

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 7: KINGS' HIGHWAY: JUDAH

Having made a U-turn at the end of looking at the Northern Kingdom side of route 66, now on week 7 we follow the same signpost through Kings and Chronicles to view the landmarks on the Southern side. Here we find the same landmarks, kings, religion and prophets. Although there are many similarities, it is the contrasts between the two kingdoms that show why Judah survived for longer in spite of eventually suffering the same fate as Israel.

Looking first at the landmark of the kings of Judah, we see both comparisons and contrasts. Comparisons include the fact that 20 kings also ruled the southern kingdom. There were violent deaths. Of them, 3 were assassinated (Joash, Amaziah, Amon); two were killed in battle (Ahaziah, Josiah); and Queen Athaliah was killed because she had usurped the throne after trying to purge the family of Ahaziah. Three kings only lasted a few months, two of those in the last 24 years before the Babylonian invasion. Jehoahaz in fact was taken to Egypt and died there and the three kings after him ruled only by the authority of Neco, king of Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Dynastically, however, Judah was the stronger because throughout its 345-year history, the direct descendants of David succeeded to the throne, fulfilling Jacob's prophetic blessing in Genesis that the sceptre would not depart from Judah. It is interesting too, that being inflicted with leprosy, a disease which would have made any other person an outcast, did not prevent Uzziah continuing to be recognised as king for the whole 52 years of his reign. His son Jotham acted as his regent during this time and succeeded him, thus preserving the Davidic succession. It was also during the reign of Uzziah that Judah reached the highest point of its strength territorially and economically. The last 24 years of Judah's existence were turbulent ones, and to some extent confusing because of the parties involved and the renaming of Josiah's descendants. Josiah's son Jehoahaz was taken as hostage to Egypt and Neco appointed his son Eliakim, whom he renamed Jehoiakim, as king in Judah. When his son Jehoiachin died, Nebuchadnezzar, who had by this time already invaded Judah and had taken captives, appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, whom he renamed Zedekiah, as king. Yet, in spite of its troubles, Judah, although territorially and economically weaker, still managed to last 136 years longer than the northern kingdom and dynastic strength played a major role in that. It was only when the time of the last king was reached that the uninterrupted line of sons succeeding their fathers was broken. An uncle was appointed king by a foreign ruler. But Zedekiah, after reigning for 11 years, rebelled and brought about a full invasion which brought complete destruction on Jerusalem and its temple. As was the practice at the time, that ruler proceeded to kill all of Zedekiah's family, thus bringing to an end David's dynasty. The dynastic landmark demonstrated the power of undisputed succession of kings and its strength was derived from the fact that the kings were recognised as inheritors of the covenant God had made with David. In other words, each king had divine sanction for his rule.

Like Israel, Judah was not territorially secure, but although threatened by surrounding nations, God's sovereignty determined Judah would not fall to the Assyrians. The kings of Judah faced wars at various times over the whole period. Rehoboam was warned by the prophet Shemaiah not fight against Jeroboam, so in that civil war, Jeroboam was the aggressor. Judah was invaded by Shishak of Egypt, and the Moabites and Edomites also

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rebelled against Israelite rule. Assyria attacked Judah, the most famous incident here being the destruction of Sennacherib's army during the reign of Hezekiah. Josiah was killed in the battle with Neco of Egypt who had allied with Assyria. So, throughout the period, it became increasingly clear that territorially David's empire would no longer exist.

When we come to the landmark of religion we find mixed messages. In comparison with the northern kings, starting with Rehoboam and his son Abijah 12 kings in all are said to have done evil in the sight of the Lord. And, as if to heighten the contrast with true and false religion, more details are given about the evil ways of the southern kings. Rehoboam and Abijah set the trend. 1 Kings 14:22 the verdict on the rebellious practices of Judah. Cultic practices went beyond even those of Israel and reached a new low of depravity, generally described as 'detestable practices.' Examples of these are given in **1 Kings 14:22-24, 2 Kings 16:2-4 and 2 Kings 21:1-11**. Even the temple was not held as sacrosanct with pagan altars being erected in its courts, which in effect, put the worship of God on the same level as the worship of all the pagan deities. What is significant in each of the cases of the evil kings is that their actions are directly related to the practices of the nations God had told the Israelites to remove from their lands. In particular, the Israelites spent 400 years in Egypt because, in Genesis 15:16, God had told Abraham that was the length of time the Amorites were to be given before judgement came upon them for their sin. And Manasseh is said to have "done more evil than the Amorites (2 Kings 21:11). Jeremiah's reference of Judah's sin to iron and diamond engraving it on the heart, conveys the image of just how strong and how deep sin had penetrated into the whole life of the nation

Yet, in spite of this gross rebellion against Him, God showed Himself ready to forgive and show mercy, specifically for David's sake.

