

Pentwater Bible Church

Isaiah Message 32

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Ancient Assyrian Bas Relief Artist and location unknown

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Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Isaiah

Message Thirty-Two

THE JUDGMENT OF ASSYRIA

August 11, 2019

Daniel E. Woodhead

Isaiah 14:24–27

²⁴Jehovah of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely, as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand: ²⁵that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and upon my mountains tread him under foot: then shall his yoke depart from off them, and his burden depart from off their shoulder. ²⁶This is the purpose that is purposed upon the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out upon all the nations. ²⁷For Jehovah of hosts hath purposed, and who shall annul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back (ASV, 1901)?

It is important to realize that after the founding of Babel by Nimrod (Cir, 2130 B.C.; 1757 A.H.) many nations under different names occupied the region. Some of them were the Sumerians, Akkadians and the Assyrians. God in these passages here is telling the nation Israel through the prophet Isaiah that He will destroy the Assyrians off of their land and even from the whole earth. Creation was Cir. 4004 B.C. and the Flood was about 2500 B.C. (1656 years Anno Homini). They all contributed to the city and concept founded by Nimrod called Babylon.

The Sumerians were the post Flood Empire that succeeded Nimrod in Babel. The Akkadians conquered Sumer. The Sumerian King List purports to identify both pre and post Flood kings of the Mesopotamian (Between Rivers) region. While Sumer may not be explicitly mentioned in the Bible, Sumerian literature impacted biblical literary forms and Sumerian culture shared a common environment with Genesis 1–11. Sumer and Sumerian literature “lies within and, in fact, chronologically and literally, at the beginning of the “historical stream” of biblical Israel.” Specific shared literary forms include: epics recounting the accomplishments of human heroes (similar to Judges), creation, the flood, praise hymns for the temple (Psalm 46; 76), anointed kings (Psalm 2; 110), deities/God (Psalm 33; 93; 96), hymns to past kings (2 Samuel 1:19–27), proverbs, genealogies, legal texts, and laments.

Sumer was succeeded by the Akkadians approx. (2270 B.C.) who were conquered by Assyria (2083 B.C.) and they were in turn conquered by the ancient Babylonians.

Around 2270 B.C., the independent city-states of Sumer were conquered by a man called Sargon I the Great of Akkad, who had once ruled the city-state of Kish. Sargon was an excellent commander, he organized his army into different units, including donkey-drawn war chariots, used to scare and trample his enemies. Sargon was an Akkadian, a Semitic group of desert nomads who eventually settled in Mesopotamia just north of Sumer. The Sumerian king, Lugal-Zaggisi, tried to form a coalition of Sumerian city-states against Sargon, but he was defeated by the Akkadian. Sargon is considered the first empire builder after Nimrod. Sargon made Agade

the capital city of his empire. It is not known exactly where it was in the plains of Shinar because it was destroyed with his demise.

Dynasty of Akkad (2270–2050 B.C.)

During the period of the Semitic dynasty of Akkad, the Akkadian language replaced Sumerian as the administrative language, as Sargon I of Agade conquered all of Mesopotamia and extended the empire to the Amanus Mountains to the West, and to the Zagros and Taurus mountains to the East and North. The Sumerian signs were used to write the Old Akkadian language which was Semitic. The wedges of the cuneiform symbols now appear only at the top or the left of the sign. This is a culmination of the tendency started in the Early Dynastic II Period of restricting the impressions of the triangular stylus 'within a narrow segment of the possible directions the stylus could theoretically take.' This meant that few changes in the direction of writing were necessary and the speed of writing could be increased.

Sargon's son and grandson ruled after him, but eventually the Akkadian Empire fell to the old Assyrian empire (Cir 2050 B.C.). The old Assyrian empire fell to the Middle Assyrian empire.

The Bible states that Asshur was the first-born son of Shem, and the progenitor of the Assyrian people (Genesis 10:22). He founded Nineveh, Rehoboth and Calah in the land of Sumer. This is also known as the biblical Shinar, (Genesis 10:10-11).

