

CHAPTER X

THE LAST YEARS OF THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH

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A. THE SUBJUGATION BY EGYPT AND BABYLONIA

THE DEFEAT OF King Josiah by Pharaoh Necho II (610–595 B.C.E.) at Megiddo in 609 B.C.E. was a pivotal moment in the latter years of the kingdom of Judah: national prosperity and high hopes for a renewed Judean empire dissolved into incessant turmoil, with Judah caught in a political bi-polar system between Egypt and Babylonia until it finally fell in 586 B.C.E.¹ The background of the Judean-Egyptian clash in 609 lay in the geopolitical changes resulting from the disintegration of the Assyrian empire, which provoked rivalry between Judah and Egypt over the inheritance of the Assyrian provinces in Palestine.² Psammetichus I (664–610), Necho's father, apparently imposed his suzerainty on the Philistine cities and the Assyrian province of Magiddû (covering the Jezreel Plain and Galilee), including the city of Megiddo itself, which by then must have become an Egyptian base. Josiah (639–609), on the other hand, managed to extend his rule only over the province of Samerina and apparently to establish a corridor to the coast in the northern Shephelah (see chap. IX, pp. 201–204).

With the weakening of the Assyrian empire, Egypt, traditional enemy of Assyria, now became its ally (probably between 622 and 617) as a result of the rise of Babylonia and Media, which had captured one Assyrian center after another (the city of Ashur in 614, Nineveh in 612, and Harran in 610). The Babylonian Chronicle of Nabopolassar, founder of the neo-Babylonian kingdom, shows that the Egyptians rushed military assistance to the Euphrates region in order to support the Assyrians in their struggle against the Babylonians in 616, 610, and 609.³

Josiah's attempt to stem the Egyptian thrust northward in 609 placed Judah in a common front with Babylonia, although it is uncertain whether this resulted from overall strategy preplanned by the two countries. The details of the encounter between Necho and Josiah are not adequately clarified (II Kings 23:29–30, and a fuller version in II Chron. 35:20–24); it appears, however, that Josiah's

move was based on carefully calculated political and strategic considerations. The Egyptian king, less than a year on the throne, lacked military experience; at the time of the sudden attack in the Megiddo Plain, the Egyptian army was not only far from home but still beyond reach of its stronghold at Megiddo. It is also possible that Egypt had somewhat earlier been humiliated by the Scythians who, according to Herodotus (I, 105), burst out of the north to Philistia and whose threat to Egypt proper was removed only through payment of a bribe by Psammetichus.⁴ Josiah's daring move might have been occasioned by the Egyptian blunder in the Euphrates region in 610—six months or so before the battle of Megiddo—when the army had had to abandon Harran and retreat to the west bank of the Euphrates.

The disastrous outcome of the battle of Megiddo in the summer of 609 led to radical political fluctuations in Judah, and with them alternate subjugation by and rebellion against each of the major powers, Egypt and Babylonia. The rapidly changing international scene demanded of the rulers of Judah skillful maneuvering and exceptional adaptability, and frequently confronted them with ominous political situations.

The first decisive step, the selection of Jehoahaz to succeed Josiah, ran counter to the principle of primogeniture. Jehoahaz was 23 years old at his accession, his brother Jehoiakim 25. That this was an exceptional occurrence seems borne out by the specific biblical reference to his anointment as king and perhaps by the name change from Shallum (Jer. 22:11; cf. I Chron. 3:15) to the significant throne-name Jehoahaz (i.e., "Yahwe has taken hold of"), like other name changes (such as Eliakim to Jehoiakim or Mattaniah to Zedekiah), which also were prompted by unusual circumstances of accession. The enthronement of Jehoahaz was thus a sort of minor *coup d'état*, occasioned by the intervention of the 'am ha-areṣ "the people of the land" (II Kings 23:30; II Chron. 36:1), that body of landed gentry in Judah whose influence was tangible whenever the natural succession of the Davidic line was at stake. The political significance of the step is made clearer by the intense anti-Egyptian attitude of the 'am ha-areṣ during this period, which undoubtedly affected Josiah's policy.⁵

It becomes apparent that Jehoahaz was chosen because his mother, Hamutal, daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah (II Kings 23:31), traced her lineage to the rural nobility of Judah, and thus to the 'am ha-areṣ. Similarly, eleven years later, Nebuchadnezzar enthroned Zedekiah, son of the same mother, who therefore also represented the anti-Egyptian faction of the Davidic house. On the other hand, the notables of Judah probably loathed the maternal lineage of Jehoiakim, since his mother Zebudah (Zebidah), daughter of Pedaiah, originated from Rumah (II Kings 23:36) in the Beth Netophah Valley in Galilee. Jehoiakim's wife (mother-to-be of his heir), Nehushta, daughter of Elnathan (II Kings 24:8),

was chosen from among the Jerusalem nobility rather than from the *'am ha-areš*.⁶

Despite the defeat at Megiddo, the leadership of Judah continued its anti-Egyptian policy, adopted prematurely at the cost of independence. Three months after his accession, Jehoahaz was summoned to Necho's headquarters at Riblah in the land of Hamath in central Syria. His destiny from the beginning seemed so uncertain that Jeremiah proclaimed: "He shall return no more nor see his native country" (Jer. 22:10–12; cf. Ezek. 19:1–4). Jehoahaz was indeed deposed and exiled to Egypt, probably because of pressure from his brother Jehoiakim (also indicated in I Esdras 1:36), who sought recognition of his rights as firstborn. Necho's appointment of Jehoiakim as king served their mutual interest: Jehoiakim's claims as legitimate heir to the throne were realized at the same time that he became Necho's vassal and loyal ally. Necho punished Judah, apparently in concurrence with Jehoiakim, by imposing a levy on the anti-Egyptian *'am ha-areš* (II Kings 23:35) rather than upon the Temple or the palace treasury in Jerusalem; the latter was hardly affected and the king of Judah still had means to erect luxurious royal buildings (see p. 211 and n. 19). Jehoiakim seems to have ascended the throne in Tishri, 609,⁷ reigning for eleven years until the winter of 598, although he himself and his circle of followers may have calculated his regnal years from the death of Josiah, entirely disregarding the regency of Jehoahaz.⁸ The summer and autumn of 609 were therefore days of great turmoil in Judah, in view of the political vicissitudes and three kings rapidly succeeding each other under extraordinary circumstances.

