

# A Warning to Zedekiah

## 34: 1-22

**DIG:** Under a **twenty month** long siege with no allies to airlift food (Second Kings 25:1-3), how was Judah able to hold out for so long? What has God already told Zedekiah about the war (21:1-10)? What was the condition that Zedekiah would die peacefully? Who became slaves in ancient Isra'el and why? Who do you think Zedekiah declared freedom for the slaves? Why do the slaveholders refuse to honor their covenant with God? How would the LORD treat those who violated His covenant? Why the uproar over the slaves? How would it feel to be freed, then enslaved again? How will ADONAI discipline those who broke their vow? What does that say about Him? About them?

**REFLECT:** What blessing has the Lord given you recently that you didn't deserve? How did it make you feel? If this were the only biblical basis for learning how God cares about the poor, what would you conclude about ADONAI? About the poor? About rich landowners and officeholders? If your COO or government leader reneges on a pledge to your people, what happens? Anything? Who are the "slaves" in your country today? Is your messianic synagogue or church proclaiming their freedom, as did Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2) and Yeshua (Luke 4:18)? Do you feel "enslaved" in any way? What would "freedom" mean to you? What can you do for those enslaved as you once were?

### 587 BC at the end of the eleven-year reign of Zedekiah

Hophra became Pharaoh of Egypt in 588 BC and succeeded in inciting Zedekiah to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar (Ezekiel 17:3-21). Bad decision. As a result, the Babylonians then came and laid siege to Jerusalem. The Jews were desperate. So in trying to find favor with God they freed their Hebrew slaves in accordance with the Torah (34:8). During the siege there wasn't much work to be done anyway so it was really to their advantage to let their slaves go so they wouldn't have to feed them. When the Egyptians came to Judah's aid, Babylon withdrew to confront the threat (see Fm - Jeremiah in Prison). When the siege was temporarily lifted, the slave owners felt the danger had passed and forced the Jews back into slavery. That showed that their original motivation for freeing the slaves was not to follow Torah, but their own selfish interests. Once the Egyptian army was defeated, the Babylonians returned and besieged the City, which fell in 586 BC.

**A warning to Zedekiah:** While Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms and peoples in the empire that Babylon had already conquered were fighting against Jerusalem and all its surrounding towns, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, "This is what ADONAI, the God of Isra'el, says: Go to Zedekiah king of Judah" (34:1-2a). And tell him: This is what the LORD says: I am about to give this City into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will burn it down. You will not be executed but will surely be captured and given into his hands. You will see the king of Babylon with your own eyes, and he will speak with you face to face. And you will go to Babylon (34:2b-3). There would be no escape. Jerusalem would fall within a year.

Yet hear ADONAI's promise to you, Zedekiah king of Judah. "You will not die by the executioner's sword. [If] you heard the word of YHVH, [then] you will die peacefully. As people made a funeral fire in honor of your predecessors (Second Chronicles 16:14, 21:19), the kings who ruled before you, so they will make a fire in your honor and lament, 'O Master,' I Myself (in the emphatic state) make this promise," declares the LORD (34:4-5). The Talmud records that it was the custom to make a funeral bonfire of the bed and other articles as a mark of honor to the deceased (Sanhedrin 52b). Spices and various perfumes were also laid on the bed (Second Chronicles 16:14). Clearly the cruel fate suffered by Zedekiah suggests that the king did not listen (39:5-7; 52:11). The king found it impossible to accept the only choice of life offered by the prophet, the choice of submission to Imperial Babylon.<sup>344</sup>

The message was delivered. Then Yirmeyahu the prophet told all this to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem while the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and all the other cities of Judah that were still holding out - Lachish and Azekah. These were the only fortified cities left in Judah and marked the extent of Nebuchadnezzar's advance southward (34:6-7). The fulfillment of these prophecies can be seen in 39:5-7 and 52:8-11.

**Freedom for slaves:** The dire peril of the nation had pricked their national conscience and some effort at repentance was made. The word came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a solemn covenant with all the people in Yerushalayim to proclaim freedom for the slaves. Everyone was to free their Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Hebrew in bondage (34:8-9). These were not lifelong slaves, but Jews who had fallen into debt. The old peasant properties had been destroyed in the wars; the heavy tribute had ruined the poorer people. Wealth had accumulated in comparatively few hands, so that the poor, seeing no alternative but starvation, had been forced to sell their children and themselves into slavery. They had to serve for six years to pay off their debt and were released on the seventh, or Sabbatical Year.

