Egyptians now entering the conflict (compare verse 7). “In the late spring or early summer 588 B.C., Pharaoh Hophra led the Egyptian army into southern Palestine. The Babylonian forces withdrew their siege of Judah and Jerusalem to confront the Egyptians. Zedekiah hoped the Babylonians would be defeated” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 6-8). The “then” of verse 5 is not to denote a new time frame after the inquiry. Rather, verses 4-5 should be understood as parenthetical—giving the background to the inquiry.

The king probably wondered if Jeremiah's message had now changed in light of the Egyptian advance: “The approach of the Egyptian forces (vv. 5, 9) seemed to contradict the message of 34:2-7; moreover, with the withdrawal of the Babylonian army, Zedekiah may have thought that Jeremiah's predictions of doom were wrong after all.... Also, Zedekiah may have been encouraged by his alliance with Pharaoh Hophra.... He may indeed have doubted his own prophets, and so he wanted to get a message from Jeremiah that would please him. Thus he asked the prophet to pray for him (v. 3)—i.e., to support his actions.... In other words, what Zedekiah wanted was for the Lord to make the temporary withdrawal of the Babylonians permanent. He may somehow have felt that the presence of Jeremiah, though he predicted doom, would insure God's protection against Jerusalem's capture. As for his regard for Jeremiah, it was tinged with superstition” (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 2-3).

It may be that Zedekiah was thinking that God had relented because of his recent emancipation proclamation, mentioned in the latter part of chapter 34. And indeed, God may have granted the lifting of the siege for this reason—or at least as a test of the people's resolve. Sadly, they had no resolve to continue in their commitment to God and His righteousness. (Human beings in general often try to make God into what they want Him to be—and have Him act as they want Him to. When they need help, they cry out to Him—but not to intervene when and how *He* deems appropriate, but in the time and manner that *they* think He should. And when the objective seems met, they want God to retire once again.)

Zedekiah and the rest of the nation's hopes that Egypt would save them were in vain, as God makes clear through Jeremiah. This was a passing circumstance. Even if Egypt's forces managed to weaken the Babylonian army, it would still return to finish its devastating work (37:6-10).

Emancipation Revocation (Jeremiah 37:1-10; 34:8-22)

Nov. 9-10 Cont'd

After God gave the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, having freed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, the first judgment He gave them was the maximum time of seven years that fellow Israelites could be kept in servitude (Exodus 21:1-6), whether or not these Israelites “had sold themselves into servitude for the payment of their debts, or though they were sold by the judges for the punishment of their crimes. This difference was put between their brethren and strangers, that those of other nations taken in war, or bought with money, might be held in perpetual slavery, they and theirs; but their brethren must serve but for seven years at the longest” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 34:8-22). In Jeremiah's time, however, the people of Judah had been ignoring this law.

When Nebuchadnezzar with his armies and allies attacked the cities of Judah, and Jerusalem was under siege, King Zedekiah made a covenant proclamation to the citizens of Jerusalem that gave an appearance of repentance (34:8-9). Perhaps this was even in response to God's warning given through Jeremiah at the beginning of the siege: “Deliver him who is plundered out of the hand of the oppressor, lest My fury go forth like fire” (21:12).

The citizens appeared repentant also since they readily responded and emancipated their Jewish slaves (verse 10). However, it soon became obvious that Zedekiah and the Jews were not truly repentant and had no real commitment to that decision. The people soon “changed their minds” (34:11)—they repented of their repentance! Zedekiah either changed his mind or at least weakly failed to enforce his proclamation. (Indeed, we will later find him obviously weak and vacillating.)

Two occurrences led to the Jews reenslaving their servants. First was the lifting of the Jerusalem siege when the Chaldeans left to confront the oncoming Egyptian forces (37:5). Even though God knew the hypocrisy and superficiality of Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem, He, out of His great

mercy, probably orchestrated this timely reprieve for the Jews. The second factor was the people realizing more than ever how advantageous it was to have slave labor. As soon as they got what they really wanted, deliverance from the Chaldeans, they felt they no longer needed God. Big mistake! God is not to be mocked or manipulated.

Their sin was especially egregious because they were renegeing on a covenant they had made with God in His temple to right the wrong (34:15). They had even ratified the covenant with a ritual first mentioned in Scripture in Genesis 15:9-17 (Jeremiah 34:18). They “passed through the parts of the animal cut in two, implying that they prayed so to be cut in sunder (Matthew 24:51; Greek, ‘cut in two’) if they should break the covenant” (*Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 34:18). And indeed, the punishment would be severe.

As a result of their treachery, freeing slaves only to reenslave them, God remarks with sardonic irony that He would free *them*—from His protection. “Behold, I proclaim liberty to *you*,’ says the LORD—‘to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine!’” (34:17). God said He would bring Babylon’s army back to conquer and burn Jerusalem—killing or capturing its people.

Jeremiah Imprisoned; Zedekiah’s Wavering (Jeremiah 37:11–38:28) November 11-12

The temporary lifting of the Babylonian siege from Jerusalem provides an opportunity for some movement outside the city. Jeremiah sets off for the land of Benjamin—presumably for his hometown of Anathoth, just three miles outside the capital—to, as one commentator translates verse 12, “attend to a division of property among his people there” (qtd. in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 12). (The King James translation, “to separate himself thence in the midst of the people,” is incorrect.) “The presupposition is that a relative had died in Anathoth; so it was incumbent on Jeremiah to be present in connection with the inheritance” (footnote on verse 12).

But the prophet is arrested on suspicion of defecting to the Chaldeans by a captain of the guard named Irijah. His grandfather’s name is Hananiah (verse 13)—possibly, as some have suggested, the false prophet Hananiah who died at Jeremiah’s decree from God (see Jeremiah 28).

We then come to Jeremiah’s imprisonment. It is not entirely clear if our current reading encompasses two separate imprisonments or two accounts of the same one (compare 37:11-21; 38:1-28). Those who argue for two imprisonments point out that Jeremiah 37:15 mentions the prophet being cast into “prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe,” where he is thrown into a dungeon or cistern (verse 18), while 38:6 says he was “cast into the dungeon of Malchiah the king’s son” (or Malchiah son of Hammelech). The argument in favor of one imprisonment here is that the two accounts are extremely similar and that, at the end of both, Jeremiah requests of the king that he not be returned to Jonathan’s house to die (compare 37:20; 38:26). Indeed, one imprisonment seems rather likely, which would mean that the dungeon or cistern of Malchiah was in the house of Jonathan—easily explainable if ownership had changed, if Malchiah had built the cistern, or if Malchiah was the official in charge of prisoners.

Pashhur, one of the leaders Jeremiah is arraigned before (who was part of Zedekiah’s delegation to Jeremiah at the beginning of the Babylonian siege in chapter 21), is the “son of Malchiah” (38:1)—perhaps the namesake of the dungeon. With Pashhur is Jucal (same verse), the Jehucal of the delegation Zedekiah sent to Jeremiah when the siege was lifted at the beginning of chapter 37.

The officials are outraged at Jeremiah’s public proclamation of what they consider to be a seditious message, and they call for his execution. Interestingly, Zedekiah declares himself powerless against these leaders (38:5). He is evidently insecure in his position. Though he had reigned for a decade, it should be recalled that many still considered Jeconiah, a prisoner in Babylon, as the real king. Also, Zedekiah later mentions his fear of pro-Babylonian factions (verse 19). Many were likely blaming Zedekiah for having instigated the Babylonian siege. Now that it had been lifted for a time, a coup was not out of the question. Nevertheless, Zedekiah certainly wielded a great deal of power still. He *could* have protected God’s prophet, but it didn’t seem politically expedient to him.

The leaders order Jeremiah thrown into the prison “dungeon” (verse 6) or “cistern” (NIV)—ostensibly, as they had called for his execution, with the intention of his dying a slow death. “The cistern of Palestine was commonly a pear-shaped reservoir into which water could run from a roof, tunnel, or courtyard. From about the thirteenth century B.C. it was plastered and its opening stopped by a suitable cut stone, large enough for protection, but sometimes quite heavy (cf. Gen 29:8-10).... [In] abandoned reservoirs there is usually a mound of debris underneath the opening, consisting of dirt and rubbish, blown or knocked in, shattered remnants of water containers, and not infrequently skeletons. These may represent the result of accident, suicide, or some such

incarceration as that which Jeremiah endured, although he did not experience the usual fatal end of exhaustion and drowning in water and mud” (“Cistern,” *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 1983, p. 129).

Jeremiah is rescued through the intervention of Ebed-Melech the Cushite, who convinces the king to have the prophet removed from the cistern (Jeremiah 38:7-10). He takes great care in helping Jeremiah out of his confinement (verses 11-13). How ironic that “a foreigner, a once-despised Cushite [and eunuch], cared more for the prophet of God than did the king and princes of Jeremiah’s own people” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 11-13). We later learn that this is because he trusts in the God of Israel—and that God will reward him with deliverance from Jerusalem’s destruction (39:15-18).

