

13

Babylon Conquers Judah

II Kings 23:36—25:30; II Chronicles 36:5-23

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Babylon Threatens Jehoiakim (II Kings 23:36—24:7)

During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled.

—II Kings 24:1

Jehoiakim had been forcibly placed on the throne of Judah in 609 B.C. in place of his younger brother Jehoahaz. This was done by Pharaoh Necho of Egypt in order to show Judah who was boss. Jehoiakim's 11-year reign was marked by the kind of spiritual rebellion that too many of Judah's kings engaged in and more political turmoil than most before him had known (23:36, 37).

Jehoiakim owed his throne to Egypt, but Egypt quickly lost power outside its own borders. In 605 B.C., at Carchemish on the upper reaches of the Euphrates River, a Babylonian army under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar defeated the combined forces of the Assyrians and

the Egyptians. All of Egypt's allies, including Judah, had to swear allegiance to Babylon (24:1a).

Nebuchadnezzar took hostages from upper-class families to ensure Judah's cooperation with him. Daniel was among these first deportees to Babylon (see Dan. 1:1-3). Daniel became a great man of God, in large part because of the Babylonian captivity. This young man played a great part in Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgment of God's sovereignty (see 2:46, 47).

The Christian can be encouraged that God never wastes circumstances, good or bad. He even uses tragedy to shape the characters of those who honor Him.

During the next three years, Nebuchadnezzar inherited the Babylonian throne and enjoyed great success. In 601 B.C. something unusual happened. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt, and Pharaoh Necho defeated him at the border. Apparently this was the occasion King Jehoiakim seized upon for rebelling against Babylon and renewing his alliance with Egypt (II Kings 24:1b).

For a time after his Egyptian defeat, Nebuchadnezzar was occupied with internal affairs in

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Conqueror and Builder

Nebuchadnezzar is mentioned 88 times in the Old Testament. The first mention of this powerful king of Babylon is given in II Kings 24:1.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon from 605–562 B.C. After defeating the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar heard of his father's death and hurried home to lay claim to Babylon's throne. Under his leadership, Babylon wrenches superpower status from the once-invincible Assyrians and brought down the kingdom of Judah among others.

In addition to his prolific military campaigns, Nebuchadnezzar undertook a massive building campaign in Babylon. He constructed dozens of elaborate temples across Mesopotamia. To remind his bride from Media of her mountainous homeland, he constructed a lush and elaborate garden, an oasis in a desert. This project came to be known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which are included among the original seven wonders of the world.

Babylon, so he was unable to give his full attention to Judah and Egypt. He did, however, instigate punishing strikes against Jehoiakim involving Babylonian units stationed in Syria, native Syrian forces (Arameans), and raiding parties from Moab and Ammon (vs. 2).

The writer of Kings insisted that Jehoiakim's troubles with the Babylonians were in fulfillment of the predictions of the Lord's prophets (II Kings 24:2, 3; see Jer. 15:1-9; Hab. 1:5-11; Zeph. 1:4-13). Jehoiakim was reaping the harvest of sins sown during the idolatrous, immoral, and violent reign of his great-grandfather Manasseh (II Kings 24:3, 4; see 21:2-9, 16; 24:3, 4). The shedding of innocent blood had been

a particularly heinous hallmark of Manasseh's corrupt regime (24:4). Jehoiakim followed his example by ordering the murder of God's prophets who spoke against him (see Jer. 26:20-23).

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I have any habitual sins that need to be dealt with?*

Second Chronicles 36:6, 7 indicate that Nebuchadnezzar sentenced Jehoiakim to shackles and exile in Babylon. Second Kings makes Jehoiakim's death sound like that of any other king of Judah (II Kings 24:5, 6). However, Jeremiah indicated Jehoiakim died in Jerusalem and his corpse was denied a royal burial and unceremoniously dumped outside one of the city gates (see

Jer. 22:18, 19; 36:30, 31). Jehoiakim may have been assassinated by a pro-Babylonian faction in Jerusalem that hoped his death would appease Nebuchadnezzar and the approaching Babylonian army. Another result of the Babylonian action against Judah and surrounding nations was that Pharaoh Necho never dared send another army against the Babylonian Empire (II Kings 24:7).

wicked king probably had been established by his character and actions while he was crown prince (24:9). It's unlikely that he had many opportunities to do much good or bad as king. Jehoiachin reaped the harvest of accumulated wickedness sown by his predecessors and culminating in Jehoiakim's wickedness. His reign began under the shadow of the Babylonian siege prompted by his father's rebellion (see vs. 1; II Chron. 36:6).

