

Book of Faith for January: 2 Kings 15-25 and Minor Prophets (Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk)

In Hebrew, 1-2 Kings are one book, telling the theological history of the southern kingdom (Judah) and northern kingdom (Ephraim or Israel) from the secession of the north after the death of Solomon (920 B.C.), and continuing to the utter destruction of Ephraim in 721 B. C. (2 Kings 17) and the conquest and exile of Judah in 597-587. B. C. (2 Kings 24-25).

In September we read half-way into 2 Kings, broke off, and now we continue. What makes this study of the central part of the OT so interesting is that we have been reading, almost side by side, the history of what was happening in 1-2 Kings, along with the prophets' criticism of the nation. We read in 2 Kings through chapter 14, telling of the long, peaceful and prosperous reign of Ephraim's king Jereboam II. We paused then, to hear from the two prophets God sent at that very time to that very nation: Amos and Hosea. They said that although the land was materially prosperous it was spiritually sick, which finally brought its death.

Now we resume the history. We hear the end of Israel, then history continues with Judah alone. There, too, however, God's prophets were sharply critical of the priests, kings and people of the nation. Finally the Lord also brought disaster to Judah—though it was not quite complete destruction.

There is much to think about, here. Clearly the USA is not ancient Israel or Judah: they had a special covenant with the Lord God (Sinai) and the US has no such special, favored relationship with God; we are, to Him, a nation like any other. Yet one of our greatest presidents, Lincoln, though he was atheistic or perhaps Deist as a young man, in the last years of his life, as evident at his second inaugural address, came to take the biblical God very seriously as a righteous judge over all nations. In the spirit of Lincoln, and of the writer of 2 Kings as well, we should ask ourselves: what is God going to do to the US--based on our ways?

January 8 assignment. Read by (1/15): 2 Kings 15-20

Chapters 15-17 are primarily about Israel/Ephraim. The string of faithless kings continues and Israel is destroyed from the face of the earth, never to be heard from again. In the middle of this story is the story of faithless Ahaz, of Judah, the king Isaiah met (Is 7-9) who would not believe the Lord nor trust his signs!

*2 Kings 15 Mid-way through the long, materially prosperous reign of Jereboam II in Ephraim (or Israel), Judah's king Amaziah was killed and is succeeded by his 16 year old son Azariah--also called Uzziah, as in the famous passage in Isaiah 6 (2 Kings 14:17-21). Azariah/Uzziah is faithful and has a very long reign, even though he did not carry through a reform by destroying the "high places" where the people yet offered pagan sacrifices. *How would you judge a political leader who does much good, but not everything that needed to be done?* 2 Chronicles 26:16-21 offers a reason why the king*

was struck with leprosy. From then on his son Jotham is regent. 8-31 briefly describe a series of Israelite kings, all of whose reigns either begin or end (or both) with murder, whose reigns are: Jereboam II's son Zechariah (six months), Shallum (one month), Menahem (ten years), his son Pekahiah (two years), Pekah (20 years, though other historical evidence suggests it was more like three years). Notable is the advent of Tiglath-pileser the great king-general of the ascendant Assyrian empire, in vv. 19f and 29. 32-38 meanwhile in Judah, when Uzziah dies his son Jotham comes fully to the throne and reigns like his father. When he dies his son Ahaz succeeds him: this is the Ahaz that Isaiah spoke with, as we read last month in Isaiah 7-9!

2 Kings 16 1-4 Ahaz is a sharp turn for the worse. After a string of Judean kings faithful to the Lord, Ahaz adopted the false religion of Israel. "Pass through fire" means to sacrifice his son in fire! 5-9 Rather than, as prophet Isaiah urged him in a personal interview, trust in the Lord, Ahaz trusts in an alliance with the super-power Assyria. He takes many of the Lord's possessions from the Temple to buy Tiglath-pileser's protection, making evident wherein his faith lay! *Try to think of at least one way that your nation could choose a policy based on faith in God.* 10-16 King Ahaz displaces the Temple's altar in favor of one of pagan design; the high priest completely cooperates. Ahaz makes more innovations; it is not clear in a psychological sense just why, but religiously it is perfectly clear: his faith is in the King of Assyria and not in the Lord.

