

## OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

### *Lesson 45 – Part 1*

#### The Fall of Israel: Prelude to the Fall

The summer between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I played baseball in the middle school leagues in Lubbock, Texas. Most games were played at Elks Field on Slide Road and 29<sup>th</sup> street. In my life, this was very important stuff! Full uniforms (including the cool socks), a fenced-in field complete with a centerfield scoreboard, loud umpires, and of course, all family in the stands cheering and heckling.

My practice then, as now, was to say my prayers before going to sleep. I remember the Friday night before our Saturday game, including in my prayer that God would “help me hit a homerun” the next day. In the mind and heart of a twelve-year-old boy, this was a very serious prayer!

The next day, my first at bat, before approaching the plate, I made the necessary warm-up swings, just like I saw the pro’s do on T.V. I then stepped to the plate, and batting right-handed, got ready for the first pitch. The pitcher threw one that was coming right over the sweet spot of the plate. I unleashed my best swing, and lo and behold, the ball sailed over the centerfield fence, hitting the big Pepsi-Cola bottle cap advertisement on the scoreboard. In humility, I should add that I also remember striking out the other two at-bats that day!

What happened? With the war in Southeast Asia, with Nixon making a historic trip to China, with the Watergate scandal gathering steam, with the Ezeiza massacre in Argentina, on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, did God listen to a prayer about one twelve-year-old boy’s dream at-bat at Elks Field in Lubbock, Texas? Even in the sports arena, as Billy Jean King was fighting Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes on the tennis court, was my middle school baseball game God’s concern?

One can look at that experience and explain it quite easily without putting God into the equation. After all, if my parents had not taken me to the game, if coach had not put me into the line up, if I had not selected a bat, if the pitcher had failed to throw a strike – maybe had failed to throw *the* strike, if I had failed to swing, then I certainly would not have hit the homerun. Furthermore, the homerun could be explained by the velocity of ball, the velocity of bat, the place of impact, the trajectory of my swing, the atmospheric conditions, and by all sorts of scientific measurements. How could anyone think that this was anything other than luck (or skill!) that produced the homerun?

We can always see and interpret things from a worldly perspective. That does not mean, however, that there is not also a perspective of faith. The idea that every

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good and perfect gift comes from God (James 1:17) does not mean that there is not an earthly perspective of the gift's origination.

With this lesson, we begin our study of the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As we do so, we will consider and analyze the fall from two perspectives: the secular one and the one of faith. For just as with the baseball swing, and so many other events, we are able to see earthly explanations for events. Yet in Kings, we see not only the earthly events and explanations, but we also see the spiritual insight of the Prophet Historian who wrote with a purpose greater than simply reciting history.

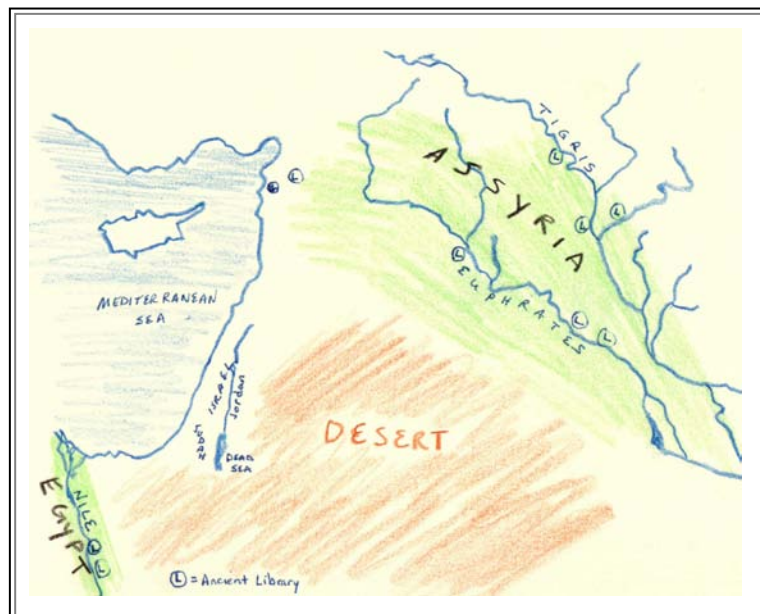
Our goal this first week is to set into perspective the earthly and spiritual perspectives, providing a background for the more in depth considerations in lessons to come.

