

## HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

### “The Fall of the Northern Kingdom” (2 Kings 15:19-29; 17:3, 5-6)

The division of Israel and the civil war which followed made both the increasingly apostate northern (and also the southern kingdom) an easy target for an aggressive conqueror. Each of Israel's kings was more evil than the previous, and Northern Israel gradually lost its territories to Assyrian pressure from the northeast over a period of more than 40 years. The Assyrian Empire was a thorn in the side for both Israel and Judah for the whole term of their existence.

A number of providential occurrences allowed Israel to be, especially vulnerable to Assyrian attacks. The instability of the monarchy in Israel with only a few family dynasties lasting several generations meant that deciding on a new king was often a bloody process. In addition to this because of its geographical location, Israel was much nearer to the domineering power of Assyria, than was Judah. Other factors included the fact that Israel's territory included fertile valleys, which were far more attractive to Assyria than the Judean wilderness. Also, the other major power in the region, Egypt gave nominal support to Judah, which set up a buffer between itself and Assyria.

### ASSYRIA

Assyria was founded, previous to 2000 B.C., by colonists from Babylon, and for many centuries was subject to, or in conflict with, Babylon. The Assyrians were a fierce, warlike people from a region called Ashur, in the north of Mesopotamia, where they had lived since about 2250 BC. Ashur was named after their chief god. About 1300 B.C. Shalmaneser I threw off the yoke of Babylon and ruled the whole Euphrates Valley. Then Assyria declined until, Tiglath-pileser I, (1120-1100 B.C.) made Assyria again a great kingdom. After a further period of declension, it became a World Empire for around 300 years.

Assyrian policy in this period was to deport conquered peoples to other lands, resulting in a destruction of their sense of nationalism, and make them more easily subject. The Assyrians were great warriors and very proficient at robbing other nations of their wealth. Their system of controlling their empire was highly organized. Governors of the provinces collected taxes and supplies. They used conquered people as forced labour to build roads and conscripted them into their armies.

They were the most notorious of all the nations for their gratuitous cruelty. Their very name became a byword for cruelty and atrocity. They skinned their prisoners alive, and cut off various body parts to inspire terror in their enemies. There are records of Assyrian officials pulling out tongues and displaying mounds of human skulls all to bring about stark horror and wealthy tribute from surrounding nations. One of the ancient monuments discovered in the ruins of ancient Assyria has this inscription by King Asshurizirpal (reign began in 883 B.C.) of a conquered city,

Their men, young and old, I took as prisoners. Of some I cut off the feet and hands; of others I cut off the noses, ears, and lips; of the young men's ears I made a heap; of the old men's heads I built a minaret.

Nowhere are the pages of history bloodier than in the records of the Assyrians wars. As a consequence, God brought about their destruction, as prophesied by the prophets, Nahum and Habakkuk.

### ASSYRIAN CONQUEST OF ISRAEL

The Assyrian takeover of Israel was gradual, at first taking the form of economic extortion. About 762 B.C., Pul of Assyria imposed a tribute of a thousand talents of silver on King Menahem of Israel,

***And Pul the king of Assyria came against the land: and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to confirm the kingdom in his hand. And Menahem exacted the money of Israel, even of all the mighty men of wealth, of each man fifty shekels of silver, to give to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria turned back, and stayed not there in the land (2 Kings 15:19-20).***

Other Assyrian invasions soon followed. In around 738 B.C., in the reign of King Pekah of Israel, Tiglath-pileser of Assyria began the captivity with the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and eastern half-tribe of Manasseh were carried away by one of the first successful Assyrian invasions. It is interesting to note these were the tribes to refuse to enter the Canaan land.

***And the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, and the spirit of Tilgathpileses king of Assyria, and he carried them away, even the Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, and brought them unto Halah, and Habor, and Hara, and to the river Gozan, unto this day (1 Chron 5:26).***

***In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglathpileses king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abelbethmaachah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and carried them captive to Assyria (2 Kings 15:29).***

Later, Shalmaneser of Assyria invaded Israel and laid siege to Samaria, the capital city of the Kingdom of Israel. Shalmaneser was succeeded (or perhaps deposed) by the former General Sargon II (who himself was later assassinated by one of his own troops about 705 B.C.), who brought about the end of the Kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. At this point the grievous oppression and wickedness of the people had been forcefully denounced by the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah who prophesied:

***As for Samaria, her king is cut off, as foam upon the water. The high places also of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed: the thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us; and to the hills, Fall on us. (Hosea 10:7-8)***

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty *is* a fading flower, which *are* on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine. (Isaiah 28:1)

For the transgression of Jacob *is* all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What *is* the transgression of Jacob? *is it* not Samaria?... Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, *and* as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover the foundations thereof. (Micah 1:5-6)

Prior to this in 2 Kings 17 and 18, we read that King Hoshea, relying upon help from the king of Egypt, thought the death of Tiglath-pileser a prime moment to rebel from the shackles of the Assyrians. It was a futile move and precipitated the end of the kingdom of Israel.

**Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria; and Hoshea became his servant, and gave him presents.... Then the king of Assyria came up throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria, and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor *by* the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. (2 Kings 17:3, 5-6)**

The fact that the king of Assyria could go through the land of northern Israel with such apparent ease, and then siege Samaria for three years without much effort, is suggestive that many of the peoples of those ten tribes must have already been carried away to Assyria. The capital city of Israel, Samaria was in all probability the last stronghold of the remnant of the ten tribes in the north.

An interesting fact is that an Assyrian cuneiform also mentioned 27,290 captives were taken from Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, by the hand of Sargon II. The description of the final defeat of the Northern Kingdom of Israel above appears to be a minor event in Sargon's legacy. This may also be suggestive of the ease of Israel's defeat to the previous two decades of invasions, defeats, and deportations. Some historians estimate that the total deported in this captivity must have numbered in the hundreds of thousands, as well as those countless thousands who died in defense of the kingdom and those who fled voluntarily before and during the invasions.

#### EXILE OF NORTHERN TRIBES

The northern kingdom of the ten tribes was now at an end and Israel had become an Assyrian province, with a governor established in Samaria. The Assyrians transported the majority of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and Habor, on the stream of Gozan, and in the towns of Media. The Lord made very plain the reason for this captivity for Israel was chastisement,

**Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only... And the LORD rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers,**

**until He had cast them out of His sight .....Until the LORD removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day (2 Kings 17:18, 20, 23).**

**And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria, and put them in Halah and in Habor *by* the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes: Because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed his covenant, *and* all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and would not hear *them*, nor do *them* (2 Kings 18:11, 12).**

The Assyrians had developed a three-stage policy of subduing nations in the construction of its empire. The ten tribes of Israel experienced all three stages:

- (1) Assyria initially contented itself with declarations of loyalty from the native ruler and the payment of tribute. If the nation gave any indication that it would rebel such as withholding tribute, Assyria moved to the second stage.
- (2) Assyria then reorganized the nation into several provinces and appointed a vassal ruler sympathetic to Assyria. Deportation was also often associated with this step. If this did not quell all rebellion, Assyria would move to the final stage.
- (3) Assyria deported chosen groups of the nation and then exterminated the remnants of the nation. As part of this policy of deportation, the Assyrians would repopulate some of the inhabitants among other nations and transport people from other nations into the newly conquered nation. By this action, they hoped to synthesize a diverse people through intermarriage who would find it difficult to unite and rebel against Assyria.

Some Jewish writers argue that there were in reality only nine tribes in the northern kingdom prior to the deportation as some of the Levites abandoned their cities in the north and joined Judah after they were cast out in the apostasy of Jeroboam I (2 Chron. 13:9). It is also true that some of the tribe of Simeon had not migrated to the kingdom of Israel, but remained in their allotted inheritance within an area controlled by the tribe of Judah. In 1 Chronicles 4:43-44 we read of the prospering of this faithful remnant in enlarging in battle by some men of Simeon who immigrated from Judah to Edom after the fall of Israel and in the reign of Hezekiah. Thus the kingdom of Judah, after the fall of Samaria and before the Babylonian captivity, consisted of at least some parts of four tribes: Judah, Benjamin, Simeon, and Levi.

It is also very probable that before the Assyrian captivity many refugees from the northern kingdom must have fled to the south as it is implied in the writings of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel of the continuing presence of Israelites in Judah before the Babylonian invasion (cf. Ezek. 9:9, Jer. 32:31; 50:1, 33). At the time of King Josiah there was clearly a remnant from the 10 northern tribes under his authority,

**And when they came to Hilkiah the high priest, they delivered the money that was brought into the house of God, which the Levites that kept the doors had gathered of the hand of Manasseh and Ephraim, and of all the remnant of Israel, and of all Judah and Benjamin; and they returned to Jerusalem (2 Chron. 34:9).**

Nehemiah and Ezra also suggest this in their writings,

**Now these are the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem: but in the cities of Judah dwelt every one in his possession in their cities, to wit, Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants (Neh. 11:3).**

According to the book of Ezra the people offered “*a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel*” (Ezra 6:17). He also describes how “*the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity*” ate the Passover (Ezra 6:21). There are also lists and numbers of the men of the people of “Israel” who returned from exile listed (Ezra 2:2; 8:35; Neh. 7:7; 11:20). Indeed, not all the distinct tribal identifications of these northern tribes had disappeared by the time of Christ in the New Testament as we read, “*And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser*” (Luke 2:36).

