

Who was King Zedekiah in the Bible?

Zedekiah was the last king of Judah and was king when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC and the majority of the people were carried into exile. The story of Zedekiah is told in 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36, and the book of Jeremiah.

Zedekiah's original name was Mattaniah. He was the son of King Josiah and the brother of King Jehoahaz and King Jehoiakim. Zedekiah would not normally have been included in the line to the throne, but the kings preceding him made bad decisions, both spiritually and politically, and were removed in succession. Jehoahaz, son of Josiah, ruled for 3 months and "did evil in the sight of the Lord," and Pharaoh Necho took him to Egypt in exile (2 Kings 23:31-33). Necho put his brother Jehoiakim in his place.

Jehoiakim ruled for 11 years. During his reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded. Jehoiakim swore allegiance to him and continued as a vassal king. He also did evil in the Lord's sight (by not removing all of the idols from the land) and then rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Upon his death, his son Jehoiachin succeeded him (2 Kings 24:1-7).

Jehoiachin continued his father's evil ways. He reigned for 3 months and then was removed from the throne by Nebuchadnezzar. At this point Mattaniah, son of Josiah, was put on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar to rule as a vassal king. Nebuchadnezzar changed his name to Zedekiah (2 Kings 24:8-17).

Zedekiah was 21 years old when he became king, meaning he would have only been about 10 when his father, Josiah, died and his brother Jehoahaz became king. Zedekiah ruled for

11 years but continued on all the evil of his brothers and nephew Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24: 18-20). In his ninth year on the throne, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and, as a result, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Zedekiah was confident of Egypt's help, which never materialized. In the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign, the city fell to Babylon.

Second Kings gives the basic historical outline, which is supplemented in 2 Chronicles 36. Jeremiah fills in much of the behind-the-scenes information and the spiritual component. In Jeremiah 21, during the siege of Jerusalem, Zedekiah asks Jeremiah to intercede to the Lord so that perhaps the Lord would deliver Judah. Jeremiah returns God's answer: He has irrevocably handed Judah over to judgment, first by plague, and those who escape that will fall to the Babylonians. The only hope that any of the people have is to surrender to the Babylonians. "Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives" (verse 9).

Zedekiah heard God's definitive answer, but he did not like it. False prophets contradicted Jeremiah and preached a more favorable message (Jeremiah 23), but God reiterated His message to Jeremiah (chapters 24-25). There is a "showdown" in Jeremiah 27-28. Jeremiah comes to the king wearing a yoke around his neck as a visual of what will happen to the people—they will be taken to Babylon as exiles in bondage. The (false) prophet Hananiah took the yoke from Jeremiah and broke it, saying, "This is what the LORD says: 'In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years'" (Jeremiah 28:11). The Lord then tells Jeremiah to pronounce judgment on Hananiah and tell him that, before the end of the year, he will be dead. Demonstrating the legitimacy of Jeremiah as a prophet and the

truth of his prophecies, Hananiah died “in the seventh month of that same year” (verse 17).

Jeremiah sends a letter to those already in exile in Babylon telling them not to trust prophets who foretell a speedy return. He tells them to settle in, build houses and gardens, have children, and seek the prosperity of Babylon, for they will be there for a long time (he specifies 70 years, Jeremiah 29:10). However, they are promised that God will restore Judah to the land, but only in His time (chapters 29-31).

In chapter 32, King Zedekiah confines Jeremiah to the courtyard of the guard in the palace (verse 2), but Jeremiah does not compromise his message.

In chapter 34, Jeremiah assures Zedekiah that he (Zedekiah) will die peacefully in Babylon, but that the city of Jerusalem will not escape. At some time in his reign, Zedekiah freed all the slaves that should have been freed every seven years, a command of the Law that had been neglected for many years. However, Zedekiah then reversed his decision and allowed the freed slaves to be enslaved again. Jeremiah delivers this message to the king: “Therefore this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed 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. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. . . . 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 withdrawn from you. I am going to give the order, declares the LORD, and I will bring them back to this city. 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” (verses 17, 21-22).

Finally, during the siege, Zedekiah fled the city by night but was captured. Zedekiah's sons were killed before him, and then he was blinded and taken to Babylon in chains (Jeremiah 52, see also 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36). Then the Babylonians broke down the walls of Jerusalem, burned the temple, and took the temple articles to Babylon with them. Zedekiah died in Babylon years later. No doubt it was a peaceful death as the Lord had promised, but what awful memories he must have endured in the meantime!

Zedekiah had been presented with a tremendous opportunity. Although he missed the throne three times when two of his brothers and then his nephew were crowned, he finally received stewardship of the kingdom. Zedekiah had the benefit of seeing firsthand the mistakes of his brothers and nephew, and he also had direct messages from God through Jeremiah. Yet he would not submit to the Lord. As a result, Zedekiah lost his sons, his sight, his freedom, and his throne. Through it all God was faithful to do what He promised. He carried out the judgment He had declared, but He also brought about the restoration. Seventy years later, Cyrus, king of Persia (successor to the Babylonian Empire), declared that all of the Jewish exiles who wanted to return to Jerusalem might do so, and they could take with them all the implements of the temple (Ezra 1).