

# CHAPTER 1

## ASSYRIA, BABYLON, AND EGYPT



Jeremiah lived from approximately 640 to 575 BC. He was present at the greatest calamity of Israelite history, the fall of Jerusalem, and his lifespan sits at a historical nexus. This was the era when the stories of the three great empires of Israelite history—Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon—converged. The Assyrian Empire collapsed while Jeremiah was still a young man, but the memory of what it had done had an abiding impact on the world of the prophet. Babylon and Egypt more directly interacted with the Jerusalem of his time. To understand the book, one must know something of these empires.<sup>1</sup>

### ASSYRIA

The homeland of the Assyrians was the upper Tigris region of northeastern Mesopotamia. It began as a small city, Ashur, which first emerged to prominence in what is called the Old Assyrian period (approximately 2000–1700 BC). At this time, Ashur had no true empire, but it did have far-flung colonies

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1. For a full history of Assyria, see Eckart Frahm, *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2023). For a useful and accessible history of Assyria and Babylon, see Arthur Cotterell, *The First Great Powers: Babylon and Assyria* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019). See also J. M. Roberts, "Assyria and Babylonia," *NIDB* 1:312–35; and D. J. Wiseman, "Babylon," *ISBE* 1:384–92. Ronald H. Sack, *Images of Nebuchadnezzar: The Emergence of a Legend*, 2nd ed. (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2004), describes the sources used for reconstructing the history of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. It is, however, more concerned with how he was perceived and portrayed through the ages than with providing a systematic account of his life. D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), is an extremely valuable but quite technical resource on Nebuchadnezzar. For a full history of Egypt, see Georg Steindorff and Keith C. Seele, *When Egypt Ruled the East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and Nicolas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Other useful works include Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Abrams, 1995); and David P. Silverman, *Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

that created a significant trade network. After a period of weakness, Assyria rose again in the fourteenth century to a new age of glory, the Middle Assyrian period. This time, it became a military empire and dominated its environment under kings such as Tukulti-Ninurta I (reigned approximately 1243–1207 BC). However, during the turmoil that swept through the entire ancient Near East at the beginning of the twelfth century,<sup>2</sup> and under pressure from waves of Aramaeans from the west in the eleventh century, Assyria almost disappeared. Nevertheless, it endured and recovered.

Beginning with the reign of Ashur-dan II (reigned approximately 943–912 BC), Assyria began to recover its lost empire and initiated the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In the eighth century, however, Assyria suffered a number of setbacks on the battlefield and was ravaged by plague. But by the second half of the century, they were once again highly aggressive and expansive, eventually creating an empire that would extend all the way into Egypt. This was the Assyria that would come into conflict with Israel and its neighbors. This phase began under Tiglath-pileser III (reigned approximately 745–727 BC). Ahaz of Judah became his vassal when confronted by a coalition of Damascus and Samaria, as described in Isaiah 7. Assyria crushed Damascus in 732 and, under Shalmaneser V (reigned approximately 726–722 BC), destroyed Samaria in 722. The southern kingdom of Judah was then all that remained of the Israelite nation. Sennacherib (reigned approximately 705–681 BC) is famous in the Bible for having ravaged Judah but also for being forced to withdraw from Jerusalem after suffering catastrophic losses through an act of God (Isa. 36–37).

Although these events all took place long before Jeremiah's lifetime, they had a significant impact on his generation. The Israelites maintained a deep hatred for Assyria (as illustrated by Jonah), but they recalled that God had delivered Jerusalem even though he had not saved Samaria. This created the myth that Jerusalem was impregnable. Its citizens thought it would always enjoy YHWH's protection because it had the temple and the Davidic monarchy. Also, people wondered why, if God brought about a miraculous deliverance for the city under Isaiah's ministry, he did not do the same thing under Jeremiah's. We will explore these issues below.

The homeland of the Assyrian Empire had great cities, including Ashur, Calah (Nimrud), and Nineveh. For readers of the Bible, the latter would become its most famous capital because of its prominence in Jonah and Nahum. All three cities were destroyed by the combined forces of Medes and Babylonians (Nineveh fell in 612 BC). Remnants of the Assyrian forces fled west to Harran in northern Mesopotamia, but that city fell in 610. With their

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2. Around 1200 BC, civilizations throughout the ancient world went through a period of chaos. Long established centers of power were thrown into disarray. For example, the Hittite Empire of Anatolia broke apart and eventually collapsed, and the city-state Ugarit was obliterated. This period also marked the end of the Bronze Age. Scholars still debate what precipitated this international upheaval.

Egyptian allies, the Assyrians launched a last attempt to regain Harran in 609 but failed. Assyria was then no more.

Neo-Assyrian Empire (911 BC–627 BC)
<p>           Assurnasipal (883–859)            Shalmaneser III (858–824)            Shamsi-Ada V (823–811)            Adad-Nirari III (810–783)            Shalmaneser IV (783–773)            Ashurdan III (772–755)            Ashur-Nirari V (754–745)            Tiglath-pileser III (745–727)            Shalmaneser V (726–722)            Sargon II (722–705)            Sennacherib (705–681)            Esarhaddon (680–669)            Asshurbanipal (668–627)         </p>
Neo-Babylonian Empire (626 BC–539 BC)
<p>           Nabopolassar I (626–605)            Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562)            Amel-Marduk (562–560)            Neriglissar (560–556)            Labashi-Marduk (556)            Nabonidus (556–539)         </p>
Egyptian Empire (2700 BC–526 BC)
<p>           Old Kingdom (2700–2160)            Middle Kingdom (2106–1786)            New Kingdom (1550–1069)            Third Intermediate Period (1069–665)            Late Period (664–526)            Psammetichus I (664–610)            Necho II (610–595)            Psammetichus II (595–589)            Apries [= Hophra] (589–570)            Amasis II (570–526)         </p>

## BABYLON

### *Babylon Before the Neo-Babylonian Empire*

Babylon appears to have been founded in the late third millennium BC. Befitting its later reputation as a cosmopolitan city, Babylon has been ruled by many different peoples. At its founding, two of the earliest peoples of Mesopotamia, the Sumerians and Akkadians, dominated the region. The earliest written reference to Babylon is in an Akkadian text dated to ca. 2250 BC. The

city briefly became an empire, ruling over several subordinate states during the Old Babylonian period. It was at this time governed by Amorites, a north-west Semitic people. The most famous of the Amorite rulers was Hammurabi (ca. 1792–1750), whose code of laws has been preserved. This can be regarded as Babylon's first golden age.