### END OF THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH

As Judah became more and more apostate like its neighbour, Israel the longsuffering of God eventually ran out. After the tragic death of godly King Josiah his son, the people put Jehoahaz on the throne in preference to his older brother, Jehoiakim. Possibly this was because they considered Jehoiakim too submissive and Jehoahaz had a reputation for being strong (Ezek. 19:3). Jehoahaz was sadly a wicked king and did “*that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done*” and “*abominations*.” As a consequence his reign lasted only three months and after their victory over Josiah, Egypt imposed a tribute on Judah, which Jehoahaz apparently refused to pay. Necho then deposed Jehoahaz and took him in chains to Egypt, placed Jehoiakim on the throne and “*put the land to a tribute of an hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold*.”

King Jehoiakim, was the 18th king of Judah, and has the distinction of being the first sovereign of Judah to be placed on the throne by a foreign power. He paid the tribute, levied by the Egyptians by initiating a new tax to fund it. In addition he built lavish palaces by cheating his laborers and oppressed the “*poor and needy*” (Jer. 22:16). Jehoiakim was also an evil King and “*he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done*.” He also engaged in idol worship and the abominable practices that were associated with it such as human sacrifices (Jer. 19:4-5).

The Lord sent the prophets Urijah and Jeremiah to warn him and call him to repentance. Instead of repenting, Jehoiakim had Urijah killed (Jer. 26:20-23) and when Jeremiah circulated his prophetic warnings, Jehoiakim burned the scroll and tried to imprison Jeremiah, who escaped (Jer. 36). The judgment of God came after the Babylonians had seized Egypt's colonial power in Judah and Jehoiakim after submitting for three years to this new power rebelled. The Babylonians then laid siege against Jerusalem and captured Jehoiakim “*bound him in fetters*” and took him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also took the vessels of the house of the LORD to Babylon, and put them in his own idolatrous temple at Babylon. Jehoiakim died “*unlamented*” and was buried with the burial of an ass (Jer. 22:18-19), and his dead body cast out (Jer. 36:30).

At the age of 18, the young King Jehoiachin was put on the throne by the Babylonians after his father Jehoiakim was taken into captivity. He proved as wicked as his father and “*did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD*” and proved rebellious enough for Nebuchadnezzar to again

lay siege to Jerusalem and re-conquer it. Convinced of the hopelessness of making any resistance, Jehoiachin, going to the camp of the besiegers, meekly surrendered, probably hoping to retain his throne as a vassal of the Babylonian empire. However, Nebuchadnezzar's patience towards the kings of Judah was now exhausted, and Jehoiachin was sent as a captive to Babylon, according to Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 22:24). Nebuchadnezzar rifled the treasures both of the church and of the state, and carried away the silver and gold of both. To complete his conquest, Nebuchadnezzar deported, “*all of Jerusalem*” including the rulers, the educated, the military and left only the poorest peasants behind.

Jehoiachin never returned from Babylon although the Lord had mercy on him and after 37 years in prison he was released by Evil-Merodach, Babylon's new king who treated him well and “set his throne above the throne of the kings that were with him in Babylon” and gave him an allowance “*all the days of his life*.” There is no evidence sadly that he ever repented of his sins. When Nebuchadnezzar deposed Jehoiachin he appointed his uncle, Zedekiah to be king over the remnant remaining in Judah, thereby fulfilling the prophecy that no descendent of Jehoiachin would be king of Judah (Jer. 22:30). King Zedekiah was the 20th and last sovereign of the kingdom of Judah. Despite the judgments of God upon his three immediate predecessors he was also wicked and “*did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that Jehoikim had done*.”

Nebuchadnezzar had extracted from Zedekiah a binding oath that “*made him swear by God*” that he would run his domain in submission to Babylon. Zedekiah made preparations to rebel and the Lord sent the prophet Jeremiah and other prophets to remind him that the Lord had brought the Babylonian invasion because of the sins of the Israelites. Zedekiah's would not listen and “*stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the LORD God of Israel*.” In his ninth year of his reign, Zedekiah rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar laid a siege against Jerusalem. As the siege progressed, Jeremiah repeatedly warned that resistance would result in disaster, but if Zedekiah would surrender, all lives would be saved (Jer. 38:2-3, 17-18). Zedekiah refused to listen and the siege lasted three summers and ended with his capture trying to flee the city by night. The Babylonian's punishment was severe and they killed Zedekiah's sons before his eyes and then his eyes were gouged out. He was then carried away to Babylon to die of old age in prison, thereby unwillingly fulfilling Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek. 12:13) that he would go to Babylon and die there, but never see it.

A frustrated Nebuchadnezzar having quashed three rebellions by Judah directed his army to break down completely the wall surrounding Jerusalem and to burn the king's palace, the temple, and many other important buildings to the ground. Anything of value was removed to Babylon along with the entire population of the city and those from the surrounding areas who surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar left only the poorest and most powerless people to work the land which soon led to much of it becoming desolate. Jeremiah prophesied that Judah's captivity in Babylon would last 70 years, and the scriptures testify that his prophecy was fulfilled. Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon, along with some 10,000 of Jerusalem's principal citizens (see 2 Kings 24:12-16).