



Lesson 13

THE JEWS IN HISTORY (Part 1)

Reading Genesis 37

The beginning of the story

The story of the Jews really begins with that faithful man, Abraham. He had a son in his old age named Isaac; Isaac had a son named Jacob, who was afterwards called Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, who were the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The youngest but one of these sons was called Joseph, and the story of his life, which we have in the Bible, is always exciting to read. But it is more than a good story - it tells us about important events in the history of the people of the Bible - the Jews. It gives us, too, a wonderful example of the over-ruling care of God for His people.

We may remember the story of how Joseph's jealous brothers sold him as a slave; and how, after many trials, he became governor of Egypt. Then, in time of famine, his father and his brothers came down to Egypt because - thanks to Joseph, and thanks, of course, to God - there was corn in Egypt.

For a time, the Jews (also called Israelites, or children of Israel) were quite happy in Egypt. But after Joseph's death, as the number of Jews in Egypt grew more and more, the Egyptians began to oppress them, and treat them as slaves.

Freedom for the slaves

Perhaps you know the story of how God brought these Jewish slaves out of Egypt, under the leadership of a man called Moses, and led them through a barren and deserted land to the borders of the land of Israel. On this long and dangerous journey, God fed them and cared for them. As we read in Nehemiah 9:20-21:

"Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst. Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not."

A law given by God

As they journeyed to the land God had promised them, they came to Mount Sinai. There something very special happened. The people were told by God to gather at the foot of the mountain, and here God said to them:

"If ye will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar (special) treasure unto me above all people" (Exodus 19:5),

The people said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8).

Then God gave His laws to Moses, and Moses gave them to the people. Of course, they were the finest laws any nation has ever had, and if only the Jews had kept them, they would have been the happiest people on earth.

As a sign that they were to be His people, God told them the last day of every week must be a holy day (holy means separate, or set apart). This day was to be called 'the Sabbath', and they were to rest and think about all God's goodness to them.

But they did not keep to God's commands. They simply could not obey them all. And that was what God knew would happen-that they would learn that they could not save themselves and needed God to save them (the same is true for us too). They disobeyed God time and time again, and they did not make the Sabbath a special day, as He had said they should.

At last they came to the land of Israel. God was their King. He gave them priests to teach them His ways, and judges to rule over them.

The Jews demand a king

Nearly 400 years went by. The Jews became dissatisfied and wanted a king like the nations around them. In asking for a king, they were refusing to recognise that God was their king. When Samuel, their judge, told God how they had demanded a king, God said:

"They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

God gave them what they wanted. You may like to read for yourself the interesting story of the anointing of Saul, the first king of Israel. You will find it in 1 Samuel 8 and 9.

A divided kingdom

Saul was followed by the great King David, of whom you will be hearing more in a later lesson. After a long reign of 40 years, David died, and his son Solomon became king.

Solomon was very rich; he taxed the people heavily. This made them discontented. When Solomon died, they came to his son Rehoboam, and asked him to ease their burden. You will read, in 1 Kings 12, how Rehoboam listened to his young friends, instead of taking the advice of the wise old men who had been his father's counsellors. When the people came to King Rehoboam to ask whether he would agree to their request, he answered very unwisely. We read in 1 Kings 12 that the king

"answered the people roughly", saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (verse 14).

No wonder the people rebelled against such a king! Ten of the tribes of Israel went away, and formed a kingdom of their own, under a man named Jeroboam. Only Judah, the tribe to which Rehoboam belonged, and the little tribe of Benjamin, remained faithful to Rehoboam.

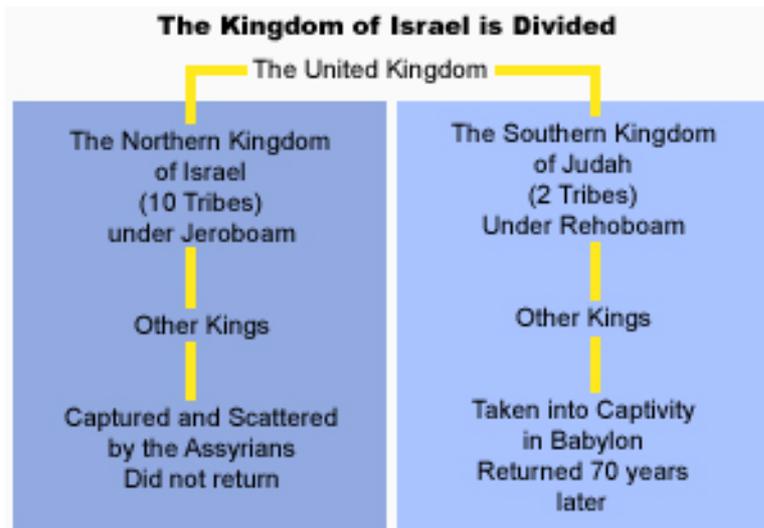
So, from this time on, we have two histories, side by side, in the Bible. There is the history of the ten tribes, often spoken of as 'Israel' or the Northern Kingdom (because they were in the northern part of the land) and the history of the two tribes spoken of as 'Judah', or the Southern Kingdom.