Following the rescue is a dialogue between Jeremiah and Zedekiah, wherein we are afforded insight into the king’s thinking. The narrative again demonstrates Zedekiah’s instability—constantly wavering and giving in to the pressure of those around him. His day-to-day life was one of rebellion against God, yet there still seemed to be an ingrained fear of one of God’s servants. Sadly, Zedekiah was like many leaders today—more intent on pleasing people than following the truth (38:19-20).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus makes this comment about the king: “Now as to Zedekiah himself, while he heard the prophet speak, he believed him, and agreed to everything as true, and supposed it was for his advantage; but then his friends perverted him, and dissuaded him from what the prophet advised, and obliged him to do what they pleased” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 10, chap. 7, sec. 2).

Nations need leaders who are steadfast and not wavering. God also requires the same of His people. “Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. Instead we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church” (Ephesians 4:14-15, New Living Translation).

Instead of standing fast, “Zedekiah will go down in history as having made more U-turns than a learner-driver breaking in wild chariot horses” (Derek Williams, ed., *The Biblical Times*, 1997, p. 196).

Jeremiah “was stirred to his most direct eloquence. ‘And you shall cause this city to be burned with fire’ ([Jeremiah 28] v. 23). This was Zedekiah’s last chance to save the city, its walls, its warriors, its women and children. All he had to do was trust the prophet, to lift his head high, take up the flag of truce, walk past the princes and out to the Chaldean armies. This simple act of contrition could have saved the city” (*Mastering the Old Testament*, Vol. 17: *Jeremiah, Lamentations* by John Guest, 1988, p. 271).

Biblical historian Eugene Merrill writes: “Zedekiah was nearly persuaded. Only his pride of position and need to maintain a face of courage in the midst of certain calamity prevented him from acceding to the word of the man of God. That stubbornness against the truth proved to be the undoing of the king and all his people with him” (*Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 465). Zedekiah could not bring himself to surrender. Jerusalem was to fall.

In verses 24-26, Zedekiah commands Jeremiah to not reveal to the other leaders what the two of them had discussed—but to instead say that he had made a request of the king that he not be put back in the cistern to die. Jeremiah complies (verse 27). So did Jeremiah lie? No, for he actually did make this request as part of their discussion in 37:20—which argues in favor of the two accounts covering the same episode.

While Zedekiah consents to Jeremiah’s request that he not be returned to the cistern, the king does not completely free the prophet. Rather he commits him to the “court of the prison” (verse 21; 38:13, 28) or “courtyard of the guard” (NIV)—“a place near the royal palace where limited mobility was possible, such as in the transaction to purchase the field [mentioned in our next reading] (see 32:1-15; Neh. 3:25)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 37:20-21). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The courtyard of the guard, probably a stockade (cf. Neh 3:25), was the part of the palace area set apart for prisoners. (Friends could visit them there.) The soldiers who guarded the palace were quartered there” (note on Jeremiah 32:1-2). Jeremiah will remain in this place until the Babylonians conquer the city (38:28; 39:11-14).

Egypt to Be Laid Waste and Scattered for 40 Years (Ezekiel 29:1-16) November 13-14

In the 10th year of Ezekiel’s captivity, January of 587 B.C., God gives him a prophecy of the downfall of Egypt. The timing here is significant, as this is the period during which Pharaoh

Hophra's forces came up to oppose the Babylonians, causing the siege of Jerusalem to be temporarily lifted. In our next reading, we will go through another prophecy of Ezekiel—given a few months later—that alludes to the outcome of this particular conflict and describes the coming fall of Egypt to Babylon. The current reading concerns the latter aspect.

God refers to the Egyptian pharaoh as a great “monster” (NKJV) or “dragon” (KJV) in the midst of his “rivers,” saying, “My River is my own” (verse 3). The major “River” of Egypt is of course the Nile—which represented the entire country of Egypt, as the population was concentrated along its length. The “rivers” (plural) likely denote the many branches of the Nile in the northern delta region. The word “monster” is translated from the Hebrew *tannim*. “The word’s meanings and its cognates range from ‘jackal’ to ‘serpent,’ ‘dragon,’ ‘sea-monster,’ ‘monster,’ ‘crocodile.’ In all O[ld] T[estament] contexts where the term is used, a fearful creature is imagined” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 3). The fearful dragonlike beast of the Nile and its branches—a river-dwelling creature with powerful jaws and thick scales (see verse 4)—is surely the crocodile. “The crocodile god, Sebek [or Sobek], was very important to the Egyptians in the Nile delta area. He was considered Egypt’s protector and at times was identified with the solar deity, Re [or Ra] (cf. Diodorus 1.35)” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 1-7). Recall from Isaiah 30:7 and 51:9 that God referred to Egypt as a monster called “Rahab,” meaning “Fierce” or “Violent”—parallel to the Egyptian name Sobek, meaning “Rager” (conjuring images of a fierce crocodile attack).

The pharaoh was identified with Egypt’s divine protector. God says the pharaoh considers himself the creator of the Nile (verse 3), meaning, essentially, of all Egypt. Besides being a blasphemous concept of the pharaohs in general, as they promoted themselves as divine incarnations, “this was [a particularly apt description of] Hophra’s (Apries’) arrogant self-image. [The Greek historian] Herodotus implied that Pharaoh Apries was so strong in his position that he felt no god could dislodge him. In his reign he sent an expedition against Cyprus, besieged and took Gaza (cf. Jer 47:1) and the city of Sidon, was victorious against Tyre by sea, and considered himself master over Palestine and Phoenicia. Such pride was consistent with the denunciation in this message ([Ezekiel 29] v. 3), for the Pharaoh felt that the Nile (Egypt) belonged to him and that he had created it for himself. This arrogance had also shown itself in an attempt to interrupt Babylonia’s siege of Jerusalem—an attempt thwarted by God” (note on verses 1-7).

God says He will draw the pharaonic crocodile out with hooks along with all the “fish” clinging to his scales, meaning the Egyptians in general who clung to or followed the pharaoh (verse 4). The pharaoh and his people would be pulled from their position of national strength and left “in the desert” as carrion for the birds and beasts (verse 5, NIV). The Egyptian ruler, at least in a figurative sense, “would not even be afforded the royal burial so important to the Pharaohs. The tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes demonstrate how important proper royal burial was to the Pharaohs’ successful journey through the Egyptian afterlife. Lack of such burial would have been [seen as] a horrible fate” (note on verses 1-7).

The imagery then changes from that of a mighty, thrashing river beast to that of a weak river plant. God calls Egypt a “staff of reed to the house of Israel” (verse 6)—just as the Assyrians had described it more than a century earlier (see Isaiah 36:6). This is an allusion to Egypt’s weakness and unreliability as an ally for the Israelites—as well as the worthlessness and even danger of looking to this nation for protection. When the Israelites lean on Egypt for support, it shatters, leaving them seriously wounded (Ezekiel 29:7).

God says He will bring the sword of warfare on Egypt to lay it waste, showing that He, not the pharaoh, is the one who determines whether the nation exists or not (compare verses 8-9). The devastation would extend across the length of the land, from Migdol in the north (in the eastern delta region) to Syene in the south (modern Aswan) and even down to the border of Nubia in what is today Sudan (verse 10). The prophet Jeremiah later foretells the fall of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar’s forces (Jeremiah 43:8-13). And Ezekiel later gives more details of this Babylonian invasion in Ezekiel 29:17-30:19. The prophet placed this other prophecy right after the one we are currently reading because it follows thematically—even though it was given more than 16 years later (compare 29:1, 17).

According to our current reading, the land would remain desolate for 40 years, during which time the Egyptians would be scattered—after which they would be returned to their homeland of Pathros, southern Egypt (verses 11-14). There is no secular confirmation of this period of scattering. Indeed, we would not expect an admission of such a massive defeat in the Egyptian records. However, “a Babylonian chronicle suggests that Egypt was conquered [by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar] around 568 B.C. Forty years after this date, the Persians [having overthrown the Babylonians]

instituted a policy of resettlement for many of the peoples who had been dispersed by Babylon” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 11). Pharaoh Hophra was executed at the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion, not long after a coup by Hophra’s own general Amasis or Ahmose, who replaced him as pharaoh. Ahmose (II) remained on the throne as a Babylonian vassal and continued into the Persian period, dying a year before the Persian invasion of Egypt in 525 B.C.

Following its conquest by the Babylonians, Egypt would never again be a superpower empire. This was especially true of the original ethnic Egyptians. More than 200 years later, after Alexander the Great, the land of Egypt did emerge again as an independent power under the Ptolemaic dynasty for three centuries—but, besides the fact that it was nowhere near the great power that Egypt had once been, this was actually a Greek kingdom, not a truly Egyptian one. Afterward, Egypt became a Roman possession and then, centuries later, a province of the Islamic empire. When Egypt became an independent nation in modern times, it was as an Arab, not a true Egyptian, state. The original Egyptians today may be found among the Copts of Egypt and possibly the Gypsies (according to some of their historical traditions)—both of whom are indeed very lowly peoples in geopolitical terms.