## THE SECULAR PERSPECTIVE

Why did Israel fall? More specifically, why did Israel fall over 100 years before the fall of Judah? What happened? A secular scholar can analyze the evidence and come up with a number of interrelated reasons why. The reasons would likely entail issues of geography (and geology), of political maneuverings, and, of course, of military strength. We consider each of these briefly. After considering the secular perspective, we will consider the spiritual insights to the same factors. We will see Israel and Judah walking a delicate line. As they struggled to play the politics of their day, and still maintain their national identities, prophets would call the leaders to make faith central, whereas the leaders often set faith aside for political expediency.

### *Geography/Geology*

Remembering our geography, Israel was in the distressing position of existing between two areas historically producing civilization's first superpowers. To the north of Israel was the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers ("Mesopotamia"<sup>1</sup>).



<sup>1</sup> Mesopotamia is a composite word of "meso" from the Greek word for "in the middle" or "between" (μεσηνύ) and "potamia" from the Greek for "river" (ποταμός).

This area had produced large and powerful civilizations for millennia taking advantage of the year- round availability of fresh water and arable land. This meant for stable societies that stayed put and grew productive having readily available foodstuffs. To the south, the situation was similar with the superpower of Egypt, built around the sustaining force of the Nile and its adjoining land. An interesting indicator of these early and large civilizations are the libraries that have been found in the Ancient Near East. There is clear evidence of vast collections of written materials in Mesopotamia and Egypt for over a millennia before any such evidence elsewhere.

The land between these two superpowers was adequate for tribal existences, and smaller societies, but it was not of such geology that large civilizations could easily be fostered and sourced there. Much of it was desert in the east. The west was bound by the Mediterranean Sea. Between the desert and the sea was land that was home to the Canaanites, the Israelite settlers after the exodus, the Philistine settlers from the Greek sea peoples, and many minor tribal kingdoms (Edom, Moab, Ammon, Syria/Damascus, Tyre/Sidon, etc.) There were also wandering tribes more affiliated with the location of their flocks than any particular town or city.

This land between the superpowers was useful land, even though it was not a natural producer of a large and powerful civilization. The land controlled trade routes from Egypt and Mesopotamia. John and James Monson call the Promised Land “The Land Between.”<sup>2</sup> Their incredible 3-D maps show the land as a bridge spanning the transportation routes for trade with and between the Superpowers. The Land Between was also a transportation option for moving trade inland from the Mediterranean Sea as well.

The land of Israel and Judah was diverse, including verdant valleys, lowlands (the “Shephelah”), and hills. There was also desert land with little more than scrub. Parts of the land received regular rain, while other parts were extremely arid. There were several productive lakes of good size as well as the Dead Sea, which, while it produced nothing living and no drinkable water, did provide a constant source of needed salt. (The Dead Sea was approximately 25% salt compared to 7% in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>3</sup>) The Jordan River flowed into the lakes as another source of clean water. In the higher elevations, snow could fall.

This land produced different crops, depending on the type of soil and exposure to rain. The land produced wheat and barley. It provided grazing for cattle, sheep,

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<sup>2</sup> Monson, James, *Regions on the Run: Introductory Map Studies in the Land of the Bible*, (Biblical Backgrounds, Inc. 2009). The maps are accessed at [www.biblicalbackgrounds.com](http://www.biblicalbackgrounds.com)

