Lessons from the Bible: Prosperity, Division, and the Prophets' Warnings

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History seeks to establish what can reasonably be reconstructed about past events. The biblical narrative offers an interpretation of the history of Israel, depicting a succession of periods of flourishing and times of crisis, when divisions, rivalries, and discord sometimes led to national catastrophes. In response to these recurring dangers, the prophets repeatedly raised their voices in warning, reaffirming the demands of morality, justice, and solidarity with others.

1. Kings and Prophets

Unlike the royal chronicles of antiquity, which often sought to glorify sovereigns and celebrate their victories, the biblical narrative adopts a remarkably independent stance toward political power. The Bible does not flatter kings; it judges them. It denounces their failings, abuses, and compromises, sometimes with uncompromising severity. Even the most powerful ruler is not exempt from moral judgment.

The prophets witnessed and sounded the alarm during the great upheavals that transformed the history of Israel and Judah. They raised their voices during the period of Assyrian expansion (853–612 BCE). They also bore witness to the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah, during the period when Babylon succeeded Assyria as the dominant imperial power (612–539 BCE).

Several decades later, under Persian hegemony, the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem ushered in a new chapter in Jewish history. The return to Zion made possible the rebuilding of the Temple and the reorganization of the community of Judah around Jerusalem. Thus, through invasions, exile, and return, the prophetic voice accompanied political upheavals, constantly reminding the people that a nation's destiny is measured not merely by its power, but also by its commitment to justice, solidarity, and moral responsibility.

2. Solomon: The Height of a United Kingdom

Solomon's reign has acquired an almost legendary aura, associated with wisdom, wealth, and the far-reaching influence of his kingdom. Biblical tradition attributes to him, among other achievements, the development of commercial activities and maritime expeditions in the Red Sea, in cooperation with the kingdom of Tyre. His

reign was marked by a period of relative peace, which enabled the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem and the development of the kingdom.

This period of flourishing illustrates the advantages that political unity could bring. Yet prosperity alone cannot guarantee a kingdom's survival. According to the biblical account, the heavy burdens imposed during Solomon's reign contributed to the rupture that followed his death.

3. The Division of the Kingdom: Internal Rivalries and Foreign Invasions

After Solomon's death, around 930 BCE, the kingdom split into two political entities: the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south, composed primarily of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The rupture soon had dramatic consequences. About five years after the division, Pharaoh Sheshonq I, generally identified with the biblical Shishak, launched a military campaign in the region and attacked, among other places, Jerusalem.

The political division weakened both kingdoms over the long term. Dynastic rivalries, military conflicts, and struggles for influence complicated their relations, although periods of cooperation and alliance were also possible.

One lesson that may be drawn from these biblical accounts and historical episodes is that deep internal divisions can undermine a society's ability to confront external threats.

4. Periods of Prosperity under Jehoshaphat, Ahab, Uzziah, and Jeroboam II

Despite the separation of the two kingdoms, certain periods were marked by relative stability and significant economic development.

In the ninth century BCE, under Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and Ahab, king of Israel, relations between the two kingdoms included periods of cooperation. Dynastic alliances, including marriages between members of their royal families, helped bring the two courts closer together, although political and religious tensions persisted.

Later, the kingdom of Judah experienced a period of prosperity under Uzziah, also known as Azariah, while the kingdom of Israel grew stronger under Jeroboam II. Their reigns in the eighth century BCE were associated with territorial expansion and economic growth.

These periods of prosperity demonstrate how political organization, stability, and cooperation could foster the development of the kingdoms. They did not, however, mean that all was well on the moral and social fronts.

5. The Prophets: Justice Before Sacrifice

It was precisely during periods of prosperity that the prophets denounced the excesses of a society at risk of confusing material success with spiritual fidelity.

Isaiah railed against religious practices devoid of genuine moral commitment. He conveyed this divine injunction:

"What do I care about the multitude of your sacrifices? […] Cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice." (Isaiah 1:11–17, excerpted and paraphrased.)

