

Searching For Israel (Part Six): Israel Is Fallen, Is Fallen

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, September-October 2004

*"Woe to you who put far off the day of doom,
who can cause the seat of violence to come near; . . .
Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives."
— Amos 6:3, 7*

The Ephraimite Jeroboam, as Part Five explained, led a successful tax-revolt against Solomon's son, Rehoboam. The result was a division of Solomon's kingdom into two nations. Judah, Benjamin, and Levi remained under the control of the Davidic monarchy, under the aegis of Rehoboam. The remaining ten tribes, situated north of Judah, formed a second kingdom under Jeroboam, the Kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam, in an effort to bolster his power over the northern tribes, instituted religious changes which "became a sin" (I Kings 12:30) for Israel.

»Fearing that he could eventually lose control over the people as they journeyed to Jerusalem for religious festivals, he built two shrines, one in the southern region of his kingdom, Bethel, and the other in Dan, near its northern boundary. He put golden calves in both sites, asserting, "Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (I Kings 12:28).

»He changed the fall festival season from the seventh month, Tishri (see Leviticus 23:33-43), to the eighth (I Kings 12:33).

»He "made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi" (I Kings 12:31). Since the Levites had no land as a part of their inheritance (see Joshua 13:33), they migrated south to the kingdom of Judah, where they served in the Temple. The dearth of priests in the north was filled by people who were not Levites.

Jeroboam intended to build his own "designer religion" from the ground up, complete with its own traditions and shrines. He was astute enough to grasp the importance of establishing a priesthood loyal to the government.

"And this thing was the sin of the house of Jeroboam, so as to exterminate and destroy it from the face of the earth" (I Kings 13:34). Because of his refusal to obey God, Jeroboam never realized the conditional promise God made him in I Kings 11:38: "I will be with you and build for you an enduring house, as I built for David." Jeroboam's son and heir, Nadab, died by assassination after only two years of rule, and Baasha from the tribe of Issachar took the throne of Israel and slaughtered all of Jeroboam's progeny (I Kings 15:25-30).

The Sin of Jeroboam

The results of Jeroboam's apostasy from the true God involved more than just his immediate family, however. II Kings 17:22 states the reason: "The children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam;

. . . they did not depart from them." Subsequent kings of the northern kingdom *never* departed from his apostasy, never sought to correct his errors. "Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight" (verse 18).

II Kings 17:7-17 catalogs the sins of Israel:

» **Widespread idolatry.** Israel "feared other gods" (verse 7). "They built for themselves high places in all their cities . . . They set up for themselves sacred pillars and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree; and there they burned incense on all the high places, as the nations had done whom the Lord had carried away before them." (verses 9-11). Further, they "followed idols, became idolaters, and . . . made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal" (verses 15-16).

» **Pagan Religious Practices.** The Israelites "caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger" (verse 17).

» **Rejection of God's Law.** Israel "walked in the statutes of the nations whom the Lord had cast out from before the children of Israel." (verse 8). Verse 15 points out that the people "rejected [God's] statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them." The prophet Amos particularizes the epidemic of social injustice in the Kingdom of Israel. As an example, notice Amos 2:6-7, where Amos chides the Israelites: ". . . because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble." The Israelites displayed a pandemic failure to love their fellow man

II Kings 17:5-6 relates the ultimate consequence.

Now the king of Assyria went throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria and besieged it for three years. . . . The king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

Assyria, a kingdom known as much for its innovative weapons as for their brutal implementation, conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 718 BC. So it was that, about 250 years after it was established, the ten-tribed northern kingdom became extinct as a sovereign nation. The Assyrians deported the population *en masse* from its homeland in Canaan, transplanting it virtually *in toto* to the southern shores of the Caspian Sea.¹ The Kingdom of Israel fell below the historians' radar.

The Fall of Judah

Jeremiah 3:7-10 states God's view of the Kingdom of Judah by comparing it to the Kingdom of Israel. God told the peoples of the northern kingdom, Israel, "Return to Me." God continues,

But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went

and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense.

Because the Kingdom of Judah had seen the results of Israel's idolatry—had witnessed the catastrophe of her fall and mass deportation, but had refused to repent—God judges that "backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah" (verse 11).

God, through a number of prophets, warns Judah not to follow Israel's course. For example, Hosea, using harlotry as an analogy for idolatry, pleads, "Though you, Israel, play the harlot, let not Judah offend" (Hosea 4:15).

With a few exceptions, notably Hezekiah and Josiah, the kings of Judah were more corrupt than their counterparts in the north. Israel set the pace into idolatry, and Judah enthusiastically followed. "Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity; Judah also stumbles with them" (Hosea 5:5).

II Kings 23:26-27 indicates the results of Judah's sin:

Nevertheless the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath, with which His anger was aroused against Judah. . . . And the Lord said, " I will also remove Judah from My sight, as I have removed Israel, and will cast off this city Jerusalem which I have chosen, and the house of which I said, 'My name shall be there.'"