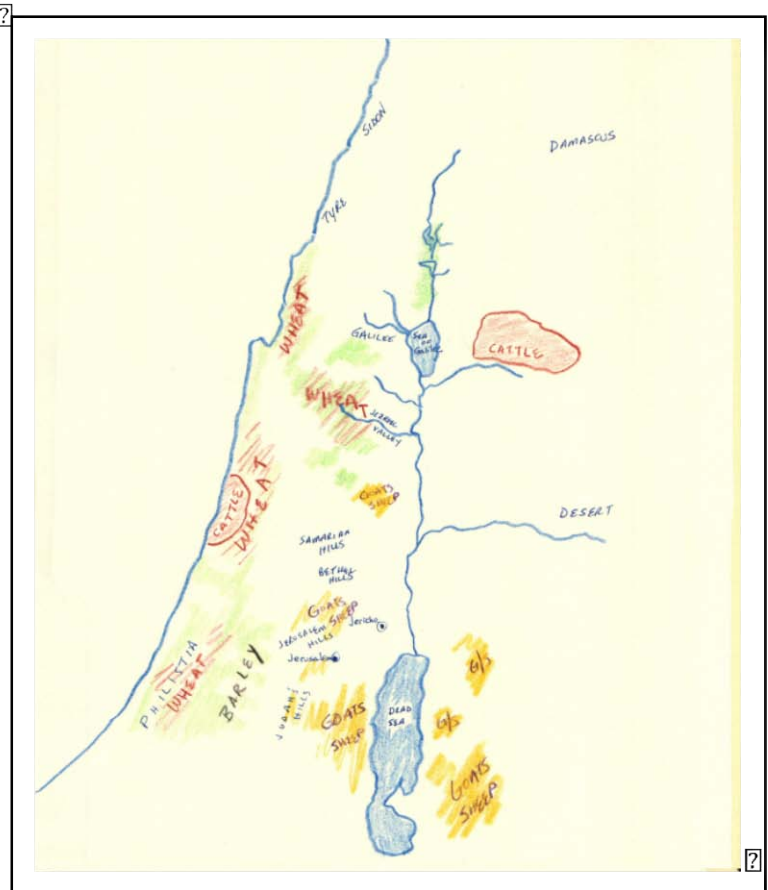
<sup>3</sup> Lawrence, Paul, *The IVP Atlas of Bible History* (InterVarsityPress 2006), at 50.

and goats. There was fishing and orchards of grapes and olives. The crops were dependent upon rainfall, however, for any irrigation was very limited with the water bodies being in the Rift Valley without any real means of pumping them up to higher elevations. This contrast to the Nile, which regularly overflowed its banks, was noted early to the Israelites by Moses in Deuteronomy:

For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven (Dt. 11:10-11).

The rainfall was (and still is) highly dependent on location. In the winter, moisture comes in with the winds blowing from the Mediterranean Sea. As the moisturized air blows in and hits the hills, the resultant rise upward produces rain. This rain dumps hard and fast. Once it falls, the land further east gets hardly any rainfall. In Jerusalem, for example, 24 inches falls annually, but just 13 miles away in Jericho, the annual rainfall is just 6 ½ inches!<sup>4</sup>

A key to understanding the different treatment of Israel and Judah come from the distinctions in geography and geology. Israel was the land with the more verdant and prosperous valleys. It had access to the fresh water lakes and most of the Jordan River, meaning access to fish. The northern land of Israel had greater rainfall and produced both wheat and barley while Judah could grow only barley. Similarly, while the southern area of Judah could handle goats and sheep, the northern country also handled cattle. Israel had more access to transportation routes,



<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 52.

making it a more accessible country. Judah was the opposite, as a hilly country that made transportation difficult and kept it relatively inaccessible.<sup>5</sup>

Israel was a valuable treasure more easily invaded. Judah possessed more natural protections and did not have the inherent value to a conquering nation that Israel did. Strictly from a geographic and geologic perspective, Israel was the more natural country to fall, especially to a northern superpower like Assyria.

### *Politics*

Any examination of the political factors will include internal as well as international politics. Internally, the politics of Israel always seemed in a state of flux. Israel began around 932 BC through a rebellion led by Jeroboam I (1<sup>st</sup> dynasty). Jeroboam's son Nadab managed to assume the throne, but he lasted only two years before he was assassinated and the dynasty of Baasha began (2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty). Baasha's son Elah was next on the throne, but also lasted only two years before his commander killed him (3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty). That coup d'état lasted for seven days until yet another family took the throne. This fourth dynasty started with Omri and lasted for four generations before another general (Jehu) overthrew and murdered king Joram (5<sup>th</sup> dynasty). This new general reigned as king through four of his sons before the sixth dynasty arose through another coup d'état. This internal turmoil continued right to the end of Israel. After Jehu's last son was killed, the murdering Shallum reigned as king for a month (2 Kings 15:10, 13). Menahem then killed Shallum (7<sup>th</sup> dynasty) and managed to hold the throne for ten years, putting his son Pekahiah on after him (2 Kings 15:14, 17, 23). Pekahiah reigned for two years before being murdered by his captain Pekah (8<sup>th</sup> dynasty). Pekah reigned for twenty years before his murder by Hoshea (9<sup>th</sup> dynasty), who became the final king of Israel.