Beginning with the monarch, Tukulti-Ninurta (1235-1198 B.C.), the Middle Assyrian empire began its first conquests, in this case the conquest of Babylon. The Assyrian dream of an empire began with the monarch, Tiglat-Pileser (1116-1090 B.C.), who extended Assyrian dominance to Syria and Armenia. But the greatest period of conquest occurred between 883 B.C. and 824 B.C., under the monarchies of Ashurnazirpal II (883-859 B.C.) and Shalmeneser III (858-824 B.C.) of the Neo-Assyrian empire, who conquered all of Syria and Palestine, all of Armenia, and, the prize of prizes, Babylon and southern Mesopotamia. The Assyrian conquerors invented a new policy towards the conquered: in order to prevent nationalist revolts by the conquered people, the Assyrians would force the people they conquered to migrate in large numbers to other areas of the empire and then colonize the conquered nation's land with people groups from other countries (II Kings 17: 24). Besides guaranteeing the security of an empire built off of conquered people of different cultures and languages, these mass deportations of the populations in the Middle East, Mesopotamia, and Armenia, turned the region into a melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and languages. Whereas there would be little cultural contact between the conquered and the conquerors in early Mesopotamian history, under the Assyrians the entire area became a vast experiment in cultural mixing. It was the Assyrian monarch, Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), who first forcefully relocated Hebrews after the conquest of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Hebrews.

God used these ruthless people to remove the Northern ten tribes of Israel because of the extreme sins they had committed in turning away from Jehovah. In fact, God did not have to use much coercion to achieve His goals. To activate the Assyrians to come against Judah, He simply gave them the notion. God used this whistling or making them aware of an opportunity for conquest such as He did with the Egyptians and Assyrians in Isaiah 7:17-19. Because they were a sinful people the Assyrians only had to sense the notion God placed in their minds to carry out their

desire to engage in war, torture and death with another nation. They did not realize that it was Jehovah God giving them the notion to attack the Jews (Isaiah 10:7).

God does judge all sin and He used the Assyrians to harm the Jews as a result of His judgment upon them for their sin. In keeping with this judgment upon sin and sinful people God then judged the Assyrians for being sinful. Both Isaiah and Nahum predicted the downfall of the Assyrians. The Assyrians were an overbearing and blasphemous people who were intoxicated with their own strength as so many despotic nations are. In 612 B.C. the allied forces of the Babylonians, the Medes and the Scythians captured the Assyrian capital Nineveh and it became a desolate ruin just as the biblical prophets predicted. Again in 609 B.C. the Medes and the Babylonians jointly attacked the remnants of Assyria and divided it among themselves. Nahum's prediction of their destruction is quite clear from a prophecy of eighty years or so earlier, prior to the Assyrian destruction.

Therefore, it is quite clear that God judges sin. Sometimes He uses sinful people acting out their sinful desires to achieve His goals. The example of the Assyrian utilized to judge Israel demonstrated the permissive will of God allowing the sins of the Assyrians to carry out God's will. The Apostle Paul characterized this well in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 2:11-12, 14

For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, (NASB)

The central focus of these verses is a discussion of the Law and those who are penalized by God for sins. In describing this Paul makes clear that under God's economy all who sin are judged. Therefore, whether God uses the sinful people to carry out His divine judgment or not, all who sin will be judged. This does not mean that we can fully understand how God works (Job 42:3). What is clear though is that the God of all creation controls all things and we must accede to Him His sovereignty.

The Assyrian army of the ninth century B.C. was a very sophisticated army of its time in terms of size, weaponry, tactics, and overall military efficiency. While armies that came after it surpassed it in some limited respects, no army equaled its overall organizational sophistication until the armies of Rome. It is important to realize their military prowess as we view the way in which they were ultimately defeated and ceased to exist. No country was able to defeat them without divine intervention.

The Assyrian army was completely integrated into the overall social, political, and economic institutions of the Assyrian state, and much of its success was due to its ability to make maximum use of this integration.

Assyria, like the other settlements of the Tigris-Euphrates valley between 1500 and 1200 B.C., was a city-state that was located upon the nexus of important trade routes that the major powers

of the day Egyptians, Hittites, and the Mitanni fought to control for economic and military reasons. Mitanni was a region of Northern Assyria with the city of Carchemish just inside its western edge. In the twelfth century B.C. Hittite power collapsed and Assyria began a three hundred-year rise to power under the direction of successive powerful kings, which resulted in the establishment of the Assyrian empire in the ninth century B.C. under the monarchies of Ashurnazirpal II and Shalmeneser III.