2 Kings 17 In this long chapter we read the utter end of Israel. 1-6 The events of the end of Israel are told briefly. Next in a long line of faithless kings (2 Kings 15:8-31) is Hoshea. He was vassal to the king of Assyria, but tried to do better, by withholding the tribute he was required to send to Assyria, and attempting an alliance with Egypt for protection. King Shalmeneser of Assyria, successor to Tiglath-pileser, learned of Hoshea's deed and came and attacked the capital, Samaria, and captured it. He imprisoned the king Hoshea, and the peoples he took back to Assyria, and dispersed them there, so they would lose their cohesion and strength as a people, and quickly blend into the Assyrian melting pot. 7-18 is the indictment against Israel. Pause to consider what is said. Because this nation turned away from the Lord it had known, the Lord destroyed it. *What bearing might this have on your country? To help you think through and learn from the details, what are the main things for which they are condemned?* 19-20 JUDAH is walking not in the Lord's way but Israel's. 21-23 is the shortest summary of Israel's history. When they left politically the son of David, (his grandson, Rehoboam) they also left religiously the faith of David. *How would you decide if a political movement was religious, anti-religious, or religiously neutral?* 24-28 Here you see why the Jews of Jesus' day despised the Samaritans! They were not descended from Abraham, but were immigrants. Notice the ancient theology, that gods are local, so that one must obey the local god or incur his displeasure. 29-34 Like ALL ancient peoples except the Jews, there are a host of gods who are worshiped, each with its own priesthood and temple and rites and rules.

2 Kings 18-20 Meanwhile in Judah a string of faithful kings continues; indeed **Hezekiah** was among the best, a second David!

2 Kings 18 1-8 FINALLY the religious reforms needed to make the people focus ONLY on the Lord were accomplished. The Lord entirely rewarded Hezekiah for this faithfulness. Where Ahaz had despaired of the Lord and trusted in Assyria, Hezekiah refused to bow to Assyria and trusted the Lord instead. *What would you think about a President pursuing a policy because he trusted in the Lord as opposed to a president who trusted in the powers of the world?* 9-12 makes the contrast between Israel's betrayal of the Lord and their utter destruction, and Hezekiah's complete faithfulness in the face of Assyria's terrible threat. Now comes great drama. 13-16 In response to huge Assyrian successes, Hezekiah loses faith and strips the Temple to appease the Assyrian king. 17-25 Assyria sends officials to meet Hezekiah's officials. Assyria's spokesman asks the very direct and completely practical question about trust: in whom does Hezekiah (and his people) trust? *Do you trust God in religious and emotional matters, but not in matters of dollars and cents?* 26-35 No king is ever invulnerable to popular opinion! Hezekiah's officials, sensitive to PR, do not want the citizens of Jerusalem to hear the Assyrian's arguments, but he appeals directly to them. 36-37 give such an interesting picture: the people, despite the potential for great fear, obey their king; yet the torn clothes of the officials indicate helpless grief.

2 Kings 19 Hezekiah, again the opposite of his predecessor Ahaz, consults Isaiah to hear from the Lord. Isaiah sends words of comfort to Hezekiah, and the Lord mysteriously causes the Assyrian general to leave. He still sends back a message to Hezekiah, not so trust his God to deliver him. Hezekiah puts Assyria's blasphemy before God and prays, and Isaiah sends comfort again in his prophesy. The prophesy is first, against the blasphemy of Assyria. And there is a sign (as in Isaiah 7 with Ahaz): people will be able to eat the first two years from the self-re-seeding crops, and in the third year normal agriculture will recommence.

2 Kings 20 1-7 The great story of Hezekiah's illness. The prophet's word to the king, though not what was wanted, at least gives the king solid information for plan and action. As we have often seen, though, the Lord's decisions can be changed. Here, Hezekiah prays, reminding the Lord of how faithful he has been, and the Lord changes his mind and Hezekiah's fate. *Will you, when you are in bad straits, be able to pray as Hezekiah did, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before your in faithfulness with a whole heart"?* 8-11 because Hezekiah will act based on what he believes, he wants to be sure of the Lord's promise and so asks for a sign. Just as a shadow moving backwards is contrary to normal, so the reversing of Hezekiah's illness will also be due to the Lord's interfering in normal processes.

January 15 assignment. Read by (1/22): 2 Kings 21, Zephaniah

2 Kings 21 STRANGE but true, sadly enough. Hezekiah, the very best of kings, a second David, is succeeded by his son Manasseh, the very worst of kings! 1-9 While we can be horrified, let us also try to understand how the horror came to be. *Draw on your own experience and observations in life: how did Judah's religion become completely*

changed from what it was under Hezekiah? V. 16 Is worshipping an idol a cause of sinful behavior? Is worshipping the Lord a cause of good behavior? How?

Introduction to Zephaniah We turn now to Zephaniah because it was at about this time that he prophesied. The first half of the 600's BC were a disaster for the faith in Judah under Manasseh. What Word does the prophet Zephaniah have from the Lord?