These were not simple “one guy kill one king then takes his place” coups. They were mean, brutal, and bloody. Around 749 BC when Menahem slew Shallum, not all of Israel readily submitted to Menahem. He sacked the town of Tirzah with a brutality that is both chilling and sickening:

At that time Menahem sacked Tiphshah and all who were in it and its territory from Tirzah on, because they did not open it to him. Therefore he

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<sup>5</sup> Archaeologist and Old Testament scholar (and class reader) John Monson commented in email on this aspect of the lesson: “In essence: Israel open and with great natural resources therefore has more temptation and is more open to influences culturally but also vulnerable to invasion. In contrast, Judah has great agriculture but is really more of a highland retreat that has a mountainous core to which it can fall back in times of trouble. In essence: the Mesopotamian and Egyptian powers need to plow right through Israel to reach each other. But the only part of Judah they need is the coastal highway, and that's really not part of Judah anyway. Judah wants it but can 'run for the hills' whenever they need to!”

sacked it, and he ripped open all the women in it who were pregnant (2 Ki. 15:16).

In order to “help him confirm his hold on the royal power,” Menahem then turned to the Assyrian “King Pul” (an Assyrian name for Tiglath Pileser III taken from the fuller “Pulu.”<sup>6</sup>) paying 1,000 talents of silver (about 34 tons!) taxing the wealthy men of Israel 50 shekels (about 21 ounces) a piece (2 Kings 15:19).<sup>7</sup>

This instability surely created a constant source of distrust and strife that kept Israel from developing into the power it could have become. Certainly during the times of stability (*e.g.*, Omri/Ahab; Jehu/Jehoahaz/Joash/Jeroboam), the prosperity of the country peaked. Israel was often too busy fighting internally to be in a position to battle internationally. Hebrew University’s Yohanan Aharoni noted that Menahem’s tax of 50 shekels and payment of 1,000 talents,

...impoverished the nation, so weakening the royal house that it fell within a few years’ time.<sup>8</sup>

It is apparent that Menahem’s payments and vassalage to Assyria, with its subsequent weakening of the prominent families in Israel prompted the rebellion of Pekah against Menahem’s son, Pekahiah. Pekah took advantage of public sentiment and fronted the conspiracy that killed the king. (Today, we would impeach the President or vote him out of office. Then they just killed him.) This illustrated the interplay between the internal politics and the international political situation.

As king, Pekah joined forces with Rezin, the king of Syria, and formed an anti-Assyrian coalition. Judah gave no support to this effort, so Pekah and Rezin invaded Judah, seeking to set an Israelite (“the son of Tabeel” – Isa. 7:6) on the throne in Jerusalem. If successful, this would galvanize a third nation to oppose the growing might of Assyria. Even as Pekah warred with Judah to expand his borders and support in the south, he was losing significant and fertile territory to the north. The Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III (“T-P”), who reigned from 746-727 BC, captured much of Israel’s northern land around Galilee, taking innumerable Israelites into captivity and exile at that time (2 Kings 15:29). The

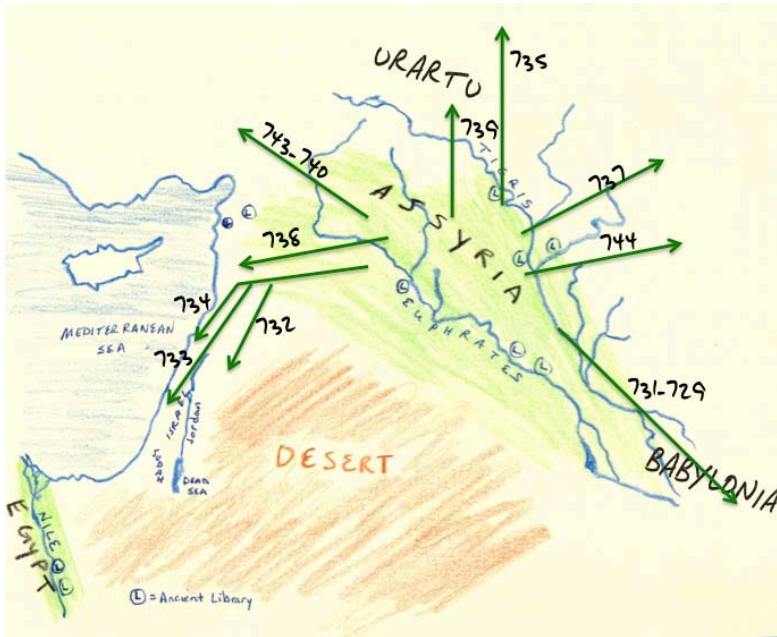
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<sup>6</sup> It was under the name “Pulu” that Tiglath-Pileser ruled on the throne of Babylon once he pacified that country late in his reign. See generally, Bright, John, *A History of Israel*, (Westminster John Knox 2000), 4<sup>th</sup> ed., at 270.

