

SESSION NINE

THE COLLAPSE OF JUDAH

2 Kings 18–25

INTRODUCTION

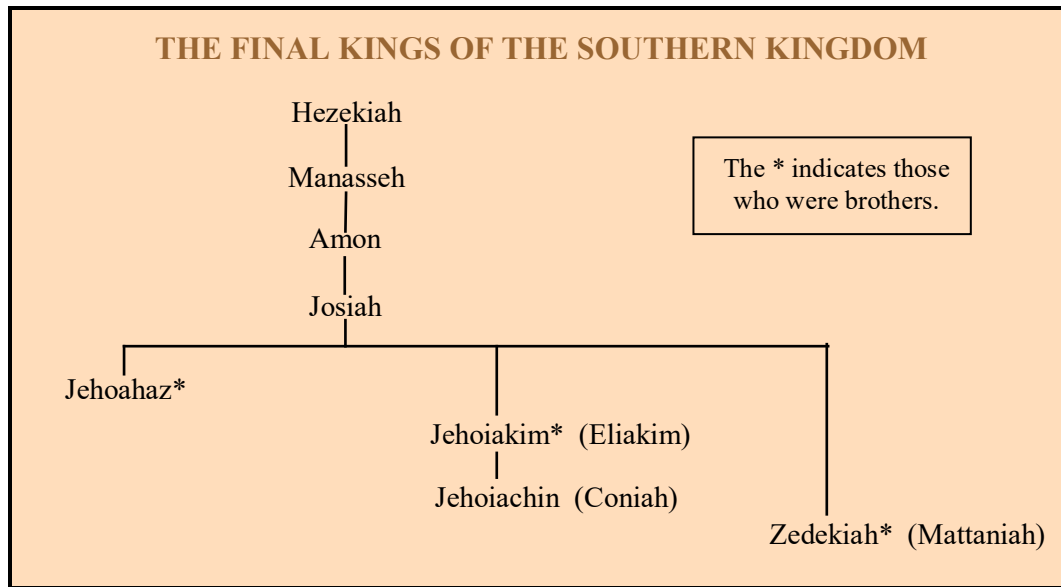
The earlier portion of 2 Kings focused on the continuing degeneration of the northern kings until finally Israel was taken away into captivity by Assyria in 722 BC. The Davidic line in the south fared better but eventually began to weaken and deteriorate as well. Although the early years of the Southern Kingdom were marked by a number of kings who "did right in the sight of the LORD," the latter history from Ahaz onward was marked by kings who "did evil in the sight of the LORD" (the only exceptions being Hezekiah and Josiah). Even though the greatest deterioration came with Ahaz and those who followed him, there were *seeds of destruction* even prior to him (particularly with Jehoram's marriage to the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel).

There are some interesting parallels between the fall of Israel and the fall of Judah. In both cases, the sin that was sufficient for judgment occurred long before the final judgment. God's decision to judge and His revelation of that decision preceded the execution of judgment. Ahijah and Elijah were the agents of that revelation in the north, and Isaiah was the agent in the south. The life of both kingdoms was extended by God's grace. In both kingdoms a reform or purge transpired between the sins that guaranteed judgment and the actual judgment itself. In the north, this came by way of Jehu's purge, while in the south this was achieved by Josiah's reform. But despite the reforms, eventual judgment was certain. Repentance and reform only forestalled the doom. Furthermore, the reforms were always found lacking in some way or another. Despite the noticeable changes they brought, they were to some degree superficial and not thoroughgoing. Thus they were sufficient to bring momentary success but not lasting success.

The plunge into evil was advanced most by the evil kings Ahaz and Manasseh. But each of these was followed by a good king who attempted to steer the nation back to YHWH, namely, Hezekiah and Josiah. Unfortunately, the influence of evil was not even apprehended by the two kings who were faithful. This raises a question: who or what will stop evil if Hezekiah and Josiah do not? The dilemma serves to prepare the nation for a solution that can only come from God ... the Messiah.

RELATION OF THE KINGS

The latter segment of the kingly succession was interrupted by foreign influence, such that three of the kings were actually brothers. [In the following chart, the brothers are marked by an asterisk].