Assyria emerged as the most powerful and successful military empire the world had seen to that time, and its power was built upon military force and police terror. These concepts are necessary for any totalitarian nation seeking to conquer others. Warfare, conquest, and the exploitation of neighboring states necessarily became the primary occupation of the Assyrian kings. Between 890 and 640 B.C., the height of Assyrian power, the Assyrians fought 108 major and minor wars, punitive expeditions, and other significant military operations against neighboring states.¹ During the reign of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), the Assyrians carried out ten major wars of conquest or suppression in sixteen years.² The result was the establishment of an empire that extended from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, from Armenia and northern Persia to the Arabian desert, and west to the Egyptian Delta. It was the largest military empire in the world, and it was sustained by the largest, best-equipped, best-trained, and cruelest military organization that the world had ever witnessed.³ Further, they developed a system of colonization management of conquered peoples, which reached its height under the Romans.

The weakness was their economic base, which was insufficient to independently maintain basic economic production of weaponry. In an age of iron, Assyria had very few easily accessed iron deposits for manufacturing modern iron weapons. It also lacked stone for its building projects. This deficiency caused a limit to the number and amount of defensive walls and irrigation projects, which could be accomplished. They lacked a good source of wood. Long, straight wooden beams were required to construct fortifications and it was wood from which the Assyrian chariots, forty-foot high siege towers, and vital battering rams were made. In an age of chariot warfare, Assyria had no grasslands on which to breed and train horses. Assyria's geography provided few of the vital strategic materials from which to forge its military strength. The solution was to conquer and occupy the neighboring states to the west, north, and southeast, all of which could provide the raw materials that Assyria required.

Assyria's fragile agricultural infrastructure and lack of military raw materials were aggravated by the country's geographical position on the Tigris, which left it vulnerable to hostile neighboring states that kept Assyria under constant geopolitical threat.

There were six important monarchs who reigned during the imperial period of Assyria. The first was Assurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), who was followed by his son Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.). There then was a period of eighty years in which the archaeological records yield little information regarding any single ruler until Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) reigned. Six years after his death, the greatest Assyrian ruler and military conqueror, Sargon II (721-705 B.C.)

¹ A.T. Olmstead, *The History of Assyria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 64
Britannica, Encyclopedia. A New Survey of Universal Knowledge. Chicago: William Benton, Publisher, Vol 21 1985 927

³ Richard A. Gabriel *The Great Armies of Antiquity*. Praeger Westport, CT. 2002 125

ascended the throne. He was a very brutal king and earned the title of Sargon II the Great. He was succeeded by his son Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) and, thirty years later, by his grandson, Ashurbanipal (668-630 B.C.). Under three of these monarchs, Assurnasirpal II, Tiglath-Pileser III, and Sargon II, major structural changes of the army were carried out that provided for the development of a powerful and up to date military machine.

The Assyrian empire was difficult to rule because the empire was widely scattered and geographically isolated by mountain and deserts. It was, moreover, comprised of conquered peoples whose loyalties did not lie with the Assyrians. The Assyrians were quite adept at administering this state through a bureaucracy, the establishment of a provincial system of hierarchical authority assisted by regional armed forces, and the ruthless use of police and military terror, supported by an efficient intelligence system.

With each conquered area a professional civil service ensured that things ran smoothly. Assyrian civil servants were trained in professional schools in a manner similar to the training of Egyptian scribes. The highest-ranking civil servant was a *tartan*, who represented the authority of the king. Next in order came the Overseer of the Palace, the Main Cupbearer, and the Governor. Military men often held high positions in the civil government of conquered areas and, in times of peace, the line between military and civilian authority was often unclear.⁴ An interesting aspect of the provincial civil service was the use of former captives in the administration itself; some were freed and permitted to hold minor governmental posts.⁵ The Assyrian civil service numbered about 100,000 functionaries.

As efficient as the administrative structure was, the Assyrian king did not place his trust in them. Backing up the king was a dedicated police and intelligence organization. He also had personal bodyguards that stayed close to him even in the heat of battle. These *praetorians* as they were called, numbered about 1,000, and had the task of making sure the civil service and anyone else in a provincial area was loyal.⁶ The intelligence force used spies and others paid to help them.

It was common knowledge that any possible insurrectionist would receive harsh punishment, which would be swift and cruel. The Assyrians were the first to practice psychological warfare on a grand scale as a matter of state policy. One such incident attesting to this is found in Isaiah 35:2-22. The *Rabshakeh* tried to intimidate Hezekiah into subservience. Rabshakeh is a title much like Tartan or others used by the Assyrians.