In verses 6 and 16, God says that His purpose in punishment is to show the Egyptians that *He* is God. While some may have come to this conclusion at the time of the Babylonian conquest, or at least to the rejection of their own false gods, including the concept of the pharaoh as divine, the Egyptians as a whole did not forsake their false religion or come to know the true God. It may be, then, that this prophecy of Egypt is dual, with elements of it applying to the end time—just as in the prophecies of judgment on Judah’s immediate neighbors in Ezekiel 25, where the purpose of punishment is also repeatedly given as teaching the recipients of God’s judgment that He is really God, a fact they will not truly learn until the last days. Like the great majority of other peoples and nations of the region, the inhabitants of Egypt have for centuries been overwhelmingly Muslim, worshipers of Allah. In time they will learn who the true God is. Concerning Egypt of the end time, it is interesting to note that the future king of the North (a revival of Babylon) will invade and subjugate the nation (Daniel 11:40-42). Afterward, Egypt will be delivered under the reign of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 19:20-25)—when the nation will finally come to truly know God and learn of His ways (verse 21).

Egypt Defeated as a Prelude to Complete Destruction (Ezekiel 30:20–31:18) November 15-16

The prophecy against the Egyptian pharaoh in Ezekiel 30:20-26 comes in the early spring of 587 B.C., just a few months after the prophecy of Egypt in our previous reading (30: 20; compare 29:1). God says He has “broken the arm of Pharaoh” (30:21) and that He “will break his arms, both the strong one and the one that was broken” to “make the sword fall out of his hand” (verse 22). The “arm” is the symbol of strength. It holds a “sword,” meaning that it wields military power. The breaking of the first arm, which had already taken place at this point, refers to Pharaoh Hophra’s attempt to relieve the siege of Jerusalem, which we read about in Jeremiah 37:5. The attempt had obviously failed, with Egypt left sorely defeated.

The image of a broken arm was quite suitable. “The flexed arm was a common Egyptian symbol for the Pharaoh’s strength. Often statues or images of the Pharaoh have this arm flexed, wielding a sword in battle. A king with great biceps was especially a popular concept under the Saites Dynasty of Ezekiel’s day. In addition Hophra took a second formal title that meant ‘possessed of a muscular arm’ or ‘strong-armed’” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 30:20-26).

The initial defeat of the Egyptian forces by the Babylonians was a mere prelude to the complete destruction Egypt would soon suffer. The nation would be devastated, with its people scattered (verses 23-26), as previously proclaimed in 29:12-13. Also repeated is the intended goal of God’s discipline—that the Egyptians would know that He is the true God (30:26). As in other prophecies, this seems to signify that ultimate fulfillment will not come until the end time.

Egypt to Be Felled Like the Great Tree Assyria (Ezekiel 30:20–31:18) Nov. 15-16 Cont’d

Two months later, God gives Ezekiel another prophecy of Egypt’s fall (31:1; compare 30:20). A comparison is made between Egypt and Assyria. Egypt was a powerful and arrogant empire like Assyria. But the Assyrian Empire was even more powerful than Egypt. In fact, Egypt itself had been conquered by Assyria and incorporated into the Assyrian Empire.

In the imagery of chapter 31, Assyria is pictured as a Lebanon cedar—as the cedars of Lebanon were the tallest trees in the Middle East. Great rivers nourished the empire—the Tigris and Euphrates

providing Mesopotamia with its fertility of soil and with important commercial traffic routes. Smaller nations, represented as birds and beasts, dwelt in and beneath its boughs. No other “trees,” imperial nations, were like it. Still, this great tree was felled—brought down to “hell” or, in Hebrew, *sheol*, meaning “the grave” (verses 15-17; compare “death” and “the Pit” in verse 14).

Despite the greatness and power of Assyria, God brought it down by means of the forces of Babylon. So why did Egypt think that *it* could now prevail against Babylon? If the Assyrian Empire had fallen to the Babylonians, so would the much weaker Egypt—especially since the Almighty God was behind it.

Ezekiel’s Prophecy Against Tyre (Ezekiel 26)

November 17-18

Chapters 26–28 of Ezekiel contain a series of oracles against Tyre, the great Phoenician seaport and major trading center of the ancient world, located in what is now the country of Lebanon. The prophecy was given in the 11th year of Ezekiel’s captivity on the first day of the month—but what month is not stated (26:1). Perhaps the month was considered as a given, following what was probably the previous date reference before the chapters of this section were rearranged thematically—the 11th year, third month, first day (31:1). This would mean the Tyre prophecies began later the same day—in the late spring of 587 B.C.

Tyre says of Jerusalem, “Aha! She is broken...she is laid waste” (verse 2). This could be a prophecy of what Tyre *would* say once Jerusalem had ultimately fallen to the Babylonians. Yet it could just as easily reflect what the Tyrians had already expressed when this prophecy was given. For with the siege against Jerusalem underway, onlookers from other countries no doubt said things like, “It’s all over for Jerusalem.”

Tyre says, “The gateway of the peoples...is turned over to me” (verse 2). “The people of Tyre were enthusiastic about the fall of Jerusalem, seeing it as an opportunity to further increase its own wealth. This was not only because Tyre expected to gain commissions from the sale of much of the Holy City’s spoil, but also because Judah had controlled the important land trade routes in the area. Tyre, just 35 miles from the Sea of Galilee and 100 miles from Jerusalem, expected that more of the land routes’ income would swell her own coffers” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Ezekiel 26). And there may be more to this, as we will see.

The remainder of the prophecy deals with punishment to come on Tyre. Verses 3-7 give a summary, and the passage that follows provides details. Some historical background and information on the layout of the city makes it easier to understand aspects of the prophecy. “Tyre was in effect [originally] two islands (they were later made one) joined to the mainland by King Hiram I [in the days of King Solomon].... In doing so he created ideal harbors, endorsing a seafaring tradition” (Karen Farrington, *Historical Atlas of the Holy Land*, 2003, p. 94). “Under Hiram’s reign, Tyre flourished. The original layout of the city was in two parts: an offshore island, which was the older part of the city, and the overspill on the mainland. Hiram developed the island-city and used landfill to connect it to the other small islands nearby, and to the mainland by a narrow causeway” (*Lonely Planet: Lebanon*, 2001, p. 231).

Tyre was later incorporated into the Assyrian Empire. After the fall of Assyria, the city submitted to Nebuchadnezzar’s Neo-Babylonian Empire. At the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign, Tyre plotted with Judah and other nations against Babylon, but nothing then came of it. But soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Tyre did rebel, leading to a siege by the Babylonians. The siege lasted for 13 long years, during which the Babylonian soldiers were worked very hard (see Ezekiel 29:18). “During the siege, the Tyrians destroyed a causeway which had connected the offshore islands to the mainland [the one Hiram had built], and retreated behind the [island] city’s walls, said to be 50 metres (160 ft) high” (*Insight Guide: Syria & Lebanon*, 2000, p. 316). Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the mainland part of the city but really had nothing to show for all his efforts, having failed to capture the city’s vast wealth. Grudgingly, the island city did again acknowledge his sovereignty but remained semi-autonomous—though the Tyrian king and royal family were deported to Babylon, in line with what Jeremiah had foretold in Jeremiah 27.

The Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians in 539 B.C. In 525, the Persians sent forces to exert their control over Western Asia and Egypt. Tyre then became a Persian vassal state.

“The next in Tyre’s long line of strongman-conquerors was more successful than Nebuchadnezzar. Alexander the Great was able to conquer the known world following his defeat of the Persian army and, in 332 BC, he marched along coastal Phoenicia exacting tribute from all its city-states. In its time-honoured tradition, Tyre alone decided to resist. The city was thought to be impregnable, but upon arriving in 332 BC Alexander built a mole or breakwater in the sea to reach

the city [essentially rebuilding Hiram's causeway from the rubble of the mainland city]. This impressive feat was carried out under a hail of missiles. At the same time on the mainland, Alexander's engineers were constructing huge mobile towers called *helepoles*, which at 20-storied high, were the tallest siege towers ever used in the history of war. After seven months these great war machines lumbered across the mole and lowered the drawbridge, unleashing archers and artillery on the city. Tyre fell after seven months and Alexander, enraged at the dogged resistance of the Tyrians which had caused heavy Greek losses, destroyed half the city. The city's 30,000 citizens were massacred or sold into slavery. This destruction heralded the domination of the Greeks in the Mediterranean" (*Lonely Planet: Lebanon*, pp. 231-232).

"The history of the city did not end there, however. Eighteen years after Alexander captured the city it was again besieged, this time by Antigonos, one of Alexander's generals. That the city was far from indefensible is demonstrated by the fact that it took 15 months for Antigonos to capture it. Far greater than the damage caused by Alexander's siege was the reopening of the canal connecting the Red Sea with the Egyptian port of Alexandria. This diverted much of the trade that had formerly passed through Tyre" (Robert Bradshaw, "Tyre," 1999, <http://www.robibrad.demon.co.uk/tyre.htm>).

"The city...after a period of Seleucid rule following Alexander's death, became autonomous in 126 BC. In 64 BC, Tyre became a Roman province and later became the capital of the Roman province of Syria-Phoenicia.... By the 4th century AD it had recovered some of its former splendour and a basilica was built on the site of the former temple of Melkart.... The city was taken by the Arabs in 635, and its prosperity continued.... People from other coastal cities had fled to Tyre when the Crusaders started to take the Middle East in 1124. They felt safe behind Tyre's 'impregnable' walls. After a siege of five and a half months, Tyre's defenses collapsed and the Christian army occupied the city and the surrounding fertile land. The Crusaders built the defensive walls and Tyre remained in Crusader hands for 167 years until the Mamluk army...retook the city in 1291. Over time, the classical and early Christian remains were demolished and the worked stone reused in later buildings. The ports were silted up and the mole which connected the island to the mainland became a sand bar; the city of Tyre became a peninsula which is now covered in modern buildings"—the modern Lebanese city of Sor or Sour (*Lonely Planet: Lebanon*, pp. 232-233).