Egypt now controlled the entire region west of the Euphrates, or, in biblical phraseology, "from the Brook of Egypt unto the river Euphrates, all that pertained to the king of Egypt" (II Kings 24:7).⁹ But its hegemony was short-lived. In 607, when the Babylonians attempted to seize the western bank of the Euphrates, they were repelled by the Carchemish-based Egyptians,¹⁰ but in 605 Nebuchadnezzar, while still heir-apparent, defeated the Egyptians in the famous battle of Carchemish and routed the remnants of their forces in the land of Hamath. This battle, which resounds in the prophecies of Jeremiah (Jer. 46:2–12), and in Josephus (*Ant.* X, vi, 1; xi, 1), and in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Chronicle,¹¹ determined the future of Syria and Palestine. The leaders of Judah nonetheless failed to understand, either then or later, the shift in the balance of power on the international scene, and adopted a high-risk policy, with fatal consequences. Persons of the stature of a Jeremiah, gifted with prescience and historical insight, had, in contrast, no semblance of doubt. Shortly after the battle of Carchemish, the prophet was already expressing his stern belief that Nebuchadnezzar would rule over Judah and all of Hither Asia (Jer. 25:1–14). For him the salvation of the nation lay solely in voluntary submission to Babylonia, a belief to which he clung until the end (Jer. 21:8–9; 38:2 ff.).

Babylonia soon subjugated Judah, although the exact date is still disputed. Even Nebuchadnezzar's Chronicle, recording his annual military campaigns to the west from 605 to 601, remains vague as to the precise date, since it fails to specify the names of the tributary kingdoms (except Ashkelon; see below). Some scholars, relying on evidence in the opening of the book of Daniel and in Josephus (quoting Berossus), surmise that Judah was conquered immediately after the battle of Carchemish. It is difficult, however, to accept the chronological veracity of these traditions, unsupported by the Babylonian Chronicle.¹² Others maintain that Judah surrendered either the following winter, when Nebuchadnezzar returned to the west to collect tribute, or the winter thereafter, when, already king of Babylon, he conquered Ashkelon in the month of Kislev, the first year of his reign (December, 604). The latter date coincides with the ninth month of the fifth regnal year of Jehoiakim, when a general fast-day was proclaimed in Jerusalem (Jer. 36:9 ff.) and an emergency session of ministers convened. To them was brought Jeremiah's forecast of national doom, whose intrinsic drama can now be more fully appreciated by virtue of the Babylonian Chronicle. But the stubborn Jehoiakim dismissed Jeremiah's warning—"the king of Babylon shall surely come and destroy this land" (Jer. 36:29)—and burned the prophet's scroll, emphasizing Judah's tenacious determination to remain free of Babylonia.

Judah seems to have surrendered only in the autumn or winter of 603, during Nebuchadnezzar's campaign in his second regnal year, which was undoubtedly conducted to the west.¹³ The Babylonian king started out in the month of Iyyar with "a mighty army" supported by siege towers, in anticipation of strong resistance. Although the continuation of the Babylonian tablet is damaged, we can nevertheless assume that Nebuchadnezzar intended to subdue all Philistia and gain control of Judah, in preparation for his ultimate objective, the defeat of his rival, Egypt. If this surmise is correct, the missing portion of the tablet would have recounted first the conquest of a specific Philistine city, such as Ashdod, Ekron, or Gaza (cf. Jer. 25:20; 47:5; Zeph. 2:4), then the surrender of Jehoiakim (cf. II Chron. 36:6–8 and Daniel 1:1–2, which seem to refer to this event).¹⁴ Moreover, this proposed dating for the subjugation of Judah accords well chronologically with the circumstances leading to Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylonia. According to II Kings 24:1, Jehoiakim was a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylonia for three years; in other words, he thrice paid annual tribute. If he made his first payment in the fall or winter of 603, the third instalment fell due in the fall or winter of 601, during the expedition in Nebuchadnezzar's fourth regnal year. In Kislev of that year (December, 601), the Babylonian king led an attack on Egypt proper, a significant international event now unexpectedly disclosed by the Babylonian Chronicle. The Chronicle

does not conceal the shortcomings of the Babylonian army in its most ambitious campaign, reporting heavy losses on both sides and the return of the Babylonians empty-handed to their own country. The Babylonian blunder motivated Judah and several neighbors to throw off the Babylonian yoke.

Egypt was vitally interested in nurturing and supporting the uprising of the peoples in Palestine against Babylonian rule, and therefore the polarity between the pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian factions gradually intensified. Unlike the "true" prophets, who saw Egypt as a "broken reed," many of Judah's leaders placed their faith in the futile Egyptian promises of military assistance. That other states in Palestine also sought Egyptian aid against Babylonia, is recorded in an Aramaic letter from Saqqara (Memphis in Egypt). In this letter, a ruler, from Gaza, Ekron or Ashdod, approaches Pharaoh for urgent military assistance against the impending Babylonian onslaught.¹⁵ If this supposition is correct, the document concerns one of the Babylonian expeditions against Philistia, either in the summer of 603 or the winter of 601/600.

