

be the last nail in their coffin. This time Divine punishment appeared in the form of Roman armies, and the Holy City was destroyed for the second time.

The Romans had appointed Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, to rule the territories that has once been under Herod himself. Soon afterwards, a serious protest against the Romans led to an open Jewish revolt in 66 CE, which neither King Agrippa II nor the Roman procurator was able to contain. The Romans retaliated with full military might, ultimately leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the armies of General Titus. The loss of life among the Jews was incredibly high, as 133 thousand are reported to be put to sword in Jerusalem alone. Thousands were made slaves, starved to death, or killed in Roman amphitheaters. Herod's Temple was burned and completely demolished.

Emperor Hadrian later built a new Roman colony, called *Aelia Capitolina*, over the desolate ruins of Jerusalem. However, the Jews were banished from their Holy City and were not allowed to re-enter for the next half a millennia.

As mentioned before, the advent of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) in the 7th century CE constituted a golden opportunity for the Jews to escape from the wrath of God the Almighty. They, however, as a community not only rejected the Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), but also earned the unenviable reputation of being the worst enemy of Islam and Muslims. As a result, their second era of decline has continued till the present, and they remained, to this date, a condemned and disgraced people. We shall return to this topic after a while.

To be continued

قرآن حکیم کی مقدس آیات اور احادیث آپ کی دینی معلومات میں اضافے اور تبلیغ کے لئے شائع کی جاتی ہیں۔ ان کا احترام آپ پر فرض ہے۔ لہذا جن صفحات پر یہ آیات درج ہیں ان کو صحیح اسلامی طریقے کے مطابق بے حرمتی سے محفوظ رکھیں۔

killed during the three month siege of the Holy City, and by the time the Roman army broke through the walls of Jerusalem, they were killing each other in confusion.

The Romans abolished the Maccabean dynasty and appointed Antipater as their puppet ruler. But soon after Julius Caesar's murder in 44 BC, Antipater was poisoned and a civil war ensued in Palestine with different groups vying for dominance. To restore order, the Romans nominated a clever Jew named Herod as their viceroy to rule the Israelites. Herod reigned for the next 33 years by patronizing the Jewish religious hierarchy on the one hand, and propagating the Greco-Roman culture and showing his faithfulness to Caesar on the other hand. In order to demonstrate his loyalty to Judaism, he ordered the third construction of the Temple. The result was the largest and most magnificent building complex of the ancient world. However, the moral degeneration of the Jews continued and reached to the lowest possible ebb during the reign of Herod.

After Herod's death, his kingdom got divided among his three sons: (a) Archelaus became the ruler of Samaria, Judea, and northern Edom, but was replaced in 6 CE by a Roman governor; (b) Antipas became the head of Galilee and Jordan in northern Palestine; whereas (c) Philip ruled the land between river Yarmuk and Mt. Hermon

It is significant to note that during all those years of indirect Roman rule, the Jews had, in general enjoyed full religious autonomy. The Romans would obviously intervene in matters of political or military nature but the everyday administration of justice and local affairs -- like the Sanhedrin court in Jerusalem -- were left wholly to the Jewish officials responsible for applying the law.

It was this Jewish court, Sanhedrin, that convicted God's last messenger to the Children of Israel -- Jesus Christ -- of blasphemy, and requested death sentence from the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The collective rejection of Prophet Jesus (Peace be upon him) by the Israelites was not a minor crime -- as he was God's envoy, or *Rasool* -- and thus their crime proved to

there were those orthodox ones -- or "fundamentalists" in contemporary terms -- who persisted with the traditional Jewish beliefs and culture, as the spirit of revival infused by Prophet Ezra was still very much active among them.

In 175 BC, Antiochus IV came to the throne, and used Hellenization to wipe out both monotheism and the Mosaic Law. He promoted Greek customs and ideas with the help of this aristocratic Jewish collaborators. Pagan altars were set up, religious celebrations and services forbidden, circumcision outlawed, and possession of Torah declared a capital crime. This only sharpened the distinction between the two groups of Jews, and motivated the orthodox ones to rebel.