Zephaniah 1 Apparently, the prophet Zephaniah is the great-great-grandson of wonderful king Hezekiah! (Josiah is the next king in Judah, when we come back to 2 Kings 22.) 2-6 begins with universal destruction! "Utterly sweep away" reminds us of 2 Kings 21:13 ("I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish.") The accusations in 4-6 fit what 2 Kings 21 reported of Manasseh's apostasy (= "abandoning one's religion"). 7-13 The "sacrifice" is a slaughter of evil-doers. V 12 has a sharp complaint against those who say, basically, that the Lord does not act in the affairs of men. *What is your belief: do you believe that the Lord punishes the evil and blesses the righteous?* 14-18 is a terrifying description of the wrath that the Lord will execute on Judah. As you read vv. 15-18 it might remind you of September 11, 2001! Such a calamity as that the Lord was to bring on Judah, because of the sin Manasseh led them into. Like vv 2-3, v. 18 points to the Lord's wrath beyond Israel to the whole world. *What do you think of this explanation: if Judah, God's chosen people, cherished for centuries, even descended from that faithful stock Abraham, becomes corrupt—then there is no hope for anyone!*

Zephaniah 2 Clearly the loudest voice is that of utter devastation, yet here is a call to repentance; notice, though, that it lacks the promise that IF they return the Lord WILL relent. 4-15 are oracles (sayings) against foreign nations, a feature of most prophetic books. Read or skip as you like but look at least at 8-11: Moab and Ammon are just east of Judah, across the Jordan, and have been enemies and rivals of Judah for 600 years. *Why will the Lord "be terrible against them;" what is their sin?* Notice a note of hope in v. 9, "a remnant of my people;" this sounds like even after the Lord's wrath in chapter 1, at least some will survive (see 2:3!).

Zephaniah 3 1-5 is against Jerusalem again; *what are her sins? What parts of the population make the most trouble?* 6-7 is most frightening. First, the Lord has visited his indignation on wicked cities (v. 6), and He says to Himself: surely they will see my anger and change: yet they do not change! *Does that fit your experience, people who will not change their bad ways no matter how much trouble the Lord sends their way? How do you explain people's relentless continuation of dysfunctional, sinful practices?* V. 8f Again, as if Zephaniah is tending toward the universal wrath that we know in Revelation, away from particular, nation-by-nation punishments; but also a universal restoration of the earth ("pure speech" replacing the confusion of tongues at Babel). 11-13, oracle of salvation: restoration includes pardon. "Haughty/humble": *why is haughty bad and humble good?* 14-20 is remarkable! Recall the context: the terrible idolatry of Judah under Manasseh, the terribly fury foretold in Zeph 1; and now this jubilant song of joy! The utter shock of it points to grace: a completely unmerited, sheer promise of mercy! The first verses almost sound like a description of Palm Sunday.

January 22 assignment. Read by (1/29): Kings 22-23, Habakkuk, Nahum

Last week we read of the terrible apostasy of Manasseh in the first half of the 600s BC, and Zephaniah's prophesying against it. This week comes the history of the second half of the 600s, with a very good king, Josiah. At the end of his reign, the whole picture of world politics changes, as the Assyrian empire, dominant for 100 years, now falls to the Babylonians (also called "Chaldeans"). These world events are commented on by prophets Habakkuk and Nahum.

Kings 22-23 Another reverse! The fabulous King Hezekiah was followed by a worthless son, Manasseh, and a forgettable grandson Amon. His son, however, Josiah, was second only to Hezekiah (and of course David!) in kingly virtue. 1-2 A lovely description, "he did not turn aside to the right or to the left," in other words, he did not favor one idea or group or value over another, but always walked the right, true and good path! 3-7 Josiah, in love for the Lord, wants the repairs of the Temple to proceed. 8-10 A discovery! In the process of renovations, a very old scroll is found. (We know that it is some version of the book of Deuteronomy!) 11-13 He tears his clothes (sign of profound sorrow) because the book of the law shows that Judah is in gross violation of what it should be doing! 14-20 Notice that to consult the Lord they go to a woman, Huldah.

23:1-3 A great and holy convocation! Having been promised that he, Josiah, would receive mercy because he was sorrowful for the people's sins, Josiah apparently wants his whole people to humble themselves so that they, too, might receive the Lord's mercy. 4-25 is the record of Josiah's purging, reforming zeal. All traces of idolatry are burned, the "holy places" of the pagan shrines are desecrated. Josiah is in one way superior in faithfulness to Hezekiah and even David, for he re-institutes the keeping of Passover, which had been forgotten 'since the days of the Judges' (approx 1200-1020 BC, prior to King Saul). 26-27 Yet the crimes and apostasy of Judah under Manasseh were so great that this reform is too little, too late. As Israel-Ephraim had been destroyed for faithlessness, so too Judah!