B. FROM REVOLT TO REVOLT

The abortive campaign against Egypt prevented the Babylonians from taking action against Jehoiakim's insolence for the next two years. In his fifth regnal year (600/599), Nebuchadnezzar stayed at home to rehabilitate his chariot force, and in the winter of 599/8 only made raids against the Arabian tribes. These raids and the vast spoils captured by the Babylonians seem to be echoed in Jeremiah's oracle on "Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon smote" (Jer. 49:28-33). For the time being, therefore, Nebuchadnezzar was forced to resort solely to punitive measures against Jehoiakim, employing Chaldean garrisons stationed in the west as well as "bands of the Arameans [some read here Edomites], and bands of Moabites, and bands of Ammonites" (II Kings 24:2).

These events seem to be reflected in Jeremiah's reference to the Rechabites seeking sanctuary in Jerusalem "for fear of the army of the Chaldeans and the army of the Arameans" (Jer. 35:1, 11), and in Zephaniah's wrathful charges against Moab and Ammon who "have taunted my people and made boasts against their territory" (Zeph. 2:8-10). If the Septuagint version of II Chron. 36:5 is historically reliable, then the incursion into Judah also included contingents from Samaria, implying that this region, previously annexed by Josiah, had, in Jehoiakim's time, once again been cut off from Judah by the Babylonians.¹⁶ In any event, no sporadic, disorganized bands attacked Judah, but regular military units and auxiliary forces incited by Nebuchadnezzar to prepare Judah for the decisive strike a year later.

In the winter of 598/7, his seventh regnal year, Nebuchadnezzar struck at Judah in a show of strength that also served warning on Egypt and her allies. The biblical account of Jerusalem's surrender under Jehoiachin has been fully borne out by the Babylonian Chronicle: "In the seventh year, the month of Kislev, the king of Akkad [i.e., Nebuchadnezzar] mustered his troops, marched to the Hatti Land [i.e., Syria-Palestine], and encamped against the city of Judah [i.e., Jerusalem], and on the second day of the month of Adar he seized the city and captured the king [i.e., Jehoiachin]. He appointed there a king of his own choice [i.e., Zedekiah], received its heavy tribute and sent [them] to Babylon" (B.M. 21946, rev., lines 11–13). The precise date of the conquest of Jerusalem on 2 Adar (16 March, 597) and the almost simultaneous replacement of the Judean ruler serves now as a chronological reference point for this entire period, as well as for the clarification of the reckoning of the regnal New Year in Judah.¹⁷ Because of this date, moreover, the actual course of the siege of Jerusalem and the resulting exile can be more fully appraised.

In the month of Kislev, Nebuchadnezzar marshalled his troops and set out from Babylon for Jerusalem, a 1600-kilometer (1000-mile) march, requiring at least two months (assuming an average daily advance of 25 kilometers or 17 miles), and bringing him to Jerusalem during the month of Shebat, shortly before the city's surrender. By then, since Jerusalem was already under siege by Nebuchadnezzar's "servants" (to be inferred from II Kings 24:10–11), we must assume that Babylonian as well as other forces were stationed in the west. The entry in the Chronicle for the previous year suggests this, reporting merely that Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon and thus implying that most of his army was left behind to reinforce the garrison in the west. It therefore seems likely that when the king of Babylon suddenly appeared at the head of his choice troops before the gates of besieged Jerusalem, frustrated for want of Egyptian aid (cf. II Kings 24:7), the spirit of the defenders failed and Jehoiachin and his retinue were prompted to give themselves up.

Since Jehoiachin surrendered on the second of Adar after a reign of only three months (II Kings 24:8; according to II Chron. 36:9, three months and ten days), his father must have died at the end of Marchesvan, 598. By this time Jerusalem was probably already under siege, which may explain the various biblical versions concerning the strange circumstances of the death and interment of Jehoiakim. Although II Kings 24:6 describes his demise in unusually general terms, the Septuagint (Lucianic recension) here and in II Chron. 36:8 records that he was buried in the Garden of Uzzah (as were his forebears Manasseh and Amon; II Kings 21:18, 26), outside the walls of Jerusalem. Interment here, certainly lackluster because of the heavy siege, may be what Jeremiah meant when he prophesied the king's ignoble end: "He shall be buried like the burial of an ass

drawn and cast beyond the gates of Jerusalem" (Jer. 22:19; cf. 36:30).¹⁸ Even though the king's behavior deserves this prophetic vision of his final lot (in contradistinction to his condemnation of Jehoiakim, cf. Jeremiah's consoling words about Zedekiah, conditioned upon the latter's submission to divine command; Jer. 34:4–5), we should not exclude the possibility that the utterances about Jehoiakim's death and burial echo actual events (cf. the prophecies about the destiny of Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin; Jer. 22:10–12, 24–30). In any case, Jeremiah (22:13–17) as well as the author of the book of Kings (II Kings 24:1–4), disparage Jehoiakim, for both his foreign and his domestic policy, which led him to oppress the populace in order to erect splendid royal edifices¹⁹ and to condemn and mercilessly pursue his opponents (he executed the prophet Uriah of Kiriath-jearim and sentenced Jeremiah to death; Jer. 26; cf. 36:26).

