



How the Children of Israel fit into God's Plan - Part 1

READINGS FOR THIS LESSON - Genesis 37; Isaiah 43.

The beginning of the story



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

The second youngest son of Jacob was called Joseph, and the story of his life, which we have in the Bible, is one we never get tired of reading. But it is more than a good story - it tells us about important events in the history of the "people of the Bible" - the Israelites, known as the Children of Israel. It gives us a wonderful example of the over-ruling care of God for His people.

You 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 a 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 Children of Israel were quite happy in Egypt. But after Joseph's death, as their numbers in Egypt grew more and more, the Egyptians began to treat them badly and made them slaves.

Freedom for the slaves

You may know the story of how God brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt, under the leadership of a man called Moses, and led them through a dry desert 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,

"You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen."

God drove out the wicked tribes who lived in the land of Israel, and gave it to the Children of Israel. He gave them a law, and chose Judges to rule over them. They knew that if they disobeyed God's laws, He would punish them.

You will read in Deuteronomy 28, the blessings that God would give them if they obeyed Him, and the curses that were to come upon them if they disobeyed Him.

The Israelites ask for a king

Nearly 400 years went by. During those years, God had appointed Judges to rule over the twelve tribes of Israel. Notice that the descendants of Jacob were divided into twelve family groups, called tribes. But the Children of Israel became unsatisfied and wanted a king like the nations around them. In asking for a king, they were refusing to recognize that God was their king.



When Samuel, their Judge, told God how they had asked for a king, God said,

"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king." (1 Samuel 8:7).

God answered their request, and gave them the king 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 rule of 40 years, David died, and his son Solomon became king.

Solomon was very rich and he made the people pay very high taxes. This made the people very unhappy, and when Solomon died, they came to his son, Rehoboam, and asked him to lower their taxation. 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 12:13-14, that the king,

"answered the people harshly" saying "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions."

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 him.

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 lived in the northern part of the land) and the history of the two tribes spoken of as "Judah" or the Southern Kingdom.

The Jews continue to disobey God

In the first and second books of Kings we read the sad story of how the people continually forgot about God, and departed from 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 36:15-16, how God had done everything He could to bring His people back to His ways,

"The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."

Punishment at last

Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was first to be taken as prisoners. The king of Assyria came and took the people into Assyria, and, as a nation, they never came back to their own land. You can read about this in 2 Kings 17:6-18, and in verse 23, where the writer says,

"the LORD removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there."



Later, the kingdom of Judah was taken captive by the king of Babylon. God promised that after 70 years they should be brought back to their own land, and the Temple, which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, should be rebuilt (Jeremiah 25:11-14).

Back in their own land again

During the 70 years in Babylon some of the Jews had grown so comfortable and wealthy that they did not want to go back to their own land. But a faithful company led by men raised up by God were prepared to make the difficult journey, and to start to rebuild the Temple, and start a new life.

They met with many difficulties, but God sent prophets to encourage and correct them; and the last three books of the Old Testament - Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi - are the writings of these prophets.

Through the prophet Micah (Micah 3:6) God had spoken of a time when

"..the sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them."

And from the time of Malachi onwards until the coming of John the Baptist, of whom we read in the New Testament, there was no word from God for the people, except what had already been written.



Yet the Children of Israel, known as the Jews, were, and still are, God's people, and, in our next lesson, we will follow their history right up to the present day.

Summary

1. Thousands of years ago, God chose the Children of Israel to be His own special nation and obey Him.
2. He brought them into the land of Israel, and afterwards He gave them a king.
3. They became divided into two separate kingdoms, one called Israel and the other called Judah.
4. Both Israel and Judah were carried away as prisoners into foreign countries.
5. After 70 years, Judah went back to their own country, and - as we shall see in the next lesson - were there when Jesus was born among them.