Even in modern times, we sometimes bear the consequences of the wrongdoing of past generations.

Ask Yourself . . . *What influences from my past must I resist in order to grow spiritually?*

Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land.

—II Kings 24:15

Jehoiachin became king of Judah for three months and 10 days starting in December of 598 B.C., running through February of 597 B.C. (vs. 8) He was 18 years old at the time. His given name had been Jeconiah (see I Chron. 3:16, 17; Jer. 24:1, KJV, NASB), which was sometimes shortened familiarly to Coniah (see Jer. 22:24, 28; 37:1, KJV, NASB). Jehoiachin's mother, Nehushta, was the daughter of Elnathan, the son of Achbor (see Jer. 26:22), a member of King Josiah's commission to Huldah the prophetess (see II Kings 22:11).

Jehoiachin's reputation as a

Rather than allowing the siege to devastate Jerusalem and its environs, the young and inexperienced Jehoiachin surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who had joined the siege force when the outcome was clear. The whole court of Jehoiachin, including his mother, yielded to the Babylonian emperor at the beginning of the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar's rule (II Kings 24:10-12).

Despite the surrender, Nebuchadnezzar and his army carried out their retaliation against Jerusalem. They confiscated all portable treasures from the temple and royal palace (vs. 13). Earlier King Hezekiah had emptied all of the temple treasures in an unsuccessful attempt to buy off the Assyrians (see 18:15, 16), but he had not sacrificed the worship implements

Nebuchadnezzar's Attacks on Jerusalem

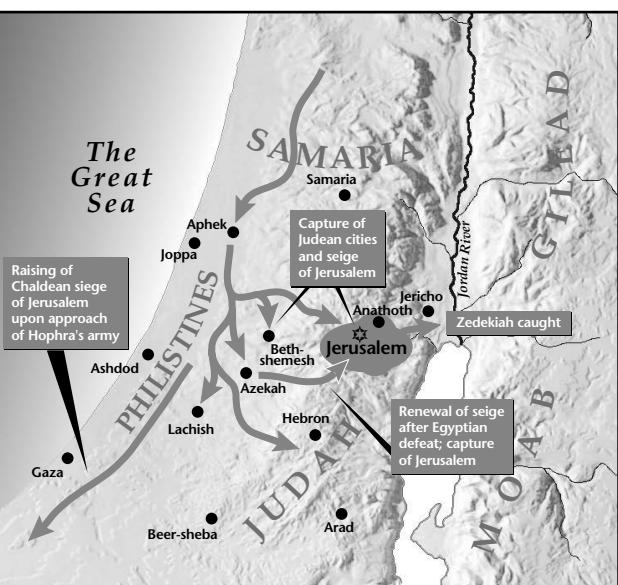
DATE	EXTENT	RESULT
605 B.C.	Quick Strike	Sons of noble families deported for civil service (Daniel included)
597 B.C.	Major Attack	King Jehoiachin deposed; leading families and skilled workers deported (Ezekiel included)
588–586 B.C.	Total Destruction	City and temple destroyed; King Zedekiah blinded; all but the poor deported

that dated back to Solomon. The Lord had predicted the Babylonians would remove Judah's remaining treasures because King Hezekiah had boasted of them to Babylonian envoys (see 20:17). Nebuchadnezzar took these items to Babylon, where they were stored in his temple (see II Chron. 36:7). The Babylonian King Belshazzar would later seal his doom by blaspheming the Lord by feasting from these

vessels (see Dan. 5:1-4).

In 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, following the long-established practices of the Assyrians, deported "all Jerusalem" (II Kings 24:14), meaning the top layer of society that controlled the government, the military, and commerce. "All Jerusalem" amounted to 10,000 people: the royal family and government officials, 7,000 soldiers, 1,000 skilled workers, and other upper-class families (vss. 14-16). Ezekiel went to Babylon in this wave of deportees (see Ezek. 1:2, 3). Jeremiah reported "3,023 Jews" taken captive (Jer. 52:28). He may have reported only the noncombatants.

Nebuchadnezzar made Mattaniah king of Judah in Jehoiachin's place (II Kings 24:17).