Amos, for his part, condemned merchants who tampered with their scales, exploited the poor, and sought to profit from the distress of the most vulnerable. He denounced a society in which religious worship coexisted with social injustice.

The prophets' message was unequivocal: ritual cannot take the place of justice, and piety cannot serve as a justification for exploiting others. True fidelity to God demands conduct that is just, honest, and marked by solidarity.

This warning finds an echo in Deuteronomy, where Moses laments that Jeshurun, the poetic name for Israel, grew fat and abandoned the One who had sustained him (Deuteronomy 32:15). The image conveys a timeless idea: abundance can lead people to forget the values that made prosperity possible.

6. Idolatry: A Struggle Between Values and Political Alliances

The kingdom of Israel was marked by religious conflicts over the worship of foreign deities, associated, among other things, with the forces of nature. The biblical narrative presents the reign of Ahab as a particularly revealing episode in these tensions, notably because of the influence of his wife Jezebel and the worship of Baal.

The prophet Elijah vigorously opposed these practices and denounced the abandonment of the covenant with the God of Israel. The biblical account portrays Ahab's end as tragic, against the backdrop of the military conflicts and prophetic warnings that marked his reign.

Beyond the question of worship, these episodes reveal a broader conflict over the people's identity, their values, and their relations with neighboring nations. The kingdom of Israel, more deeply involved in certain regional alliances, was exposed to

the political and religious influences of its partners. Judah also pursued alliances, but the prophets were especially concerned about the consequences of such choices for religious fidelity and the country's independence.

7. The Great Powers: The Dangers of Alliances That Lead to Dependence

Confronted with the ambitions of great powers, particularly Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, the prophets warned rulers against alliances that could compromise their autonomy.

Isaiah urged the leaders not to place their trust in the military power of neighboring states, but to exercise discernment and restraint and to put their faith in God. The expression "be careful and remain calm" (Isaiah 7:4) encapsulates this call not to give in to panic or rush into alliances.

Ahaz's Alliance with Assyria

In the eighth century BCE, King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Aram threatened Ahaz, king of Judah. Ahaz appealed to Tiglath-Pileser III, king of Assyria, hoping to neutralize his adversaries.

According to the Book of Isaiah, the prophet opposed Ahaz's decision to turn to Assyria, urging him to trust in God rather than seek security through an alliance with a foreign power.

Assyrian intervention profoundly altered the regional balance of power. Assyria subjugated the kingdom of Israel, annexed part of its territory, and deported some of its population. Samaria fell in 722 BCE, bringing the northern kingdom's existence as an independent political entity to an end.

Biblical and rabbinic tradition would later associate this disappearance with the fate of the "Ten Lost Tribes." The historical reality is more nuanced, however: some of the population was deported, while others remained in the land.

Judah's Resistance and Jeremiah's Warning

More than a century later, the kingdom of Judah found itself caught between the ambitions of great powers. As Babylon extended its dominion, some Judean leaders hoped to obtain military support from Egypt to counter the Babylonians.

Jeremiah warned King Zedekiah against this policy of confrontation. He went so far as to advise the king to submit to Babylon, believing that resistance would only make the disaster worse.

His counsel was rejected. In 586 BCE, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroyed the First Temple, and deported a substantial portion of the population to Babylonia.

The biblical narrative thus highlights the tragic gap between the prophets' warnings and the decisions made by political leaders. Often preoccupied with their prestige, immediate security, or alliances, they sometimes refused to heed advice that might have limited the consequences of their choices.

8. From the Assyrian Invasions to the Babylonian Exile

The prophets witnessed and sounded the alarm during the great upheavals that transformed the histories of both kingdoms.

The Assyrian conquest brought down the kingdom of Israel and led to the deportation of part of its population. Later, following the Babylonian conquests, the kingdom of Judah suffered the destruction of its capital and the exile of part of its people.

