

A Tale of Four Cities Ninevah, Babylon, Thebes and Jerusalem

We've just lived through a period of unbelievable change over the past 20 years. It began with 9/11 and continued through one contested election after another until COVID rewrote how we do almost everything. How do we rebound from changes as rapid and radical as these? How do we theologically reframe hope? We find ourselves longing to go back, but we know that is neither possible nor faithful. We know God is calling us to trust and creatively rebound so we can continue to be God's agents for justice in this world.

You are taking time to learn from Isaiah how they struggled to remain faithful through a time much like our own. This handout provides you with some historical background to the radical and rapid changes in the geopolitical world of the book of Isaiah.

The last great period of the Assyrian Empire lasted for almost 300 years! (@900 – 605BCE) For our purposes in this course on Isaiah, I'll focus on just several periods during these 300 years of domination of the Near East.

In 734BCE, King Hoshea of Israel (remember this was the Northern Kingdom comprised of 10 tribes of Israelites) and the King of Damascus declared war on King Ahaz of Judah (remember this was the southern kingdom comprised of 2 tribes, and included Jerusalem, Solomon's temple, and the Davidic dynasty) because he refused to join their rebellion against Assyria. Despite 1st Isaiah's strong warning not to ally himself with the Assyrians (and their foreign gods) and his promise that God can be trusted to deliver on God's promises to God's covenant people, King Ahaz called on Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria to help him defeat Israel and Damascus.

Tiglath Pileser III was only too happy to come to King Ahaz' aid. He completely destroyed the kingdom of Damascus, and reduced Israel to a small territory surrounding the capital, Samaria. The rest of Israel was divided up into 3 Assyrian provinces, ruled by Assyrian governors. King Ahaz was required to pay annual tribute to Assyria, and pledge complete loyalty to its king.

Chapters 6-11 of Isaiah cover this period of time. Reread them with this history now in mind. What do you think of Ahaz' solution?

In 722BCE, during a transition between the reign of Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, King Hoshea of Israel revolted yet again, leading to the final destruction of Samaria and the end of Israel. The elites were carried off, never to return. In their place, the Assyrians brought in conquered peoples from other lands, as was their custom. Over the following centuries those remaining Israelites and their new neighbors intermarried and came to be known as the Samaritans! You will meet them in the Gospels.

We have no oracles preserved in 1st Isaiah of the final fall of the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722BCE. It is not until the reign of Ahaz' son, King Hezekiah, that Isaiah once again gets involved in geo-politics. King Hezekiah decided to free himself from paying tribute to Assyria by

revolting. He timed it to fit the coming to power of the Assyrian King Sennacherib. It was during his reign that the capital of Assyria was moved to Ninevah, where it would remain until the Babylonians conquered it. After several years of securing the eastern frontiers of the Assyrian Empire, Sennacherib moved west with his army and destroyed almost every city of Judah, including the well documented destruction of Lachish in 701BCE. However he was unable to capture Jerusalem, and returned home to Ninevah after a failed siege. But Hezekiah was forced to pay a large sum of money to keep Assyria from attacking again, and of course most of his country was in ruins.

Despite this, King Hezekiah felt it was an answer to his prayers to God, and Isaiah 36-37 recounts how the prophet boldly declared that Jerusalem would be miraculously spared through the intervention of God. This reinforced what I term “rabbit’s foot theology.” By that I mean the people of Judah, based on the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the war in 734BCE and now again in 701BCE, learned the wrong lesson! They came to believe that the reason they were spared was due to Solomon’s temple, God’s footstool! Jerusalem would never fall as long as they kept that temple going, and followed all the proper worship laws. They coupled that idea with the cherished promise to King David that his dynasty would always have an heir on the throne in Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 7:1-17) Sadly, they turned a deaf ear to Isaiah’s strong words regarding personal ethics, rulers who were honest and practiced justice, and the treatment of the poor, powerless, widows, orphans and immigrants. As long as they kept worship going strong, the way it always was and should be done, the rest of their lives were theirs to do as they pleased with. (For a detailed look at the prophetic call for justice, check out my handout titled *Worship Prophetic Style*.)

Assyria kept on expanding, conquering Egypt in 671BCE. Ashurbanipal assumed the throne in 668BCE and ruled over 40 years until 627BCE. During the last years of his reign, Ashurbanipal collected ancient epics and myths of the middle east, particularly from Babylon, and housed them in his new library. Over 30,000 clay tablets were discovered in the mid 19th century, and can be found in the British Museum, the most famous of which is the Epic of Gilgamesh. Scholars to this day use this material in comparative study of the Biblical book of Genesis.

Who could have imagined that after 300 years of Assyrian domination, it would be gone in about 20 years? (*Remember the 20 year time span I asked you to think about at the beginning of this handout?*) Who could have imagined that instead of paying taxes to Assyria, the people of Judah would be carried off into exile by the Babylonians? The book of Isaiah doesn’t contain oracles from this period, but the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel do.

What follows is a brief summary of the end of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Babylonian Empire.

In 626BCE King Nabopolassar defeated the Assyrians and declared Babylon’s independence. Despite repeated attempts by the Assyrians to oust him, King Nabopolassar remained in control of Babylon. It was during this period that King Josiah of Judah decided to revolt, reform Judah,

and unite the northern parts of what had been Israel into one country again, with Jerusalem as its capitol. Assyria was too busy elsewhere to pay Josiah any attention.

In 612BCE, the Babylonians and Medes joined forces and conquered Ninevah. The Assyrian army fled west to Haran, while an Egyptian army was stationed at Carchemish. In 610BCE the Babylonians and Medes captured Haran and the Assyrians fled across the Euphrates river and joined forces with the Egyptians.

The Egyptians, under Pharaoh Neco II decided to help prop up what was left of the Assyrian empire to serve as a buffer between Egypt and the new powerful coalition of the Babylonians and Medes. In 609BCE Josiah decided to throw his lot in with the Babylonians and Medes, and attacked Pharaoh Neco II as he brought another Egyptian army north to reinforce the one already in Carchemish. He was killed and his newly reunited Israel became a vassal of Egypt. This came as a shock to the Israelites, who assumed that since he had cleaned up the mess left by his father Amon, and purified worship in Solomon's temple, he would of course be victorious in battle.

Pharaoh Neco II's armies, along with what was left of the Assyrian army, attempted to recapture Haran. The Babylonians and Medes soundly defeated them, which ended forever the Assyrian Empire. Pharaoh Neco II retreated back Egypt, and gave up Egypt's claims on Mesopotamia. He remained in control of Palestine, however.

For several more years King Nabopolassar consolidated his control in the east, but by 605BCE his son, now King Nebuchadnezzar, was ready to challenge Egypt's claim on Palestine. The Babylonians attacked the Egyptian army stationed at Carchemish and utterly defeated them. The way south through Palestine to Egypt lay open, and King Nebuchadnezzar would not delay long in marching against Egypt itself.

Unlike Isaiah before him, Jeremiah counseled King Jehoiakim of Judah to surrender to the approaching Babylonians, since God was using them to punish his covenant people. Jehoiakim refused his advice, rebelled, and was crushed by King Nebuchadnezzar. In 597BCE and again in 587BCE, a sizeable portion of the population was taken into exile in Babylon. It is here we will meet 2nd Isaiah.

2nd Isaiah will declare God is faithful and free to do a new thing. There will be a new Exodus back to a new creation.