Nebuchadnezzar's attacks

Mattaniah was Jehoiachin's uncle, that is, King Josiah's fourth and youngest son. Nebuchadnezzar demonstrated his dominance of Judah's internal affairs by changing Mattaniah's name to Zedekiah. Similarly, Pharaoh Necho had placed Eliakim, another of Josiah's sons, on Judah's throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim a dozen years earlier (see 23:34). Zedekiah means "Righteousness of the Lord." Nebuchadnezzar may have intended to imply that deposing Jehoiachin in favor of Zedekiah was right in the eyes of Judah's God.

Jeremiah treated Jehoiachin as the final Davidic king when he prophesied that no descendant of Jehoiachin's would ever sit on the throne of Judah (see Jer. 22:28-30). Ezekiel dated 13 of his prophecies from the exile of King Jehoiachin. Zedekiah seems to have been widely regarded as a regent for the rightful king, who lived in exile.

deposed nephew, Jehoiachin, when he became king (vs. 18). He reigned for 11 years, from 597 to 586 B.C. His mother, Hamutal from Libnah, had also been King Jehoahaz's mother (see 23:31). Zedekiah continued to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. The quality of his kingdom only confirmed the Lord in His intention to remove the people of Judah from His presence in the promised land (24:19, 20).

King Zedekiah figures prominently in the Book of Jeremiah. He consulted with the prophet (see Jer. 21:1, 2) and even begged for Jeremiah's help (see 37:3), but he never had the courage to do what he knew was right. The ungodly advisers around Zedekiah always got their way (see 38:1-5). One contingent of those advisers convinced Zedekiah that he could rebel against the Babylonians who had put him in power (II Kings 24:20).

Ask Yourself . . . *Do I have any bad advisers in my life?*

Zedekiah shuttled ambassadors between Jerusalem and the capitals of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon to discuss allegiance to Babylon (see Jer. 27:3). In 595 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar faced a rebellion in Babylon. It may have been at that time that Zedekiah and the other small nations around him decided they could break from Babylonian control. In 589 B.C., Pharaoh Hophra ascended the throne in Egypt and declared his independence from Babylon. The Lachish letters, 21 pottery fragments with military mes-

C Babylon Crushes Zedekiah (II Kings 24:18—25:7)

They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.

—II Kings 25:7

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old, just three years older than his

sages on them, reveal that Hophra was in communication with the commander of Zedekiah's forces in southern Judah. Jeremiah consistently bore witness to Zedekiah that the Lord wanted Judah to submit to Babylon (see Jer. 27:12-14).

On January 15, 587 B.C., the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem (II Kings 25:1). The siege lasted for 18 months, interrupted briefly when Pharaoh Hophra led an Egyptian army north in a futile attempt to relieve Judah (vs. 2; see Jer. 37:5-8; Ezek. 17:15). On July 18, 586 B.C., when famine conditions in Jerusalem had reached desperate proportions,

The Babylonian Siege of Jerusalem

The Babylonian Chronicles, imprinted on clay tablets by scribes, left a record of the important events in the kings' reigns. The tablet pictured gives an account of the second siege of Jerusalem, around March 16, 597 B.C.

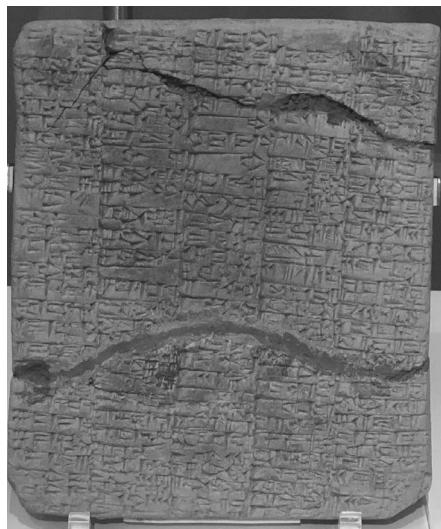
It reads: "In the seventh year, the month Kislev, the king of Akkad [Babylon] mustered his army and . . . encamped against the city of Judah and on the second day of the month Adar he captured the city [and] seized [its] king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city [and] taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon."

portions, the northern city wall was breached by the Babylonian army (II Kings 25:3, 4a).

The army of Judah attempted to escape Jerusalem by night through a gate on the southeast corner of the city (vs. 4b). They fled across the Kidron Valley, over the Mount of Olives, and down into the Arabbah, the deep valley containing the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. On the plains of Jericho, about 15 miles from Jerusalem, the forces of Babylon overtook and captured the exhausted defenders of Judah's capital (vs. 5).