STRUCTURE

Most of the first 17 chapters are filled with information concerning Israel. Information about the south that is provided (see chart on II Kings) seems to have some bearing on the deterioration of the Southern Kingdom. Chapters 18–25 deal with Judah alone and can be divided into four primary sections:

- (1) The Reign of Hezekiah
- (2) The Utter Revolt of Manasseh and Amon
- (3) The Reform of Josiah
- (4) The Final Plunge

This last stage is the rule of Josiah's three sons and is marked by political instability.

THE RODS OF DISCIPLINE

As with the Northern Kingdom, YHWH uses the foreign powers to discipline His people for their sins, a principle in keeping with the plan of Deuteronomy 28–29. Syria troubled Israel for years and even began to create problems for Judah during Ahaz's reign. However, the rise of mighty Assyria to the international scene halted Syria's threat to Judah. From Hezekiah's reign onward, there were three major world powers, each of which played a role in Judah's history in turn: Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon.

A. Assyria

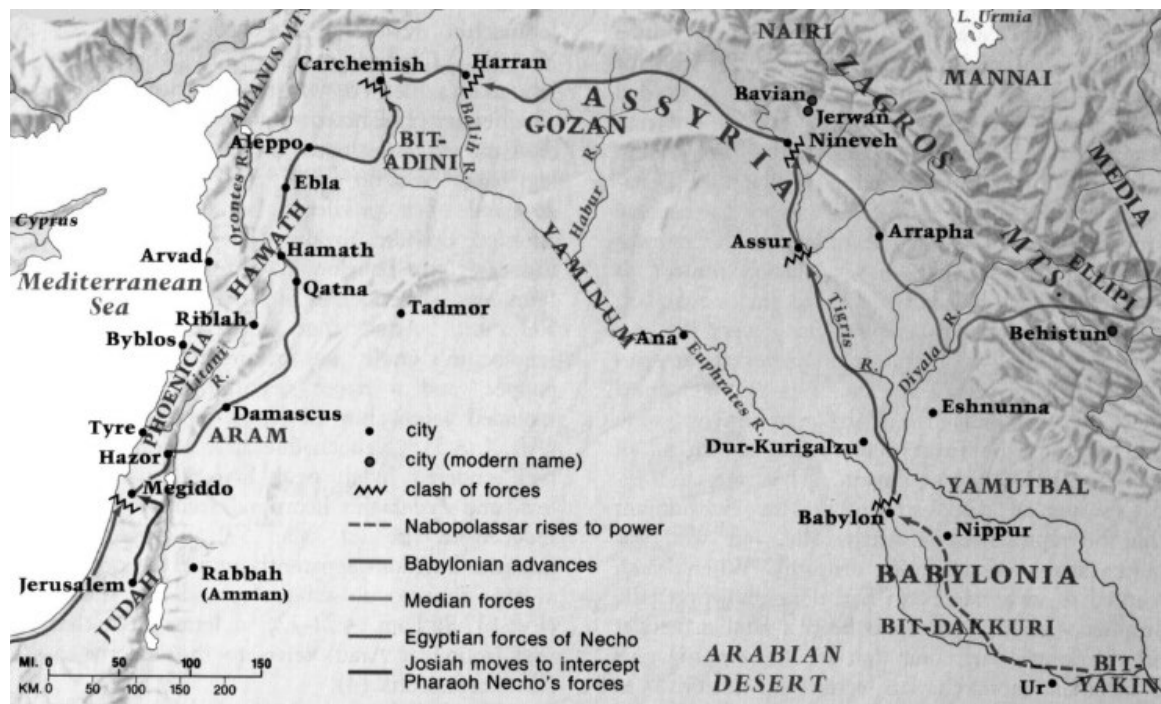
The Assyrian empire was the domineering force, exerting its influence on Judah from roughly 740 to 612 BC.¹ Under the successive rulers Shalmaneser V (727-722) and Sargon II (722-705), the Northern Kingdom of Israel was carried away into captivity. Hezekiah was challenged by

¹See Merrill (*Kingdom of Priests*, 405-420) for a sketch of the Assyrian menace on Israel and Judah.

