

## UNIT TWO: GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK WITH ISRAEL

### SESSION NINE: ISRAEL'S HISTORY IN THE LAND

#### Summary of the Ninth Session of the Course

##### Division of the History by Stages

1. The conquest and settlement of the land
2. The period of the judges
3. The first kings and the united monarchy
4. The divided monarchy
5. The downfall and destruction of Israel
6. The downfall and destruction of Judah
7. The exile and restoration of the Jewish Homeland
8. The Greek period
9. A brief time of independence
10. The Roman period

##### The Conquest and Settlement of the Land

The two biblical books which tell the story are Joshua and Judges, but they really seem to weave together two stories: the violent conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua, and the more gradual settlement of the land. I assume each gives a view of the settlement from a different perspective. Deuteronomy may present as an ideal the complete destruction of the Canaanites and everything Canaanite, but such was not the case. Canaanites continued to live in the land throughout Israel's history there, and Jesus had an encounter with a Canaanite woman which ends with his healing her daughter.

After the conquest, Joshua apportions the land to the various tribes of Israel. Each tribe receives its "portion in Yahweh," its part of the land, except the tribe of Levi. The Levites are the priests, and their portion is Yahweh. So, all harvest celebrations in Israel were to include the Levites as well as the resident foreigner and the widow – people who had no land of their own from which to derive a harvest.

Joshua son of Nun is the dominant figure in the conquest. At its completion, he not only apportions the land to the tribes but calls them all together at Shechem for a covenant renewal ceremony. There he challenges all the Israelites to choose that day whom they will serve: the gods

of their ancestors, the gods they served beyond the river (Jordan), or Yahweh who brought them out of Egypt and gave them this land. The people agree that they will serve Yahweh, but Joshua tells them they cannot, because Yahweh will demand loyalty and obedience. They insist they will serve Yahweh.

## **The Period of the Judges**

The judges are not judges as we know them, although some of them at least do make judgments in disputes. They are charismatic military leaders called by Yahweh to lead Israel into battle in a particular situation. They are not professional soldiers but civilians empowered by Yahweh's spirit to bring victory over Yahweh's enemies. The classic judge is Gideon, and an incident in his campaigns shows the nature of Israel's holy wars. Before allowing him to engage the enemy, Yahweh tells Gideon he has too many men, which means he could win the battle without Yahweh's help. So, Gideon must send a large portion of them home before he may enter the fight. The battle is Yahweh's, not Gideon's or Israel's. We noted that modern so-called holy wars would never willingly follow this rule of having to be militarily disadvantaged before entering into battle.

The period of the judges goes in cycles. After a victory over their enemies (most notably the Philistines), the Israelites are faithful to Yahweh for a while. In time, however, they go their own way, no longer looking to Yahweh or obeying him. Then, their enemies gain power over them again and attack them, and the Israelites are defeated. In their distress, they cry to Yahweh for deliverance. Yahweh raises up another judge to lead them to victory, and the cycle repeats.

We talked about the woman judge, Deborah. She is identified as a prophetess and a judge who was settling disputes. She summons Barak, a warrior, and tells him Yahweh wants him to lead the Israelites against Sisera, a Canaanite general. Barak tells her he will go if she accompanies him. She answers, "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for Yahweh will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman."

## **The First Kings and the United Monarchy**

In time, the Israelites demand a king because the other nations all have kings. No doubt, the people want the stability and security a monarchy could provide with its standing army. The ongoing threat comes from the Philistines, and the people want a king to make them safe and keep them secure. So, they approach the last judge (also a prophet), Samuel, and ask for a king. Samuel takes the matter to Yahweh who assures him the people are not rejecting him (Samuel) but Yahweh, their true king. Yahweh agrees to give them a king, although Samuel warns the people a king will take their sons for his army and their daughters for his court and will tax them heavily. Yahweh reveals to Samuel the man to anoint (they anointed with oil rather than crowning a king), and he is Saul, who then becomes the first king of Israel, Yahweh's anointed (*messiah*).

Saul is a good enough king for a while, but in time he turns from Yahweh and becomes unstable. Finally, Yahweh tells Samuel to anoint a new king whom he finds in the house of Jesse in Bethlehem: David, who will become the great king. First Samuel tells the stories of David's service in Saul's army and his court and of Saul's attempts to kill him. Saul and his son Jonathan, David's friend, are killed in battle, and David becomes king. He is first made king of Judah, his own country, and then king of Israel. So, even though Israel and Judah remain two distinct countries within "all Israel" (which is confusing), the two lands are united under the monarchy of David.