The troops of Judah were scattered and Zedekiah was captured (vs. 6). Nebuchadnezzar had not been personally at the siege of Jerusalem. He had remained at his base camp at Riblah in northern Syria, probably to deal with the

Babylonian tablet



Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Zedekiah was taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where his sons were executed in his presence before he was blinded and taken to Babylon. The Lord had prophesied about Zedekiah through Ezekiel, "I will bring him to Babylonia, the land of the Chaldeans, but he will not see it, and there he will die" (Ezek. 12:13).



Babylon Destroys Jerusalem (II Kings 25:8-21)

[Nebuchadnezzar] set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. —II Kings 25:9

On August 14, 586 B.C., roughly a month after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, Nebuzaradan, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial guards, arrived in the captured city with instructions for destroying it. He burned the temple, the royal palace, and every home. When structures made of lime-stone blocks are burned, the stones become crumbly from the heat and useless for rebuilding. Finally all of the troops under Nebuzaradan's command set about dismantling the walls of Jerusalem (vss. 8-10).

The distribution of workers during Nehemiah's rebuilding efforts in 445 B.C. suggests that the destruction

was more thorough on the east and north sides of the city and less along the west and southwest (see Neh. 3).

After completing the devastation of Jerusalem, Nebuzaradan took three groups of people into exile to Babylon: the survivors of Jerusalem's residents, the inhabitants of the towns and countryside of Judah, and those who had deserted to the Babylonians during the siege (II Kings 25:11). Jeremiah reported only 832 exiles at this time (see Jer. 52:29). The prophet must have counted some highly specific segment of what the writer of Kings described as a mass deportation. The peasantry of Judah was left to till the land and keep it from reverting to a wilderness (II Kings 25:12).

In 597 B.C., when Jehoiachin was deported, the Babylonians had taken the gold and silver utensils from the temple. In 586 B.C., under Nebuzaradan, they made the extraordinary effort necessary to cut up and remove from the ruins of Jerusalem the large bronze items of the temple. They confiscated every bronze utensil from the temple, no matter how humble its use. They also found other items of gold and silver, perhaps newly made since the previous raid (vss. 13-15).

The two bronze pillars Solomon had cast to grace the entrance to the temple were the most impressive items the Babylonians took away (vs. 16). As when the columns were made (see I Kings 7:47), there was no practical means to weigh the quantity of brass involved when they were broken up.

In the course of his mopping up activities in Jerusalem, Nebuzaradan arrested Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the next senior priest, the three directors of temple security, the most senior military commander still at large, five surviving members of Zedekiah's government, an official charged with mobilizing the citizenry of Judah, and 60 of his organizers (II Kings 25:18, 19). Nebuzaradan transported this last batch of prominent captives to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where they were all executed (vss. 20, 21).

After Nebuzaradan's mission of destruction in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar's army returned to Babylon with all of its Jewish captives. "So Judah went into captivity, away from her land" (vs. 21). Thankfully, the chief priest Seraiah's son Jehozadak was deported rather than executed with his father (see I Chron. 6:15). Seraiah's descendants in Babylon through Jehozadak included Ezra (see Ezra 7:1), the great scribe directed much of the spiritual renewal of the community of exiles who returned from Babylon after the captivity.

Even among the ruins of shattered dreams, spiritual growth can occur.

Ask Yourself . . . *How did I grow spiritually during times of crisis in my life?*

II Kings 25:22-30; II Chronicles 36:5-23 in Brief

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, the grandson of the man who participated in Josiah's recovery of the law and the son of the man who protected Jeremiah from King Jehoiakim, as governor over the peasant population left in Judah. Gedaliah set up his government in Mizpah. Jeremiah joined him there, and soon expatriates who had fled the war filtered in from the nations east of the Jordan.

Ishmael, a distant member of the royal family, assassinated Gedaliah because he cooperated with the Babylonians. Many of the remaining Jews fled to Egypt to escape Babylonian retaliation. They forced Jeremiah to go with them even though he told them the Lord wanted them to remain in Judah.

God had not forgotten His chosen people. After 37 years of exile, King Jehoiachin was released from prison in Babylon and honored by his captors for the rest of his life. After the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon in 538 B.C., Cyrus, the first Persian emperor, decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.