Historical inquiry can establish the occurrence of conquests, destruction, and deportations. The Bible, in turn, offers a theological interpretation of these events, relating them to justice, fidelity to the Covenant, and collective responsibility.

9. The Return from Exile and Reconstruction

The Persian conquest of Babylon under Cyrus II in 539 BCE opened a new chapter. Persian policy allowed some of the exiles to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the Temple, a project completed around 516 BCE.

The return to Zion did not restore an independent kingdom comparable to that of David or Solomon. It nevertheless enabled the Judean community to reorganize itself around Jerusalem and sustain its religious and collective life under foreign rule.

The experience of exile also helped reinforce the importance of the Law, study, and collective memory in preserving the continuity of the Jewish people.

Thus, through invasions, destruction, exile, and return, the biblical tradition affirms that a people can survive the loss of sovereignty so long as its memory, culture, and moral commitments remain alive.

10. Under Greek and Roman Hegemony

The Hasmonean revolt, sparked in part by the Hellenizing policies imposed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, led to the creation of an independent Jewish state and the establishment of a new dynasty. The Hasmonean period, however, was itself marked by internal rivalries.

After the death of King Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), his two sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, fought over power and the offices of king and high priest. This dynastic rivalry took on political and military dimensions and ultimately led to the intervention of a foreign power.

In 63 BCE, Hyrcanus II and his supporters appealed to Pompey, the Roman general, to intervene in their conflict with Aristobulus II. Pompey intervened in Judea, and Jerusalem was captured by the Romans. This marked a major turning point: Judea gradually came under Roman control, initially as a dependent kingdom before becoming a Roman province in 6 CE.

During the First Jewish–Roman War, as Roman legions besieged Jerusalem in 70 CE, violent clashes erupted within the city between rival Jewish factions, notably the Zealots, the followers of John of Gischala, and those of Simon bar Giora. These factions disagreed over the distribution of power and the conduct of the war against Rome and ultimately turned against one another. Their internal divisions weakened the city's resistance to the besieging forces. Jerusalem was eventually captured, much of the city was set ablaze, and the Roman army destroyed the Second Temple.

Thus, after winning independence through a prolonged struggle against foreign domination, the Hasmonean kingdom was eventually weakened by its own divisions and by recourse to an outside power. It would nevertheless be misleading to regard these events as a mechanical repetition of history: the circumstances, actors, and balance of power were profoundly different.

11. Lessons for Our Time

Biblical history and Jewish history offer lessons that extend far beyond antiquity. Historical parallels must, however, be drawn with caution. Events never repeat themselves in precisely the same way, and history is not governed by an immutable fate. Yet examining divisions, political choices, and their consequences—as interpreted in the biblical narrative—can help illuminate the challenges of the present.

Prosperity does not absolve a society of its duty to pursue justice

A society can be prosperous, powerful, and deeply attached to its traditions while remaining confronted by inequality and the vulnerability of its weakest members. Biblical tradition consistently links *mishpat*—justice—and *tzedakah*—social justice and solidarity. This obligation remains relevant today, particularly in a society such as Israel, whose standard of living is high, but where socioeconomic disparities remain significant.

Internal divisions can weaken a society

The separation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, dynastic rivalries, and factional struggles weakened their ability at various times to resist external threats. This does not mean, of course, that disagreement is inherently dangerous. A democratic society thrives on debate and the clash of ideas. But when divisions become so deep that they prevent dialogue or the search for compromise, collective cohesion can be put to the test.

This reflection resonates with the tensions running through Israeli society today, particularly between political currents and between religious and secular communities. Nevertheless, elections continue to take place in an orderly manner and in accordance with democratic principles. The point is not to equate these tensions directly with the divisions of antiquity, but to recall a more general lesson: a society can hardly preserve its cohesion if its various components cease to engage in dialogue.

Alliances with great powers require discernment and long-term vision

In antiquity, internal rivalries sometimes led rulers to seek the intervention of foreign powers. Such decisions could offer immediate advantages, but they also carried the risk of diminishing a country's political freedom of action.