2 Kings 23:31-37 Josiah's son and successor, Jehoahaz, rules briefly and badly and is quickly replaced, by the ruling power of Egypt, by his brother Jehoiakim.

Introduction to Habakkuk Habakkuk prophesied in the last years of Josiah's rule, so it is appropriate to turn to him now. Habakkuk, unlike all his predecessors (Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Zephaniah) does not prophesy against Judah! Rather, with his eye on international affairs, he poses the same question we ask: Lord, we see how an evil nation succeeds in its evil; how long are you going to wait before acting?

Habakkuk

1: 2-4 is the perennial cry to the Lord of those who, in Jesus' words, "hunger and thirst for righteousness." 5-11 The Lord's reply: look abroad. among the nations I am acting. I have roused a furious nation, the Babylonians, to be my whip for punishing the guilty. 1:12-2:1 The prophet complains again. 2:2-4 The Lord replies again, telling the prophet to record the Lord's promise for later verification, assuring that the vision is not false but

only not yet arrived, so faith is called for. The proud (godless) have a disordered spirit which cannot live, whereas those with faith in the Lord shall live because of such right spirits.

Habakkuk 2:6-20 Five woes. Strong poetic descriptions of ill behavior and its hopeless consequences.

Habakkuk 3 is a psalm. Like the book of Nahum (next), it rejoices in the violence of the Lord's destroying of evil. 17-19 is a beautiful confession: even if all material wealth is gone, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation!

Introduction to Nahum Like Habakkuk, Nahum also does not prophesy against Judah. Actually, Nahum has a single theme:

Imagine you were born in 1950 in Hungary. Yours is a prominent family in Hungary, you grew up with rich, vivid noble stories of Hungarian heroism, both among your own ancestors and others. You know Hungarian music and writing. But also, all you have ever known is your proud and beloved country under the control of the Russians! Those robbing, cheating, gloomy, drunken Russians! Then, finally the day comes when the USSR has been so weakened that it cannot maintain its death grip on your nation! Celebration! Exultation! Justice! Freedom! And destruction to the oppressive empire!

Such was Nahum. After the Assyrian empire rose to power it destroyed Israel (or Ephraim, the northern kingdom) in 721 BC and subjected Judah to its rule. Finally, a century later, its chief city Asshur fell to conquerors in 614, and the empire's collapse was complete when its second city Nineveh fell in 612. Nahum celebrates this event as the righteous act of the Lord, judge of sin and protector of Judah.

Read as much or little as you like. The poetry is vivid; enjoy its energetic pictures of events. I will point you to a few places. To appreciate it, put yourself in Nahum's position, praising his furious God, like a powerful war general, who destroyed the wicked enemy!

1:2-10 Praise of God's righteous power! V. 7 is important: the Lord's fury lives with his goodness: he protects any who come to Him; it is only those who oppose His reign of justice and goodness that he pursues.

1:15 A messenger, a runner from afar, brings the happy news (something like Oz's, "The wicked witch is dead!").

2:3-12 Lively poem of the city's fall.

3:4-7 Common in the prophets (including Revelation), a hated city is described as a prostitute, who by her charms (wealth and military power) seduced nations to serve her. (Some nations of the world probably see the USA this way). Here the Lord disgraces her.

January 29 assignment. Read by (2/5): Jeremiah 7, 9, 18; 2 Kings 24-25

Three years ago in this series, we spent two months on Jeremiah. To help you, Dear Reader, understand how Jeremiah fits in here. Jeremiah was one of the very most important prophets of all times, for several reasons. And it is just at this time that he was writing. A puzzle is that, though Jeremiah was at work during Josiah's reforms, he does not mention them, even though they are exactly what he was calling for. (Perhaps Jeremiah recognized that however pious the king, such governmental reforms were not enough truly to change the wretched misbelief of the people.)

So here, just before we read of the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians (also called Chaldeans) let us review a bit of what Jeremiah said.

Jeremiah 7 This is an important event in Jeremiah's life, the "Temple Sermon." The faith problem was that the Jerusalemites believed that the Temple was an automatic guarantee of divine protection and favor. So much so, that they believed that they could deliberately commit sins, go to the temple and offer the appropriate sacrifice, sort of as the price of doing business, then go out and sin again. Jeremiah's powerful sermon brings to truth to attack that bad faith.

Jeremiah 9 Complaints and threats. Again the Lord's frustration, "What else can I do?" (Try to answer his question!) Vv. 12ff raise a question for us: why do bad things happen? Could they be punishment from the Lord? Especially when *national* bad things happen.