1 Kings 15:4-5 (NIV) Nevertheless, for David's sake the Lord his God gave him (Abijah) a lamp in Jerusalem by raising up a son to succeed him and by making Jerusalem strong. 5 For David had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord and had not failed to keep any of the Lord's commands all the days of his life—except in the case of Uriah the Hittite.

2 Chronicles 33:11-13 (NIV) So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. 12 In his distress he sought the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. 13 And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God.

Abijah was given a son to succeed him. Manasseh, the most evil king, who had suffered as a prisoner of the Assyrian army commanders and was taken to Babylon, repented of his sin. As a result of recognising his sin brought that punishment upon him, Manasseh's humbling of himself before God resulted in his being mercifully restored to his position in Jerusalem. For the remaining years of his reign he tried to undo the damage he had done. He tried to rid the land of foreign gods and rebuilt the altar of the Lord. Manasseh is an exception among the

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kings of the Southern kingdom because while his gross sin is mentioned in the book of Kings, his repentance only appears in Chronicles. The writer of Chronicles obviously saw this as an important reminder that God is willing to respond positively when there is recognition of His sovereignty and a willingness to be obedient to His laws of worship and behaviour.

1 Kings 15:11-14 (NIV) Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done. 12 He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made. 13 He even deposed his grandmother Maakah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive image for the worship of Asherah. Asa cut it down and burned it in the Kidron Valley. 14 Although he did not remove the high places, Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life.

2 Chronicles 17:3-6 (NIV) The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him. He did not consult the Baals 4 but sought the God of his father and followed his commands rather than the practices of Israel. 6 His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord; furthermore, he removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah.

Asa and Jehoshaphat are examples of kings who rejected the false worship and with varying success tried to eliminate pagan religious practices from Judah. Although, like Asa, some of the 'good' kings did not remove the high places, the key feature about these two kings is their wholehearted devotion to the Lord. Without that, none of what the kings did regarding the removal and destruction of the physical trappings of pagan worship would have mattered. To be compared with David was the highest compliment that could be paid to any king. Asa and Jehoshaphat exemplified the fact that the nature and dynamic of the true worship of God was internally motivated. That internal motivation was then manifested in the words and actions of the kings.

On the landmark that features the religious life of the Southern Kingdom two kings stand out Hezekiah and Josiah.

2 Kings 18:3-7 (NIV) He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. 5 Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. 6 He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. 7 And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him.

2 Kings 20:1-6 (NIV) In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 3 "Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.6 I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David."

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Hezekiah's wholehearted commitment to the Lord mentioned in chapter 18 of 2 Kings also refers to David. This king remained committed to restoring the true worship of God to Judah and the destruction of the vestiges of pagan worship at the high places. Additionally, no higher praise could be given to that level of commitment than it being said to have followed the Mosaic Law. In view of the standard by which his reign was assessed, Hezekiah experienced two miracles. As mentioned earlier, Sennacherib of Assyria's attack failed because God destroyed the army besieging Jerusalem. In view of what the Assyrians had done to Israel, the kingdom of Judah was helpless. The 185,000 Assyrian soldiers besieging Jerusalem died in one night. Sennacherib returned to Assyria where he was later assassinated. Hezekiah's obedience had brought God to the defence of the city for His own sake and for the sake of the covenant He had made with David. The second miracle resulted in the extension of Hezekiah's life by 15 years. Again, this is directly related to his faithful and wholehearted commitment to the Lord, which was exactly what God had expected from His people from the time of Moses.

The Law became even more prominent during the reign of Josiah.

2 Kings 22:1-2 (NIV) Josiah was eight years old when he became king, ... 2 He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left....

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.10 Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. 11 When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."

When Manasseh's son Amon became king he reverted to supporting pagan forms of worship. He reigned for two years after which Josiah became king and once more Judah had a king determined to follow the ways of David, the man after God's own heart. In the 18th year of his reign while restoration of the temple was taking place at Josiah's insistence, the Book of the Law was found. Tearing his robes is the image of his distress and how appalled he was at how far the nation had fallen from standards defined in the Mosaic covenant. What followed can justifiably be called a religious reformation, details of which are found in 2 Kings 23.