We can now reasonably reconcile the seeming biblical contradiction concerning the number of deportees and dates of deportation during Jehoiachin's time by assuming two consecutive stages.²⁰ The first stage is probably represented by the list of deportees in Jer. 52:28 (which seems to be based on an official record), according to which 3,025 "Judeans" were carried off in Nebuchadnezzar's seventh year. This apparently limited deportation comprised the provincial elements of Judah, outside the capital, captured either during the siege of Jerusalem or immediately after its surrender (and cf. the allusion in Jer. 13:18–19). The subsequent and major exile described in II Kings 24:12 included the higher echelons of Jerusalem, headed by King Jehoiachin and his retinue, along with thousands of the city's defenders. The city fell on 2 Adar, and since organizing such a mass deportation took several weeks it must have occurred by the time Nebuchadnezzar's eighth regnal year began (II Kings, *loc. cit.*) on 1 Nisan, 597. Further, II Chron. 36:10 ("when the year was expired") also indicates that Jehoiachin's exile took place at the time of the civil New Year (Nisan). The assumption of a two-phase exile may also serve to resolve the discrepancies in the numbers of deportees listed in II Kings 24:10,000 men in one case (v. 14), and 7,000 in the other (v. 16), to each of which must be added 1,000 armorers and sappers,²¹ the auxiliary technical personnel. The number 7,000 might refer to the later main deportation and the figure 10,000 to the total, including the 3,000 captives from the first stage.

The effects of Jehoiachin's exile were of greater qualitative than quantitative significance, however, for the elite of Judah was forced out—the royal family, high officials, the upper class as a whole, and the choice military personnel and artisans (II Kings 24:12–16; cf. Jer. 24:1; 27:20; 29:2). Deportees also included the religio-spiritual leadership, priests and prophets, (Jer. 29:21 ff.), among them the prophet Ezekiel. Jeremiah's vision of the two baskets of figs thus justifiably equates Jehoiachin's exile with the "good figs" (Jer. 24, esp. v. 5).

Indeed, the exilic community itself considered this deportation the decisive event in the progressive disintegration of the land of Judah, signaled by the inauguration of a new dating-system (cf. II Kings 25:27 and the chronological calculation employed throughout the book of Ezekiel). Whereas the prime calamity at the end of Zedekiah's rule was the complete devastation of many Judean cities, above all Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 34:7; 44:2), the surrender of Jehoiachin had virtually saved the country from total physical destruction. Although the archaeological evidence for the partial destruction of certain sites in the time of Jehoiachin, such as Tell Beit Mirsim and, in particular, Lachish, is questionable,²² some outlying districts can be presumed to have been taken away from the Judean kingdom, probably at its northern rather than its southern perimeter as is generally assumed.²³ In fact, Nebuchadnezzar may have annexed Benjamin to the province of Samerina and thus saved the area from destruction a decade later, during the period of the final disaster (see below). Certain notables of Benjaminite origin were actually deported, however, such as the forebears of Mordechai, even though his family was exiled from the capital, Jerusalem (Esther 2:5-6).

The mass deportation of Judah's upper class and the heavy tribute exacted by Nebuchadnezzar, reported in the Babylonian Chronicle, undermined the very foundations of the kingdom during its final decade. Bereft of its experienced, authoritative political leadership, the country was becoming prey to unreliable and adventurous elements. After the land- and property-owners were exiled ("none remained, except the poorest people of the land," II Kings 24:14), social and economic instability prevailed. In this respect Nebuchadnezzar's policy of deportation was surely shortsighted. Nevertheless, carrying off the bulk of the army, its ordnance and fortifications experts, made Judah incapable of restoring its former strength and security.

These hindrances to Judah's recovery were increased by the co-existence of two kings of the Davidic line—the exiled Jehoiachin and his uncle Zedekiah, appointed in his stead—which raised the problem of the royal succession in Judah, creating confusion within the kingdom and undermining government authority. The biblical sources, now reinforced by the Babylonian Chronicle, tell us that Zedekiah was enthroned by Nebuchadnezzar himself in a coronation that included a ceremony and an oath of allegiance to the suzerain (Ezek. 17:12-14; cf. *Ant.* X, vii, 1), typical of the somewhat earlier Assyrian vassal treaties (neo-Babylonian treaties have not been preserved) made with the subject states in the west. The vassal ruler was adjured not only by the suzerain's gods but by his own as well; in our case, by Yahweh (cf. Ezek. 17:19-20; II Chron. 36:13). Furthermore, the frequent diatribes of Jeremiah and Ezekiel against Zedekiah for breach of fealty, as well as the Babylonian vengeance against the

renegade Judean king (see passages below, p. 220), accord with the curses and punishments that the extant vassal treaties from the ancient Near East meted out to a rebel.²⁴

Although Zedekiah was duly and properly installed as king by Nebuchadnezzar, his exiled nephew, Jehoiachin, was not divested of his royalty, but enjoyed special status at the Babylonian court. The so-called Weidner Tablets, discovered at Nebuchadnezzar's palace, which list food rations for the various exiles, testify to this. Jehoiachin is mentioned in four documents as the "King of Judah" and in one of them, which is dated—the thirteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar (592/1)—he is referred to when Zedekiah was, in fact, in power.²⁵ One should not, however, conclude from this that Jehoiachin actually remained king *de jure* of Judah, nor that Zedekiah was only regent or *locum tenens*, but rather that he may have been regarded as titular head of the Jewish diaspora in Babylonia. Other exiled kings at the Babylonian court also retained their royal titles,²⁶ and were perhaps to be used, *inter alia*, as a trump card against the new rulers appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. Equally unlikely is the claim that the seal impressions "(Belonging) to Eliakim servant (*na'ar*) of Yaukin." found on jars from Tell Beit Mirsim, Beth-shemesh, and Ramat Rahel prove that Jehoiachin maintained both his position as king and his royal estates in Judah even after his exile.²⁷ In fact, other seals bearing the epithet *na'ar* do not necessarily indicate royal officials. It would seem, moreover, that the seal discussed should be dated paleographically considerably earlier than Jehoiachin's reign.