With this history in mind, let's look at some specifics of Ezekiel's prophecy. God said that He would bring "many nations" against Tyre as "waves" of the sea (Ezekiel 26:3). The plurality of nations could conceivably refer to the many peoples that made up the Babylonian Empire. Or they could refer to a succession of nations that would conquer Tyre over the centuries. Either interpretation fits Ezekiel's prophecy. Notice again that they come as *waves*. While this is a fitting metaphor for military forces assaulting a seaport or an island city, it may also signify successive conquests. Again, either interpretation fits.

Verses 7-11 refer specifically to the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar. Since the Babylonian ruler did not take the island citadel, the heart of the city, the destruction described in this passage must refer to what he would do to the mainland city and Tyre's "daughter villages in the fields"—that is, outlying villages on the mainland. Nebuchadnezzar is denoted in these verses by name and then by the pronoun "he."

But in verse 12, the pronoun switches from "he" to "they"—perhaps referring back to the "they" of verse 4, denoting the many nations that would come against Tyre. In verses that follow, God uses the pronoun "I" to show that He is ultimately behind what is happening.

Notice the pronouncement of verse 12. God says that "they"—the nations to follow Nebuchadnezzar—would be successful in plundering Tyre. More remarkably, it is stated that they would lay the stones, timber and soil of Tyre "in the midst of the water." This must be, at least on some level, a reference to what Alexander's forces did. They dumped the rubble of the mainland city into the sea to rebuild the causeway out to the island fortress. It is surely no mere coincidence that Alexander's army conquered the city in this amazing way. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the city, but he did not accomplish all that was prophesied for Tyre. Alexander went further, casting the rubble from Nebuchadnezzar's destruction into the sea and plundering the wealth of Tyre by capturing the island city.

But did Alexander, then, completely accomplish the prophesied ruin of Tyre? God said He would scrape the dust from Tyre, leaving it like the top of a rock (verses 4, 14). He also said it would be a place for spreading nets in the midst of the sea, sunk in the deep (verses 5, 14, 19). In both cases, this could perhaps apply to what Alexander did to the mainland city area, scraping it bare for material to cast into the sea to construct his causeway. Yet nothing of the sort happened, or has ever happened, to the *main* city—the island city that was protected by 160-foot-high walls. Alexander did

conquer it but obviously did not lay it waste as the prophecy would seem to imply. Some of the island city is now below water, but most of the ancient island remains a thriving city to this day.

God said of Tyre, “You shall never be rebuilt.... so that you may never be inhabited.... You shall be no more; though you are sought for, you will never be found again” (verses 14, 20-21). It is difficult to reconcile this with the history of Tyre up to the present time. It is possible that God was speaking exclusively of the mainland area. While there are Roman ruins on what used to be the mainland coast, seeming to indicate rebuilding, it may be that the original Phoenician city was located not here but somewhere nearby. Regrettably, if the original mainland city was completely scraped bare, we don’t know exactly where it was located—which could conceivably fit the description of never being found again. (Curiously, an uninhabited area a bit south of the modern Tyrian peninsula surrounding several major freshwater springs has been declared a nature reserve, with construction forbidden by law—an interesting way to keep it from being rebuilt if this is the site of ancient mainland Tyre.)

Yet it seems odd that God’s announcement of doom on Tyre would apply primarily to the mainland overspill of the city and not the main island city itself with its towering walls. Indeed, notice verse 13, where God says, “I will put an end to the sound of your songs, and the sound of your harps shall be heard no more.” Consider that before the mainland city was destroyed, the people simply moved a half-mile out across the water to the island citadel—where singing and music could still be heard (and can still be heard today). So it seems likely that Alexander did not accomplish all that God had foretold for the city’s destruction.

Notice again the summary of Tyre’s judgment in verses 3-7, ending with the intended purpose in punishment: “Then they shall know that I am the LORD” (verse 7). Recall from chapters 25 and 29-30 that the same thing is said of the outcome of punishment on Judah’s other national neighbors, which seems to signify that ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies will not come until the end time. Jeremiah had warned Tyre’s ruler that sword, famine, pestilence and slavery would come on those nations that failed to submit to Babylon (Jeremiah 27)—but many of the Tyrians escaped destruction or captivity in Nebuchadnezzar’s time, and it is likely that nothing of what Jeremiah said was recalled by anyone in Tyre at the time of Alexander. Indeed, the Tyrians as a people did not really come to know that the true God was God in either Nebuchadnezzar’s or Alexander’s invasions. Most of them probably did not even know that God had pronounced any judgment against them at all.

Indeed, there are other indications of duality in the prophecies of Tyre in chapters 26-28, pointing to fulfillment in ancient times *and* the end time. One is the similarity of the description of Tyre and its fall in chapter 27 to that of end-time Babylon in Revelation 18. Another indication is the obvious parallel with other prophecies of Tyre that are apparently dual in nature, such as the one in Amos 1:9-10 and Isaiah 23.

Furthermore, we’ve already seen in Isaiah 13 and Jeremiah 50-51 another parallel: God’s prophecies of *Babylon’s* utter destruction and desolation, where He states that *it* would never be resettled or rebuilt—even though the site of ancient Babylon has been resettled and parts of it rebuilt over the centuries. As noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on those passages, the explanation is that God is speaking primarily there of *end-time* Babylon, a powerful global empire, religious system and trading bloc centered in Rome in the years just prior to Jesus Christ’s return. In fact, God foretold of Babylon through Jeremiah: “How Babylon has become desolate among the nations! The sea has come up over Babylon; she is covered with the multitude of its waves” (Jeremiah 51:41-42). Is not this very close to what God foretold of Tyre through Ezekiel?

In the Bible Reading Program’s comments on Isaiah 13 and 23, it was explained that many people of Babylonian and Phoenician descent eventually displaced the Romans and became spread across southern Europe. Thus, the European empire of the last days can logically be referred to as either Babylon or as Tyre, the chief Phoenician city. The end-time Babylonian capital, the city of Rome, is located close to the sea. And figuratively, the waters from which Babylon rises and over which it rules represent “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:15)—back into which this great power bloc will sink when it is at last overrun by those it has oppressed.

With this in mind, consider again Tyre’s statement against Jerusalem in Ezekiel 26:2: “She is broken who was the gateway of the peoples; now she is turned over to me; I shall be filled.” In other prophecies in the book of Ezekiel, Jerusalem is often representative of all Israel in the end time. So this particular verse, besides the ancient application, may also portray a future “Tyre” or “Babylon” rejoicing over the fall of modern-day “Israel” (meaning the United States, Britain, the Jewish people, etc.), seeking to take over the Israelites’ position as gatekeeper of world commerce and banking and

to seize their wealth. In any case, we know from other prophecies that this *will* happen—and that it will bring God’s judgment.

Finally, it is clear that the destructions of ancient Tyre under Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander did indeed fulfill important elements of God’s prophecy in Ezekiel 26. But these did not constitute *complete and final* fulfillment. They were, in fact, mere precursors to the ultimate fall of the latter-day “Tyre” at the time of Christ’s second coming, when the whole Babylonian-Tyrian system will be plundered, stripped bare and destroyed forever—never to rise again.

The Sinking of the Great Merchant Ship of Tyre (Ezekiel 27)

November 19-20

“Ezekiel’s prediction of the endless death of Tyre (26:1-21) is followed by messages about the doomed city [in chapters 27 and 28]. First comes a funeral dirge, picturing the great commercial center as a merchant ship. The prophet describes her construction (27:1-11) and then lists her trading partners (vv. 12-24)... The prophet completes his metaphor with a vivid description of the sinking of richly laden Tyre (vv. 25-36)” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, chapters 27–28 summary).

This great “ship of state” is made of the finest materials—including planks of fir trees from “Senir,” another name for Mount Hermon or another peak in its range (see Deuteronomy 3:9; Song of Solomon 4:8; 1 Chronicles 5:23).

For “merchant of the peoples on many coastlands” in verse 3, the New Living Translation has “trading center of the world.” Like the previous chapter, this one is dual—applying to ancient Tyre as well as Tyre of the last days (modern Babylon), a global economic market and religious empire centered in Europe. The mourning of the participants in the system over the sinking of Tyre is quite similar to the mourning of participants in the Babylonian system of the end time (compare especially verses 29-33; Revelation 18:17-19). *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on Revelation 18:9-19, “This section is framed like an ancient lament and is especially similar in content to Ezekiel’s lament over the destruction of Tyre (see Ezek. 27).” Moreover, as noted in our previous reading, many in southern Europe are descended from the ancient Babylonians and Phoenician Tyrians, strengthening the identification.

Many nations participated in the international marketplace of ancient Tyre, as their modern counterparts will participate in the Tyrian or Babylonian system of the end time. There was and will be Ashurite or Assyrian involvement (verses 6, 23). “Men of Gammad” in the watchtowers (verse 11) may be a mistranslation. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* offers: “Rather, as the Tyrians were Syro-Phoenician, from a Syriac root, meaning daring, ‘men of daring’... It is not likely the keeping of watch ‘in the towers’ would have been entrusted to foreigners. Others take it from a Hebrew root, ‘a dagger,’ or short sword... ‘short-swordsmen’” (note on verse 11).