<sup>7</sup> The Assyriologist Donald Wiseman writes that the 1,000 talents “were calculated on the number of males of military age at the current Assyrian value of a slave (50 shekels).” Wiseman, Donald, “Assyria”, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 1997), Vol. 1, at 335.

<sup>8</sup> Aharoni, Yohanan, *The Land of the Bible, A Historical Geography* (Westminster 1979), at 370.

international scene found Assyria's power rising fast and strong during the reign of T-P. While Assyria had languished in the decades before, fighting internal rebellions fostered by outbreaks of plague and the bad omen of a near total eclipse,<sup>9</sup> T-P reestablished firm control over the central and outlying regions



Almost each year, Tiglath-Pileser campaigned to expand and strengthen his kingdom. The green arrows and corresponding dates are based on Assyrian records.

This map well illustrates Isaiah's prophecy that, "the Lord is bringing up against them ... the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck... (Isa. 7:6-7).

of Assyria. T-P then began regular campaigns past Assyria's traditional boundaries into the mountainous regions north and west, into the regions of the Mediterranean, and into The Land Between. Civilization had reached a point where there were values not found in Assyria, but needed by the Assyrians. Venturing into the mountains offered the ores necessary for metal-working. Assyria sought the access to the Mediterranean and its trade with the Eastern countries. Lebanon and other areas offered timber necessary for building, for machines of war, and for ships. Assyria sought control over Israel and surrounding countries before, but this time it was different. Whereas earlier Assyrian exertions of extra-border strength were bent on exacting tribute, T-P

<sup>9</sup> In just a seven-year period, between 765 and 759 BC, Assyria suffered multiple internal revolts and saw two severe outbreaks of the plague, with undoubtedly devastating results on the population.<sup>9</sup> Another very rare occurrence in Nineveh happened during the reign of Jeroboam II. On June 15, 763 BC, a near total eclipse of the sun occurred from 9:33 a.m. to 12:19 p.m.<sup>9</sup> For more, see Old Testament Survey lesson 36 Part 1 (Jonah) downloadable at the class website, [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

sought to permanently expand Assyria's borders through absorption of conquered peoples. T-P organized his conquered lands into provinces, assigning Assyrian governors and transferring local populations (at least of the upper strata of people) and replacing them with foreigners deported from elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

This added an extra layer of politics for Israel. The Chronicler supplements the information in Kings explaining that Uzziah's grandson Ahaz had taken the throne in Judah, following "the ways of the kings of Israel" (2 Chron. 28:2). He made and worshipped metal idols, and even "burned his sons as an offering" (2 Chron 28:2). The Chronicler then tells that when Israel's Pekah and Syria's Rezin attacked Ahaz and Judah, while they were not successful at replacing Ahaz, they did damage Judah, and a number of Judahites were taken captive to Damascus. The Jerusalem palace also suffered, losing two of Ahaz's sons (including the next in line for the throne) and the palace commander. Not just Syria, but even Israel took Judahites back to Israel as slaves; however, through the intervention of a prophet, those captives were returned promptly.

It was in this struggle that Judah's King Ahaz wrongly turned to Assyria, rather than the Lord for help. Ahaz's world (a/k/a kingdom) was falling apart. Losing territory to Israel and Syria from the north was just part of the story. Ahaz also lost territory to Edom in the south and to the Philistines in the west. Tiglath-Pileser heard Ahaz's cry for help and his offer to pay tribute, but saw it as weakness. Rather than help Ahaz, T-P simply took the tribute payment and came against Judah as well as Israel, taking even more from Ahaz. The Chronicler summarizes:

At that time King Ahaz sent to the king of Assyria for help... So Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came...but it did not help him (2 Chron. 28:16,10-21).

Instead of turning to God, Ahaz mimicked the worship of his captors, becoming less faithful to God and shutting the doors to temple worship.<sup>11</sup> In the international arena, T-P was running unchecked. Archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions from T-P's records that allow a good reconstruction of his expansionism.

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<sup>10</sup> Aharoni at 369.