The continued disobedience of the Jews

In the first and second books of Kings we read the sad story of how the people persistently forgot about God, and forsook His ways. At last, things became so bad that God said He would punish the people, as He had warned them continually that He would, by causing them to be taken from their land as slaves. You will see from these words from 2 Chronicles 36:15-36 how God had done everything He could to bring His people back to His ways:

"And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy."

Punishment had to come



Such disobedience had to be punished. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was first taken captive. The King of Assyria came and carried the people into Assyria, and, as a nation, they never came back to their own land.

Later, the Kingdom of Judah was taken captive by the King of Babylon. But God promised that, after 70 years, they should come back to their own land.

And many of them did. Encouraged by the prophets, they rebuilt the Temple of God in Jerusalem. The last three books of the Old Testament - Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi - were written during these days.

Between the Old and New Testaments

After these three prophets, there was a long period of time - 400 years - during which the Jews had no direct message from God. The prophet Amos had spoken about this time. In Amos 8:11 we read:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord."

This period of 400 years comes between the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament. No wonder that when John the Baptist appeared, there was a great stir among the people. After hundreds of years of silence, God had spoken again to His people.

The greatest Jew

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for someone even greater. God was about to send His own Son to save His people. And so, in the land of Israel, nearly 2,000 years ago, the Lord Jesus Christ was born. We sometimes forget that Jesus was a Jew.

You know what happened. After hearing his words, and seeing the wonderful things he did, the Jews rejected Jesus. They persuaded Pilate to crucify him. When Pilate said, "*I am innocent of the blood of this just person*", the Jews answered:

"His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:24-25).

They could not have committed a worse crime. They shed the innocent blood of God's own Son. Yet, by the powerful preaching of the apostles, God gave them another chance. Most of the Jews refused God's offer of mercy, and punishment had to come. A dreadful punishment it was!

A people without a home

About forty years after the death of Jesus, the Roman army came and fought against the Jews. It was a time of dreadful suffering. The horrors of that war are some of the grimmest in history. The city was taken by the Romans, and those Jews who survived were scattered among all the nations of the earth.

God had warned the Jews long ago that this would happen if they forsook His ways. You will read in Deuteronomy 28:64:

"The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other."

And so, for nearly 2,000 years, the Jews had no land of their own. Worse than this, they have suffered many terrible persecutions, and the dreadful curses of *Deuteronomy chapter 28* have been brought upon them. Some of these persecutions have happened within living memory. Many of us can remember the concentration camps of Hitler during the 1939-45 World War. Over six million Jews were killed with a cruelty that shook the world. Read again *Deuteronomy 28:64 - 67*, and you will marvel that these words, written by Moses over 3,000 years ago, have come to pass in our time.

It is a sad story, but it is not yet ended. We are bound to feel glad when we read from the Word of God that the ending will be a happy one.

The framework below may help you (the years are approximate)

1. 3,500 years ago

God brought the Jews out of Egypt, and gave them the land of "Israel to live in. He taught them His ways. Instead of showing the nations around how God wanted them to live, they copied those wicked nations.

2. 2,500 years ago

God at last punished them by sending them into captivity. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was brought back to the land of 'Israel after 70 years, but they still went on disobeying God.

3. 2,000 years ago

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Jews were driven out of the land. For nearly 2,000 years they have been homeless and, persecuted.

4. Today

God is bringing them back to the land of Israel. (You will hear more about this in a future lesson.)

Chapters to read

Deuteronomy 28; 2 Chronicles 36:11-23

Learn by heart

Isaiah 43:11,12