Assyria during much of his reign, and was invaded by Sennacherib (705-681) in 701 BC. Assyria reached her greatest zenith under Ashurbanipal (668-627), but following his death lost her prominence, finally collapsing with the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC.² The Assyrians were one of the cruelest peoples of all ancient civilizations (see notes on the book of Nahum).

B. Egypt

With the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, two other emerging empires scrambled to obtain supremacy: Egypt and Babylon. Babylon became a mighty force as it sought to expand westward beyond the Euphrates. However, Egypt moved northward sweeping through Palestine and Syria, and joined the remnant of the Assyrians in an effort to halt Babylon at the Euphrates. This took place in 609 BC at Carchemish. However, by 605 BC, Egypt was decisively defeated by Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar in another engagement at Carchemish. During this period of 609-605 BC, Egypt held power over Judah. Pharaoh Neco dethroned Jehoahaz in 609 on his return from Carchemish. The Egyptians rallied to come back and defeat Babylon in 601 BC, which allowed Judah a chance to rebel from Babylon (2 Kgs 24:1). Nevertheless, it was short-lived.



C. Babylon

With the great victory over Egypt at Carchemish in 605 BC, Babylon had become the controlling power with Nebuchadnezzar as king. The setback by Egypt in 601 BC was only temporary. By 597, Nebuchadnezzar had regrouped and came upon Judah once again. Babylon now became the *rod of discipline* that YHWH used to bring Judah into exile. Babylon reigned

²Merrill (438) uses the dates of 668-627 BC for Ashurbanipal, based on the work of Joan Oates ("Assyrian Chronology, 631-612 B.C.," *Iraq* 27 [1965]: 135-59).

supreme from 601 until 539 when they were overthrown by the Medes and Persians. The Babylonian exploitation of Judah took place through several deportations.

1. 605 BC - Following the battle at Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar took control of Judah and forced Jehoiakim into submission. Some of the people were deported at this time, including Daniel.
2. 597 BC - Judah rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar returned to besiege the city, which fell on March 15, 597 BC. Many of the officials were carried away to Babylon, including the king Jehoiachin and the prophet Ezekiel.
3. 586 BC - Zedekiah was allowed to govern Judah, but he eventually rebelled. The Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem for thirty months and the city fell on July 18, 586 BC. This was the greatest devastation of Jerusalem. The great Temple of Solomon was completely destroyed and the city demolished. Afterwards, a great many of the people were deported to Babylon. The sons of King Zedekiah were slaughtered, and even Zedekiah himself was disgraced. The Babylonians put out his eyes, bound him with bronze fetters and brought him to Babylon (2 Kgs 25:7). Only a small group of people were allowed to remain in Judah, primarily the common people or those not of nobility (Jeremiah remained). Within only a few months, the puppet governor (Gedaliah) was murdered, and in rebellion a group of Jews fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them (probably late 586).
4. 582 BC - Nebuchadnezzar ordered another deportation of Jews to Babylon.

JUDAH PRIOR TO HEZEKIAH

There are several developments during this period that laid the foundation for the apostasy of the Southern Kingdom. The first substantial event came with Jehoram of Judah who not only did evil, but married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. This was also the fault of Jehoshaphat, his father, who made an evil alliance with Ahab. As a result Jehoram married the daughter of Jezebel, and she dominated Jehoram like her mother dominated Ahab. It had been Ahab's marriage to Jezebel that ushered in the obsessive Baal worship for Israel, and now Jezebel's daughter (herself a fervent devotee of Baal) was allowed to bring her satanic influence to the Southern Kingdom (2 Kgs 8:18-19). While Jehu was purging Israel of Baal worship in the north, Athaliah was propagating it in the south.

The next notable event is Athaliah's attempt to destroy the Davidic line (2 Kgs 11:1-3). The child Joash escaped (by God's sovereignty), thus permitting the continuance of the Davidic line (2 Sam 7) and channel for the Messiah (Jesus came through Joash; see Matt. 1). The priest Jehoiada led a resistance to Athaliah and a reform that helped Judah shape up.

"Then Jehoiada made a covenant between the LORD and the king and the people, that they should be the LORD's people, also between the king and the people" (11:17).