<sup>11</sup> The prophet Isaiah spoke bluntly to Ahaz about his mistake. Ahaz was warned that his real problem was not Pekah or Rezin. Assyria was the real concern! Ahaz gave Isaiah the brush-off. When Isaiah urged Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign, Ahaz mumbled an excuse of not wanting to put the Lord to the test. Isaiah then proclaimed a great prophecy of the Messiah Immanuel as a sign the Lord would give of his own initiative (Isa. 7).



Back in Israel and Damascus, the anti-Assyrian coalition crumbled. T-P destroyed Damascus in 732 BC, and dissolved Syria, transplanting its citizens elsewhere. T-P also credits himself with removing Pekah from the throne and replacing him with Israel's last king Hoshea.

### ***Military Strength***

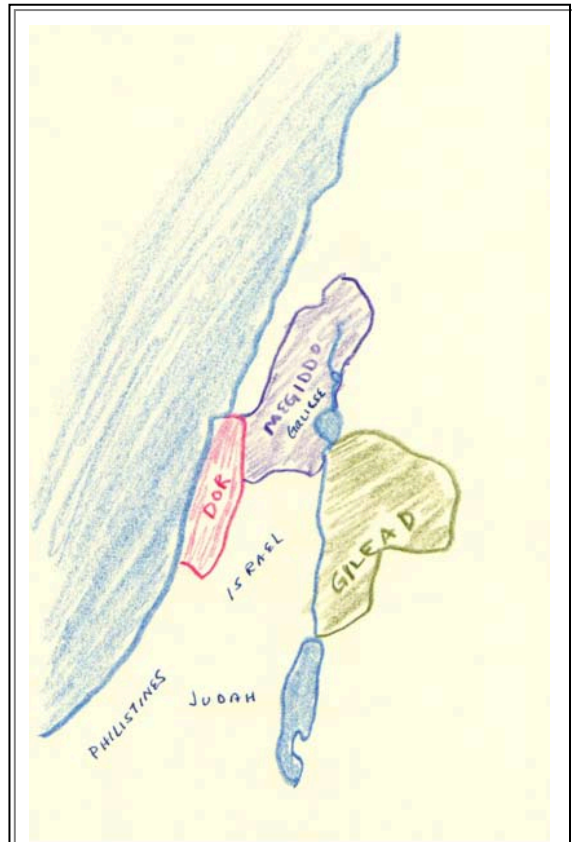
The military might of T-P and the Assyrian empire far outweighed the strength of Israel, Judah, Syria, or any combination of the three. T-P was able to draw from a vast network of cities and compose an army that went forward with campaigns almost every year of his near twenty-year reign. T-P's record keepers recorded these campaigns and archaeologists have many of the records available for study today.

These records reconstruct T-P's successful marches against Babylon and the Chaldean chiefs to the southeast, Urartu to the northeast, the Syro-Hittite states to the west, as well as his success against Damascus, Israel, and Judah to the south. In modern parlance, T-P took his kingdom from the north of Iraq, conquering the rest of Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and much of Turkey. Israel was no match for this army or empire.

In conclusion, from a secular perspective, Israel was battling limitations of the land of Israel, both geographically and geologically. Israel was torn internally, and it was victim to a massive superpower bent on expansion from the north. A secular perspective explains the fall of Israel quite reasonably. The perspective of faith, however, shows something greater at work. It is to this perspective we now turn.

### **THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH**

Scripture, through the voices of the prophets,



When T-P first conquered northern portions of Israel, he divided his new territories into three provinces. The province that was the way to the sea he called "Dor." The northernmost province including Galilee he called "Megiddo." The province east of the Jordan was called "Gilead." These provinces are referred to in Isaiah 9 as land that "in the latter time" God would make glorious. Isaiah called the three provinces, "the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations" (Isa. 9:1).

directly relates the political fall of Israel to the spiritual fall of Israel. This was not simply “Monday morning quarterbacking.” Back during the reign of Jeroboam II, while Assyria was struggling with internal issues and Israel was expanding and prospering like never before, Amos had predicted the coming cataclysm. Set against the prosperity of Israel, the unfairness of her treatment of the poorer segments of society, and the injustice of her courts, Amos delivered the warning of the Lord:

Seek the LORD and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, **O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!** (Amos 5:6-7).

The Israelites were urged to change their course:

Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; **it may be that** the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:14-15).

Failure to do so was foretold to bring the final deportation to the northern empire beyond Damascus:

“Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream... I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts (Amos 5:23-27).

Amos even specified that the wealthy scions of the land would head first into exile:

"Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away." (Amos 6:4-7).