So all the officials obeyed (Hebrew: *shema*) and people who entered into this human covenant among them and agreed that they would no longer hold them in bondage. They obeyed (*shema*), and set them free (34:10). It is noteworthy that the national repentance took the form of respecting the rights of the weakest and most downtrodden of the people. This is characteristic of the Torah and of Judaism.

But afterward, when the danger from Babylon had seemingly passed, they turned (*shuwb*), and took back the slaves they had freed and returned (*shuwb*) them again to slavery because of the report that Pharaoh Hophra's army was approaching and the lifting of the siege was at hand (34:11). There is something symbolic about the fact that one of the last acts of the people of Judah in Tziyon was to re-enslave the slaves that they had freed just prior to the destruction of the City and a return to slavery themselves.

**The violation of the Torah:** Then the word of ADONAI came to Yirmeyahu. God responded to the breaking of the Torah. This is what the LORD, the God of Isra'el, says: I made a covenant with your ancestor (the I is emphatic) when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 21:2-11; Leviticus 25:39-46; Deuteronomy 15:1 and 12-18). I said: Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrews who have sold themselves to you. After they have served you six years, you must let them go free, Your ancestors, however, did not obey (*shema*) or listen to Me. In parallel fashion, Zedekiah's contemporaries also did not listen. The problem now was that the slaves that were released had already served their six-year penalty; in fact, they may have served more than six years! That is why Zedekiah had to issue a proclamation to free them. Recently you (the you is emphatic) repented (*shuwb*) and did what is right in My sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before Me in the House that bears My Name (34:15). Zedekiah probably made this proclamation in the Temple compound itself, which would have added to the solemnity of the announcement. Obeying (*shema*) Torah always pleases God. But obedience was followed by disobedience: now you have turned around (*shuwb*) and profaned My name, the oath that they took must have included the divine name. Each of you has taken back (*shuwb*) the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again (34:12-16).

**The judgment of God:** Once again Judah proved herself to be in active disobedience, and once again a clear statement of God's judgment was given. Therefore this is what ADONAI says: You have not obeyed (*shema*) Me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim "freedom" for you, declares the LORD - "freedom" to fall by the sword, plague and famine. Because of their treachery in proclaiming a genuine emancipation for their slaves, Ha'Shem proclaimed an indisputable "emancipation" for them. They would be liberated from their disobedience and deceit and delivered over to the famous triad of the sword, disease and starvation (34:17a).

I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. Those who have violated My covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before Me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces (see the commentary on [Genesis Eg - I am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land](#)). Now it is the people of Y'hudah who are cast as the ritual calf who would be cut, which of course meant brutalized and killed. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the Land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals (34:17b-20). [Not only would the guilty be slain, but their bodies would not even receive an honorable burial.](#)

The final judgment pronounced concerned the king who would be handed over to the Babylonians. I will deliver Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has [been temporarily](#) withdrawn from you. I am going to give the order, declares ADONAI, and I will bring them back ([shuwb](#)) and besiege this City (see above). They will fight against it, take it and burn it down. And I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there (34:21-22). There is not a single known case where Jews continuously occupied a town of Judah through the seventy-year exile period (see [Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)).

The main point of this section is clear. The practice of Torah and the implementation of the commandment to release the slaves would generate safety and wellbeing for Zion. Disobedience to the Covenant meant invasion from Babylon. The first step toward death was economic chaos with in the City itself. Such chaos reflected the rebellion in Judah. The reference to the Exodus (above) is a reminder that ADONAI's initial act of rescue was a gesture of liberation in which the slaves of Egypt were rescued from their economic plight of helplessness. Y'hudah was expected to continue to reenact that miracle of new economic beginnings in its own day by freeing the slaves. The re-enslaving of their slaves showed how hard their hearts were and was outward evidence to prove the Israelites had no love for YHVH or for His Word. Their pride in themselves and their selfish lack of love for God was what brought the Babylonian exile on the Jews.<sup>345</sup>