An elderly priest named Mathathias rejected such outrageous disobedience of the Divine commands. He, along with his five sons, started a revolt in the form of guerrilla warfare. Soon, a group of zealous Jews joined them, who were known as "Hasideans", or the pious ones. An army of devoted Israelites was formed which began a full-fledged revolutionary struggle against their Syrian oppressors, and this came to be called as the "Maccabee" uprising. A long series of battle followed, where these small, untrained, and ill-equipped group of men were able to defeat their much superior rivals. This ultimately led to the establishment of the "Great Maccabee Empire", marking the second phase of rise and domination for the Israelites.

The religious fervor and sincerity among the Jews, however, started to subside with the passage of time. The love of God began to be gradually replaced by the craving for material comforts and wealth. The spirit of morality disappeared, leaving behind the empty form of rituals. Internal conflicts led to a split among the Jews, so much so that some of them invited the Roman general Pompey to come to Palestine. But once the Roman army had arrived, it would not leave.

The Second Era of Decline

In 63 BC Pompey, after taking over the old Seleucid Empire of Syria, turned towards Jerusalem. Thousands of Jews were

progress beyond the laying down of its foundations. Eighteen years latter, Zerubbabel became Judah's governor who, supported by Prophets Haggai and Zechariah and the high-priest Jeshua, completed the second Temple in 515 BC.

In 443 BC, Persian king Artaxerxes I allowed Zehemiah, one of his Jew attendants, to supervise the building of the walls of Jerusalem, and later appointed him governor of Judah as a separate province. Prophet Ezra (or *Uzair*) arrived in Jerusalem in 398 BC, with the mission of re-establishing religious purity and obedience to the Mosaic Law. He persuaded all Jewish men to divorce their pagan wives and proscribed mixed marriages in the future. He also demanded strict adherence to Sabbath and the dietary laws. He took a pledge from his people that they would worship none other than God. A major achievement of Prophet Ezra was that he re-compiled the five Books of Moses or the Torah, which were lost during the destruction of Jerusalem.

The process of Jewish revival suffered a set back with the rise of Greeks, and the defeat of the Persians by Alexander in 333 BC. After the death of Alexander, his kingdom was divided among his generals. Egypt came under the control of Ptolemy, whose descendants ruled Judah for the next hundred years. Seleucus had established his own dynasty over Babylonia and Syria, whereas Palestine was incorporated into this kingdom by Antiochus III in 198 BC.

Earlier, Alexander had initiated a policy of implanting the Greek culture -- Hellenism -- in his conquered lands. As a result, during all these years of Greek rule, the Jews became divided into two groups. Those living in Egypt and other places outside Judah, called "Jews of the Dispersion", started adopting Greek ideas, dress, language, and life-style. The sacred scriptures had to be translated in Greek as most of them could no longer comprehend their original language, Hebrew. Mixed marriages became common once again, and circumcision was increasingly ignored. A popular Hellenistic idea -- that different nations simply worshipped the same God with different names -- became acceptable among these "progressive" Jews. On the other hand,

Jerusalem. The following statements are taken from the "Book of Ezekiel" in the Old Testament:

This word of the Lord came to me:

O man, when the Israelites were living on their own soil they defiled it with their ways and deeds; their ways were loathsome and unclean in my sight. I poured out my fury on them for the blood they had poured out on the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed in many lands. I passed a sentence on them which their ways and deeds deserved.

(Ezekiel 36:16-19)

It is not for the sake of you Israelites that I am acting, but for the sake of my holy name...I shall take you from among the nations and gather you from every land and bring you to your homeland. I shall sprinkle pure water over you, and you will be purified from everything that defiles you; I shall purify you from the taint of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and make you conform to my statutes; you will observe my laws faithfully. Then you will live in the land I gave to your forefathers; you will be my people, and I shall be your God.

(Ezekiel 36:22,24-28)

God's mercy came in the shape of Cyrus, king of Persia, who, after conquering Media and Lydia, brought the Babylonian Empire to her knees in 539 BC, thus laying down the foundations of the Great Persian Empire. The very next year, Cyrus authorized the Jews in Mesopotamia to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple at the expense of the royal treasury. He then appointed Sheshbazzar, probably the son of King Jehoiachin, to rule Judah as a semi-independent state. Sheshbazzar led the first group of Jews back to their homeland, followed by another expedition led by Zerubbabel in 522 BC. However, because of a number of reasons, the rebuilding of the Temple could not

Nebuchadnezzar decided to make an example of the city, and his orders were carried out with cruel thoroughness. The city walls were demolished. The Temple and the palace were stripped of all valuables and burned to the ground. Thousands were killed, and a large part of the population was taken as captives to Babylonia, more than 500 miles away. The kingdom of Judah itself became a Babylonian province, which presented at that time a deeply scarred look. Everywhere, towns were ransacked and burned, crops destroyed and villages deserted.

