

LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

THE ORDER FOR ISRAELITE KINGS

*Deuteronomy gave clear stipulations about who was eligible for kingship and how the king should conduct himself. Such laws were akin to ancient suzerainty treaties in which a vassal must be subordinate to his suzerain. **For Israel, the king might be the ruler of the nation, but he stood under the suzerainty of Yahweh, for in the truest sense, only Yahweh was the Great King** (cf. Dt. 33:5).*

As such, Israel's king must not develop a large chariot corps for defense (Dt. 17:16). (Horses were used for chariots, and cavalry would not become a military norm until much later.) Egyptian horse-breeding for chariots was well-known from ancient times, but the king of Israel must not emulate this military strategy. Also, he must not build a large harem, a usual practice among potentates who wished to establish secure borders by marrying the princesses of adjoining countries (Dt. 17:17a). Foreign wives, especially, would lead the king away from his pure devotion to Yahweh. Further, he was not to build a large treasury (Dt. 17:17b). Together, these restrictions converge toward a fundamental thesis. Whatever king might rule, he must be wholly devoted to Yahweh, not depending upon the conventional trappings of security and defense but entrusting the welfare of the nation to God.

The king also must wholeheartedly follow the Torah (Dt. 18-20). Similar to ancient Near Eastern customs, in which a copy of the suzerainty treaty was retained by the vassal, who was obliged to read it periodically, the Israelite king was to have a personal copy of God's covenant law and read it regularly, refreshing his memory with its statutes. Only such faithful obedience would result in the longevity of his dynasty.

A central theme in the history of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings is the conflict between the kings and the prophets. Samuel versus Saul, Nathan versus David, Abijah versus Jeroboam I, and Elijah versus Ahab: all these conflicts reflect the theology of Deuteronomy and work toward a balance of power in the leadership of ancient Israel. In the nations of the ancient Near East, where kings were often considered to be divine, it is only in ancient Israel that a prophet could beard the king in his den and hope to escape. Jeremiah rises as the prophet *par excellence* who stood against the last of Judah's kings.

Jeremiah and the Kings of Judah (21:1--23:8; 36; 45)

At the heart of the tension between Jeremiah and the kings of Judah was the royal theology based on the covenant with David. In the original covenant, David had been guaranteed a perpetual dynasty (2 Sa. 7:11b-16) as well as an undisturbed land from which the Israelites would never be driven (2 Sa. 7:10-11a). The inviolable nature

of this covenant is clearly expressed in David's dying words (2 Sa. 22:51b; 23:5a). The Davidic covenant came to be firmly associated with the temple on Mt. Zion (Ps. 2:6-9; 78:65-72; 132:11-18). Zion had been chosen by Yahweh as his special home (Ps. 9:11; 48:1-14; 87:1-2; 99:1-3), and the city of Jerusalem and the temple on Mt. Zion were considered impregnable (Ps. 46:1-11; 125:1-2; 146:10).

Early warnings from the 8th century prophets indicated that the Davidic covenant must not be viewed as an unconditional political guarantee (Am. 2:4-5; 6:1a; Mic. 3:10-12). Nevertheless, the popular view persisted that Jerusalem and Mt. Zion were promised protection by God no matter

what (Mic. 3:11; Zep. 1:12). Had not Yahweh saved Jerusalem in the nick of time during the days of Hezekiah, when Sennacherib of Assyria had invaded with terrific force (Is. 36-37), and had not the city been saved specifically "for the sake of David" (Is. 37:35)? True, Judah's enemies might make life difficult (Is. 29:1-4), but at the last minute, Yahweh would defend his sacred shrine on Mt. Zion (Is. 29:5-8; 31:4-5). He would give to the Jerusalemites horns of iron and hooves of bronze with which to gore and trample their enemies (Mic. 4:11-13). Thus, the popular royal theology in Jeremiah's day was that the nation was politically safe (6:14; 7:10; 8:11). Small wonder that when Jeremiah preached his temple sermon in which he declared that Yahweh would do to the Zion temple what he had done to the ancient tabernacle at Shiloh (7:12-15), the officials of Judah called for his death because he "prophesied against this city" (26:10-11).

It is against such a background that Jehoiakim burned Jeremiah's first scroll which Baruch had read publicly after Jeremiah had been placed under gag orders and barred from the temple precincts (36; 45). Jeremiah's protests against the popular royal theology repeatedly brought him into conflict with the kings of David's family.

TALKING POINTS

- *Who was the first of Israel's kings to egregiously violate the protocols for kingship?*
- *Why would God restrict Israel's kings from horses, a large harem, and a burgeoning treasury?*
- *If Israel's prophets were a kind of "balance of power," is there anything comparable in the modern church world?*

Jeremiah and the Dynasty of David



This red jasper seal, bearing the image of a fighting cock, has the inscription: "[belonging] to Jehoahaz, son of the king."