There is mention of Javan or Yavan (verse 13), the biblical Hebrew word used elsewhere for Greece. Javan is listed in the table of nations of Genesis 10 as the son of Noah’s son Japheth, father of the yellow-skinned Mongoloid peoples of the Far East but also of many white and olive-skinned people of the Mediterranean. Many southern Europeans, such as the Greeks, Cypriots, Italians and Spaniards, have traditionally been traced, at least in part, back to Javan’s sons Elishah, Kittim and Tarshish—all mentioned in Ezekiel 27 (verses 6-7, 12). (It may be that Japheth himself was Caucasian and his wife Oriental, allowing for offspring to take after either side of the family.)

It appears that the sons of Tarshish originally settled in southern Asia Minor, giving their name to the city of Tarsus. Some later migrated from here to Spain, giving their name to Tartessus, the city of Tarshish to which Jonah fled (and which gave its name to the famed Phoenician and Israelite “ships of Tarshish”). This western branch of Tarshish would today, then, seem to be a significant portion of the people of Spain, Portugal and Latin America. Yet there may well be an eastern branch of this family. The traditions of ancient Japan claim its people were led to the “Land of the Rising Sun” by a three-legged crow—the “sun crow” representing the sun deity in the ancient Far East. Surprisingly, the rare imagery of three-legged birds as sun symbols has also been found on coins of Asia Minor, where sat Tarsus. Might this region be the origin of some of the Japanese?

Interestingly, the Japanese traditionally trace themselves mainly through two peoples, known as the Yamato and the Kumaso. The Kumaso, from whom the lower class is predominantly descended, are believed to be of Malay or Indonesian origin. But the Yamato, ancestors of the ruling class, appear to have come from far in the west. A.L. Sadler, a professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney, wrote in his 1946 book *A Short History of Japan*: “Judging from the Caucasian and often Semitic physiognomy seen in the aristocratic type of Japanese, the Yamato were mainly of Caucasic, perhaps Iranian, origin. These were...modified to some extent by mingling with the Mongoloid rank and file.... The colour of the Japanese does not differ at all from that of the South

European races like Spain and Italy.... The Alpine or Central European race...is of much the same type as the ordinary Japanese.... Some Japanese ethnologists favour the theory that the Yamato came from Central Asia” (pp. xi-xii). Indeed, perhaps they came all the way from Asia Minor.

In the end time, the peoples of Tarshish—encompassing perhaps the Spanish–Latin American world in the west and Japan in the east (each of which has had a great commercial tradition in modern times in its own right)—will merely be merchants for the much greater system of Tyre or Babylon that will dominate the globe (see verse 12).

Tubal, Meshech and Togarmah (verses 13-14) in ancient times dwelt near the Black Sea. Today, as we will later see in our examination of Ezekiel 38–39, these peoples may be found in central, western and eastern Russia respectively. The bartering of human lives mentioned in 27:13 parallels a similar statement about end-time slave trade in Revelation 18:13.

Even Israel and Judah are shown participating in the Tyrian marketplace before their downfall (Ezekiel 27:17). This was true in the ancient world and will come to pass again at the end of this age.

In verse 19, the Israelite tribe of Dan is associated with Javan or Greece, likely because the Danites for a time settled in Greece and plied the seas with the ancient Phoenicians and Greeks (see “Appendix 2: Were the Greeks Israelites?” in our online publication *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future* at <http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/appendices/ap2.html>.) Dan today may be found in Ireland and Denmark. Yet, as part of the European Union, they are once more associated with Greece—“traversing back and forth” as they are located on opposite ends of the European continent.

Areas of the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Jordan, Mesopotamia (southeast Turkey and Iraq) and Iran are also shown as participating in this system (verses 15-18, 20-24).

Verse 26 shows the overloaded ship of Tyre broken by “the east wind.” *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on this verse: “The east wind was often powerful and potentially destructive (see Gen. 41:6; Job 27:21; Ps. 48:7 [where God says He breaks the merchant ships of Tarshish with an east wind]; Is. 27:8). Thus it symbolizes the destruction the [ancient] Babylonian army [from the east] would bring on Tyre. In 26:7, Babylon would come from the ‘north.’ This was the direction from which the army would invade Phoenicia.” In the end time, a great wave of destruction will come on the European empire from forces from the east (see Revelation 9:13-19). And ultimate destruction will come when Jesus Christ returns “as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west” (Matthew 24:27).

As great as it is, the ship of Tyre will ultimately sink—meaning the demise of both ancient Tyre and the future global power bloc it represents. In the description of its finery and vast wealth along with what is to befall it is a lesson for everyone, especially when we consider that, in a broader sense, Babylon—and so Tyre as well—is representative of mankind’s entire corrupt civilization. *The Bible Reader’s Companion* states in its note on chapter 27: “The extended metaphor in this poetic description of Tyre and her fall is one of the most powerful to be found in ancient or modern literature. The funeral dirge sums up the world’s preoccupation with material wealth and prosperity and the pride success breeds. The sudden sinking of the ship not only portrays the demise of Tyre, but the vulnerability of all material possessions to destruction. The last two verses particularly display the anguish of those who pin their hopes on things—only to see them suddenly, irretrievably, gone.”

Tyre’s Human Ruler and the Power Behind the Throne (Ezekiel 28) November 21-22

Having foretold, at God’s direction, the destruction of Tyre in chapters 26 and proclaiming a lament or dirge over it in chapter 27, Ezekiel in chapter 28 now relays God’s word concerning the “prince,” or “ruler” (NIV), of Tyre (verses 1-10). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* suggests that the reference on one level is to “Ittobaal II of those days [of the Babylonian conquest], though the speech is in many ways not against any one particular king but Tyre’s kings per se” (note on verses 1-5).

Expositor’s goes on to comment in its note on the same passage: “Tyre’s king is described as a very wise man. Through his wisdom and insight in commercial sea-trade, he was able to amass Tyre’s great abundance of wealth (vv. 4-5; cf. ch. 27). However, the accumulation of riches and its accompanying splendor and importance created a haughty pride in this ruler (v. 5b; cf. 27:3). He was so impressed with himself that he actually began to think that he was a god—perhaps even El, the chief deity of the Canaanite pantheon (v. 2). Ancient Near Eastern thought often viewed the king as the embodiment of the god(s).... He was sitting on the ‘throne of a god in the heart of the seas’ [NIV]. Most likely Tyre’s well-known, magnificent temple of Melkart, Tyre’s patron deity, was in

the prophet's mind. It was not uncommon for a city or a temple to be called the throne of a god, even in the O[ld] T[estament] (cf. Ps 132:13-14; Jer 3:17 et al.). On ancient bas-reliefs of Tyre, the city and its temple are seen projecting high out of the surrounding sea."

This kind of thinking will likely also characterize the ruler of *end-time* Tyre or Babylon, a powerful dictator referred to in the book of Revelation as "the Beast" (a name that also applies to his empire). Consider that Adolf Hitler, a ruler in this tradition and forerunner of the final dictator, saw himself as a superhuman messianic figure who would reign over a "Thousand-Year Reich."

Returning to the passage, mention is again made in Ezekiel's book of the prophet Daniel (28:3; compare 14:14), showing that Daniel was already famous for his wisdom while he lived. This, of course, helps support the authenticity of Daniel's book as a product of the sixth century B.C., a fact many now seek to deny. In the King James and New King James Versions of Ezekiel 28:3, it is stated that the Tyrian ruler is wiser than Daniel. This could be a sarcastic statement. But notice the NIV translation, which gives this as a question: "Are you wiser than Daniel? Is no secret hidden from you?"

Clearly this ruler is not as wise as he thinks. He sees himself as a god when he is, in fact, just a man—and a man who will be humbled for his supreme arrogance by the *true* God. Strangers will invade and devastate his land, and he will die at the hands of aliens or foreigners (verses 7, 10). This applied to the ruler of ancient time. But it is also the fate of the end-time Beast ruler. His European empire will be devastated by a ruthless wave of invasion from the east (Revelation 9:13-19). And he himself will be slain in the ultimate "alien" invasion—at the coming of Jesus Christ and His saints (verses 19-21), who were strangers and foreigners in this world and will certainly be seen as foreigners from the vantage point of this "uncircumcised" ruler (see Ezekiel 28:10).

God then tells Ezekiel to take up a lamentation for the "*king*" of Tyre (verses 11-19). Though a large number of scholars argue that the poetic imagery of this passage merely emphasizes the downfall of the Tyrian ruler given in the beginning of the chapter, "many take the shift from 'ruler' to 'king' to indicate a shift of prophetic focus from a literal [human] ruler to a being he typifies, Satan" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chapters 27–28 summary).

The latter interpretation becomes especially compelling when we consider the specific descriptions in the lament. Notice these points from *The Bible Reader's Companion*:

"(1) The description 'model of perfection' [NIV], and 'blameless...from the day I created you' seems an inappropriate description of any human ruler.