Signs of weakening continued to follow Judah, however. During Amaziah's reign (796-767), sinful Israel even gave Judah a defeat, and later Amaziah was assassinated. The LORD struck Uzziah with leprosy (15:5). During Jotham's reign (750-731), the nation was afflicted by foreign powers (a sign of failure - Deut. 28!):

"In those days the LORD began to send Rezin king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah against Judah" (15:37).

A drastic downturn took place with Ahaz (735-715), for "he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God" (16:2). His spiritual apostasy (described in 16:2-6) included making his son pass through the fire, sacrificing and burning incense on the high places, and walking in the way of the

kings of Israel. He also changed the Temple and constructed a new altar upon the model of an altar constructed in Damascus, all of which was without divine sanction. As an attempt to ease his troubles with Syria, he sought the aid of Assyria (rather than seeking the LORD). He even declared to Assyria, "I am your servant and your son" (16:7), suzerainty treaty terms, which reflected that He rejected YHWH as the true suzerain of the nation. He openly and defiantly was taking himself out from under the suzerainty covenant with YHWH.

THE REIGN OF HEZEKIAH (r. 729 – 686 BC)

Ahaz's son is Hezekiah, and he becomes a welcome change for the throne. He has a glorious reign, in contrast to Ahaz, and the Scriptures speak more highly of him than of any other king:

"He trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses" (18:5-6).

After a description of his reign (18:1-12), the remainder of the Hezekiah narrative deals with his problems with Assyria and the pro-longing of his life. Whitcomb believes that there is good reason to believe that the illness and extension of life (ch 20) actually occurred before the Assyrian threat (18:13–19:37).³ His obedience and prosperous reign may have led to a pride condition, as 2 Chr 32:25-26 seems to imply. The pride of his heart could account for the Assyrian invasion of Sennacherib.

It is against this background of the Assyrian invasion that the book of Isaiah was written, whose prophecies extended roughly from 739-686 BC. The Book of Isaiah is developed in three parts:

1. Part 1 (ch 1–35) - Isaiah predicts the overthrow of the Northern kingdom and that the South will be attacked. Yet he asserts that the Assyrians will never take Jerusalem. The Assyrian forces are likened to flood waters (as from the Euphrates) spilling over the banks. They engulf the entire Fertile Crescent, and Judah is likened to a man being progressively engrossed by these floodwaters. They come up to the nose, but the head stays above water (Isa 8). The point is this: the Assyrian army may overrun the entire Fertile Crescent, but there is one point on the map she cannot take, and that is Jerusalem. A hexagonal clay prism inscribed with the annals of Sennacherib has been found which contains this inscription:

"I shut up Hezekiah the Judean like a caged bird within the city of Jerusalem, his capital city."⁴

But that is all that God allowed Sennacherib to do . . . he could not take her. So, Isaiah predicts discipline on Judah by Assyria, but assures them of this hope: Jerusalem will not fall.

2. Part II (Ch 36-39) - This is an historical interlude centered on Hezekiah's reign. In 36–37, Isaiah describes the Assyrian invasion, while in 38–39 he predicts the Babylonian captivity for Judah.

³John Whitcomb, *Solomon to the Exile*, 125.

⁴*Ibid.*, 122.

3. Part III (Ch 40–66) - Isaiah addresses the exiles in Babylon with a word of comfort to the people of that coming captivity. He will deliver a remnant, regather them, and eventually bless them greatly.

The final chapter on Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20) deals with Hezekiah's illness and the extension of his life. This illness seems to have been due to the lifting up of his heart in pride (2 Chr 32:25-26). Hezekiah's prayer (20:2-3) results in YHWH compassionately extending his life for 15 years. This extension of life, however, allows a situation in which Hezekiah is tested by the visitation of some diplomats from the rising kingdom of Babylon:

"And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that he might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chr 32:31).

Whitcomb's comments on this incident are most insightful:

What did the test reveal? ... his heart's desire was to convince these men that he was not a second-rate king according to the world's standards. And so, instead of learning about the uniqueness and holiness of Jehovah, and the necessity of acknowledging him alone, they carried back to Babylon nothing more than a knowledge of silver, gold, spices, precious oil, and material treasures (2 Kings 20:13).⁵

Isaiah's reaction to this foolish boasting of Hezekiah was the prediction that all these treasures would one day be carried off to Babylon (20:17).