Into this same period, God sent the prophet Hosea, with his difficult life giving meaning and a message to Israel. Hosea was told by God to take “a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom” (Hos. 1:2). Hosea married the adulterous Gomer and their first child was named “Jezreel,” the name of the town where Jehu slew Israel and Judah’s king along with other royal family members. This name prophesied God putting an end to the kingdom of Israel (Hos. 1:4).

The second child was named “Lo-Ruhamah,” which meant “no mercy.” This was because the time was coming where God would “no longer have mercy on the house of Israel” (Hos. 1:6).

Hosea’s life was a prophetic parallel to the nation of Israel. When Israel entered into the Sinai covenant, the process was one akin to marriage. The procedure itself mimicked the process of a marriage in that day. The people were the bride and Yahweh was the Bridegroom. The covenant was “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7). In a sense God was actually doing the very thing illustrated in the home life of Hosea. With God’s instruction to “take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom” came the reason, “for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hos. 1:2). God was taking a people with an adulterous heart who would persistently desert him for other lovers. The Israelites started such adultery with the golden calf while Moses was on Sinai and it persisted on and off throughout Israel’s existence.

The people abused God and his gifts as an adulterous wife does her husband.

Hosea explained,

Plead with your mother...that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst. Upon her children also I will have no mercy, because they are children of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully (Hos. 2:2-5).

In Hosea chapter three, God instructs Hosea to return to Gomer and love her in spite of her adultery and prostitution, just as God loves Israel in spite of her rampant and adulterous idolatry. Chapters four through eight illustrate the depths of God’s love that it continued even through Israel’s sin, where there was,

...no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land (Hos. 4:1).

Instead there was,

...swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; [while] they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed (Hos. 4:2).

Hosea echoed Amos’s dire prediction,

They shall not remain in the land of the LORD...they shall eat unclean food in Assyria... My God will reject them because they have not listened to him; they shall be wanderers among the nations (Hos. 9:3, 17).

Hosea's cry was a warning, one that Israel ignored to its own detriment. The last verse of Hosea contains the prophet's final plea,

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them (Hos. 14:9).

The Prophet Historian who wrote up the Kings accounting of Israel's fall, set out the same insight,

And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." (2 Kings 17:7-12).

Kings emphasized that Israel was not without warning. God did not sneak judgment upon them. He had sent Amos, Hosea, and the like:

Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." (2 Kings 17:13).

Israel's reaction was not what it should have been. Rather than turning from sin, Israel turned deeper into sin.

But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves

to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger (2 Kings 17:14-17).

This is what brought the judgment of the Lord and the fall of Israel:

Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only (2 Kings 17:18).

## CONCLUSION

One can look at the fall of Israel and see in it a purely secular explanation. Assyria was stronger, was seeking to expand, and Israel made some stupid political mistakes, aligning itself with Syria in rebellion. With Tiglath-Pileser III seeking to expand, making war his annual springtime hobby, what chance did the small bridge of Israel have? Much like the baseball homerun, there are simple facts present which can be seen to dictate the results.

Yet the spiritual truth is much more profound, and adds a dimension through faith that should speak to us today. God constantly works through the world as he works in the world. Our tendency is to credit God simply in those areas where we have gaps of knowledge and an inability to offer any other explanation. This is a tragic view as not only setting faith to disappear (when and if the knowledge gap is closed through new understanding), but also in failing to see God's hand in weaving the fabric of everyday life. When Jesus urged us to pray daily for God to give us bread, he was not suggesting that a loaf would magically appear out of nowhere on our porch each morning. The prayer conveys, at least typically, that God will work in and through the world to bring forth the bread needed and prayed for.

This is not to say God cannot work miraculously apart from the explanations of the physical laws of the universe. Certainly, the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ speak to this (as does the raising of Lazarus, the feeding of the 5,000, etc.). Yet we must recognize the hand of God when events unfold in certain ways in fulfillment of his will and word.

This certainly raises difficult ideas that move one to contemplate the majesty and mysteries of God. Does this mean that history unfolds differently if Israel had turned from their sin and lived rightly before God? Would the Assyrian map simply expand all around Israel? Would all of history be different and T-P lose his power before deporting the Israelites? These questions we cannot answer, and to some degree are moot. Our response is fairly simple. We are to live right before God, trusting him with the consequences. We set one foot in front of the other, seeking his will on earth as it is in heaven. In this walk, as we acknowledge him, we trust him to make our paths straight.