Assyrian cruelty became legendary. What made the Assyrians different from other conquerors is that they boasted about their cruelty and raised monuments to it as a form of propaganda to convince actual and potential adversaries that resistance was futile and carried terrible penalties. Frequently as a sign of Assyrian victory the vanquished were dealt severe physical and public punishment. Defeated monarchs, generals, and high government officials often met horrible and painful deaths in full view of the newly subjugated population. Assurnasirpal II's vengeance against the city of Susa was a typical example of this Assyrian practice: "I built a pillar over the

⁴ Ibid, 605-6

⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 21 1985, 930

⁶ D.D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylon*, 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926. Vol I

city gate and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled...on stakes.” The officers who rebelled were first flayed alive and their limbs were then cut off, “and I spread their skins upon the walls.⁷ Sargon II had his main palace hall decorated with particularly brutal reliefs depicting what he had done to his enemies. The room was used specifically for greeting foreign dignitaries, who usually did not miss the point. The king's personal bodyguard also functioned as an intelligence and police force and could be employed to enforce the king's terror at will.

Changing politics caused the military to become weak and misdirected. This fact brought about the end of the Assyrian empire. We can see how God influenced the various parties in His desire to end the empire that cursed the Jews. Isaiah 7:18-22 demonstrates how God places thoughts in the king of Assyria to do His Will. We can also see God much in the same way declaring in Ezekiel 38: 16 how He will *cause* the future ruler of the Northern most Empire, Russia whose title is Gog to attack Israel in a collation of nations comprised of Germany and various mid-east Muslim nations. God is always in control of every situation regardless if we realize it or not.

In 668 B.C., Ashurbanipal, the last great Assyrian king, was given control of Assyria upon the death of his father. He inherited an empire that was wavering in effectiveness to carry out earlier protective measures. They had become over-extended by defending border wars and suppressing domestic insurrections. The many people groups they had conquered and brought into their homeland became restless and less interested in obeying the Assyrians. Political control from the center was becoming less effective as auxiliary forces became less reliable to defending them, even as they became more necessary to suppress the increasing number of revolts.

In 664 B.C. the Elamites sacked Babylon, in the first of two attacks. They did it again in 656 B.C. In 653 B.C. Shamash-shum-ukin, Ashurbanipal's brother made an alliance with five groups to rebel against his brother. The allied invasion included Babylon, the Elamites, the Arameans, the Arabs, and the Egyptians. The result was a conflict that tore the army in pieces through civil war. The records are limited but, the subsequent period between 648 B.C. and the death of Ashurbanipal in 630 B.C. was a time of civil war provoked by Ashurbanipal's sons fighting over the control of power. ⁸ The weakness at the political center encouraged local governors and generals to drop their allegiance to Assyria and engage in revolts.

The end came in 612 B.C. when a coalition of Median and Babylonian armies sacked Nineveh and destroyed what was left of a powerful empire and army. The destruction of Nineveh was complete and the terror continued for months as the victorious allies subdued one remnant garrison after another. A terrible vengeance was wrought upon the Assyrians, and their cruelty was revenged with even greater cruelty. The Biblical commentary by Nahum captured the sense of God's will realized as the empire fell apart.

Nahum 3:1-7

Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and rapine; the prey departeth not. ²The noise of the whip, and the noise of the rattling of wheels, and prancing horses, and

⁷ *ibid.* Vol I 144-145

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 21, 1985, 928-30

bounding chariots, ³the horseman mounting, and the flashing sword, and the glittering spear, and a multitude of slain, and a great heap of corpses, and there is no end of the bodies; they stumble upon their bodies;— ⁴because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the well-favored harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts. ⁵Behold, I am against thee, saith Jehovah of hosts, and I will uncover thy skirts upon thy face; and I will show the nations thy nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame. ⁶And I will cast abominable filth upon thee, and make thee vile, and will set thee as a gazing-stock. ⁷And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee from thee, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her? whence shall I seek comforters for thee (ASV, 1901)?

So complete was the destruction of the Assyrian capital Nineveh that two hundred years later Xenophon and his Greek army of 10,000 men passed the ruins of Nineveh and was not aware that it was ancient Nineveh.⁹ Nothing of ancient Assyrian power was left. This people group who had lived near the Fertile Crescent for 2,000 years had disappeared completely. God promised to judge them and He did.

NEXT MESSAGE: THE JUDGMENT OF PHILISTIA

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⁹ Laffont, Robert *The Ancient Art of Warfare* New York: Time-Life Books, 1966, vol.1, 45