In 1595 BC, Babylon fell to the Hittites of Anatolia (modern Turkey). This began the Middle Babylonian period (1595–1155 BC). Hittite domination of the city did not last long, and for most of this period, Babylon was governed by a people called the Kassites (the origin of this people is unknown, but they may have come from northern Mesopotamia). During this time, Babylon was generally stable and strong. The Elamites, a people to the east (in modern Iran), conquered Babylon in about 1155 BC, and the Kassite dynasty ended. As a supreme indignity, the Elamites carried off the image of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. Thereafter, local Semitic peoples ruled the city. The most famous Babylonian king of this time was Nebuchadnezzar I (1124–1103 BC). He gained glory by defeating the Elamites and recovering the stolen statue of Marduk. He was unsuccessful, however, in his military incursions against Assyria to the north. Thereafter, the city was in the shadow of the growing power of the Assyrians.

From the ninth through the seventh centuries, Babylon was generally subservient to the Neo-Assyrian Empire. At the same time, there was within Babylonia an ongoing struggle for control between the native Babylonians and a people called the Chaldeans. This was a group who had migrated from the west into Mesopotamia during the tenth century and eventually became an important part of the mix of peoples in the region. One important Chaldean was Marduk-apla-iddina (the Merodach-Baladan of the Bible), who managed to gain control over the city in the years 722–710 and 703–702 BC. He sent envoys to Hezekiah of Judah seeking allies in his struggle against the Assyrians (Isa. 39). Eventually the Assyrian Sennacherib, wanting to be free of the Babylonian problem once and for all, destroyed Babylon in 689.

This was regarded as a great sacrilege, however, and his son Esarhaddon rebuilt the city. Upon Esarhaddon's death in about 669 BC, his elder son Shamash-shuma-ukin was made king over Babylon, and a younger son, Ashurbanipal, became ruler of Assyria and thus the suzerain over his older brother. Eventually, in 652, Shamash-shuma-ukin rebelled against his brother and launched a civil war. After a bloody conflict, Babylon fell in 648, and Shamash-shuma-ukin died. Although Ashurbanipal was victorious, Assyria was left exhausted, and subsequent Assyrian kings had to deal with unrest and rebellion in an empire that was coming apart.

### ***Nabopolassar***

In this context, in about 626 BC, the Chaldeans under Nabopolassar gained full control of Babylon. The Chaldean kings overthrew Assyria and

established the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and they ruled Babylon during the time of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel.

Nabopolassar's origin is somewhat unclear. He may have been from among the leading families of Uruk, at the time a garrison city of the Assyrian Empire. With the empire in decline, he became leader of an anti-Assyrian faction. In about 616, he allied himself with the Median king Cyaxares by marrying his daughter. He drove what remained of Assyrian power out of the lower Mesopotamian cities Uruk and Nippur, and Cyaxares took the Assyrian city Ashur. Their united forces conquered and destroyed Nineveh in 612. The Assyrians under Assur-uballit II retreated to Harran in Syria, but with its fall the Assyrian Empire ceased to exist in 609. With Assyria gone, Nabopolassar was now ruler over all Mesopotamia.

Assur-uballit II had been aided in his resistance to Babylon by Egypt under Pharaoh Necho II of Egypt, who feared that the balance of power would be heavily tilted in Babylon's favor if Assyria were eliminated. Necho's first campaign in the north, where he tried to hold Harran, failed, and he returned south. But he soon returned north and continued his struggle with Nabopolassar for control of Syria. But Nabopolassar fell sick and had to return to Babylon, and he left his son Nebuchadnezzar in charge of campaigns on the Upper Euphrates and in Syria (607–606). As crown prince of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar met with Necho for the decisive battle at Carchemish in 605 BC. He thoroughly defeated Necho and forced him to abandon plans for a new Egyptian empire stretching to the Euphrates.

### ***Nebuchadnezzar II***

The victorious prince, known to us as Nebuchadnezzar II, was the eldest son of Nabopolassar and ruled from 605 to 562 BC. Nebuchadnezzar may have been so named to imply that the former glory under Nebuchadnezzar I was returning to Babylon, although he was not related to Nebuchadnezzar I.

Nebuchadnezzar's victories decisively checked Egyptian power in Syria. Prior to this, many Syrians had sided with the Egyptians. Two events followed soon after the battle of Carchemish. First, Nabopolassar died in Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar rushed back to the city to assume the throne. His enthronement seems to have been uneventful; he became king without a power struggle in August of 605. Second, in several campaigns, he set about consolidating power in the Levant (a region made up of modern Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, and called "Hatti" by the Babylonians). He forced many local kingdoms to submit and swear allegiance to him, including Judah. Jehoiakim gave his new overlord tributary gifts and aristocratic hostages, including Daniel (Dan. 1:1). Nebuchadnezzar sacked at least one significant city of the Levant, probably Ashkelon, ca. 604. The next year included at least one major siege, but the name of the place has not survived. It may have been another Philistine city, Gaza. He again campaigned in the Levant in 602 and 601, but again we do not know precisely where (but he does claim to have brought an enormous

amount of plunder back to Babylon).<sup>3</sup> However, the campaign of 601 was to lead to near disaster for Nebuchadnezzar. He attempted to invade Egypt, no doubt intending to eliminate Egyptian involvement in the Levant once and for all and to firmly consolidate his control over the region. The Babylonians were badly mauled, although the Egyptians also appear to have suffered heavy casualties. Nebuchadnezzar had to use the following year rebuilding his forces, and Egypt, although bloodied and wary of facing the Babylonians again, was still standing.

In Jerusalem, many were convinced that the Egyptians could provide protection against Babylon. At some point in this general time frame, Jehoiakim took the fatal step of rebelling against his Babylonian overlord. In January of 597, the Babylonian army invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Judah quickly submitted, surrendering on March 15 or 16, 597, according to the Babylonian Chronicle. It is unusual for the Chronicle to date such an event so precisely; the purpose may have been to point out how quickly the enemy capitulated.<sup>4</sup> Jehoiakim died during the siege, and his successor Jehoiachin was taken into exile along with an enormous amount of plunder, some of it from the temple.<sup>5</sup> Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, assumed the throne in Jerusalem and swore an oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar.