The duality of kingship during the last decade of the First Temple Period undoubtedly caused dissension in Judah, creating factions, of which one supported Zedekiah and the other Jehoiachin as the legitimate ruler, with the hope of his return to power. This question of legitimacy of royal succession seems to have been a cause for contention between the "true" and "false" prophets in the overall political and ideological controversy over relations with Babylonia, which raged within the prophetic circles.²⁸ In his ideological debate with Jeremiah at the Temple in Jerusalem, Hananiah son of Azur, representative *par excellence* of the false prophets, boldly proclaimed that "two years hence" the exiles would be returned to Judah and Jehoiachin reinstated (Jer. 28: 1–4).²⁹ Jeremiah unequivocally rejects, in contrast, the legitimacy of Jehoiachin's reign (Jer. 22: 24 ff.; cf. 36: 30), and retains his allegiance to Zedekiah through the darkest hours of crisis and political divagations (cf. Jer. 38: 14–26). Recognition of the legitimacy of Zedekiah's rule persists after the destruction of Jerusalem in the dirge for the king of Judah: "the breath of our nostrils, the Lord's anointed was taken in their pits, he of whom it is said: 'under his shadow we shall live among the nations'" (Lam. 4: 20).

Beyond the ideological controversy, however, the fact that Zedekiah ruled

under foreign tutelage, contrary to the natural succession (unlike his step-brother Jehoiakim), and the threat of an alternative represented by Jehoiachin, bespoke pressure on Judah's last king and restricted his maneuverability. In addition, the king's vacillating personality reduced him to hardly more than a puppet in the hands of his own ministers, as he himself confesses: "for the king can do nothing against you" (Jer. 38:5). This explains Zedekiah's paradoxical conduct in rebelling against the very power by whose grace he ruled Judah; by repudiating his own interests he nailed down his own coffin and that of his kingdom.

Zedekiah soon became entangled in the international scene. During his fourth regnal year, between Tishri, 594 and Tishri, 593, there convened in Jerusalem an anti-Babylonian conference, attended by emissaries from the Transjordanian states—Edom, Moab, and Ammon—and the Phoenician coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon (Jer. 27:3; for the date, cf. 28:1). More precisely, this subversive gathering took place just prior to the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah, which occurred in the fifth month of the same year (Ab, 593). The anti-Babylonian plot loosed bitter charges between Jeremiah and those false prophets who advocated open revolt against Nebuchadnezzar, not only in Judah (Jer. 27:9–16; 28), but even among the Judean exiles in Babylonia (Jer. 29:8–9; 21 ff.). It is not unlikely that this intensified prophetic activity set the stage for the call of Ezekiel. The prophet's inaugural vision more or less coincided with the conspiratorial meeting held in Jerusalem, which boded ill no less for the exiles in Babylonia than for Judah.³⁰

According to the Babylonian Chronicle, on the eve of the Jerusalem conspiracy, the Babylonian empire was beset by serious domestic and foreign problems, which gave the nations in the west the chance to rebel. In 596/5 the king of Elam attacked Babylonia, but was roundly defeated, the inspiration, probably, for Jeremiah's invective against "Elam, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah" (Jer. 49:34 ff.). In the winter of 595/4 an insurrection broke out even in Babylonia proper, but Nebuchadnezzar was able to quell it and depart immediately thereafter for a brief campaign to the west. Less than a year later (December, 594), he set out once again for the west, an episode mentioned just before the Chronicle breaks off. If we assume correctly that the rebellion in Jerusalem started a few months later in the course of the following summer, then this last Babylonian campaign could not have been very impressive, or might even have failed, thus aggravating the ferment in the west. During his fourth regnal year, Zedekiah is said to have gone to Babylon, or at least to have sent his "quartermaster" (Jer. 51:59). We do not know, however, whether this occurred before or in connection with Nebuchadnezzar's campaign to the west, or, conversely, whether this step was necessitated by the Babylonian response to the conspiracy against them.

The subversive schemes in Judah were no doubt, once again, fomented by Egyptian intrigue. The immediate cause of the anti-Babylonian alliance, however, was not, as is often assumed, Pharaoh Psammetichus II's ascent to the throne, since his reign now appears to have started in 595, not 594, more than two years before the Jerusalem plot.³¹ During his third year (593), Psammetichus was engaged in a successful campaign in Nubia, probably with foreign mercenaries participating, including troops from Judah, to which the Letter of Aristeas alludes.³² During his fourth year (592), he set out for Haru, i.e., Palestine and the Phoenician coast. The Egyptian sources make it clear that this expedition was essentially a pilgrimage, complete with priests, to holy sites in this area, perhaps including the Temple in Jerusalem.³³ Psammetichus' appearance in Asia certainly had strong diplomatic repercussions and undoubtedly stoked the latent anti-Babylonian sentiments smoldering within the Judean leadership.

These seeds of discontent, however, burgeoned into open rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar only after the accession early in 589 of Pharaoh Hophrah, who continued relentlessly to undermine Babylonian hegemony over Palestine. But no broad anti-Babylonian front in the west ever took shape, since, apart from Judah, only Tyre and the kingdom of Ammon seemed to have had the courage to rise up against the foreign oppressor. Tyre's attempt to rebel is proven by Nebuchadnezzar's siege, begun shortly after the conquest of Jerusalem and lasting for thirteen years (Ezek. 18:26–28; 29:17–20; *Ant.*, X, xi, 1; *Against Apion*, I, 21).³⁴ Ammon's rebellious designs are implied by Ezekiel's vision of Nebuchadnezzar's dilemma during his march, as to whether he should attack Rabbath-ammon or Jerusalem (Ezek. 21:23 ff.), and also by the scheme of king Baalis of Ammon to eliminate Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the governor of Judah appointed by the Babylonians after the Destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Ishmael son of Nethaniah (Jer. 40:14; 41:15).