"(2) 'Eden, the garden of God' is described as the gem-filled center of earthly rule, and is taken as the province of Satan before Adam's creation. [It could also refer to the heavenly paradise of God, especially given the mention of this being walking among the fiery gems 'on the holy mountain of God,' signifying the place of God's throne.]

"(3) 'A guardian cherub' [(NIV) or 'anointed cherub who covers' (NKJV)] again is hardly an appropriate description of a pagan king. But it would fit Satan's pre-fall role as an important angelic being [being evidently one of the two cherubim whose wings overshadowed the throne of God, as represented in the earthly copy of God's throne, the mercy seat above the Ark of the Covenant].

"(4) 'Till wickedness was found in you' does not fit the [fact that no human beings are sinless]...but seems to indicate a specific act of sin which corrupted the being described.

"(5) 'I expelled you...I threw you to earth' [NIV] seems to fit Christ's words about Satan's expulsion from heaven, as recorded in Luke 10:18. While these same verses admit metaphorical and poetic interpretation references to the human rulers of Tyre, those who see Satan in this passage believe they are more appropriately rooted to him" (note on verses 11-19).

It is most fascinating to consider that the patron God of ancient Tyre was Melkart. This name means "king of the city" (*Expositor's*, note on verse 13a). His great temple in Tyre was seen as his throne, as earlier mentioned. So the "king" of Tyre that God addresses would naturally seem to be the false god Melkart. Consider that a false god could represent an actual demonic power. The apostle Paul said of pagan temple sacrifices, "The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God" (1 Corinthians 10:20). And Scripture makes it clear that demonic forces are the real rulers of this world (Ephesians 6:12; Daniel 10:10-21), with Satan the devil as the chief ruler or king of this world, the "god of this age" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Satan, then, is the real power behind the throne—of both ancient and future Tyre. Ezekiel 28, then, is parallel to Isaiah 14, which addresses the human ruler of Babylon (both ancient and future) as well as the ultimate *spirit* ruler of Babylon, Satan. (Readers may wish to review that passage and the Bible Reading Program's comments on it in context of the current reading.) The lament over the king of Tyre probably does refer to the human ruler in a metaphoric sense—but the primary

reference is to Satan. Consider that Satan may actually possess the Beast dictator at times (as seems to have occurred on a few occasions with Hitler). So there could actually be a blending of personalities. Even short of actual possession, there will clearly be evil spiritual influence. The supreme arrogance and blasphemy of the human ruler, of both ancient and end-time Tyre, ultimately comes from Satan—“the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). (To learn more about the powerful evil spirit who dominates the present age, send for or download our free booklet *Is There Really a Devil?*)

In the next section of Ezekiel 28, God pronounces judgment on Sidon (verses 20-24). Sidon was a sister city to Tyre. In fact, Tyre began as a colony of Sidon. The name Sidon is mentioned in the table of nations in Genesis 10 as the firstborn son of Canaan (verse 15). Thus, it may be that Sidon is used in Ezekiel 28 to portray the Phoenician people generally—with Tyre as the political, economic and religious power that has sprung up from among them. Recall that many of the Phoenicians today, along with the modern Babylonians, are scattered throughout southern Europe. Sidon was also the origin of Canaanite idolatry, which so infected the Israelites over the centuries—and this could be another reason it is singled out for special mention.

The chapter ends with God’s promise to return the Israelites to their land. *Expositor’s* states in its note on verses 25-26: “The judgment of the nations around Israel was given to encourage the exiles that God would faithfully exercise his righteousness against the nations as well as Judah. Ezekiel encouraged the Judeans further with a reminder that the Lord would regather them from among all the nations where they had been scattered by God’s judgment. This restoration to Palestine would take place when God executed his judgments on the nations, judgments that would not be completed fully till the end times. By regathering Israel God would demonstrate to all nations that he was the holy God, unique and distinct. None of man’s proposed deities had ever been able to accomplish a restoration such as this, and they never would; for the Lord alone was God and none other.”

Jeremiah Buys His Cousin’s Field—A Sign of Hope (Jeremiah 32) November 23-24

The events of this chapter occur during the 10th year of Zedekiah (verse 1), which equates to the 11th year of Ezekiel’s captivity—for even though Zedekiah’s reign and Ezekiel’s captivity began at the same time, Zedekiah’s first year seems to have followed an uncounted accession year (see Edwin Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 1983, pp. 184, 190).

Zedekiah’s 10th year was the second year of the siege of Jerusalem (587 B.C.). As we earlier read, the Egyptian army had approached (Jeremiah 37:5), prompting Nebuchadnezzar to order his Babylonian forces to temporarily depart from Jerusalem to confront them. The Egyptians suffered a terrible defeat (see Ezekiel 30:21-22) and withdrew back into Egypt. Now the Babylonians had returned and their siege of Jerusalem was again underway. On King Zedekiah’s orders, Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard at the palace (32:2). “Zedekiah should have known by this time that Jeremiah’s message was not his own. Yet he found fault with the prophet’s predictions because they were wholly unfavorable to the country and to Zedekiah himself. In plain, unequivocal terms Jeremiah foretold Zedekiah’s fate” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 3-5).

God informs Jeremiah in advance of the visit of his cousin Hanamel. The prophet is to agree to Hanamel’s offer to sell him his field in their hometown of Anathoth under the terms of property redemption: “Family property must not pass into the hands of an outsider (v. 7). The purpose of this law was to keep property in the family and preserve the bond between family and their property. For the seller this was duty; for the relative or kinsman-redeemer it was a right.... The passage reveals that the ancient laws of land tenure were still followed in Judah in spite of its apostasy. In addition to the general law for all Israel, these land-tenure laws would in Jeremiah’s time have special relevance to alienation of property belonging to priestly families—property that should not pass into nonpriestly hands. The situation is all the more dramatic since the field Jeremiah was to buy had already been captured by the invading Babylonians” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 6-7).

Expositor’s suggests that Hanamel might have been in financial straights (same note). Biblical historian Eugene Merrill, however, concludes: “Hanamel obviously believed that, whereas he would soon be exiled, Jeremiah would be left behind and, hence, in a position to care for the estate” (*Kingdom of Priests*, p. 465).

With the Chaldeans outside, the request would have seemed preposterous to anyone who found out about it. Yet God directs Jeremiah to go through with the transaction, which the prophet does, committing the deed scrolls to his scribe Baruch. “According to custom, one copy of a deed was sealed for safekeeping; a second copy was left open for future consultation” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 10-11). Jeremiah, at God’s command, tells Baruch to put both copies in a clay jar to

be kept safe for a long time to come (verse 14). Interestingly, the oldest copies of the Old Testament, those among the Dead Sea scrolls, were found preserved in just such clay jars in the Judean desert—and they had been preserved more than 2,000 years!

Jeremiah relays the point of what God has told him to do: “Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land” (verse 15). The exiles will one day return. But the prophet then prays to God, seemingly to gain understanding of what was happening, mentioning the presently dire circumstances of the nation (verses 16-25). Some commentators “have seen a need on Jeremiah’s part for confirmation of the transaction. Still others feel that Jeremiah slipped into an attitude of doubt.... Given all the circumstances and the tension of the political and military situation, such an attitude would be understandable. Jeremiah may have longed for some reconciliation of the purchase with his prophecies of Jerusalem’s destruction.... Although he had explained the meaning of the episode (v. 15), [it is possible that] he was still troubled by its improbabilities; furthermore, he also longed for reassurance for the people” (*Expositor’s*, note on verse 16).

God then gives His reply reassuring Jeremiah (verse 26-44). Even though the situation seemed hopeless, God reminded Jeremiah that nothing is too hard for Him.

Yes, for the time being He would deal severely with Judah, destroying the very rooftops where they burned incense to idols (verse 29). Israel and Judah, in spite of God’s magnificent promises to them, had rebelled from the very beginning when they were a young nation. Amazingly, God says of the “holy city” of Jerusalem: “For this city has been to Me a provocation of My anger and My fury from the day that they built it, even to this day” (verse 31). How ironic that the Jews thought that being in that city would save them! The idolatry and rebellion became so bad in the end that they even set up their idols in God’s temple. Josiah had removed the idols, but the pagan worship was still in their hearts, and it hadn’t taken long for them to revert to their old ways. God knew what human nature was like, but even He hadn’t expected Judah to stoop so low that they would actually murder their children, sacrificing them to the false god Molech (see verse 35, where He uses words He had spoken to Jeremiah many years earlier in 7:31). So again, yes, the nation would now be punished as Jeremiah had announced (32:36).

But, as God explains in the remainder of the chapter, He would, in the future, gather the exiles back from captivity and resettle them in the land. While the Jewish return from Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra may have been in mind on one level, it is clear that this is not the primary meaning of this section. God repeats His promise from chapter 31 to make a new covenant with the people of a changed inner being. He refers to it as an “everlasting covenant” (verse 40) as in Ezekiel 16:60. And this covenant will be made with all the people, who are described as having a unified heart (Jeremiah 32:39). This is obviously describing not the ancient return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity but the future return of all Israel and Judah at the time of Jesus Christ’s second coming, when the Kingdom of God is established on earth. Note the nature of the Kingdom Age. It is not described as transpiring in some “heavenly” place above the clouds. People will buy land, sign and seal deeds, and through business become prosperous (verse 44). Indeed, this comes back to “the main theme of this chapter. [Jeremiah’s] transaction was an example to be universally followed in the future restoration (v. 43). What he did will be repeated by many others in that coming day” (note on verses 43-44).