For the next few years, Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns were less frequent. In about 595 he led a force to the east, possibly against the Elamites. On this occasion, no battle was necessary. Upon hearing that the Babylonians were encamped nearby, the enemy fled.<sup>6</sup> For the most part, the empire was secure. But Zedekiah, probably goaded by Egypt, was busy plotting to lead the west in a rebellion against Babylon. He sought the support of Tyre and Sidon (which had long maintained close diplomatic relations with Egypt), as well as that of Moab, Ammon, and Edom (Jer. 27:3).

Nebuchadnezzar could not leave this challenge unanswered. D. J. Wiseman, citing Jeremiah 39:1, calculates that he began his assault on Jerusalem on January 15, 588 BC.<sup>7</sup> The Babylonians destroyed several fortified towns in Judah, including most notably Lachish. At this outpost, short communications scratched out on ostraca (potsherds used for short letters) were sent to and received from other command centers of Judah. Archaeologists discovered a stash of these communications, now known as the "Lachish letters." In letter 4 of this collection, an unknown person writes to the garrison at Lachish that a garrison at a place called Beth-harapid has been abandoned and that the fire-signals from the garrison at Azekah were no

3. This may have been the occasion for Daniel's deportation to Babylon. See Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 24.

4. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 32.

5. The problem of the circumstances of Jehoiakim's death is discussed under "The Last Kings of Judah" below.

6. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 34.

7. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 36.

longer visible. This suggests that the Babylonian process of picking off these outposts was underway.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Jerusalem was under siege. At some point during this process, Pharaoh Hophra tried to relieve the siege, and for a time the Babylonians did pull back from Jerusalem to confront this threat. But the Egyptians were repelled and hurried back to their own land. Babylonian forces finally broke into the starving city of Jerusalem and destroyed it entirely.

Besides Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar also carried out a lengthy siege of the island city-state of Tyre. In this, he was only partially successful. He did not militarily take the city (Ezek. 29:18), although Tyre returned to the status of Babylon's vassal and sent royal hostages to Babylon.<sup>9</sup> A fragmentary cuneiform text suggests that Babylonian forces made a sortie against Egypt in 568 BC.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Nebuchadnezzar completed the rebuilding of Babylon and made it the greatest city of the time. Today, when one reads of the great walls, gates, temples, and avenues of ancient Babylon, one is reading about Nebuchadnezzar's city.

### ***After Nebuchadnezzar***

Upon Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562, the throne was taken by his son Amel-Marduk (called Awel-Marduk or Evil-Merodach in English translations of the Bible). Although many sources are from a later period and details are uncertain, it appears that Amel-Marduk was often in conflict with his father and that some members of the palace court were not happy with him being on the throne.<sup>11</sup> Other than releasing from prison Jehoiachin, the deposed and captive king of Judah (Jer. 52:31–32), we know little of what he did as king. Amel-Marduk was murdered in a palace coup by his brother-in-law Neriglissar in August of 560.

Neriglissar (Akkadian name: Nergal-šarra-uṣur) is thought to be a man called Nergal-Sharezer (or Nergal-sar-ezer) in Jeremiah 39:3 (the text is perhaps corrupt; it mentions two Babylonian officials called Nergal-Sharezer, and they may both refer to the same person).<sup>12</sup> He is believed to have been a foreign prince who married Nebuchadnezzar's daughter Kashshaya.<sup>13</sup> His one known major accomplishment as king was conducting a successful military

8. Robert A. Di Vito, "Lachish Letters," *ABD* 4:127–28.

9. H. J. Katzenstein and Douglas R. Edwards, "Tyre," *ABD* 6:690.

10. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 39–40.

11. Ronald H. Sack, "Evil-Merodach (Person)," *ABD* 2:679.

12. As argued by William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 268. However, John Goldingay argues that they are two people of the same name. Goldingay, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 764. Complicating the situation is that Sharezer may not be part of a proper name but a title. The Hebrew נֶרְגַל שַׁרְעֵזֶר can be translated as "Nergal, ruler of a land," meaning that he is a high-ranking person of a vassal state.

13. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 11–12.

campaign in southeast Anatolia in 557 BC.<sup>14</sup> Neriglissar died in 556 and was succeeded by his son Labashi-Marduk, who ruled only a few months before being slain in a palace coup by Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar. Although these men are important for Daniel, they are not involved in the events of Jeremiah's life. Cyrus II of Persia conquered Babylon in 539/538 BC.

## EGYPT

### *Egypt Prior to the Time of Jeremiah*

Ancient Egypt was situated along the Nile Valley. Egypt was the “black land.” This was in two parts: the fertile land in the delta region (Lower Egypt); and south of that, the thin strip of soil on either side of the Nile River (Upper Egypt). The arable black land, where agriculture could thrive, was the domain of Egyptian civilization. Beyond the confines of the Nile Valley was the desert or “red land,” the region of strange beasts, disorder, and death. Because the black land was in two parts (Upper and Lower Egypt), the pharaoh wore a double crown, symbolizing his rule over both.

Egyptian history is traditionally divided into “dynasties.” Originally, their number was reckoned to be thirty, but now historians speak of thirty-three dynasties. Kings are generally located chronologically by their dynasty (for example, all the pharaohs of Jeremiah's time were in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty). Also, Egyptian history is broken up into a series of long eras. There were three eras in which Egypt was unified and powerful: the Old Kingdom (2700–2160), the Middle Kingdom (2106–1786), and the New Kingdom (1550–1069). These were the times of Egypt's legendary magnificence. For example, the pyramids were built during the Old Kingdom, and the famous Ramses II ruled during the New Kingdom. After each of these “kingdom” periods was a period of severe decline, called respectively the First, Second, and Third Intermediate periods. During these times, Egypt was not unified; several competing pharaohs might rule at the same time over different parts of Egypt, or the country might be under foreign domination. It is not necessarily the case that Egypt was entirely prostrate during these times; a pharaoh of the Third Intermediate period, Shoshenq I (reigned 945–924), invaded Judah and plundered the temple. He is the Shishak of 1 Kings 14:25. He was, however, a Libyan and not a native Egyptian, and the Egypt of the Third Intermediate period possessed but a pale image of the glory it had enjoyed during the New Kingdom.

