

TUTORIAL
1.34

God sent His prophets to the Israelites, the warnings are refused

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: ***Isaiah 29:13, Jeremiah 6:13,14, 2 Kings 25:1-12.***

Last time

Joshua, Moses' successor, led the Israelites' push to occupy Canaan. The following centuries saw a pattern repeated; first *apostasy*, then *judgment* in the form of military defeat and occupation, eventual *repentance*, then finally *deliverance*, when a "judge" or "rescuer" was raised up to lead the nation. In time the people demanded that a human monarchy be established. Saul was crowned the first king, but when he proved disobedient to God he was replaced by David, who became Israel's most famous monarch. After the reign of Solomon – builder of the first Temple in Jerusalem – the nation split into a northern and southern kingdom. With only a few exceptions, the kings of the respective kingdoms did not acknowledge God's sovereign rule.

God's commitment is unwavering despite Israel's unfaithfulness

God continues, in His Narrative, to describe many key events from the ensuing 500 years of Israel's history. Much of the account is dominated by the nation's repeated violations of the terms of their covenant relationship with God. Again, the predominant metaphor is that of marriage, with one partner being unfaithful while the other waits patiently for the eventual return, repentance and restoration. Of course God, although grieved, does not play a passive, victim's role. He vigorously seeks out His faithless chosen nation in many ways, and often allows harsh punishment to come in order to get their attention. Their national spiritual philandering has many tragic consequences for them as individuals and as kingdoms – now known respectively as Israel and Judah.

The truly remarkable theme that continues to emerge throughout this often sad history is God's unwavering commitment to communication, to revelation. The predominant way that He communicates to Israel and Judah during this period is through His appointed storytellers, His prophets. Some of the most

well known prophets of these centuries are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Often their message is polemic – powerful, confronting condemnations of the communities' tolerance of and involvement in godless practices...along with warnings about looming judgment. Some, like Jonah – famous for being swallowed by an enormous fish – are sent to warn the surrounding nations about the terrible results ahead if they continue to ignore the true Creator God. Throughout this period, there are always some individuals from both Israel and Judah, who respond to God's revelation and approach Him humbly and in faith, on His terms rather than their own. Occasionally one or the other of the two kingdoms, in dire circumstances or under the direction of a rare reforming monarch, undertakes a public return to God. These, however, are exceptions rather than the rule. In general, God's exhortations and warnings through His prophets go unheeded.

It should be noted that for much of this period, the sacrificial system officiated by priests at the Jerusalem Temple continues. But for the most part this has become a meaningless ritual that God condemns. Through the prophet Isaiah (29:13) he says *"These people say they are mine, they honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote."*

God's priority has always been genuine relationships with human beings on his terms. Religious forms are valid if, and only if, they serve this purpose. As empty rituals, they are a mockery of true, heartfelt repentance and worship. Throughout its history, Israel is dogged by false prophets, claiming to speak for God. They often have populist appeal with a message that dismisses fears about God's judgment and offers temporal prosperity. Speaking as God's mouthpiece, Jeremiah says (6:13, 14) *"From the least to the greatest their lives are ruled by greed. From prophets to priests they are all frauds. They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when there is no peace."* This kind of poisonous mix of truth and lies – at times dazzling and dramatic, at others soothing and seductive – continues to be one of Satan's favourite stratagems for confusing those who know something of God's Story.

God judges the two kingdoms

Eventually the time of God's patient, gracious appeal to His people comes to its tragic conclusion. As we've noted before in the Narrative, His grace never runs out, but when people finally and completely reject His efforts to rescue them, they then face the inevitable punishment His righteousness demands. Isaiah prophecies to Israel, the northern kingdom, that the Assyrians – an ascendant super-power in the region – will defeat them in war if they do not repent. When they refuse to listen, Assyrian forces do indeed lay siege to the northern capital, Samaria, for 3 years. It finally falls around 722 BC and Israel comes under Assyrian control.