UTTER REVOLT

One can hardly imagine that such an evil son could come from such a good father, but as Hezekiah was numbered as one of the greatest kings, his son Manasseh was perhaps the most evil and rebellious of all. The consequences of his reign (as well as his son Amon) guaranteed the doom of the kingdom. However, there are two phases to his reign.

A. The Abominations of Manasseh (r. 686 – 643/42 BC)

The horrors of his reign are well described in 2 Kgs 21:1-9 and 2 Chr 33:2-9. He is the worst king of all, and it is not just that he is morally corrupt . . . he completely throws YHWH worship out and replaces it with every despicable heathen practice. This included Baal worship in the Temple and even outright satanic worship:

"he built altars (i.e., altars for Baal and Asherah) in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, 'In Jerusalem I will put My name.' For he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he . . . practiced witchcraft and used divination, and dealt with mediums and spiritists" (2 Kgs 21:4-6).

He was doing more evil than all the Canaanites whom YHWH had thrown out, completely defiling YHWH's Temple! The incredible thing is that the LORD allows his reign to continue for almost half a century during which time the Word of God was in oblivion. Furthermore, he persecuted and martyred the believing remnant (21:16), so that true YHWH worship almost disappeared from the kingdom. Manasseh was tolerated by the people (2 Chr 33:9), and this together with his abominations resulted in an irreversible decree by YHWH that Judah would have to be exiled from the land (cf. 2 Kgs 23:26-27 and Jer 7:16).

⁵Ibid., 131.

But during this period (682-642 BC), God disciplines him. He becomes a vassal of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681-669) and Ashurbanipal (668-627). Under these two kings, Assyria reached the peak of her power. But during this time, God raises up a prophet by the name of Nahum. He writes his prophecy about 654 (according to Walter Maier), just when Ashurbanipal is at his peak.⁶ Although everything looks hopeless for Judah under the thumb of mighty Assyria, Nahum comes forth with a great message: "Nineveh will fall!" Nahum's great concern is that the holiness of God is at stake in the use of Assyria, but God is in control. Assyria is a terrifying and cruel people, but God will topple her kingdom.

B. Manasseh's Repentance

What is astounding about Manasseh is that he experiences something of a conversion towards the end of his life. Ashurbanipal takes him captive for a certain period and removes him to Babylon where he is placed in great distress (2 Chr 33:10-17). Out of this despair, He humbles himself and calls upon the LORD. The repentance is apparently genuine, and God returns him to Jerusalem. From this, he became a different man: "Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God" (2 Chr 33:13). He even began to reform the kingdom, although he apparently met with little success, since the damage he had already done was so serious. Furthermore, his son who followed him (i.e., Amon) walked in evil ways.

JOSIAH'S REFORM (r. 641/40 – 609 BC)

2 Kgs 22:1–23:30

Josiah is the other bright spot of Judah's history. In 622 BC, the book of the law was found in the house of the LORD and when read to Josiah launched the nation into a major reform. Actually, this discovery only accelerated the reform that had already been initiated (comp. 2 Chr 34).

8th year (632) - Josiah began to seek the LORD (2 Chr 34:3)

12th year (628) - Began a purge of Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chr 34:3)

13th year (627) - Jeremiah the prophet began his prophecies (Jer 1:2)

18th year (622) - the book of the Law is found and a major reform takes place (2 Kgs 22)

When Josiah came to the throne in 640 BC, he already had the knowledge of Nahum's preaching that Assyria would fall. This was a theological support that he did not need to fear Assyria. Furthermore, Zephaniah rises up during this period, possibly between 640 and 632.⁷ Zephaniah's preaching probably accounts for the early reform during Josiah's reign. Zephaniah's message was basically this:

Although God seems hidden, it is really God who is sovereignly moving over history, and if you will only repent, you will experience the blessings of God upon you.

Thus Josiah had the theological support of Nahum and the message of Zephaniah that encouraged him toward reform.