The Twenty-fifth Dynasty (ca. 780–656 BC) is reckoned to have been the last of the Third Intermediate period. This, too, was a foreign dynasty. It was Cushite (or Nubian), and because its rulers were from sub-Saharan Africa, they are sometimes called the “Black Pharaohs.” They were able to unify Egypt but could not expand their power into the Near East because this was also

14. Sack, *Images of Nebuchadnezzar*, 115.

the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, with whom they clashed on several occasions and generally suffered defeat. For Bible readers, the most famous pharaoh of this dynasty was Taharqa, who briefly aided Hezekiah while Sennacherib of Assyria besieged Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:9, where the pharaoh is called Tirhakah). However, the Egyptians were restive under foreign kings, and the Assyrians used this to their advantage and broke the power of the Cushite dynasty.

### ***Egypt During the Time of Jeremiah***

The Assyrian king Esarhaddon invaded Egypt in 671 BC and placed native Egyptians over the cities of the Nile Delta. The ruler of the city of Sais, in the western delta, was Necho I. In 665, the Cushite Tantamini invaded the delta and reasserted Cushite control there. Necho I died in battle and his son, Psammetichus I, fled to Syria. The Assyrians, under Ashurbanipal, invaded Egypt and restored to power Psammetichus who, with Sais as his base of operations, gained control over the whole of Egypt. His reign marks the beginning of the Twenty-sixth or “Saite” Dynasty, the last era in which Egypt would be a significant world power under native rule. Five pharaohs, all from the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, ruled Egypt during and immediately after the lifetime of Jeremiah. Following the chronology of Kenneth Kitchen, these are:<sup>15</sup>

- 664–610: Psammetichus I (fifty-four years)
- 610–595: Necho II (fifteen years)
- 595–589: Psammetichus II (six years)
- 589–570: Apries [= Hophra] (nineteen years)
- 570–526: Amasis II (forty-four years)

### ***Psammetichus I (Also Called Psamtek I)***

Although a native Egyptian, Psammetichus I had been trained by the Assyrians and relied heavily on Greek mercenaries for military support. Indeed, the use of foreign mercenaries was a fixture in the Egyptian army throughout the dynasty. He eliminated all his rivals in Lower Egypt, drove the Cushites out of Upper Egypt, and gained firm control of the sacred city of Thebes, where his daughter was given the politically and religiously important title of “God’s Wife of Amun.” With all Egypt under his authority, he instituted a new era of assertive Egyptian nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Necho II (Also Called Neco II)***

An energetic and aggressive king, Necho came to the throne legitimately, as the son and successor of Psammetichus, but during a time of crisis. With Nineveh already destroyed and the remnants of the Assyrian Empire having

15. Kitchen, “Egypt, History of: Chronology,” *ABD* 2:321–31.

16. Shaw and Nicholson, *Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 229.

moved west to Harran to put up a last stand, he faced the prospect of Babylon dominating all the Fertile Crescent as an empire without rivals. He thus went north in person to try to prop up the Assyrians as a buffer state. While moving north, he encountered Josiah of Judah in battle at Megiddo and killed him (2 Kings 23:29). Although he had some success in his first Syrian campaign, he failed to save the Assyrians at Harran, and they disappeared from history. His second campaign to Syria also showed that he was a vigorous leader, but he suffered a calamitous defeat against Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish in 605 and withdrew to Egypt. He was able to regroup and rearm, however, and his repulse of the attempted Babylonian invasion in 601 showed that Egypt was still a power to reckon with. Besides his wars with Babylon, Necho tried to make Egypt into a maritime power. He unsuccessfully attempted to have a canal cut from the Gulf of Suez to the Nile River. He is also reported to have sent an expedition of Phoenician sailors from Egypt south to the Red Sea and all the way around the Cape of Good Hope, which continued north to Gibraltar and the Mediterranean and finally back to the Egyptian delta (Herodotus 4.42).

### *Psammetichus II (Also Called Psamtek II)*

Psammetichus II was the son of Necho II. Although he continued to encourage Jerusalem to rebel against Babylon, most of his attention was focused on the south, where the Cushites were showing signs of reasserting themselves and moving against Egypt. He invaded Nubia and broke the power of the Cushites, so that they were no longer a threat to Egypt. He did, however, lead a military expedition into the Levant in 592, which reinforced the conviction in Jerusalem that Egypt was a major military power and could be depended upon if Judah switched its allegiance from Babylon to Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

### *Hophra (Also Called Apries)*

The son of Psammetichus II, his reign was a troubled time. Jerusalem, now in open rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, sought his help against the Babylonian force besieging the city. Hophra did dispatch a force toward Judah, and for a brief time the Babylonians lifted their siege of the city to confront the threat at their back. The Egyptians, however, quickly withdrew and did not intervene again as the Babylonians brought down Jerusalem. In addition, during Hophra's reign native Egyptians resented the presence of foreign mercenaries in their territory. Matters came to a head when Dorian Greeks invaded Egypt from Libya. Hophra suffered a humiliating defeat, and the Egyptians rose against him and installed Amasis II, who had been a general under Psammetichus II during the Nubian campaign. The details of what followed are somewhat unclear. Hophra appears to have fled to the

17. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 22 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 8. See the table of dates on pp. 8–11, and especially note 6 on p. 10, for specific historical information on the campaign of Psammetichus into the Levant.

Babylonians, who attempted to invade Egypt in 568 to restore him to power. This was not successful, however, and Hophra either died in battle or was captured and killed soon after.<sup>18</sup>

*Amasis II (Also Called Ahmose II)*

Although not a lineal descendant of the preceding pharaohs, Amasis II is still considered to be part of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (to add legitimacy to his claim to the throne, he married a daughter of Hophra). He continued to use foreign mercenaries but did so more discreetly to avoid enraging the native population. However, during his reign Babylon was supplanted by a new great power, Persia. Amasis is said to have tried to assuage the Persians and forestall the threat, but it was to no avail. Upon his death, he was succeeded by his son Psammetichus (Psamtek) III, who reigned only six months before being killed by the Persian king Cambyses, who conquered Egypt and brought the Twenty-sixth Dynasty to an end.<sup>19</sup>

From that time forward, Egypt was perpetually under the rule of outsiders: first the Persians, then the Macedonian Greeks (Alexander the Great and then the Ptolemies), and finally the Romans.

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18. Shaw and Nicholson, *Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 36–37.