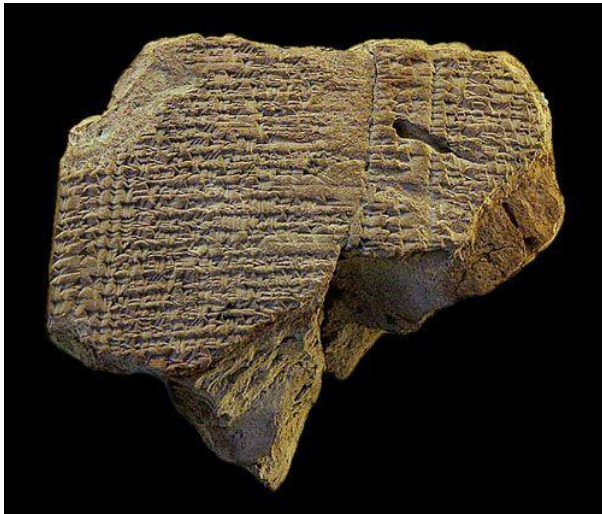
(Israel Museum)

Repeatedly, Jeremiah addressed the kings of the royal house of David and called them to account. Repeatedly, he warned them against the popular theology of guaranteed safety, urging them to do what was just and right if they wanted the nation to survive (22:1-9, 21). But their track record was terrible, and even foreign nations would eventually come to acknowledge that Judah had forsaken her covenant with Yahweh (22:8-9). Jehoahaz (Shallum), Josiah's

son, was deposed and exiled by the Egyptians (22:10-17; 2 Kg. 23:30b-33). Jeremiah bluntly announced that he would never return home (22:10-12). In his place, Pharaoh-Neco II elevated Jehoiakim, Jehoahaz' brother, as a puppet king (2 Kg. 23:34-37). However, Jehoiakim began his reign by rebuilding the royal palace at the expense of the poor, decorating it with "large windows" and paneling the walls with cedar, probably imported from Lebanon (22:13-17). Jeremiah repudiated this self-centered national expense as totally inappropriate, prompting the question, "Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?" (22:15). In the end, Jeremiah condemned Jehoiakim because of his dishonesty, oppression, and extortion (22:17).



Jeremiah's diatribe against Jehoiakim's palace-building project at the expense of the poor likely refers to construction at Ramat Rahel, the royal citadel just south of Jerusalem, which archaeologists have excavated. Jeremiah especially singled out the ornate windows. This limestone window balustrade from the 7th century BC, excavated at Ramat Rahel, consists of capitals that probably imitate the stylized palm trees in Egyptian architecture.



That Jehoiachin was exiled to Babylon is verified by this 3" tall cuneiform fragment, one of four tablets excavated in Babylon and mentioning Jehoiachin of Judah by name.

This tablet describes monthly rations for the exiled king and his five sons to be allotted to "Jehoiachin, king of the land of Judah."

Pergamon Museum, Berlin

After Jehoiakim burned Jeremiah's scroll (36:29), Jeremiah informed the king that God had rejected his family, and when he died, he would not even be given a decent burial (22:18-19; 36:30-31). Though Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim's teenaged son, would succeed his father, he would only last a scant three months before he, too, would be exiled (2 Kg. 24:8). Jeremiah predicted this exile as well, describing Jehoiachin as a discarded signet ring and a broken pot. None of Jehoiachin's sons would sit on David's throne, and like Jehoahaz, who died in Egypt, Jehoiachin would die in Babylon (22:24-30). Jehoiachin, along with large portions of Judah's population, would be transported to Babylon as prisoners of war (2 Kg. 24:10-16).

Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, was placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar II as the last of the puppet kings of Judah (2 Kg. 24:17), but he was no better than his predecessors (2 Kg. 24:18-20). When he attempted to break his vassal

relationship with Babylon (2 Kg. 24:20b), hoping against hope that Yahweh would perform another miracle at the last minute (21:1-2), Jeremiah scorned such speculation as foolhardy (21:3-7). If fact, the intelligent decision would be to simply surrender to the Babylonians and save as many lives as possible (21:8-10). As for the royal kings of David's line who depended upon their supposed divine guarantee (21:11-13), Yahweh was against them (21:14; 23:1-2).

TALKING POINTS

- *How dangerous would it have been in the ancient world to speak publicly (or even privately) against the reigning king?*
- *Can you see why Jeremiah was considered by many of his contemporaries to be a traitor?*

The Future of David's Dynasty

Given the blistering judgments which Jeremiah pronounced against the house of David, one might suppose that he had rejected the Davidic covenant outright. This would not be accurate, however. Though the Sinai covenant, with its blessings and curses, and the Davidic covenant, with its promise of a perpetual dynasty, seemed to be in tension, they were not mutually exclusive. In fact, Yahweh still held out a future for the Davidic dynasty and the promises to David. Though the judgment of exile for repeated covenant violation was inevitable according to the Sinai covenant, restoration was possible because of the Davidic promises. Yahweh himself would regather the people and establish them in safety (23:3-4). This future was to be realized when a righteous Branch of David's line would arise, one named *Yahweh-Tsidkenu* [= Yahweh, Our Righteousness] (23:5-6). The distress of the nation would come to an end, and the nation once more would serve a king from David's family (Jer. 30:8-9), a leader close to Yahweh (Jer. 30:21). The royal palace in Jerusalem and the temple on Mt. Zion would be restored (Jer. 30:18b; 31:6b, 12, 23, 38-40). All the tribes of Israel would be reunited (Jer. 31:1), and God would establish with them a new covenant of forgiveness (Jer. 31:31-34), a covenant guaranteed for all time (Jer. 31:35-37). Associated with this new covenant was the reestablishment of David's family (33:14-18). The ancient promises to David were guaranteed fulfillment by Yahweh's most solemn oath (Jer. 33:19-26).

This promise would become the core of messianic expectation, and when in the New Testament people asked whether or not Jesus was the "son of David," it is to this hope that they refer. Centuries later, St. Paul would put it succinctly, "Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel..." (2 Ti. 2:8).

TALKING POINTS

- *Can you see how the exile of Judah lays the foundation for the messianic hope?*
- *Can you also see why the New Testament begins with the genealogy of Jesus, the son of David (Mt. 1:1)?*