C. THE DESTRUCTION OF JUDAH

When Nebuchadnezzar finally struck in the winter of 589/8, Judah had to stand up singlehanded to the awesome might of Babylonia. Diplomatic efforts to achieve an anti-Babylonian bloc had come to nothing, and Egyptian support was so minimal that Judah was virtually isolated in her hour of peril (cf. Lam. 1:2, 7). Judah was also less capable militarily of withstanding the Babylonian onslaught than she had been a decade earlier, when select troops were hers to deploy. And the morale of the nation was undermined by the unresolved issue of total war with Babylonia or surrender. Among those who opted for surrender were Jeremiah and certain military figures, who were convinced of the futility of armed confrontation. Given such prodigious obstacles, Jerusalem's ability

to endure so long and so arduous a siege is all the more remarkable. The siege persisted for a year and a half, reckoning Zedekiah's regnal years from Nisan; if we adopt the autumnal Tishri-calender that has been used in this chapter, it lasted a full year longer.³⁵

Whereas the books of Kings and, more significantly, Jeremiah and Ezekiel provide detailed accounts of the final struggle of Jerusalem, they do not specify what happened in the rest of Judah. Only an incidental remark is made about two Judean cities—Lachish and Azekah (Tell Zakariyeh)—which were in their turn to become battlegrounds, “for these alone remained of the cities of Judah as fortified cities” (Jer. 34:7). These words, to be ascribed to the first year of the siege of Jerusalem, prior to the dispatch of the Egyptian relief force (when Jeremiah still enjoyed freedom of movement and retained a flicker of hope for Zedekiah; *ibid.* vv. 1–5, 21–22), testify to the speed with which the Babylonians had overrun Judah, except for those two cities, which managed to maintain communication lines to the capital from the south-west. The lack of biblical data for the rest of the country is offset to some extent, however, by archaeological and Hebrew epigraphical evidence from several Judean sites, which highlight the drama of the close of the First Temple Period.

Undoubtedly the most significant collection of Hebrew documents for our period are the ostraca from Lachish, Level II, and Arad, Level VI (see chap. II and the literature there). The Lachish ostraca are mainly letters (or copies thereof) dispatched to Joash, apparently the last commander of the city's garrison. Since they were found in the destruction layer of the city-gate, they can be dated to the eve of the fall of Lachish. Although the letters do not explicitly mention the Babylonian invasion, they do attest the feverish activity in the southwestern part of the country—urgent orders, inspection of military guards, and installation of communication signal systems. Like the Bible, they also reflect the opposition and tension between activist leadership in the capital and the army in the outlying districts, as well as some prophets, who advocated appeasement, thus creating a situation destined “to weaken the hands of the soldiers . . . and the hands of the nation” (Ostrakon no. 6, line 6; cf. Jer. 38:4). These documents record a relatively early stage of the war, when the central government and high command in Jerusalem were still in full control of the situation, the military services were functioning normally, and communication between the capital and the southwestern front was still intact. Another letter, however, attests a genuine state of emergency and might have been written after the fall of Azekah (Ostrakon no. 4, lines 10–13).

Unlike those of Lachish, the documents from the border fortress of Arad are essentially administrative, but found with these were several letters from the archive of Eliashib son of Oshiahu, probably the fortress commander. They

generally deal with supplying provisions, mostly to the *kittiyim*, possibly mercenaries of Greek or Cypriot origin serving in the Judean army. A most instructive letter orders, in the king's name, the urgent dispatch of soldiers to the Edomite border to forestall an expected enemy invasion.³⁶ Although an Edomite attack on Judah could easily have coincided with the Transjordanian incursions just before the first Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 598/7 (see above), such an attack is more readily understandable in the context of the last Babylonian war. It also seems that the repeated wrath against Edom in biblical books was caused by the Edomite role in the final destruction of the Judean kingdom (cf. Jer. 49:7–22; Ezek. 25:12–14; Obad. 1:10–14; Joel 4:19; Ps. 137:7; Lam. 4:21–22).

The outcome of the final struggle with the Babylonians and the extent of the devastation of Judah are vividly illuminated by the archaeological excavations. While these excavations demonstrate that most of the fortress cities had begun to decline in an earlier era, there is unequivocal evidence that numerous sites in various parts of Judah were totally destroyed at the very end of the First Temple Period: Lachish, Tell Beit Mirsim, Beth-shemesh, and Gezer on the border of the western slopes of the hill country and the Shephelah; Beth-zur, Khirbet Rabud (apparently the site of Debir), Ramat Raḥel, and, above all, Jerusalem in the mountain region; apparently Arad,³⁷ Tel Maḥata, and Tel Masos on the southern fringes; even remote En-gedi on the Dead Sea was not spared.³⁸ Thrust into the city walls of En-gedi were packs of arrows of the type used by the Babylonian army, living proof of the fierce battles this site had witnessed.³⁹

Totally different, however, was the situation north of Jerusalem, where the Benjaminite settlements seemed to have fared much better. It has long been doubtful whether the archaeological evidence from Bethel and Mizpah (Tell en-Naṣbeh) means that these places were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar rather than at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century.⁴⁰ Recent excavations at Gibeah (Tell el-Ful) and Gibeon (el-Jib; mentioned even after the Destruction of Jerusalem in Jer. 41:12, 16) also suggest that these sites were destroyed not at the hands of the Babylonians but considerably later. Neither at Anathoth (Rās el-Kharrūbeh), Jeremiah's native town, nor at Mozah, is a break in settlement apparent during our period⁴¹. This may also apply to Ramah, headquarters of Nebuzaradan, the Babylonian commander during the final phase of the siege of Jerusalem, and a way-station for Judeans going into exile after the fall of their capital (Jer. 40:1).