19. Shaw and Nicholson, *Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, 229.



## CHAPTER 2

# THE LAST KINGS OF JUDAH



By the time Jeremiah was born, Samaria (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) no longer existed. Little Judah stood alone. It did, however, enjoy the one moment of great glory when the Assyrians, who had recently obliterated Samaria, came to do the same to Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah. However, YHWH answered the king's prayer and fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies by intervening to destroy the Assyrian invader (Isa. 36–37). This event is never explicitly mentioned in Jeremiah, but as mentioned above, it must have had an enormous impact on the psyche of the kings and people of Jerusalem. When the Babylonians were outside the gates, they wanted Jeremiah to repeat the miracle of Isaiah's time and obliterate the Mesopotamian enemy. This would not happen, and a burden of the book of Jeremiah is to explain why.

Judah's decline into paganism, as described in Samuel–Kings, was temporarily halted during the reign of Hezekiah. His son Manasseh (reigned ca. 687–642) led Judah back into idolatry and spiritual decline, and this continued in the short reign of Amon (reigned ca. 642–640). In the reign of Josiah, however, there was a final push to purge the land of idols and return Judah to orthodoxy.

## JOSIAH

At the age of eight, Josiah was placed on the throne and reigned for thirty-one years (2 Kings 22:1), from 640 to 609. The Chronicler describes Josiah's reform in three stages. First, in the eighth year of his reign (when he was about sixteen), he began to "seek the God of his father David" (2 Chron. 34:3a). Second, in his twelfth year as king, he began to purge Jerusalem, Judah, and even outlying areas in the former Israel, of Asherah poles, shrines to Baal, and other pagan objects of worship (2 Chron. 34:3b–7). Third, in the eighteenth year of his reign, at about age twenty-six, he began to refurbish the temple. In the process of doing this, a copy of the book of the law was found,

and when it was read, Josiah was mortified at how deeply apostate Judah had become. The prophetess Huldah affirmed that indeed Judah's sin was so great that YHWH would destroy the nation, but not in Josiah's lifetime. The king led the nation in a covenant renewal ceremony to reaffirm their commitment to YHWH, and he redoubled his efforts to purge the land of paganism. He organized a national celebration of Passover and closed all outlying shrines so that worship would be carried out exclusively at the Jerusalem temple. The religious life of the nation was placed entirely under the eyes of the priests and the royal house so that local, paganized worship could no longer flourish (2 Chron. 34:8–35:19).<sup>1</sup>

Although there was a group of people around Josiah who encouraged and supported the reformation, it is clear from subsequent events that a majority of the people, including members of his own family, did not. Idolatry flourished again under later kings. When Ezekiel in September of 592 saw in a vision what was really happening in and around the temple, he found it to be filled with every kind of object of pagan veneration (Ezek. 8). After Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the people blamed Josiah for it, because he prevented them from worshipping “the Queen of Heaven” (Jer. 44:15–19). Furthermore, his reign ended abruptly and violently. As Pharaoh Necho was moving north to try to save what remained of Assyrian power, Josiah tried to block his movement and was killed in the attempt. This further convinced some people that Josiah's reformation had itself been an act of apostasy and that his death was divine punishment.

It is not clear why Josiah went to Megiddo to confront Necho. He may have done it out of hatred for the Assyrians, who had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had badly ravaged Judah. Also, he may have believed that subservience to Assyria was a motivating factor behind the introduction of pagan cults to Judah. If these things were his incentives, then Josiah was trying to block Necho from bringing aid to Assyria to be sure that Israel's nemesis would never rise again. The narrative in Kings does not criticize Josiah, and Jeremiah was fulsome in his praise for Josiah's righteousness (Jer. 22:15–16). The Chronicler, however, indicates that Josiah's move to fight Necho was impetuous and unwise, and curiously enough quotes Necho delivering a rebuke to Josiah in God's name, even affirming that what the pharaoh said was a true word from God (2 Chron. 35:21–22). Josiah “did not listen to what Necho had said at God's command.” But Chronicles does affirm that Josiah was a righteous king and that his reformation was a worthy undertaking. Jeremiah was born at the time Josiah became king, and the events of Josiah's life and death profoundly shaped the young prophet.

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1. Second Kings 22:3 omits reference to events in Josiah's eighth and twelfth regnal year, beginning its story of the reformation with the work on the temple and the finding of the law in the eighteenth year of his reign.

## JEHOAHAZ

Jehoahaz was a throne name; his given name was Shallum (1 Chron. 3:15). He was twenty-three years old when he became king in 609 BC, and he reigned a mere three months (2 Kings 23:31). After Josiah's death, the "people of the land" chose him to be the next king even though he was Josiah's fourth son (2 Kings 23:30). This does not mean that he was democratically elected. "The people of the land" was one of the political factions in Judah at this time, and although it was probably populist in orientation some of its members were almost certainly highly placed members of the aristocracy. Amon, Josiah's father, had been assassinated by a group of his nobles, but the "people of the land" overthrew them and placed the young Josiah on the throne (2 Kings 21:23–24). But why did Josiah's fourth son have enough support to gain the throne? We cannot know with certainty, but considering how rapidly Necho deposed him, it is likely that the "people of the land" were a faction in Judah that favored Josiah's attempt to block Necho at Megiddo. Evidently, Jehoahaz identified with that faction. Soon after he gained the throne, however, Necho summoned him to his field headquarters in Riblah (2 Kings 23:33):

Pharaoh Necho put [Jehoahaz] in chains at Riblah in the land of Hamath [in Syria] so that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and he imposed on Judah a fine of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold.

Necho was obviously not happy with Judah's choice for a king. Jehoahaz spent the rest of his life in exile in Egypt, where he died (2 Kings 23:34; Jer. 22:11).

## JEHOIAKIM

After his unsuccessful attempt to preserve the remnants of the Assyrian Empire at Harran, Necho returned to Egypt and along the way deposed Jehoahaz. He installed Jehoahaz's half-brother Eliakim, who took the throne name of Jehoiakim, as king of Judah in late 609 BC. He came to the throne, therefore, as a vassal of Egypt. But when Nebuchadnezzar vanquished Necho at Carchemish, continued loyalty to Egypt was no longer prudent. By plundering at least one significant city in the region, Philistine Ashkelon, Nebuchadnezzar gave the other states a valuable object lesson, and Jehoiakim became his vassal. Nevertheless, Jehoiakim still favored alliance with his original patron, Necho and Egypt, and would soon rebel against Babylon.