In the nineteen years between 604 and 585 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the same Babylonian king who later came to realize God's place in history,² carried the population of Judah to Babylon. In the first wave of deportation, he took the military officers, craftsmen, smiths, and other skilled workers, leaving only "the poorest people of the land" (II Kings 24:14). Later, because of continuing conspiracies against him, he totally destroyed Jerusalem, Temple and all, and "carried away captive the rest of the people" (II Kings 25:11). What Assyria had done to Israel 233 years earlier, Babylonia did to Judah in and around 585 BC: "Those [of Judah] who escaped from the sword [Nebuchadnezzar] carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia" (II Chronicles 36:20).

As national entities, Israel and Judah are extinct, their peoples, as punishment for their inveterate apostasy from God's law, subject to Gentile rulers. However, this double fall of the children of Israel, a crisis of affairs indeed, does not mean God reneged on His promises to the patriarchs. Nor does this situation mean that the blessings the patriarchs in faith bestowed on their sons are meaningless poetry. It does mean that God carried out His promise to the children of Israel as outlined beginning in Leviticus 26:14. There, God promises that *if* the people "do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments," He would punish them with "terror," "wasting disease," famine, military defeat, and scattering "among the nations."

But how long would they be punished? God tells us exactly how long! Next month, we will discuss a remarkable search criterion that indicates the time when the punishment will end. Combined with all the other criteria we have identified, this one will point to the precise whereabouts of Israel today.

[to be continued]

Endnotes

¹ The Assyrians exhibited a deep paranoia of what in international relations is called *irredentism*. Irredentism is a resolute policy adopted by a people to regain lands taken from them by a conqueror. Irredentists seek to restore to their own control lands taken from them. The Assyrians saw irredentism as a historical cycle and feared that it would overtake them with a vengeance. In consequence, they developed a national strategy designed to protect them from the nations they vanquished and to ensure stability, if not perpetuity, to their empire.

That strategy is as well documented as it was ruthless: *Destroy the national identity of all vanquished people*. The Assyrians, therefore, played musical chairs with the populations they conquered—deporting them from their homeland *en masse*. The strategy also called for "encouraging" conquered folk to abandon their language and their religion. The long-term effect, the Assyrians reasoned, would be the protection of their empire from later reprisals. After all, a conquered people could not seek to regain past national glories if they had forgotten what those glories were!

Modern examples of irredentist policies are those of Nazi Germany, which developed a war machine in part to regain German territories claimed by the French after World War I. The current policies of the Palestinian Liberation Organization *vis-?-vis* the State of Israel are, clearly, irredentist.

² See Daniel 4:34-37.

Inset:

Where Did the Jews Live — Up No rth or Down South?

II Kings 16:1-6 briefly summarizes one of the many wars between the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel to its north. Appearing in this passage is the first occurrence of the word *Jew* in God's Word.

In the seventeenth year of Pekah, . . . Ahaz, . . . king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz . . . did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God. . . . Then Rezin king of Syria and Pekah, . . . king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to make war; and they besieged Ahaz but could not overcome him. At that time Rezin king of Syria captured Elath for Syria, and drove the men of Judah from Elath.

The King James Version translates "men of Judah" with the single word *Jews*. During the military campaign outlined above, the Syrians captured the port city of Elath from Judah, driving the Jews out.

The term *Jew* usually refers to a person from the tribe of Judah. In fact, *Jew* is a shortened, or what semanticists call a "clipped," form of the word *Judah*. Strictly speaking, a Jew is genetically a member of the tribe of Judah; that is, the term *Jew* refers to a *person* who has descended from Jacob's son, Judah. The Jews make up one tribe of the children of Israel, the tribe of Judah, whose homeland was in the southern part of Canaan. The Jews, then, form only a subset of a much larger group of people, the children of Israel.

Of course, the Kingdom of Judah had in it individuals descended from the tribes Judah, Levi, and Benjamin. Today, Jews (for the most part) do not differentiate between these three tribes. A modern Jew, more likely than not, is descended from the tribe of Judah *or* the tribe of Benjamin *or* the tribe Levi—few, if any, know specifically from which tribe. Moreover, few even give the matter much thought, so irrelevant today have the tribes become as social and political entities.

The term *Jew* is **not** interchangeable with the term *Israel*.

There is an important distinction between them. Today, a Jew is an individual descended through one of three tribes. However, the term *Israel* has a number of broader meanings, all derived from the fact that Israel was the name God gave the patriarch Jacob.

»The word *Israel* can refer to a person. When used this way, it refers specifically to the patriarch Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel (see Genesis 32:28).

»The word *Israel* often refers to *all* the descendants of Jacob. Hence, "the children of Israel," a term much used in the Pentateuch, refers to individuals from *all* the tribes—literally, all the descendants of the man Jacob (Israel).

»After the fissure of the Davidic monarchy, the term *Israel* came to have a more specific *national* meaning. Used in this collective sense, *Israel* refers to those Israelites who were citizens of the Kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom.

»Often, the Scriptures use the word *Israel* in a specialized, limited way, where it refers *only* to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob, remember, began his blessing on the two boys with the statement, "Let my name be named upon them" (Genesis 48:16).

These differences are more than "shades of meaning," or nuances. Readers of God's Word need to keep a keen eye on both the words *Jew* and *Israel*, ensuring that they understand their proper meaning in context.