The contemporary lesson must be formulated with the same caution. Israel maintains an exceptional strategic relationship with the United States, which is one of the foundations of its security and strength. The point, therefore, is not to advocate a break with this ally, but rather to consider the importance of preserving, as far as possible, an independent capacity for action and diversifying economic, technological, and diplomatic partnerships. A long-term vision requires a balance between strong alliances and strategic autonomy.

Political power must remain subject to moral judgment

The biblical narrative grants rulers no moral immunity on account of their rank. Kings themselves are subject to the judgment of the prophets, who assess their conduct according to standards of justice, responsibility, and respect for the most vulnerable.

This conception retains particular resonance in a modern democracy. The debates over judicial reform in Israel have profoundly divided society, with each side invoking democracy, justice, and the protection of institutions in support of its position. Without taking a position here on the substance of the reform, one broader

lesson remains: political legitimacy rests not solely on the power to make decisions, but also on public confidence in institutions, respect for checks and balances, and the pursuit of equilibrium among the different components of society.

Finally, adversity can become a source of renewal

The destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, exile, and persecution did not lead to the disappearance of the Jewish people. Memory, transmission, attachment to tradition, and the capacity to rebuild helped sustain a history repeatedly threatened with rupture.

The overarching lesson of the prophetic message may be summarized as follows: power alone cannot guarantee a people's endurance, any more than wealth alone can ensure its greatness. Justice, solidarity, political discernment, responsible leadership, and fidelity to fundamental values are also essential conditions of resilience.

12. Lessons for All Time

It is in the light of this biblical teaching that a Jewish wisdom has taken shape over the centuries, continuing to animate the Jewish people and the State of Israel—a wisdom rooted in memory, vigilance, and debate. In Israel, democracy is often noisy and at times tumultuous, but arguments confront arguments without disagreement necessarily descending into violence. Social justice remains an unfinished ideal, yet genuine progress has been made. In adversity, Israel has forged alliances, weathered economic crises and wars, developed a resilient society, and found new sources of support over time.

And yet, when Israel is concerned, the scrutiny to which it is subjected often seems to follow a different set of rules. Media standards can become more exacting, its failings more conspicuous, and nuance more difficult to convey. At times, Israel's adversaries are viewed through a more indulgent lens, while tragedies unfolding elsewhere in the world receive less sustained attention. This disparity deserves, at the very least, to be examined.

Perhaps part of the explanation lies in Israel's own legacy. One of the great gifts the prophets of Israel bequeathed to humanity may be their unrelenting hope for a reconciled world: a time when nations will turn their swords into plowshares, when justice will walk hand in hand with peace, and when humanity will finally learn to live without destroying itself. Whether or not one awaits the Messiah, the messianic ideal remains a compass. It points the way forward and reminds us of what the world might become.

Perhaps this is the reverse side of that immense prophetic legacy. Because Israel has carried a hope that transcends the boundaries of a single people, it is sometimes expected to meet standards beyond those of ordinary human conduct. It is measured, at times, against the very ideal it helped bring into being. And when the ideal is set so high, the gap between aspiration and reality can appear all the greater, and the resulting disappointment all the more intense.

Ultimately, Israel can rely only on its own conscience. It must be willing to examine its history without complacency, learn from its mistakes, and never abandon the ideal of justice handed down to it.

At this point, the words of Balaam come to mind. He had set out to curse Israel but, against all expectations, found himself blessing it. From the heights of Moab, he uttered these enigmatic words: "Behold, it is a people that dwells apart and is not reckoned among the nations." (Numbers 23:9.)

To dwell "apart" does not mean to stand above others. It may mean bearing a particular responsibility: remaining faithful to a memory, but also to a hope. Perhaps this is, ultimately, one of the Bible's most demanding lessons: the people of the Book are not merely custodians of their past; they are also bearers of a hope that reaches beyond themselves and speaks to all humanity.