Reform & Revival: The Maccabees

The destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians was irreversibly complete and final. The dispersed Jews lost their distinct identity as they merged with and vanished among the neighboring nations, especially the conquerors. In contrast, the Babylonian exile was only a harsh reminder from Almighty God to the inhabitants of Judah.

Although the exiles were not subjected to blatant slavery, the impact of captivity was still soul-crushing for them. They must have felt humiliated and anguished with the memory of their abject defeat and ongoing bondage, as depicted in the poetry composed during that period (see "*Lamentations*" in the Old Testament). In Babylonia, the Jews were made targets of contempt and derision; they were required to toil hard and pay tribute money in exchange for their existence. Those of noble origin were particularly treated with indignity, adding the pain of insult to their already injured souls.

All this must have melted their hearts and caused them to repent. There were a number of active reformers, both among the captives and among those who remained in Judah, preaching and exhorting everyone to fulfill their part of the Covenant. Most prominent among these voices of reform was that of Prophet Ezekiel, who had been brought to Babylonia during the first deportation in 597 BC. He called his people towards God, inspiring them to mend their ways and atone for their sins. He announced that Almighty God is going to give the Israelites another chance to repent, and that He will cause them to return to

they are all mighty warriors,
 their jaws are a grave, wide open.
 to devour your harvest and your food,
 to devour your sons and your daughters,
 to devour your flocks and your herds,
 to devour your vines and your fig trees
 They will beat down with the sword
 the walled cities in which you trust.

(Jeremiah 5:15-17)

Despite all these explicit and unambiguous warnings -- delivered to the inhabitants of Judah by two of their great prophets -- there was no sign of any remorse or repentance whatsoever. Instead, the Israelites stubbornly continued in their pagan practices and disobedience of Divine instruction, thereby inviting the wrath of God.

Divine punishment first appeared in the form of Babylonian forces marching into Judah in 604 BC, when King Jehoiakim acquiesced without any struggle and agreed to pay heavy tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia. He, however, rebelled against his Babylonian overlords in 601 BC, resulting in the first siege of Jerusalem that lasted three months. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar entered the Holy City on March 15, 597 BC, and plundered the Temple of Solomon. They decimated the society by deporting the new King Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim's son), his family, noblemen, and thousands of influential citizens, soldiers, and skilled craftsmen as captives to Babylonia. Nebuchadnezzar then placed the king's uncle Zedekiah on the throne of Judah. Soon Zedekiah also became involved in a conspiracy against Babylonia, resulting in the second siege of Jerusalem. This time the city remained under siege for 18 months, and the conditions deteriorated to such an extent that some of the inhabitants were forced to eat human flesh.

Finally, the wall of Jerusalem was breached on July 9, 587 BC. The rebellious vassal king was captured and was forced to watch as his sons were slaughtered. Then he was blinded and taken in chains to Babylonia, where he later died in prison.

and becoming worthless like them;
 that they did not ask, "Where is the Lord,
 who brought us up from Egypt
 and led us through the wilderness,
 through a barren and broken country,
 a country parched and forbidding,
 where no one ever traveled,
 where no one made his home?
 I brought you into a fertile land to enjoy its fruit
 and every good thing in it,
 but when you entered my land you defiled it
 and made loathsome the home I gave you.
 The priests no longer asked, 'Where is the Lord?'
 Those who handled the law had no real knowledge of me,
 the shepherds of the people rebelled against me;
 the prophets prophesied in the name of Baal
 and followed gods who were powerless to help.

(Jeremiah 2:4-8)

Stop before your feet are bare and your throat is parched.
 But you said, 'No, I am desperate.
 I love foreign gods and I must go after them.

As a thief is ashamed when he is found out
 so the people of Israel feel ashamed,
 they, their kings, their princes, their priests, and their
 prophets,

who say to a block of wood, 'You are our father'
 and cry 'Mother' to a stone.

On me they have turned their backs
 and averted their faces from me.

Yet in their time of trouble they say,
 'Rise up and save us!'

Where are the gods you made for yourselves?

In your time of trouble let them arise and save you.

For you, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns.