Second Kings 24:1–6 recounts the history of conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim:

In [Jehoiakim's] days, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon approached [Judah]. And Jehoiakim became his servant for three years. And then [Jehoiakim] turned against [Nebuchadnezzar] and rebelled. And YHWH

sent against [Jehoiakim] bands of the Chaldeans, bands of the Arameans, bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites. [YHWH] sent them against Judah to destroy it, in accordance with the word of YHWH that he spoke by his servants the prophets. Indeed, this happened to Judah at the command of YHWH, so that he could remove them from his sight because of the sins of Manasseh, as a response to all he had done. It was also because of the innocent blood that he had shed; he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and YHWH was not willing to forgive. And the rest of the deeds of Jehoiakim, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? And Jehoiakim slept with his fathers, and his son Jehoiachin ruled after him.

Jehoiakim's initial submission to Babylon, when Nebuchadnezzar "approached," implies only that the Babylonians initially made a show of force in the area. It does not imply that there was any combat between Babylon and Jerusalem, and it certainly does not imply that Jerusalem was under siege. It does not even explicitly claim that Nebuchadnezzar's forces got within sight of the city. It only requires that Nebuchadnezzar had troops who made their presence felt in the area and that Jehoiakim, realizing that the Babylonians were now the dominant power, made a show of submission and declared himself to be Babylon's vassal. This suggests that soon after his victory at Carchemish and enthronement, during his "Hatti" campaign, Nebuchadnezzar made sure that all the states of the Levant knew that he had defeated Egypt. They needed to realize that the power of Egypt was now broken and that their survival depended on their submission to Babylon. Jerusalem quickly capitulated.

Jeremiah 46:2 puts the battle of Carchemish (605) in Jehoiakim's fourth year. This indicates that the military action in the north and the subsequent demands upon the states of the southern Levant occurred around this time. However, 2 Kings 24:1 also tells us that after three years (in around 602/601), Jehoiakim rebelled against the Babylonians. Judah then suffered an undefined period of warfare, when Babylonian, Syrian, Moabite, and Ammonite troops conducted raids in the land (2 Kings 24:2). This does not imply that Jerusalem was at any time under siege during this period. It was a period of harassment prior to the full assault on Judah. Thus, Babylon's local vassal states made the incursions into the southern Levant in the years 602–600.

During this critical period, Jehoiakim died and Jehoiachin succeeded him (2 Kings 24:6). At some point within this time frame, Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, and in the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (the seventh by Babylonian reckoning), in 597, he captured the city and removed Jehoiachin in exile to Babylon (2 Kings 24:11–12). The narrative in 2 Kings implies that Jehoiakim died in Jerusalem before or during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and that Jehoiachin, a few months after having been crowned, surrendered. This appears to be supported by Jeremiah 22:18–19:

Therefore, thus says YHWH regarding Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah: They will not mourn for him: “Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!” They will not mourn for him: “Alas, my master! Alas, his majesty!” He will be buried with the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem.

Prophetic language should not necessarily be pressed literally, but this passage does make two specific claims. First, Jehoiakim would not have the normal funeral rites for even a common person (“Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!”), much less receive rites befitting a king (“Alas, my master! Alas, his majesty!”). Second, his body would be “dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem” to be buried (or left to rot), implying that he would die in the city. In addition, although it is clear that there was a great deal of consternation in Jerusalem over Jehoiachin’s exile to Babylon, and a fervent hope that he would return soon, the book of Jeremiah never implies that anyone was aware that his father Jehoiakim had been removed to Babylon as well.

For these reasons, 2 Chronicles 36:5–6 creates a significant problem for reconstructing events surrounding Jehoiakim’s demise. It appears to assert that Jehoiakim was taken captive to Babylon:

Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of YHWH his God. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against him and bound him with bronze chains to take him to Babylon.

Given the very terse nature of the biographical information found in the biblical texts, it is difficult to know precisely what happened. We can, however, construct a hypothesis that reconciles the passages. First, 2 Chronicles 36 does not say that Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiakim to Babylon; it only says that he bound him in chains with the purpose of taking him to Babylon. Second, Jeremiah does not say who cast out Jehoiakim’s body like a donkey carcass. It was presumably not the leaders and people of Jerusalem, whom Jeremiah presents as being strongly in favor of his policies and who at any rate would be loath to treat one of their kings in such a manner. It is far more likely that the Babylonians, who would have been enraged at his treachery and happy to make an example of him, would have subjected his corpse to such abuse. Thus, we can propose the following: Jehoiachin became coregent with his father several months before the city fell. It may be that Jehoiakim became incapacitated in some way and Jehoiachin had full authority to make decisions, and exercised his authority by surrendering to Babylon. Alternatively, it may be that the nobles staged a coup against Jehoiakim, imprisoned him, and put Jehoiachin on the throne. These men held considerable power; King Zedekiah feared them and acted in secret whenever he thought they would disapprove of his actions (Jer. 37:17; 38:5, 24–26).

Either way, the leaders of Jerusalem offered to give Jehoiakim to the Babylonians as part of the terms of surrender. Upon entering the city, the Babylonians seized, bound, and imprisoned Jehoiakim, the agent of the rebellion, intending to carry him away; but he died during his Jerusalem confinement. They then unceremoniously threw his body outside the city and forbade that he be given a burial or funeral rites. And instead of Jehoiakim, they took his son Jehoiachin to Babylon. The language that the Chronicler uses to recount Jehoiakim's demise may be intended to communicate that he fell into the hands of his enemies before he died.

The Bible, especially in Jeremiah, is unsparingly harsh in its condemnation of Jehoiakim. Second Kings 24:3–5 attributes the fall of Jerusalem to the child sacrifice instituted under Manasseh, but by implication this condemns Jehoiakim as well: “It was also because of the innocent blood that [Manasseh] had shed; he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and YHWH was not willing to forgive. And the rest of the deeds of Jehoiakim. . . .” Josiah put an end to the child sacrifice at the Ben Hinnom Valley (2 Kings 23:10; also translated as “Valley of the Son of Hinnom”), but this policy was reversed under Jehoiakim and the practice was resumed (Jer. 7:30–31). Jehoiakim had no respect for the word of YHWH, and showed this by mutilating and burning a scroll of Jeremiah's prophecies (Jer. 36:23–24). Had Jeremiah not fled and hidden himself, Jehoiakim would have had him murdered (Jer. 36:19, 26), just as he had murdered the prophet Uriah (Jer. 26:20–23). Interestingly, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus skips over Jehoiakim (Matt. 1:11).