David is both a warrior (with his own professional army) and a politician. Once he is king of two countries, he needs a neutral capital that will satisfy both. David picks the perfect spot: it lies within Judah (his homeland and chief base of support) but near its northern border with Israel, and it belongs to neither nation but to the Canaanites. It is Jerusalem on Mount Zion, and David conquers it (by having his men sneak up the water system into the city) and makes it his own – the city of David.

David is a very human biblical hero. He is the "man after God's own heart," but he is also a man of power and passion, given to pursuing his own appetites. We talked about the story of his affair with Bathsheba (who becomes pregnant by the king) and his arrangement of the murder of her husband Uriah. To connect this week's discussion with next week's, we looked at David's confrontation by Nathan the prophet. Nathan takes King David a situation requiring the king's judgment. A rich Israelite with many sheep has taken the one and only sheep of poor Israelite to whom the animal was a pet and beloved companion. Angered by the injustice, the king declares the man who has done such a thing deserves to die. Nathan then tells him, "You are the man." David does not have Nathan killed, but repents. The child of David and Bathsheba dies, but David is spared. From then on, however, his house is troubled, especially by his own sons and their aspirations to power. In the end, it is another son of David and Bathsheba, Solomon, who inherits the kingship.

David is not permitted to build Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem, for two reasons the Bible gives. Yahweh rejects the idea of David's building him a house because Yahweh has always been content to "live" in a tent and journey with the people. God has no need of a house. Instead, Yahweh will build David a house, meaning a dynasty. Yahweh promises that David's heirs will always sit on throne in Jerusalem. The second reason David may not build the temple is that he has too much blood on his hands.

King Solomon does build the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. His father David had conquered countries surrounding Israel, and Solomon conquers still more. This king is renowned for his wisdom and becomes the patriarchal figure of the wisdom literature of Israel, which includes the biblical books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes as well as many of the psalms.

Solomon begins his reign well, asking Yahweh for wisdom rather than wealth or power, but he wavers in his fidelity to Yahweh. He has many wives, including those he marries to forge political alliances. Since these wives are not Israelites, they worship foreign gods, and Solomon

makes places for them to worship their gods. His building projects and life of wealth also tax the citizens heavily, which is resented particularly by the people of the northern kingdom, Israel.

### **The Divided Monarchy**

When Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam listens to the wrong advisors and rejects the demands of the Israelites for lower taxes and less forced labor. So, the northern kingdom renounces his monarchy over them and its allegiance to the house of David: “What portion have we in the son of Jesse?” (Jesse was David’s father.) Israel makes its own king, Jeroboam I, while Rehoboam rules Judah.

In Judah, the monarchy is maintained by succession from father to son within the house of David. In Israel, the anointing of the king returns to the charismatic means by which Yahweh is supposed to choose the anointed. Both ways have their advantages and disadvantages. The obvious advantage of Judah’s Davidic dynasty is stability; the disadvantage comes as the Davidic kings presume upon their position and power, growing greedy and corrupt. The charismatic kingship offers the advantage of freshness and vitality because there is no automatic succession. The selfish or incompetent son of the king does not become the next king. The disadvantage is the lack of stability in a political process open to intrigue and even murder. Succession easily becomes a matter of plots and assassinations.

The same cycles of faithfulness and unfaithfulness we saw in the period of the judges continues in both monarchies, that of Israel and that of Judah. The Bible evaluates kings, not by their conquests or building projects, but by their fidelity to Yahweh and maintenance of justice for the people. So, the Bible will say of a king who was very effective as the world measures leadership, “He did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and he died.” That’s it. Little more needs to be said, unless his infidelities are detailed. Some kings are judged to have been good and faithful, but most are condemned as corrupt and unfaithful. So, the biblical telling of the histories of the two monarchies shows both headed toward disaster.

### **The Downfall and Destruction of Israel**

Next week, in discussing the prophets, we will look more closely at the causes of Israel’s downfall, but we did talk some about the situation. It is the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., and the dominant power in the Near East is Assyria (capital city, Nineveh). Israel, Judah, and the other small countries of the Near East pay tribute to the king of Assyria, to whom they refer as “the Great King.”

In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., Israel (the northern kingdom) enjoys its greatest prosperity, its golden age, under the rule of King Jeroboam II. Israel had established its capital in Samaria and its national sanctuary at Bethel (since Jerusalem had served as both under Solomon). It seems that the 8<sup>th</sup> Century brings the rise of a money economy (replacing the barter system) and international trade.