Next week, we resume our study on the Fall of Israel with a focus on the effects on Judah and the words of the prophet Isaiah.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“In the time of his distress he became more faithless to the LORD”* (2 Chron. 28:22).

Troubles and tribulations play an interesting number on our psyche. It drives some to their knees seeking divine intervention and aid. It sends others into a faithless plunge, seeing God as an absent landlord at best, or even a non-entity, pushing desperate people to do desperate things. What of you and me? Do we see the hand of God at work in the good times and the bad? Do we find in our troubles an opportunity to call out to God for rescue? If the rescue does not seem to come forth, do we deny him, do we blame him, or do we seek his strength to walk through the difficulties?

This world is not god, and it is not a friend to God’s people. It is a struggle on both a physical and a spiritual level. We struggle to take care of our families, to rear our children, to love our neighbor, to honor God, and to walk holy in his sight. All of these struggles need to move us to greater dependency upon God and greater faithfulness to his Word. It is there that we will find his plan unfolding with our fulfilling our role. Then we live in the peace that passes understanding, knowing, as Paul did in his imprisonment, that God is at work within us to his purposes. Those purposes came to fruition through the sacrifice of his Son. This gives us confidence that he will do whatever is necessary, pay whatever price, to ensure that we are held tightly in his presence for eternity! With that assurance, let the world and its problems drive us deeper into the God who is beyond this world!

2. *“Israel had sinned against the LORD their God...and had feared other gods”* (2 Kings 17:7).

There are some wonderful facsimile makers in London who have produced forgery quality facsimiles in place in many museums around the world. When I met this wonderful husband and wife in their home for breakfast, I was shown many of the treasures they have placed in some of the world’s top museums. These copies are stamped as such because they are so precise that only destructive testing would reveal them as copies. The lawyer in me would call these “master forgeries,” except that they are not passed off as originals. I asked the couple whether or not they could counterfeit a \$20 bill effectively. Their response was,

“We can make you all of those you want! But they will run you 25 dollars a piece!”

Of course, that would be a nonsense deal! Who would trade 25 dollars for a twenty-dollar bill? As bizarre as it sounds, that is very much what Israel did. They traded the God for gods. The Creator was replaced by gods of their own creation.

Most of us would quickly point out that we have no idols we worship over God. Yet we are making a mistake if we think that we need a golden calf before something qualifies as an idol. Paul wrote to the Philippians about those whose “end is destruction, *their god is their belly*, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). We make an idol of anything we put in priority over God. If we set our minds and hearts on things of this earth as our ultimate drive, goal, motivation, or purpose, then we have set up the creation as our gods rather than the God of creation.

Let us examine our lives carefully, scrutinizing our priorities and choices under the lens of the cross. Does anything mean more to us than following Jesus and serving the Father in life and death? If it does, we need to prayerfully confess such and lay it out before the Father, turning to him in love and service. This brings us into the plans of the one true God, which is where we want to be! After all, who wants to spend 25 dollars to get a 20-dollar bill?

### 3. “*They went after false idols and became false*” (2 Kings 17:15).

Here the trade off is explained. We become like the gods (or God) we worship. If you want to chase after material things, you will become materialistic. If you value and pursue fame, you will become self-absorbed in your fame you get. If you enjoy the taste of gossip, you will become a gossip in practice. If you willingly thief from others, you become a thief at heart. If you find the possession of knowledge an end in itself, it will become a dead-end.

This is a principle that Jesus explained as he urged his followers to set God as their pre-eminent aim and desire as he urged them to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt. 6:33). He taught for people to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” for this reason! “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:20-21). If you treasure false idols, you will become false!

Our goal needs to be pursuit of God, and other goals need to fall into line in proper priority behind the seeking first of his kingdom and righteousness. Then as we get knowledge, it is wise knowledge that leads to life. Then as we come into possessions, we become stewards administering those possessions for God and his

kingdom. Then as we get notoriety, we hold up God and point any glory to the only one worthy of praise and honor. When faced with sin, we seek the greater joy and life that comes from refusing the fruit of this world and seeking instead the fruit of the Spirit.

### **WANT MORE?**

We continue to work our way through the conquering of Israel, so still time to read up on Tiglath-pileser and Sennacherib! Isaiah is a long book, but consider reading some portions of it. At least work through chapter 7 and consider the Messianic prophecy in the midst of the judgment announced against Israel and Judah!

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