

Lesson 10 – The Fall of Jerusalem

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC is one of the most significant events in Israelite history. The sinfulness and stubbornness of Judah's last four kings brought upon Judah the wrath the prophets had been warning about for decades. After invasions and deportations in 605 and 597 BC, Babylon had placed Zedekiah on Judah's throne, apparently with the understanding he'd be a loyal servant of Babylon. Jeremiah warned him to submit to Babylon, for it was God's will. Zedekiah was a coward. At times, he seemed to believe Jeremiah, yet he never followed the prophet's advice. Zedekiah was encouraged to rebel by numerous factors. Egypt offered military support against Babylon. The officials and nobles were fiercely patriotic. Neighboring countries who were also subjects of Babylon were eager to rebel. All these voices had seriously underestimated Babylon's power and, more importantly, were ignorant or defiant concerning God's will. Babylon besieged Jerusalem for almost two years. When the starvation had grown extreme, Zedekiah and his army attempted to escape but were overtaken. The Babylonians destroyed the city wall and temple and burned the palace and other buildings. They exiled many of the survivors. Jeremiah had prophesied that the Jews would be in exile for seventy years and return. The first wave returned c. 536 BC, which was seventy years after the first exile (605 BC). The temple reconstruction was completed in 516 BC, seventy years after its destruction. After the fall, the Babylonians installed a governor named Gedaliah. The new Judean government was centered in Mizpah. But Jewish zealots murdered Gedaliah. Fearing Babylonian retaliation, the Jews fled to Egypt, ignoring Jeremiah's instructions to stay in Judah. Jeremiah seems to record a fourth exile occurring c. 581 BC, presumably as retaliation for Gedaliah's murder or to capture rebel forces. The fall of Jerusalem finally purged idolatry for good. The temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, and the city walls were rebuilt c. 444 BC.

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Prophets were already positioned where God wanted them when Jerusalem fell. In 605 BC, Daniel had been exiled and placed in the royal court of Babylon. In 597 BC, Ezekiel had been exiled and continued to deliver God's message to his fellow Jews in Babylon. Jeremiah was imprisoned in Jerusalem during the fall but released by the Babylonians and allowed to stay with the new government. His work continued among the Jewish survivors in Judah.

Several Biblical texts record Jerusalem's fall. 2 Kings 25 provides the primary narrative. Jeremiah 39 contains an almost identical record, minus some details. Jeremiah also records his own release from prison. Jeremiah 52 reviews the event from a later time, recording that Zedekiah was imprisoned in Babylon until his death. This appendix includes details about the plunder of the temple, executions, and three waves of exiles (597, 586, 581 BC). Ezekiel 33 records when news of the fall of Jerusalem reached the exiles in Babylon. 2 Chronicles 36 briefly narrates the fall. Chronicles was written for the Jews rebuilding their lives and country after the return from exile. It's traditionally attributed to Ezra, who led the second major wave of returning exiles in 458 BC. In Lamentations, Jeremiah mourned the fall. Of course, many prophets had foretold it, with Jeremiah and Ezekiel providing the most abundant information beforehand through preaching and living parables.

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1. What oath had King Zedekiah broken? (2 Chron. 36:13)

2. About how long did the siege last? (2 Kings 25:1-3)

3. What did Nebuzaradan do to the temple, other buildings, and walls of Jerusalem? (2 Kings 25:9-10)

4. Who did the Babylonians exile and who did they leave? (2 Kings 25:11-12)

5. What had been plundered from the temple after the 597 BC siege? What was plundered after the 586 BC siege? (2 Kings 24:13; 25:13-17)

6. Who was executed by the Babylonians? (2 Kings 25:7, 18-21)

7. What instructions did Nebuchadnezzar give Nebuzaradan concerning Jeremiah? What options was Jeremiah given? Where did the prophet go? (Jer. 39:11-14; 40:1-6)

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8. Gedaliah, Judah's governor after the fall, was the son of Ahikam and grandson of Shaphan. His uncles were Elasah and Gemariah. His cousin was Micaiah. What do we know about this family? (2 Kings 22; Jer. 26:24; 29:1-3; 36:1-25; see the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia's entry for Shaphan)
9. After the fall of Jerusalem, where were Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah located and to whom did they preach?
10. What did Gedaliah tell the survivors in Judah to do? (Jer. 40:9-10)
11. What had Isaiah prophesied concerning Jerusalem and its kings during the reign of Hezekiah? (Isa. 39:5-7)
12. How long had the temple stood? Note that the Exodus occurred in 1446 BC. (1 Kings 6:1, 38)