We can therefore assume that the settlement in Benjamin in fact survived unscathed by the Babylonian invasion. This may have been because Benjamin, a distinct entity (cf. Jer. 17:26; 32:44), was separated from Judah as early as 597 (see above) or because it surrendered to the Babylonians at the outset of their

final invasion in 589/8. Whichever the case, after the destruction of the kingdom this area became the center of the remaining population, with Mizpah the seat of Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judah (cf. Neh. 3:7 on the continuation of Mizpah as the governor's seat right into the Persian period). An incident involving the prophet Jeremiah is instructive: During a temporary pause in the siege of Jerusalem, because an Egyptian relief force had arrived, the prophet, probably not unlike other inhabitants of the capital, tried to make his way to the land of Benjamin. Since Benjamin might by then have been under Babylonian control, such a move was bound to be called desertion to the enemy, exactly the accusation made against Jeremiah by the officer in charge of the Gate of Benjamin: "You are deserting to the Chaldeans" (Jer. 37:11 ff.).

Further evidence that Benjamin escaped destruction is suggested by the list of exiles returning from Babylonia (Ezra 2:21-35; Neh. 7:25-31).⁴² According to this list, the first returnees settled mainly in Benjaminite towns, which indicates that they were not in ruins. Special attention should be paid to the three Benjaminite cities listed in the Shephelah: Lod, Hadid, and Ono; situated as they were near the *Via Maris*, the vital route used by the Babylonian forces, they had no chance whatever to withstand the enemy and probably surrendered without a struggle. Besides Benjamin, the only localities mentioned in the list are the cities of Bethlehem and Netophah. As for the latter, it is of particular interest that the only army officers to join Gedaliah in Mizpah, whose place of origin is stated explicitly—Seriah son of Tanhumeth and the sons of Ephai and their men—are from Netophah (II Kings 25:23; Jer. 40:8). From this we can conclude that the Judean army in this area had not been completely disbanded nor exiled to Babylon. The same may perhaps be said for Bethlehem, which apparently was not depopulated and after the Destruction of Jerusalem continued to be an important transit station on the road to Egypt (Jer. 41:17). There thus remained throughout Judah proper population pockets neither destroyed nor destined for exile.

The siege of Jerusalem started on 10 Tebeth, in Zedekiah's ninth regnal year (II Kings 25:1; Jer. 52:4; Ezek. 24:1-2), and ended with the Destruction of the Temple on 7 (or, according to another version, 10) Ab, the eleventh year of the king of Judah and the nineteenth of Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 25:8-9; Jer. 52:12). In absolute dates (adopting a Tishri-calendar for the regnal year in Judah), the siege lasted from 15 January, 588 until 14/17 August, 586. The book of Kings focuses only on the final phase of the battle of Jerusalem and the destruction of the city (II Kings 25:1-22; Jer. 52:4-27), but many details of the actual course of the siege can be gleaned from the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Faced with the enemy's threat, the king of Judah sent envoys to Egypt in order to enlist military aid, especially chariotry, as Ezekiel recounts (17:15) and possibly

one of the Lachish Letters ("the commander of the army, Coniah son of Elnathan had come down in order to go to Egypt," Ostrakon no. 3, lines 14 ff.). Though Pharaoh was slow to respond, an Egyptian relief force did in fact compel the Babylonians to raise the siege of Jerusalem temporarily (Jer. 37:5, 11). This led to a false sense of security in the capital, which Jeremiah quickly warned against. The citizens went so far as to renege on the covenant made early in the siege for the manumission of slaves, an extreme measure probably intended to reinforce the city's potential defensive power (Jer. 34, esp. vv. 21-22).⁴³ The Egyptian task force, however, was too frail to be of any real consequence (Ezek. 17:17; 30:20-26; cf. Lam. 4:17). Ezekiel's prophecies of doom concerning Egypt, headed by chronological superscriptions, imply that the abortive Egyptian operation took place in the spring of 587.⁴⁴ Hophrah's intervention occurred, therefore, only a year after the investment of Jerusalem; but even though it failed and the noose was newly tightened around the capital, the city's staunch defenders were able to hold out for more than a year.

That some of Jerusalem's inhabitants nevertheless yielded to the enemy during the final year of the siege is indicated by Zedekiah's reply to Jeremiah, who at the eleventh hour urged his capitulation: "I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand and they mock me" (Jer. 38:19). These deserters are probably among the 832 captives listed in Jer. 52:29 as exiled "from Jerusalem" in Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth regnal year, while the city was still under siege. Analogous to the exile under Jehoiachin (see above, p. 211), this small-scale deportation may reflect a preliminary wave, followed after the fall of Jerusalem by a mass exile in Nebuchadnezzar's nineteenth year (II Kings 25:8; Jer. 52:12).⁴⁵ Although the Bible does not mention the total number of deportees, it does suggest a multitude: "now the rest of the people that were left in the city . . . with the remnant of the multitude did Nebuzaradan . . . carry away" (II Kings 25:11; Jer. 39:9; 52:15). Among the captives were the higher officialdom, high priesthood, and the army command, whose punishment was far more severe than it had been in the days of Jehoiachin, for they were executed at Riblah, Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters in central Syria (II Kings 25:18-21; Jer. 39:6; 52:10, 24-27).