Thousands are taken as captive slaves. Then, consistent with Assyrian practice for their occupied lands, they bring people from other subjugated nations to settle the northern areas of Canaan. Inevitably, these people do not know the true, living God, but have their own cult deities and practices. Over the ensuing decades and centuries, there is extensive intermarriage between the remaining Israelites and the new settlers. Their descendants become known as Samaritans. As a people, they claim to worship Yahweh, but they assert that only the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament written by Moses - is God's Word. They build a rival to the Jerusalem Temple on Mt. Gerizim in their own territory of Samaria.

Isaiah's counterpart to the south, Jeremiah, along with other prophets, repeatedly warns the kingdom of Judah that they are in imminent peril if they do not repent and return to the proper covenant relationship with God. Their indifference results in the fulfillment of his prophecy that Babylon, the other super-power of the region, will destroy them. The Babylonian forces, when they do come and over-run the kingdom, are ruthless, tearing down the Temple and even the stone walls of Jerusalem. Like with Israel, a large percentage of Judah's population is taken away into exile in Babylon. (2 Kings 25:1-12)

Back from exile, then domination by the Greeks and Romans

In exile, many of God's people return to the truth, finding ways to engage with His Word while cut off from the Temple with its sacrificial and *Levitical* – or priestly - system. After a generation some of the exiled Hebrew people in Assyria and Babylon begin to make their way back to Canaan. In time, the city of Jerusalem, its walls and Temple are rebuilt. As a people they become widely known as Jews, probably a contraction of Judah, the predominant Israelite tribe to the south, in the area of Jerusalem.

Sadly, the return to their homelands does not result in a permanent and sincere relationship with God as divine Guide and focus of the community. As a nation they do not provide – as the Lord always intended – an example of a living, vibrant Theocracy in contrast to the dark polytheism around them. Instead, a religious system becomes increasingly entrenched - a slavish adherence to the letter of the Law, with more and more additional regulations... based on the faulty assumption that this is the way to please God, to avoid punishment and to receive His blessing.

Around 400 BC Canaan is overwhelmed and occupied by the military might of Alexander the Great. Although his reign is short-lived, Hellenisation – the spread of Greek culture – impacts the entire Mediterranean basin and well beyond. Greek becomes the language of wider communication throughout the entire area, including Canaan.

After Alexander's death, the wars between his generals over how his empire will be divided sweep through the territories of the Samaritans and the Jews. Forming a strategic land bridge between the Seleucid Empire based in Syria to the north and the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt to the south, the Hebrew territory is a hotly contested military prize for the next century and a half. Partial Jewish rule over Palestine is reinstated after the Maccabean revolt around 164 BC but in 60 BC, the iron military machine that is Rome rolls through and Israel becomes a vassal state. The people are heavily taxed to pay the imposed tribute to Rome.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. What is your response to the picture of God as the great Communicator, doing everything possible to rescue the lost race of people He created? Also of history as the story of this rescue effort? Do you see any parallel between the responsibility of the prophets to speak God's message and our responsibility to share His Word, particularly with those who are cut off from its reach?
2. Without taking for ourselves what is God's role as Judge, can we draw a valid parallel between the many Israelites going through the form of the sacrifices etc. and similarly religious people in our society? Why do you think that many people now, as then, are vulnerable to the message of false prophets? Trace out the basic worldview and "heart" issues you feel might be involved in causing people to follow something that is close to the truth but is, in fact, a lie?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Read the book of the prophet Micah and these other related Old Testament passages that give some historical background: 2 Kings 15:32–20:21; 2 Chronicles 27–32; Isaiah 7; 20; 36–39.
2. In a few sentences, describe the impact each of these had on Israel's history in the centuries before Christ:
 - Assyria
 - Babylon
 - Alexander the Great
 - The Hasmoneans
 - Julius Caesar
3. For some extra background, you could do some research into the Samaritan people.