Jeremiah was also a prophet of Josiah's time, and his initial prophecies came before the major reform of 622 BC. His message was basically this:

Get back to Moses where you came from and obey the LORD. Get back to the Bible!

⁶ Walter A. Maier, *The Book of Nahum* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1959); reprint, Minneapolis, MN: James Family, 1977), 36.

⁷ The fact that he does not mention any reform, but yet calls for one, suggests that he may have written before any reform took place.

This is what Josiah does. Thus, Zephaniah was responsible for the latter reform, and this brings the people back to their covenant with YHWH.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE REFORM

A. Lack of True Repentance

On the official level, the nation did come back to Yahwehism. However, there seems to have been a bifurcation between the state religion and the popular religion, for the populace never seems to have really come back whole-heartedly to pure YHWH worship. The people were never really cured of the sins with which Manasseh had seduced them. Dr. Waltke states:

Outwardly and officially the reform thoroughly purged the land; pure YHWH-ism was once again the state religion. But inwardly and individually it did not purge the populace; they conformed to the covenant but not in their heart The kingdom of God needed a new covenant; one where obedience to the law issued out of the heart.⁸

This situation was dangerous, for it only promulgated an external religion. The state was conforming to Torah, but inwardly the people on the whole still lacked the right heart toward the Lord. Jeremiah rises up to decry this situation:

"And yet in spite of all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to Me with all her heart, but rather in deception" (Jer 3:10; cf. 6:16-20).

B. The Final Plunge

(2 Kgs 23:31–25:30)

When Josiah died in July of 609 BC, the nation was left to his sons, three of whom reigned during the closing years: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. One other king, Jehoiachin, was the son of Jehoiakim. All four "did evil" and struggled under foreign oppression.

1. Jehoahaz - dethroned by Pharaoh Neco in 609 BC. Egypt holds power over Judah from 609-605 BC.
2. Jehoiakim - Made a vassal in 605 to Babylon, but rebelled after three years in spite of the warnings of Jeremiah (Jer 27:4-11). This was probably about the time Egypt rallied to return Babylon with a surprising defeat in 601 BC. His reign was afflicted by several foreign powers as a prelude to the complete devastating judgment that the LORD was sending. 2 Kgs 24:3-4 testifies that the sins of Manasseh and his persecution of innocent faithful believers were the immediate causes for God to give Judah into the hands of these foreign powers. The incident of the LORD's supernatural smiting of the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:35-37) should be considered in contrast, for that story is a testimony that YHWH could have defended His people against the greatest forces on earth, including Babylon and Egypt. They only crushed Judah because God ordained them to discipline His people, not because they were militarily superior.
3. Jehoiachin - He was the ruling king when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem on March 15, 597 BC, deporting almost 10,000 to Babylon (including Ezekiel, who prophesies from 590-572 in Babylon). Jehoiachin is also referred to as Coniah or Jeconiah (see Jer 22:24).

⁸Bruce K. Waltke, Class notes, Dallas Seminary.

4. Zedekiah – Nebuchadnezzar allowed him to rule Judah, but after his rebellion the Babylonians crushed Jerusalem and the Temple on July 18, 586 BC.

C. The Davidic Line

The final paragraph of the book of 2 Kings contains a notice that Jehoiachin (who had been deported to Babylon in 597 BC) was eventually released from prison in 560 BC and treated kindly in the court of the king of Babylon. This is not an insignificant way to close the book at all, for this reflects God's gracious faithfulness in preserving the line of David in keeping with His covenant (2 Sam 7) in preparation for the eventual coming of the Messiah who will establish the kingdom that endures.⁹

Surely, the books of Kings have demonstrated that Israel's ability to establish the kingdom under a human monarchy is hopeless!

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

There was never a more corrupt individual than Manasseh, but God's grace even reached to him (2 Chr 33:12-13).

⁹Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah after the return from exile, is actually a grandson of Jehoiachin (either through Shealtiel or Pedaiah; see 1 Chr 3:19). According to Jer 22:28-30, Jehoiachin was placed under a curse, for his sons would not have the honor of sitting on David's throne *as king*. Though we do have someone functioning as "governor" from the line of David following the exile (e.g., Zerubbabel), we do not have anyone actually reigning *as king* until Jesus Christ comes.