Notice that Jeremiah placed this hopeful chapter right after chapter 31, the New Covenant chapter. Indeed, chapters 30–33 are sometimes referred to by commentators as the Book of Consolation, as this section looks forward to the wonderful time when Israel will at last be restored, spiritually converted and richly blessed.

National Restoration and the Righteous Branch (Jeremiah 33)

November 25-26

This chapter concludes what some have called the “Book of Consolation,” the section containing God’s promise of national restoration, before the book of Jeremiah returns to the historical aspects of Judah’s downfall.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem were trying desperately to save their city. As had happened in Hezekiah’s day, the people pulled down houses, including some within the palace complex, to strengthen the walls (verse 4; see Isaiah 22:10). “Houses that were built along the city walls could be torn down and filled with rubble to produce a wider, more solid wall. This was one means of combating the sloping earthen siege ramparts that armies constructed opposite domestic quarters rather than at heavily fortified towers or gates” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 33:4-5). But this effort would prove to be in vain because it was God they were really fighting against (verse 5).

Verse 6 then switches immediately to a message of great hope, when God will bring “health and healing.” The captives of both Judah and Israel will return (verse 7), clearly pointing to the time of Jesus Christ’s second coming. Jeremiah was still in prison (verse 1) but God was now going to encourage him and give him an even greater insight into the wonderful world to come, revealing His secrets (verse 3).

God again tells Jeremiah about the coming new world—prosperity, peace, rebuilt cities, forgiveness, fertile pastures, peace for the flocks, safety and an example to the whole world. It would be so good that even God Himself will be made happy by it. The New Living Translation brings out the impact of this: “Then this city will bring me joy, glory and honor before all the nations of the earth! The people of the world will see the good I do for my people and will tremble with awe!” (verse 9). The people will be so happy that they will again sing praises to God and offer Him their thanks. With regard to the “sacrifice of praise” or “thank offerings,” the *Harper Study Bible* comments: “Jeremiah seems to refer to spiritual sacrifices, not animal offerings, i.e., thanksgivings made with the mouth, or what Hosea calls ‘the fruit of our lips’ (Hos 14:2)” (note on Jeremiah 33:11).

In verses 14-16, God repeats the prophecy about the coming “Branch,” given earlier in chapter 23. “The Messiah is here called a *righteous Branch*, a true shoot of the stock of King David. Many of David’s descendants had become kings of injustice; now the people were looking for the coming of a righteous king who would come as the Lord’s anointed or Messiah. The phrase *The LORD is our righteousness* must be understood as, ‘Jesus is our righteousness.’ The word ‘LORD’ here is ‘Yahweh’ [‘He Is Who He Is’; the Eternal]; in this context, it can only mean Jesus the Messiah. Thus Jesus is Yahweh, or God. And the N[ew] T[estament] refers to Jesus our Righteousness (cf. 1 Cor 1.30). His righteousness is imputed to us [through His death atoning for our sins and His life in us helping us to obey God]. We have no righteousness in ourselves, only his righteousness (2 Cor 5.21)” (*Harper Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 23:5-6). In Jeremiah 33, the name “The Eternal Our Righteousness” is given to Jerusalem (verse 16)—as God’s people bear His name and receive His righteousness.

Continuity of the Royal and Priestly Lines (Jeremiah 33)

Nov. 25-26 Cont’d

The latter part of Jeremiah 33 is a remarkable section concerning two important family lineages. God had promised David that his royal line would continue forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). This is repeated here with the addition of a second part, the promise of continuity for the Levitical priests. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “Monarchy and priesthood were the two bases of the O[l]d T[estament] theocracy. When these appeared to be in most danger of extinction in Jeremiah’s day, we find their continuance couched in sure and irrevocable terms. What is affirmed of the monarchy in v. 17 is promised the priesthood in v. 18. The Levitical priesthood is assured a permanent ministry (cf. the promise to Phinehas in Num. 25:13). As legitimate priests, they will serve the Lord” (note on Jeremiah 33:17-18).

Yet these promises have appeared to many to contradict history. Neither the occupation of the Davidic throne nor the Levitical priesthood’s offering of burnt and grain offerings has been continuous. *Expositor’s* explains in its note on verses 17-18: “If one sees in them a constant presence and succession of Davidic rulers and Levitical priests, then, of course, history does not validate this interpretation. But the passage claims no such thing. It says only that David’s dynasty will never cease. Temporary interruption is only apparent, not true cessation.”

Yet when would the two offices, brought down with the Babylonian conquest, resume? The physical sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood were reactivated when the Jews returned to the land of Judah in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. But a few centuries later they were again cut off for a short time under Syrian oppression in the second century B.C. After their next restoration, they continued until the Romans destroyed the second temple in A.D. 70. Since then, nearly 2,000 years have gone by and they have never been reestablished. Of course, the priestly descendants have always been there—recognized even. Many Jews today bear the names Cohen, Cohn, Kahane, Kagan, Kahn or some other variant, meaning “priest.” No doubt many of priestly descent have continued to serve in a “priestly capacity” as teachers and officiators at religious functions. In fact, some have speculated that the true ministry of Jesus Christ has always had descendants of the Levitical priesthood among its numbers, and that may well be. But the prophecy here specifically mentions burnt and grain offerings. Sacrifices are elsewhere prophesied to be reestablished among the Jews soon before Christ’s return—to be performed once again, no doubt, by the Levitical priesthood. But these too will be cut off. Then, as the last section of Ezekiel informs us, sacrifices will be reinstated under Levitical priests after Jesus Christ returns to set up His 1,000-year reign over the earth. Indeed, this ultimate

resumption appears to be the main focus of this passage in Jeremiah—or, more accurately, the continuity of the priestly line that will make this millennial resumption possible.

What then of the Davidic throne? Since the prophecy of David's descendants is intertwined with that of the Levites, they are usually viewed as being similarly fulfilled. Based on the gaps in the Levitical service, many have interpreted this section of Jeremiah with the view of a very long gap in the occupation of David's throne—from Jerusalem falling to the Babylonians more than 2,500 years ago until David's descendant, Jesus Christ, comes to claim the throne at His yet-future return to then reign forever. But while that is no doubt the ultimate focus of verse 17, parallel with the messianic prophecy of verses 14-16, it does not fully consider the section that immediately follows, which speaks of a vast pool of Davidic descendants (verse 22) from which God will draw "rulers" (*plural*) to set over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (verse 26). Since this multiplicity of rulers of Davidic descent cannot logically apply solely to Christ's millennial rule, it must mean that David's throne would be reestablished before Christ's coming to allow multiple occupants of the throne. So we see that we should view the prophecy here about the Davidic line somewhat differently from that of the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices. The prophecies are intertwined not because they are fulfilled in exactly the same way and time frame, but to show that these two bedrocks of Israelite government, both civil and ecclesiastical, would both be reestablished. God says His promises in this regard are more certain than the cycle of day and night (verses 20, 25). Of course, the *ultimate* fulfillment of both prophecies would come in the same time frame—when Christ comes to rule the earth.

Again, though, it should be clear that David's throne would be reestablished even before the coming of Christ. In fact, Psalm 89 adds a very important detail in this regard. God there reveals that He promised to David, "Your seed I will establish forever, and build up your throne *to all generations*" (verse 4). So although there could be vacancies in the occupation of David's throne, a generation could not pass before that vacancy was filled. This means a generation could not have passed from the deposing of Zedekiah at the fall of Jerusalem until the reestablishment of the throne. But that throne was never reestablished in Judah. So what happened?

Notice that Jeremiah 33:17 says that, from the time this prophecy was given, David would not lack a descendant to sit on the throne *not* of the house of Judah, but of the house of *Israel*. This makes sense when we recall from Ezekiel 17:22-24 the prophecy of the transfer of the Davidic throne from Judah to Israel. Jeremiah himself would be instrumental in this transfer, with his curious commission "to root out and to pull down" and then "to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). God would use him to transplant the Davidic dynasty through a daughter of Zedekiah from Judah to the Israelites in ancient Ireland, from where it would later be transferred to Scotland and then to England—eventually becoming the British royal family of today. (For more details documenting this little-understood history, see our online publication *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future* at <http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/index.html>.)

The Fall of Jerusalem and the End of the Judean

Monarchy (2 Kings 25:2-7; Jeremiah 39:2-7; 52:5-11)

November 27-28

In the summer of 586 B.C., when Jerusalem's food supply had run out, the Babylonians at last breached the walls of the city (2 Kings 25:2-4; Jeremiah 39:2; 52:5-7). The various rulers of the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar then "sat in the Middle gate" (39:3). "The 'Middle Gate' was probably between the upper and lower divisions of the city. The purpose of the officials' session at the Middle Gate was either to plan their military strategy or to establish their quarters there" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-3). *The Nelson Study Bible* suggests that it was "to assert their authority in the conquered city" (note on verse 3). At the beginning of his ministry, 40 years earlier, Jeremiah had prophesied, "'Out of the north calamity shall break forth on all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the families of the kingdoms of the north,' says the Lord; 'They shall come and each one set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem...'" (1:15).