With money, come the practices of lending and foreclosing which lead to abuses of the poor and powerless. Amos accuses the wealthy merchants of selling the needy for a pair of sandals and of making money by peddling even the sweepings of the wheat from the threshing floor. Economic injustice rivals political corruption, and the two feed off each other.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, Assyria experiences some internal troubles which require attention at home, and so the empire seems to loosen its grip on the smaller nations from which it demands tribute. Israel and some of the other small nations see an opportunity to throw off the Assyrian yoke by withholding tribute. They form an alliance against Assyria, but the king of Judah refuses to join them. In anger, they attack Judah and besiege Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah warns the king of Judah not to do anything rash and not to be afraid. Isaiah assures the king Yahweh will deliver the city, and so he should simply trust and wait. Indeed, the siege is lifted after an outbreak of illness among the besiegers, but the King of Judah has neither trusted nor waited. Instead, he has sent an appeal to the Great King for help, and Assyria responds with devastating force. In a relatively short time, the Assyrians destroy Israel (around 722-721 B.C.), and the kingdom never exists again. The Assyrians take some of the surviving Israelites into exile and, then, bring foreign peoples into the land to inhabit it and intermarry with the Israelites who remain so the ethnic and national identity of Israel will be destroyed.

### **The Downfall and Destruction of Judah**

Although various prophets warn Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, of Yahweh's impending judgment, it is Jeremiah who is chosen to deliver the final words of doom upon the holy city, its temple, and the Davidic dynasty. After the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians, Judah could have taken the prophets' warnings to heart and returned to Yahweh but did not. Instead, the southern kingdom seems to have decided that, since Israel has been destroyed, it – Judah – must be the true Israel of God.

We are now in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., and the dominant power in the Near East is Babylon. As Israel had done two centuries, Judah decides to withhold tribute from its overlord. The Babylonian response comes swiftly with deadly force. Town and fields are burned, and citizens of Judah are taken back to Babylon to live in exile from their homes. Twice the King of Judah and the nobles withhold tribute, and twice the Babylonian army comes and takes their people into exile. The Babylonians remove the King of Judah and replace him with a puppet king, although still a descendant, if less directly, of David. Even this puppet king, however, is persuaded or forced by the nobles to defy Babylon again. It seems that their faith, though false, is strong. They seem truly to believe that Jerusalem can never be taken by an enemy, that Yahweh will preserve his holy city, his temple, and his house of David. Jeremiah tells them it is not so, but they do not believe him. He mocks their confidence in the temple and prophesies the end of the house of David, but he stands alone.

In 587 B.C. (some date it as 586), the Babylonians, who have come a third time and besieged Jerusalem, breach the city's walls and take it. They burn the temple, kill the king's sons before his eyes and then blind him so their deaths will be his last sight, and then lead him and the foremost citizens of the city into exile. Jeremiah was right. Unable to move the people and their leaders with forgiveness or punishments, Yahweh has brought destruction on Judah and Jerusalem.

### **The Exile and Restoration of the Jews, the Greek Period, and a Brief Time of Independence**

We did not talk much about the exile or the eventual downfall of Babylon, except to say that Babylon does finally fall to Cyrus the Persian, who not only allows the Jews to return to Judah but gives them financial assistance to do so. Many, however, remain in Babylon which has become their home. Those who do return struggle to survive and rebuilt ruined Jerusalem but are hampered by poor harvests, hostile neighbors, and internal strife. When completed, the second temple is a poor substitute for Solomon's, and those who remembered the old temple weep at the sight of the new.

Still the Jews are not truly free, because Persia rules the Near East until a new conqueror comes – Alexander the Great. He dies young, however, and his empire is divided among five of his generals and their descendants. Two of the resulting dynasties figure in the history of Israel: the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria. It is the Seleucid King Antiochus IV who pushes the Jews to rebellion. He decides to make Judah into a land of Greek culture, and so he imposes that culture upon the Jews by force. He even has a statue of Zeus erected inside the temple in Jerusalem. His abominations, as the Jews consider them, lead to the Maccabean revolt which brings temporary independence to Judah. Judah the Maccabee (hammer) leads the Jews in the liberation of Jerusalem and the cleansing and rededication of the temple, now celebrated as Chanukah (which means *rededication*). Unfortunately, the descendants of the Maccabees, the Hasmoneans, are notoriously corrupt. The last Hasmonean Jewish kings are the Herods.

### **The Roman Period**

We discussed little of the Roman period in class, except to note that the Roman general Pompey and his legions bring an end to the time of Jewish independence. The Hasmoneans remain as puppet kings, but Rome rules the region and most of its known world.

Pompey loses out to Julius Caesar who is himself assassinated. From the power struggle that follows Caesar's death, Octavian emerges triumphant. He becomes Rome's first emperor and gives himself the throne name of Augustus. Luke tells us that during his reign Jesus is born.

In 70 A.D., Rome crushes a Jewish rebellion and destroys Jerusalem again. No longer will there be a Jewish nation until after World War II when the modern state of Israel is brought into existence in the land of Palestine.