2 Kings 23:21-23 & 25 (NIV) The king gave this order to all the people: "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant." 22 Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed. 23 But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem..... Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did—with all

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his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

The Book of the Covenant was read to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including the priests and the prophets. The king and people renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord and pledged themselves to keep God's law with heart and soul. The temple was purged of all traces of pagan worship. Idolatrous priests were dismissed or killed. The shrines of the male prostitutes were torn down and the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah destroyed. He rid the nation of mediums and spiritists and household gods. All the high places were desecrated and especially mentioned was the altar in the valley of Ben Hinnom so that no more child sacrifices could be made to Molek. Another remarkable desecration was that at Bethel for it was a fulfilment of the prophecy that had been made to Jeroboam in 1 Kings 1:6. It was after all of this had been accomplished that the people were ordered to celebrate the Passover. In all that he did Josiah had done his utmost to restore those that remained of God's chosen people back to their religious heritage and the very foundation of their national identity.

It is no wonder that Jeremiah lamented the passing of Josiah

2 Chronicles 35:25 (NIV) Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments.

The Book of Lamentations in the Old Testament is the record of these laments. Although Jeremiah is credited with writing the whole book, scholars believe parts were added at varying times after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586BC. However, the laments are reminder of an avoidable tragedy, although, given the overall history of Judah, it was impossible for just one king to avert the disaster that God was about to inflict on it. It seems no coincidence that 7 of the twelve writing prophets were active in the centuries leading up to the destruction of both kingdoms. Amos and Hosea were mentioned last week and five more were mainly associated with Judah. The fact that written accounts of these prophecies and pronouncements of the prophets have survived and today remain in both Jewish and Christian scriptures testify to the enduring importance of their messages. More important, in fact, than the history of the kings, although it is these accounts that gave the prophets their main themes.

As we come to the prophets, the third landmark on the Southern Kingdom side of route 66, we find their themes centring on the rebellion of kings and people against God; certain retribution in the form of the fall of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem; the need for repentance and reward for repentance. There are promises of restoration, but in these later prophecies restoration is for the distant future and not in the form expected by those either left in Judah or taken into exile.

From the dates, it is clear that kings and people of Judah had heard the messages of the prophets for over 170 years before Jerusalem was destroyed. Together with the attempted

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reforms during the reigns of ‘good’ kings, particularly Hezekiah and Josiah, it can be seen that what happened to Judah could have been avoided.

2 Kings 20:16-19 (NIV) 16 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the Lord: 17 The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. 18 And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

2 Kings 22:19-20 (NIV) Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. 20 Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.” So they took her answer back to the king.

As a reward for his efforts to restore God’s rule to Judah, Hezekiah was spared the experience of defeat by the Assyrians. But although the most immediate threat for Hezekiah was from the Assyrians, Isaiah’s prophecy recorded in 2 Kings 20 was made when Isaiah learned that Hezekiah had shown off all the treasures of his realm to visiting Babylonian officials. As a result of Hezekiah’s flaunting of his wealth, Isaiah told him that all his treasures and some of his descendants would be taken to Babylon. Isaiah’s more detailed and wide-ranging prophecy regarding Judah and Jerusalem is recorded in the book of Isaiah chapter 3.

Micah worked at the same time as Isaiah and he condemned the apostasy and injustice which pervaded the kingdom. He, too, prophesied the terrible judgement that would befall Judah and Jerusalem, but that it would come only after God had given people countless opportunities to repent.

Fifty or so years after Micah those opportunities had been squandered. In spite of Josiah’s reforms, this message of retribution became even louder and more insistent, through the prophecies of Jeremiah. Josiah was also told of disaster when he sent messengers to inquire of the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20 & 2 Chronicles 34:20-28) what course of action should follow the discovery of the Book of the Law. On that occasion Huldah told Josiah that as a reward for his efforts to reform the religion of the kingdom that he would be spared the experience of being witness to the Babylonian conquest of Judah. To give Josiah credit, he decided to press ahead with his reforms even though he knew Judah could not avoid what was to come to pass.

General warnings had also come from Zephaniah and Habakkuk.