## JEHOIACHIN

The son and successor of Jehoiakim had the given name Jeconiah (Jer. 24:1), which was sometimes shortened to Coniah (Jer. 22:24). He only reigned for three months and ten days, and was eighteen years old at the time (2 Chron. 36:9). Thus, with the Babylonians at the gates of the city, Jerusalem was under a boy king. As suggested above, the best way to make sense of the confusing situation in Jerusalem at this time is to assume that he was coregent but had full authority to act. In agreement with Jerusalem's ruling aristocracy (and probably heavily pressured by them), he chose to give up the fight and surrender to Nebuchadnezzar in mid-March of 597 BC.<sup>2</sup> Second Kings 24:12 describes the event:

And Jehoiachin king of Judah, his mother, his attendants, his nobles, and his eunuchs went out to the king of Babylon [to surrender]. And the king of Babylon, in the eighth year of his reign, took him [into exile].

The people of Jerusalem heavily grieved the loss of their young king and hoped he would speedily return. This was probably because they had affection

2. This date is derived from the Babylonian Chronicle. See Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 32.

for him on account of his youth, sympathy for how he had been cast onto the throne in the middle of a crisis, and a profound hostility toward the Babylonians. They were receptive to prophets who predicted the fall of Babylon and return of their young king (Jer. 28:1–4; 29:8–9, 15–23). To the contrary, however, he spent the rest of his life in Babylon, and throughout the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, he was in a prison cell. Akkadian administrative texts from the time of Nebuchadnezzar speak of provisions made for him and his fellow prisoners, suggesting that his imprisonment was not extremely harsh.<sup>3</sup> Even so, he was neither free nor recognized as king of Judah. Near the end of life, however, he had a measure of his dignity restored:

And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month,<sup>4</sup> Awel-Marduk, king of Babylon, in the year of his accession to kingship, pardoned<sup>5</sup> Jehoiachin king of Judah and released him from prison. He spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. And Jehoiachin no longer wore his prison clothes but ate regularly with the king for the rest of his life. And his allowance was a perpetual allowance, provided daily for him by the king of Babylon as long as he lived, till the day of his death. (Jer. 52:31–34)

Amel-Marduk (also known as Evil-Merodach or Awel-Marduk) succeeded his father Nebuchadnezzar in October of 562. His reign was short (only two years), and as described above, almost nothing is known of his reign (some later sources suggest he had once tried to usurp his father or that there was opposition to his becoming king among the nobles, but these are late and dubious).<sup>6</sup> We do not know why he released Jehoiachin from prison and honored him above other captive kings. The perpetual confinement Jehoiachin endured may have been because Nebuchadnezzar had felt especially betrayed first by Jehoiakim and then by Zedekiah, and therefore he retaliated against the sole surviving king of Judah. Perhaps Amel-Marduk felt that Jehoiachin's humiliation had been too severe, having been held in prison much longer than other subjected kings.

Also, because Amel-Marduk's reign was so short, it is unclear how long Jehoiachin enjoyed this favorable treatment. It may be that Jehoiachin died before Amel-Marduk, or that Jehoiachin outlived him and was still held in esteem by his successor Neriglissar. On the other hand, since Neriglissar

3. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 308.

4. The parallel text in 2 Kings 25:27 says that this was the twenty-seventh day of the month. The LXX of Jeremiah says it was the twenty-fourth day.

5. This is literally, "he lifted the head," an idiom for pardoning, as in Gen. 40:13. See Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 443.

6. Sack, "Evil-Merodach (Person)."

overthrew Amel-Marduk, he probably would not have regarded Jehoiachin with the same favor that Amel-Marduk had. But based on the claim that Jehoiachin “ate regularly with the king for the rest of his life,” it looks like he died soon after his pardon and before the fall of Amel-Marduk.

Although Jehoiachin reigned only a short time, the Bible presents him as an evil king (2 Kings 24:9). Jeremiah 22:24–26 is especially harsh, declaring that YHWH would throw away Jehoiachin even if he were YHWH’s signet ring (the symbol of his authority) on his right hand. This metaphor pertains especially to his role as YHWH’s anointed and the heir of the Davidic monarchy, the visible representation of YHWH’s kingship. The casting away of the ring implies the end of the Davidic dynasty as an earthly, political institution. This is made more explicit in the verses that follow:

Is this man Coniah [Jehoiachin] a despised, shattered pot? Is he a vessel that no one cares about? Why are he and his offspring hurled away? Why are they cast away in a land that they do not know? Land, land, land, hear the word of YHWH! Thus says YHWH: Record this man as childless, a man who in his days will not be successful. For none of his offspring will succeed in sitting on the throne of David and continuing to rule in Judah. (Jer. 22:28–30)

The metaphor of pottery is important in the book of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 18:1–10, it represents YHWH’s freedom to deal with a nation however he wishes, just as a potter can make or discard a pot he is forming. In Jeremiah 19:1–13, the smashing of a clay vessel represents YHWH’s determination to destroy Jerusalem. The metaphor of divine judgment here, in Jeremiah 22:28, is more narrowly focused on the house of David and on Jehoiachin, a “despised, shattered pot.” Jerusalem may be rebuilt, and the Jews may repopulate it, but an earthly Davidic monarchy will never again exist. Jehoiachin is to be recorded “as childless.” He in fact had seven sons (1 Chron. 3:17–18), but none ever became king, and in that sense he was no different from a king with no offspring. The claim of Jeremiah 52:32 that Amel-Marduk “spoke kindly to him” may imply that the Babylonian king reached an agreement with him to return him or one of sons to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. In turn, Jehoiachin’s descendants would resume serving Babylon as vassal kings.<sup>7</sup> If there ever were such a plan, it was cut short by the overthrow of Amel-Marduk, and no descendant of Jehoiachin was able to claim the throne.

## ZEDEKIAH

Zedekiah was another son of Josiah and the uncle of Jehoiachin (2 Chron. 36:10 calls him the “brother” of Jehoiachin, but this should be understood

7. This is suggested by John M. Berridge, “Jehoiachin (Person),” *ABD* 3:663.

in the more general sense of “relative”). His given name was Mattaniah, and Zedekiah was his throne name (2 Kings 24:17). He was put on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar after the surrender of Jehoiachin (Ezek. 17:12–14), and was only twenty-one years old at the time (2 Kings 24:18). He ruled for eleven years (ca. 597–586).