Because the battle of Jerusalem was a formidable challenge for Nebuchadnezzar, he enlisted his choice commanders (Jer. 39:3, 13), who, years later, served in high positions in the Babylonian empire (such as Nergal-Sarezer, who was to become king of Babylon, if only briefly). He also employed the most advanced techniques of siege-warfare of his day, throwing dikes around the city, raising ramps up to the walls, and using battering rams to breach the walls (II Kings 25:1; Jer. 32:24; 33:4; Ezek. 4:1-2; 17:17; 21:27). Despite all this sophisticated siege technique, the Bible implies that the major cause for the

fall of the city was the devastating famine which plagued the inhabitants (II Kings 25:3; Jer. 52:6, and cf. Jer. 37:21; Ezek. 5:10; Lam. 4:4–10), whose number was probably swollen early in the Babylonian invasion by refugees from the countryside who sought safety within the capital.

Finally, on the ninth of Tammuz, in Zedekiah's eleventh regnal year (18 July, 586), the wall of Jerusalem was breached (Jer. 39:2; 52:5–7; and, the month omitted, II Kings 25:3–4), probably on its northern side, topographically the most vulnerable flank of the city. Penetration of the city from this direction is also implied by Zedekiah's position at the Gate of Benjamin during a critical stage of the siege (Jer. 38:7) and by the gathering of the Babylonian officers upon the breach of the wall at the "Middle Gate," both in the north of the city. But under cover of darkness Zedekiah and his retinue fled through the southern accesses of the city (by way of the King's Gardens near the Siloam pool), attempting to escape to Transjordan. The king was overtaken in the plain of Jericho, however, brought before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, subjected to cruel punishment, and led into Babylonian captivity (II Kings 25:4–7; Jer. 39:4–7; 52:7–11; cf. Ezek. 12:12–14; 17:20; 19:9), in accord with the breach of a vassal treaty.

About a month later the city was thoroughly ransacked by the rampaging enemy—walls and houses razed and the Holy Temple and royal palace burned (II Kings 25:8; Jer. 52:12). The sacred vessels in the Temple and the palace treasures which had been left behind following the Babylonian despoliation in the days of Jehoiachin were pillaged and plundered (II Kings 25:13–17; Jer. 27:10–22; II Chron. 36:18). Tangible evidence of the catastrophe which befell Jerusalem has been disclosed by the archaeological excavations both in the Upper City and on the eastern slopes of the southeastern hill of Jerusalem, where traces of once-demolished buildings have been uncovered.⁴⁶ The destruction in the latter region was so all-encompassing that Nehemiah, a century and a half later, was forced to abandon the ruins and leave the ravaged area outside his newly-erected city-wall (cf. Neh. 2:12–14). In the Upper City, at the northern defense line (south of the Street of the Chain), the burnt remains at the foot of a tower and finds of several arrowheads point to the violent battle with the Babylonians, who attempted, as stated above, to break through from this direction.

With the conquest of Jerusalem and the cessation of the Davidic monarchy, Judah was divested of her polity, but the drama had not yet come to a close. Surviving remnants of the army and populace sought sanctuary across the Jordan River (Jer. 40:11), or possibly—if we may draw an analogy from the final events surrounding the Destruction of the Second Temple—in hideouts and caves in the hills and wilderness of Judah. For the latter, we can find support in the Bible and in epigraphical and archaeological discoveries. Indeed, the bitter

reality enveloping the survivors is delineated in Ezekiel's grim vision at the news of Jerusalem's fall: "they that are in the wasteland shall fall by the sword, and him that is in the open field will I give to the beasts to be devoured, and they that be in *the forts* and in *the caves* shall die . . ." (Ezek. 33:27; cf. 7:15-16).⁴⁷ The cruel fate of those who escaped the sword is also tolled in the poet's lament: "Our pursuers were swifter than the vultures in the heavens; they chased us on the mountains, they lay in wait for us in the wilderness" (Lam. 4:19).

Such refugees, seeking shelter from the enemy, might well have left behind the Hebrew graffiti in a cave near Khirbet Beit-Lei, east of Lachish, where the names of Judah and Jerusalem appear with words of prayer.⁴⁸ The pottery and a Hebrew papyrus⁴⁹ discovered in the caves at Wadi Muraba'at near the Dead Sea indicate that the fugitives found refuge there not only at the end of the Second Temple Period but also during the seventh, and, apparently, the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E. In the Wadi ed-Daliyeh caves northeast of Ramallah, there were also discovered, alongside papyri from the end of the Persian period, several potsherds from Late Iron Age II, about the time of the Destruction of the First Temple, perhaps hinting at the final tragedy.⁵⁰

For want of testimony like that of Josephus' *Wars*, the Massada discoveries, and the Judean Desert cave material, which illuminate the end of the Second Commonwealth and the Bar Kochba Revolt, we may never know the whole dramatic story of the tribulations of the rebels and refugees after the fall of Jerusalem.⁵¹ Instead, Jeremiah 40 ff. presents us with the epilogue to the catastrophe, allowing us to glance at the surviving population gathered around Gedaliah son of Ahikam, who tried to restore the last vestiges of the community. But the assassination of Gedaliah and the annihilation of the Babylonian garrison at Mizpah (Jer. 41:3) shattered all hope for a resurgence of the Jewish community from within. Now the aspiration and yearning for national revival turned toward the Jewish diaspora in Babylonia and its yet unbudded potential.