Jeremiah 18 At the potter's house. Here the Lord shows Jeremiah his sovereign freedom to do as he sees fit to administer world-wide justice. Vv. 13-17 more threats. V. 18 an event from Jeremiah's life. Prophets were not liked! So he complains to the Lord. How poignant: v. 20 Jeremiah says, I pleaded to you for them, and now they try to kill me. It does not seem to me that Jeremiah is being merely humanly spiteful here, but more like he is experiencing exactly what the Lord is, the hatred of a people that he tries to help!

Kings 24 Remember that Jehoiakim, second son of good king Josiah, was installed on the throne of Judah by the King of Egypt, in place of his older brother. V. 1, that is, Nebuchadnezzar threatened attack; that Jehoiakim "became his servant" vassal) means that he chose, rather than to try to defend his city against Nebuchadnezzar and hope for the best, to ask for terms of surrender. Nebuchadnezzar then said, If you give me such and such money now, and so much every year, then you can be king here as my servant and I won't destroy you. After three years, Jehoiakim stopped paying="rebelled." V.2 "Chaldeans" are the people of Babylon, here joined by a coalition of Babylon's other "servants": kings of the surrounding nations. 3-4 are the theological judgment of what is going on; more than Babylonian empire is involved; Babylon is merely a tool in the Lord's hand to chastise Judah for its sins under Manasseh. 6-9 Confusing that Jehoiakim's son is Jehoiachin, but there it is. Since the former had been placed on the throne by the king of Egypt, the note explains that Egypt, a perennial superpower, was so stripped by Babylon that it could not longer play a king-making role in Judah. Also, for all the terror on Judah, again we see the remarkable fact that the kings continue in their perverse ways rather than return to the Lord. *Do you find that stubbornness (if that is*

what it is) believable—and why or why not? 10-17 V. 10 refers back to v. 2. The son Jehoiachin quickly surrendered rather than resist, in 597 BC and he and his whole court and all the educated and leaders were removed to Babylon as prizes of war. **This is the EXILE**, one of the single most important events of biblical history. Nebuchadnezzar placed on Judah's throne Jehoiachin's uncle (this would be the third son of good king Josiah) and renamed him "Zedekiah" ("the Lord is righteous"). 18-20 We are used to these brief report cards on a king's reign, but we have never heard anything so fearsome as v. 20.

Kings 25 Zedekiah, like his brother Jehoiakin, rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, after nine years, and Nebuchadnezzar did as expected: he came to punish his rebellious vassal. 1-3 A two year siege (standard military practice against a fortified city) meant that no one could go in or out of the city in all that time. Not to trade, not to get food, nothing. A siege succeeded either by starving the city out, or by breaching (breaking through) the wall so that the far superior army outside could enter and kill the defenders inside until there would be surrender or destruction. V. 7 so that the destruction of his sons was the last thing his eyes ever saw. *See why kings really did not want to lose wars?* 8-12 is the devastation of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Every remaining citizen was exiled, so that only the poor farmers were left, with no social structure. The threats of 1 Kings 9:6-9 have been realized. 13-17 The Temple is looted. 18-21 More leaders are killed. V. 26 This last exile was voluntary; refugees fleeing for their lives to Egypt. 27-30 is an extremely important epilog. Nebuchadnezzar dies and his successor, Evil-merodach, has pity on the exiled Judean king who has been in prison from 597-560 BC. Jehoiachin, remember, was grandson of good king Josiah and son of one of Josiah's evil sons, and evil himself. The theological point of this epilog, though, is that even after the thorough out-pouring of the Lord's wrath on a wicked nation, the uplifting of wicked Jehoiachin offers a glimmer of hope that he, a descendent of David, might yet have offspring so that God's promise to the dynasty of David might yet hold!

The vivid description of such terrible slaughter and torture and destruction and despoiling of once great Judah ought to be for us the absolute assurance that, as Paul says, "God is not mocked." Especially in view of the childish and utterly unbiblical "faith" which is prevalent in the USA and in the ELCA that God has no wrath. While the USA and Judah are not the same, not theologically nor in any other way, the USA may share with Judah the same arrogance that considers itself immune to administration of justice by the Righteous Judge, a "faith" that Judah found out, in the costliest of ways, has no basis.

If we can recognize the reality of divine wrath, as well as that it comes from sheer justice and from no kind of unjustified peevishness, then how brightly shines the splendor of divine mercy in Jesus Christ, in whom God takes his own rage against human sinning into His own holy person in order to spare us sinners and give us eternal blessedness! THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!