We know little of his reign beyond what is reported about his rebellion against Babylon and subsequent downfall. We do know that he led a delegation to Babylon in the fourth year of his reign (Jer. 51:59), no doubt to assure Nebuchadnezzar of his fealty. In that same year, however, Zedekiah convened a conference of local states with the purpose of forming a coalition, which, with the support of Egypt, could expel the Babylonians from the region. Jeremiah, however, showed up at the meeting and delivered an oracle warning that the plan was doomed to fail:

In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from YHWH. Thus said YHWH to me: Make for yourself a yoke of straps and bars and put it on your neck. And send [this oracle] to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon by the hand of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah, king of Judah. And command them [to convey this message] to their masters. Thus says YHWH Sabaoth, the God of Israel, This is what you shall say to your masters: I made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, by my great power and my outstretched arm. And I give it to whomever I wish. And for now, I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time [of reckoning] for his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their vassal. But I will punish any nation or kingdom with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence that will not serve him, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and that will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon. [I will do this,] says YHWH, until I have completed their destruction by his hand. (Jer. 27:1–8)

The assembled delegates were no doubt stunned by the oracle and the spectacle of Jeremiah walking about wearing a yoke. Zedekiah and his associates were surely angered at how the prophet had thrown their orchestrated attempt to form an anti-Babylonian alliance into disorder. But Zedekiah was attempting rebellion against Babylon despite his oaths of fealty to Nebuchadnezzar and in defiance of YHWH’s terrible warnings of how it would turn out.

Beyond that, the book of Jeremiah describes incidents that give us insight into Zedekiah’s character. He appears to have been weak, vacillating, and unreliable. He wanted Jeremiah to pray for deliverance from Babylon, and so he understood Jeremiah to be a true prophet, but he did not heed Jeremiah’s

explicit predictions that Jerusalem would fall and that Zedekiah's only hope for survival was to surrender. He was afraid of the nobility and yielded to them when they wanted to kill Jeremiah, but then he allowed the faithful Ebed-Melech to rescue the prophet. In another episode, members of the upper class made a covenant before YHWH to free their Judahite slaves, but they quickly reversed their decision, rounded up all their recently manumitted slaves, and forced them back into servitude. Zedekiah was to some degree complicit in this; at the very least, he failed to use his authority to prevent this outrage (see Jer. 34:8–22; 37:1–38:28).

A single episode, Jeremiah 38:14–26, tells us a great deal about the politics of Zedekiah's reign and his personality, which we quote in part here:

And King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and summoned him to the third entrance to the temple of YHWH. And the king said to Jeremiah, "I am going to ask you something. Do not hide anything from me." . . . And Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says YHWH God Sabaoth, the God of Israel: If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will continue, and this city will not be burned down in a fire. You and your household will survive. But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians, and they will burn it down in a fire. And you will not be delivered from them." And King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am worried about the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will torture me." And Jeremiah said, "They will not hand you over. Obey YHWH by doing what I tell you, and it will go well with you, and you will survive. But if you refuse to surrender, this is the message YHWH revealed to me: Now listen! All the women remain in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought to the officials of the king of Babylon, and those women will say to you, "The men you trusted misled you and gained control of you. Your feet are sunk in the mud. They were disloyal." . . . And Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "No one can be allowed to know about this conversation, or you may die. If the officials hear that I talked with you, and they come to you and say to you, 'Tell us what you said to the king. Do not hide it from us or we will kill you. And what did the king say to you?' Then you must say to them, 'I was making a supplication to the king, that he not to send me back to Jonathan's house to die there.'" (Jer. 38:14, 17–22, 24–26)

Zedekiah did believe that Jeremiah was a prophet, but his faith was not strong enough to act on what Jeremiah said. For a long time, he had been caught in a dilemma. Two factions had struggled for control in Jerusalem. The one faction believed in continued submission to Babylon and evidently had been behind Jehoiachin's decision to surrender. This faction was "pro-Babylonian" in the sense that they believed Babylon's power to be irresistible

and that Judah could for the time being survive only as a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. In the aftermath of Jehoiachin's surrender, however, there was widespread bitterness in the city over his deportation and imprisonment, and a pro-Egyptian faction became dominant. This group had been supportive of Jehoiakim's rebellion and believed that Egypt, having proven in 601 that they had the strength to turn back the Babylonians, made for a better suzerain.

In his decision to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, therefore, Zedekiah was heavily influenced (and intimidated) by the pro-Egyptian group. Once the rebellion had begun and the army of Babylon appeared in Judah, some members of the pro-Babylonian faction fled the city and gave themselves up to the Babylonians. We know that these were not just commoners because Zedekiah feared that the Babylonians would hand him over to these men if he surrendered. This could be a possibility only if their number included ranking members of the aristocracy—men who would have access to the Babylonian officials and a degree of freedom to do as they pleased in the Babylonian camp. Thus, after the siege began, the pro-Egyptian party completely dominated the political scene, and effectively had Zedekiah as their puppet. Any people in the city who still supported surrender to Babylon were regarded as traitors and accused of weakening the morale of the people; both accusations were hurled at Jeremiah (Jer. 37:13; 38:4). Lachish Letter 6 also appears to contain a complaint about nobles who weakened the resolve of the people to resist Babylon.<sup>8</sup> Zedekiah feared the pro-Egyptian party because they had shown themselves to be willing to commit murder to achieve their goals. The palace women in Jeremiah's prophecy at 38:24–26 represent people with access to aristocratic circles. They had inside information about palace conflicts but had little power to influence the outcome. They would only suffer the consequences. The women recognized that the pro-Egyptian party had no real loyalty to Zedekiah and in their arrogance had brought disaster upon the dynasty. In the end, the pro-Egyptian faction, exploiting the weakness of Zedekiah, insisted upon the adoption of policies that would destroy themselves and their city.

After a prolonged siege, the army of Nebuchadnezzar overcame Jerusalem's defenses. As the city was falling, Zedekiah and a small group of soldiers attempted an escape from the trap. He was captured and taken to Nebuchadnezzar. The last thing he saw was the execution of his sons; after that, his eyes were gouged out. He was taken to Babylon and died there (Jer. 52:6–11).

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8. Di Vito, "Lachish Letters," 128.