

## Who was Gedaliah in the Bible?

Five men named Gedaliah appear in the Bible. The most famous of those is the Jewish leader whom King Nebuchadnezzar assigned to serve as governor over Judah after the destruction of the temple. The other four Gedaliahs are the following:

- One of the six sons of Jeduthun who served as musicians during the reign of King David “for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals” (see 1 Chronicles 25:1-9).
- The grandfather of the prophet Zephaniah (Zephaniah 1:1).
- One of the men descended from the priests who had broken God’s Law by marrying foreign women during the time of Ezra (Ezra 10:18).
- One of the men who, with King Zedekiah’s permission, helped cast the prophet Jeremiah into a muddy well to keep him from saying to the people that all who stayed in Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege would die but that those who left the city and surrendered would live (Jeremiah 38:1-6).

The best-known Gedaliah also lived during the time of the Babylonian siege and defeat of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar looted and destroyed the temple in 587 BC. Judah’s King Zedekiah and most of the Jews who survived were taken in exile to Babylon. The Babylonian soldiers (referred to as Chaldeans) pulled the walls down and burned the buildings. Jerusalem was leveled.

Only the poorest Jews were left behind in Judah to grow crops and tend the land.

Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah to serve as his Jewish tributary or governor over the region. It was common for a conquered people to be given a governor from among their own to serve as a representative between Babylon and the locals. Some Chaldean soldiers also remained in the land to keep order and ensure no rebellion took place. Gedaliah served in this capacity as governor from the town of Mizpah, north of Jerusalem.

When those who had fled from the invaders heard that Gedaliah had been established as governor, they returned to Judah. Among those who returned were several groups of soldiers who had not been in Jerusalem during the siege and had not been captured. As they arrived, Gedaliah wisely urged everyone to accept their fate and live at peace in the land under the rule of the Babylonians. They had nothing left to fear. The Chaldeans would not harm them as long as they remained peaceful. "Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you" (2 Kings 25:24). The prophet Jeremiah, too, came to Mizpah to be near Governor Gedaliah.

After such terrible death and destruction, Judah enjoyed a brief season of peace and even prosperity. The people who remained in the land "harvested an abundance of wine and summer fruit" (Jeremiah 40:12). That peace did not last, however.

Johanan, one of the captains who had escaped the Babylonian exile, told Gedaliah about a plot against him. Another of the remaining captains, Ishmael, was working in league with the king of the Ammonites to kill Gedaliah. Johanan requested permission to kill Ishmael quietly to preserve Gedaliah's life and maintain the fragile peace in the land. Gedaliah, however, refused to believe that Ishmael would actually kill him.

Why did the king of Ammon want Gedaliah dead? The Ammonites had been allies with the previous king of Judah against the Babylonians. Governor Gedaliah, however, was cooperating with the Babylonians. In addition, if the Babylonians were forced to deal with a new rebellion in Judah, it would delay their impending attacks against Ammon. It's possible that the Ammonites simply wanted to cause turmoil in Judah to save their own necks. In any case, Ishmael had indeed been sent to betray and kill Gedaliah.

Gedaliah was so convinced of Ishmael's loyalty that he welcomed Ishmael and ten men to sit and eat with him (Jeremiah 41:1). Ishmael and his men killed Gedaliah and those who were with him, including the Chaldean soldiers present. Gedaliah had only been the governor for two months. The following day, Ishmael slaughtered 70 pilgrims from the north who had come to worship at the temple. Finally, Ishmael took captive everyone in Mizpah and headed toward Ammon. Before he could get away, however, Johanan—the one who had warned Gedaliah about the plot—chased Ishmael down and rescued all of the captives. Ishmael escaped with eight men and returned to the Ammonites.

You can read what happened next in Jeremiah 41.

Much later, Jewish leaders established a fast in remembrance of these events and the loss of Jewish self-governance. The Fast of Gedaliah falls on the third day of the Hebrew month of Tishri and is still recognized in Judaism.