(Jeremiah 2:25-28)

Israel, I am bringing against you a distant nation,
 an ancient people established long ago, says the Lord,
 a people whose language you do not know,
 whose speech you will not understand;

Once again the Lord spoke to me; he said:
Because this nation has rejected the waters of Shiloah,
which flow softly and gently,
therefore the Lord will bring up against it
the mighty flood waters of the Euphrates.
The river will rise in its channels and overflow all its
banks.

In a raging torrent mounting neck-high it will sweep
through Judah.
With his outspread wings
the whole expanse of the land will be filled,
for God is with us.

Take note, you nations; you will be shattered.
Listen, all you distant parts of the earth:
arm yourselves, and be shattered;
arm yourselves, and be shattered.

Devise your plans, but they will be foiled;
propose what you will, but it will not be carried out;
for God is with us.

(Isaiah 8:5-10)

Then came Prophet Jeremiah, who tried to shake his people out of their perverted ways, idolatry, and apostasy, during the period 627 BC to 587 BC. His sermons, however, met with an intense opposition from a corrupt society that was addicted to idol-worship to the point of fanaticism. His teachings were later collected as the "Book of Jeremiah" in the Old Testament, from which the following excerpts are taken:

Listen to the words of the Lord, people of Jacob, all you
families of Israel.
These are the words of the Lord:

What fault did your forefathers find in me,
that they went so far astray from me,
pursuing worthless idols

associated rituals of licentious dances remained irresistibly attractive for the austere Israelites.

At last, Almighty God's anger manifested itself in the form of Assyrians from the north, whose takeover of Israel started gradually but ended with severe subjugation. Initially, the kings of Israel were forced to pay tribute money to Assyria, but in 721 BC, the Assyrian armies, under king Sargon, attacked and plundered Samaria, killing thousands of her inhabitants. According to an Assyrian inscription, King Sargon carried away 27,290 Israelites into captivity, and scattered them in his eastern provinces. This ended the existence of the northern kingdom as an independent nation.

On the other hand, the history of the southern state of Judah displays a relatively slower degeneration in beliefs and morality. However, they too started to indulge in idol-worship and transgressions of the Divine Law, becoming more and more corrupt with every passing generation. Prophet Isaiah rose and tried to reform his people during the period 740 BC to 700 BC. His warnings and prophecies -- which were collected in the "Book of Isaiah" of the Old Testament -- clearly testify to the moral decadence of his times. Here are a few statements from his sermons:

You sinful nation, a people weighed down with iniquity,
a race of evildoers, children whose lives are depraved,
who have deserted the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel,
and turned your backs on him!

Why do you invite more punishment, why persist in your
defection?

Your head is all covered with sores, your whole body is
bruised;

(Isaiah 1:4,5)

Your rulers are rebels, associates of thieves;
every one of them loves a bribe and chases after gifts;
they deny the fatherless their rights
and the widow's cause is never heard.

(Isaiah 1:23)

Dr. Ahmed Afzaal

LESSONS FROM HISTORY-III

Based on the Urdu Columns By: Dr. Israr Ahmad

First Period of Decline

The death of Prophet Solomon marks the beginning of the first period of decline for the Israelites. The united monarchy disappeared, and in its place arose two kingdoms -- Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The people of the northern kingdom crowned Jeroboam, an official who had rebelled against Solomon and taken refuge in Egypt, and he made Shechem his royal city. The southern kingdom continued to be ruled by the Davidic dynasty, its first monarch being Rehoboam, son of Prophet Solomon, with its center at Jerusalem.

Although both kingdoms were strife-ridden from the very beginning, Israel was especially turbulent because of its large population who seldom agreed on anything. Politically unstable, the northern kingdom suffered a prolonged period of internal warfare until 876 BC, when an army officer Omri got hold of the throne and built a new capital at Samaria. He, however, adopted a policy of compromise with paganism, as a result of which the common people began to assimilate various polytheistic practices of the neighboring communities. The rise of paganism became especially serious under Omri's son Ahab, who married a Phoenician princess, Jezebel. She started a ruthless campaign to wipe out Israel's traditional monotheism, and to replace it with the Canaanite fertility cult and the worship of Baal. Two prophets, Elijah (or *Elias*) and Elisha (or *Al-Yasa*), rose and tried their best to warn their people, and to check their growing inclination towards paganism, but the cult of Baal and the