Zephaniah 1:15-17 That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against

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the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the LORD.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 (NIV) How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? 3 Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. 4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

Zephaniah and Habakkuk prophesied at the same time as Jeremiah. The terror of the Day of the Lord described in chapter 1 of Zephaniah gives way to a call to repentance in 2:3 and a vision of a glorious restoration in chapter 3. Habakkuk was in complete despair about the state of the nation and the impending catastrophe. Yet prays that in God’s wrath He will remember mercy (3:2) and passes from doubt to faith that God’s sovereignty will prevail over the fates of both Judah and eventually Babylonia as well.

These examples from prophets’ writings show that politically, religiously and socially all the Ten Commandments and the Levitical laws that were meant to establish justice and equity, had been abandoned. The laws which God had intended to ensure a just and righteous social order beneficial to all no longer existed. Bearing in mind that these laws were part and parcel of the Mosaic covenant, breaking even one of them was tantamount to breaking the whole law. The fact that Judah was as guilty of this kind of law-breaking as Israel had been, simply exacerbated the guilt of the kingdom in its unfaithfulness to the standard God had set for it. Given that God had been faithful to his promise to David in passing kingship to each generation of his descendants for over three centuries, the unfaithfulness of Judah was more heinous than that of its sister kingdom Israel.

The final act in the tragedy was the destruction of Jerusalem. It incurred special condemnation because it was revered as the city of David and God’s dwelling place on earth.

Micah 1:6 & 9 (NIV) “Therefore I will make Samaria a heap of rubble, a place for planting vineyards. I will pour her stones into the valley and lay bare her foundations.....9 For Samaria’s plague is incurable; it has spread to Judah. It has reached the very gate of my people, even to Jerusalem itself

Jeremiah 26:11 (NIV) Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man [Jeremiah]deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.”

Jerusalem is singled out because it was the Holy City where the presence of Yahweh dwelt in the temple holy of holies. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, in effect, was the destruction of the Israelites national identity as Yahweh’s chosen people. Yet, the very people who should have been encouraging the people to listen to Jeremiah were the ones opposing him. To predict the destruction of the city was tantamount to blasphemy for which Jeremiah deserved death. Such a disaster was unthinkable both for Judah before the exile and for those

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who were taken into captivity before the Babylonians destroyed the city. The people simply refused to believe God would do it in spite of all the warnings. Even despite this prediction, they refused the opportunity to repent.

As the example of the repentance of Manasseh, the most evil of the kings, shows, had they listened, God was prepared to forgive and delay His judgement if there had been true repentance.

Joel 2:13 (NIV)...rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

The importance of the prophetic theme of repentance cannot be overestimated. Appeals for true repentance which would invoke the mercy and forgiveness of God were on offer throughout the whole period of Judah's existence. The people of Judah not only knew what had happened to their Northern neighbour, they also had knowledge of the words of Amos and Hosea as well as all the prophets of the Southern Kingdom. Lessons were not learned for by the time of Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Habakkuk, God's reputation had suffered to such an extent that retribution was necessary and came in a way that was completely in accord with God's pure righteousness and justice. The Israelites of the Northern and Southern kingdoms were so certain that as God's chosen people, He would never do anything to harm that special status or harm that national identity or withdraw His presence from them. And Judah complacently continued to believe God would tolerate whatever went on in its society and would continue to bless the people regardless of their actions.

God had kept his promise to Judah, which first appeared in the blessing Jacob gave his son Judah in Genesis. All through Judah's history, God's covenant with David had been upheld. Had He now decided to rescind that covenant and leave His people to their fate? The destruction of Jerusalem, the holy city, and the temple, the symbol of God's presence with His people brought into question why God was prepared to allow this to happen in order to further His plans for the salvation of the world through the people He had chosen. Was the state Judah, like its sister kingdom Israel, destined to disappear from history forever? In 586BC these questions were as yet unanswered. On the one hand, the Davidic dynastic kingship had come to an end and all the elements and aspects of the worship of Yahweh lay in ruins. On the other hand, faithful followers of Yahweh believed He would not go back on His covenants with His chosen people. But by 605BC when the Babylonians came in force, the consequences of not listening to the prophets meant the fall of Judah was inevitable. The Southern Kingdom side of route 66 has given us landmarks which have evoked both hope and despair. And although it is a signpost of despair that takes us on to the next stage of the road, glimmers of hope do start to appear.