"Jeremiah gives the Babylonian names of the Babylonian high officials ([Jeremiah 39] v. 3): Nergal-Sharezer was Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law and succeeded him under the name Neriglissar [ruling Babylon from 560 to 556 B.C.]. The 'chief officer' [NIV] (*rab-saris*) was head of the eunuchs who served as chamberlains. 'A high official' [NIV] is literally 'chief magi' (*rab-mag*)" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-3).

Zedekiah, realizing Jerusalem was lost, sought to escape by night. "The two walls near the king's garden between which Zedekiah and his army slipped out of Jerusalem probably lay at the extreme

southeastern corner of the city, giving direct access to the Kidron Valley (cf. Neh 3:15)” (footnote on 2 Kings 25:4). They made their way “toward the Arabah” (verse 4; Jeremiah 39:4; 52:7, NIV)—“the great Jordan Rift Valley that extends throughout the length of the Holy Land from the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Aqabah” (same footnote). But Babylonian forces caught them in the plains south of Jericho.

They were taken to Nebuchadnezzar in “Riblah on the Orontes River in Syria, which was the field headquarters for Nebuchadnezzar’s western campaigns. Jehoahaz had been summoned there earlier by Pharaoh Necho ([2 Kings] 23:33)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 25:6).

Nebuchadnezzar had no pity for those who had rebelled against him. He first killed the king’s sons, followed by the nobles. “Only Zedekiah was spared for captivity after he saw with his own eyes the slaughter and then was blinded.... By modern standards what Nebuchadnezzar did was unusually harsh, but was in accord with ancient pagan practices and is understandable in view of the trouble that Judah and especially Zedekiah had given Babylon. This kind of punishment, especially the blinding (v. 7), is mentioned in the Hammurabi Code.... Thus two prophecies were fulfilled: (1) Zedekiah would see the king of Babylon and would be taken there (cf. 32:3-4), and (2) he would die in Babylon without ever seeing it (cf. Ezek 12:13). To add to his torture, Zedekiah had to witness the slaughter of his sons and the nobles.... This kind of punishment was very ancient (cf. Judg 16:21). Assyrian sculptures show how kings delighted to put out, often with their own hands, the eyes of captive rulers” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 39:6-8).

“The last thing Zedekiah saw was the reward of his sinful folly—the horrible spectacle of his own loved ones being put to death. He would carry this picture with him until his own death in a Babylonian prison (Jer. 52:11)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 25:7).

Besides serving as a lesson to other nations, the killing of the princes and nobility was also to eliminate anyone who, as a possible successor ruler, might serve as a rallying point for the Jewish people. The Judean monarchy had indeed come to a brutal end. Yet, as explained in the comments on our previous reading, the dynasty of David would be transferred elsewhere and go on, just as God had promised.

Destruction and Deportation

(2 Kings 25:8-21; 2 Chronicles 36:17-21; Jeremiah 39:8-10; 52:12-30) November 29-30

About a month after the captivity of Zedekiah, in the Hebrew fifth month of Ab or Av (corresponding to July-August), came the demolition of Solomon’s temple, the palaces and buildings, the removal of all the valuable items to Babylon and the destruction of the city’s walls. This was no easy task—as is born out by the use of the whole Babylonian army to tear down the walls.

As is often the case in Bible translation, the English does not truly convey the sense of the original language. *Mastering the Old Testament* comments regarding 2 Kings 25: “In Hebrew, the first twelve verses of the chapter are one long sentence, each verse beginning with ‘and.’ Clause is heaped upon clause in a kind of cadence, as if each one were another tick of the clock counting down Jerusalem’s final hours” (Vol. 9: 1, *2 Kings* by Russell Dilday, 1987, p. 505).

A lot of detail is given concerning exactly what was taken from the temple. Many items had been taken in previous invasions. Now the temple was stripped bare before it was razed. Strikingly absent is any mention of the Ark of the Covenant, which has fueled suspicions that it was secreted away to some hiding place beforehand (though we cannot now know for sure). As mentioned in comments on a previous plundering of the temple, it is interesting to note that after the fall of Babylon to the Persians, the Jews who are permitted to return to Judah at that time are given temple items to go back with according to a detailed accounting (Ezra 1:7-11)—perhaps made possible by the fact that Daniel was a high official of Babylon who could well have had a hand in this.

Concerning the temple, there appears to be a contradiction as to what day of the month Nebuzaradan, the Babylonian captain of the guard, arrived and destroyed it. In 2 Kings 25:8 the date given is the seventh while Jeremiah 52:12 says it was the tenth. *John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible* says that the difficulty may be solved “without supposing different copies, or any error: [Nebuzaradan] might [have] set out from Riblah on the seventh day, and come to Jerusalem on the tenth; or he might come thither on the seventh, and not set fire to the city till the tenth; or, if he set fire to it on the seventh, it might be burning to the tenth, before it was wholly consumed. The Jews account for it thus: ‘strangers entered into the temple, and ate in it, and defiled it, the seventh and eighth days; and on the ninth, towards dark, they set fire to it; and it burned and continued all that whole day, as it is said, Jer 6:4’” (note on 52:12). The Jewish oral tradition gives the ninth of Av as the date for the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians—as well as the date for the

destruction of the second temple by the Romans more than 600 years later (Tosefta Ta'anit 4:10; Ta'an 29a). The anniversary of the destruction of Solomon's temple was commemorated as "the fast of the fifth month" (Zechariah 8:18)—still observed by the Jews on the ninth of Av as the anniversary of the destruction of both temples. Indeed, a number of other great tragedies have befallen the Jewish people on this date over the centuries.

Another possible solution to the apparent discrepancy is that the date given in Jeremiah 52:12, the tenth, actually applies to verse 15 regarding the deportation of the people—and that everything in between is a parenthetical inset explaining what *had already* happened up to this point.

Not everyone, we learn, was deported at this time. The Babylonians knew the value of the land and, rather than leaving it totally desolate, they allowed some of the poorer people to stay behind to care for the vineyards and fields.

Certain important people were chosen for execution, such as the high priest Seraiah, grandson of Hilkiah, the faithful high priest of Josiah's day. "Although Seraiah was executed at Riblah ([2 Kings 25] v. 21), his son Jehozadak was simply deported (1 Chr. 6:15). Through Jehozadak's line would come Ezra, the priest and great reformer, who one day would return to Jerusalem and take up Seraiah's work (Ezra 7:1). The second martyred priest Zephaniah may be the priest mentioned by Jeremiah (Jer. 21:1; 29:25). Jerusalem would be less prone to future rebellions with the chief religious and civil officials gone" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 25:18).

Of course, many were carried away at this time—though much less than had already been carried away more than a decade earlier. Bear in mind that the figures given in Jeremiah 52:28-30 concern only the city of Jerusalem. Many more people were taken from the rest of Judah. Observe also that, according to verse 30, a final deportation would occur a few years after the current one.

The exile would continue "until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths" (2 Chronicles 36:21). "According to the Law of Moses the land was to lie fallow every seventh year (Lev. 25:4). This became known as the sabbatical year. Judah's exile in Babylon allowed the land to enjoy the Sabbaths it had missed [because the people had failed to obey God's law] (see Lev. 26:33-35)" (note on 2 Chronicles 36:21).

Being driven into captivity was a hard plight. As one source explains: "It was indeed a subject for an artist to depict, the long march of the exiles on the way to their distant home. Delicate women and little children forced to travel day after day, irrespective of fatigue and suffering; prophets and priests mingled together in the overthrow they had done so much to bring about; rich and poor marching side by side, manacled, and urged forward by the spear-point or scourge. All along the valley of the Jordan, past Damascus, and then for thirty days through the inhospitable wilderness...whilst all the nations round clapped their hands" (F.B. Meyer, *Jeremiah*, 1980).

Mastering the Old Testament comments on 2 Kings 25: "The reader cannot help but be struck by the passionless tones of the narrative in this chapter. Not once does the author show his feelings, even though he is describing the tragic downfall of his country" (p. 505).

"Nor," the same source goes on to say, "can the reader help but be impressed with the revelation throughout these chapters of God's patience and His reluctance to punish. More than four hundred years had passed since Solomon first disobeyed God and introduced the children of Israel to pagan idolatry. Faithfully, through all those years, a steady stream of prophets clearly proclaimed the warnings of punishment. Varying disasters confirmed their messages, vividly previewing what was to come if the people did not repent and turn to God. With steadfast love, God tried again and again to seek and save His people, but they mocked His warnings, killed His prophets, and would not listen to His reproof. So finally the hour struck and the impending crash came. The harshness of the judgment is somehow softened by the recognition that the Lord is indeed long-suffering toward His people. But His patience and steadfast love are balanced with justice. The destruction is a reminder that we must not presume on His grace and mercy" (pp. 505-506).

This stands as a witness against those who would portray the God of the Old Testament as invariably harsh. It also serves as a warning that the God of love will extend His patience only so far. No one can dispute the fact that today's world blatantly disobeys and disregards God's laws. It can only be a matter of time before He says, "That's the end..."

Supplementary Reading: "The Bible and Archaeology: The Downfall of Judah: Exile to Babylon," *The Good News*, January/February 1999, pp. 22-24, 28.