Historical Background of the Time of Isaiah

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Almost one-fifth of Isaiah's chapters and prophecies are directed specifically to foreign nations. (Isa. 13-23, 46-47.) Major sections of other chapters are also set in the historical and sociopolitical context of his age. (Isa. 1-10, 28-39.) In order to understand Isaiah's message to the foreign nations and to Israel and Judah, one must have a basic knowledge of historical events in the eighth century B.C. During Isaiah's ministry, Assyria dominated the Middle East, although Egypt still harbored hopes of regaining previously lost territories and prestige. Assyria During much of its early history, Assyria was controlled by various powers that periodically invaded Mesopotamia, conquered Babylon, and extended their rule over the Assyrian inhabitants. During the years 1300 to 800 B.C., the Assyrian kings engaged in continual struggle to keep their boundaries intact, with the primary military objective of freeing Assyria from foreign domination. This Assyrian preoccupation, coupled with the weakness of Egypt and Babylon, left David and Solomon free to extend their own boundaries and maintain their kingdoms independent of foreign domination. However, with the ascension of Adad-Nirari II (909-899 B.C.) to the Assyrian throne , t h e Assyrians began to expand their territories and annex newly-conquered areas to the Assyrian state. Succeeding kings improved upon this policy, increasing the army's power and reputation and building a vast empire that ruled many peoples with a harshness and terror previously unsurpassed in history. It was the rise of this Assyrian Empire that figures so heavily in the prophecies of Isaiah and the political policies of Israel's neighbors. As the Assyrians, under the new imperialist dynasty, began to take more vigorous military action against the tribes that resisted them, they were able to build up a ring of vassal countries surrounding the Assyrian homeland. Often, princes would free themselves and join in anti-Assyrian ventures. Assyria would then be forced to undertake new campaigns. This brought about the need for a strong standing army, which in turn required civilian and military officials accountable only to the king. The king's powerful army, with its cruel professional soldiers, soon became the dread of the conquered peoples in the Assyrian Empire. In the middle of the ninth century B.C., Shalmaneser III extended Assyria's rule from Urartu (Turkey) to the Persian gulf, and from Media (Iran) to the Syrian coast. When, in 857 B.C., Shalmaneser III captured the city of Carchemish in Syria, the cities to the southwest were alerted to action; the feuding states surrounding Israel and Judah quickly made peace and formed a coalition against the oncoming Assyrians. The armies of Assyria met the armies of this coalition in 853 B.C. at Qarqar, and while this battle is not mentioned in the Bible, Assyrian inscriptions state that King Ahab of Israel was a major participant. The outcome of this battle being indecisive, it led to other unsuccessful Assyrian attacks. These indecisive battles became a thorn in the side of the Assyrians and served as a catalyst for the explosive situation between Assyria and the West during Isaiah's day. Shalmaneser III died in 810 B.C., and the Assyrian Empire entered a dormant period during which the various kingdoms of the western Fertile Crescent gained more and more power and independence. In fact, Jeroboam II (792-747 B.C.) of Israel was able for a short time to expand his rule to encompass both Syrian and Judean territories. Although Assyria lost control of some territories and the taxes from most vassal states, no one directly tried to challenge her power because of her fearsome reputation. The dormant period and years of ineffectual rule ended with a palace revolution just a few years before Isaiah was called as a prophet. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.; called Pul in the Bible) took immediate action to strengthen the empire. Under his able leadership, the Assyrian Empire reached the pinnacle of its power (see Bible Map 5). He developed a new type of imperialistic foreign policy and strengthened royal authority and administration by changing the great Assyrian provinces to small administration districts owing direct allegiance to the king himself. Also, instead of forming a loose vassal relationship with surrounding states, he destroyed, step by step, the political independence of those petty states and incorporated them into the provincial structure of the empire. The process of his conquest is outlined below.

First stage: Pul brought the states to a vassal relationship by demonstrating his military might through harassment and threats. Each vassal state was required to pay an annual tribute and furnish auxiliary troops. This policy was no different from those of Pul's predecessors.

Second stage: When the vassal states revolted or were suspected of plotting against the crown, the Assyrians removed the unfaithful ruler and replaced him, if possible, with someone more loyal from the ruling family. In most instances, Pul reduced the size of the vassal's kingdom and gave it to a more loyal vassal. If necessary, he deported segments of the upper class and other societal leaders to distant parts of the empire. In any case, Pul increased the annual tribute and watched the vassalage more closely.

Third stage: At the slightest sign of further anti-Assyrian activities, the military directly intervened, removing the vassal king, liquidating the political resistance in the nation, and establishing the area as an Assyrian province under the jurisdiction of Assyrian officials. Again, they deported the native upper class and placed a foreign one in its stead.

As Assyrian territory expanded toward Israel and Judah during Isaiah's lifetime, Israel underwent all three stages of conquest while Judah suffered only the first stage, barely escaping the other stages. Since both Israel and Judah had enjoyed great independence during the period of Assyrian dormancy, this encroachment was particularly frustrating and frightening.

Egypt

Egypt was the second major ancient power in the Middle East. Indeed, when Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea, Egypt was the strongest imperial power in the area. Within a couple of centuries, however, the dynasties of the Egyptian New Kingdom period weakened and then finally crumbled. Although the pharaohs of the post-imperial period (1100-700 B.C.) often took forays into Palestine and Syria, Egypt was unable to reassert full control over her former vassals . Egygt's weakness in foreign affairs was due largely to domestic weakness and internal dissension; the Egyptian rulers were unable to control the various provinces that composed the country. Often the provinces remained petty independent states or banded into two larger states, upper and lower Egypt. During Isaiah's youth, while the twenty-second dynasty continued to rule at Tanis-Zoan in the delta area of lower Egypt, a twenty-third dynasty was already establishing a power base in the south, near Thebes. Neither dynasty was able to gain substantial control because of weak leaders, resulting in a civil war centered at Thebes. Hoshea, the last king of Israel, foolishly relied upon one of these weak pharaohs as a source of military aid in his rebellion against powerful Assyrian masters. It is no wonder that help never came to save Samaria from its fall. The short-lived twenty-fourth dynasty (715-709 B.C.) was confined to a single pharaoh, Bocchoris, whose only mark of significance was his codifying of many Egyptian laws. However, during the reign of Bocchoris, a new power entered into Egyptian history, the Ethiopian or Cushite pharaohs. By the middle of the eighth century, these Ethiopian rulers consolidated their rule in their African homelands around the fourth cataract of the Nile and were ready to move north against a weakened Egypt. Although from south of Egyptian Nubia, these Ethiopian pharaohs were thoroughly Egyptian in culture. By 720 B.C., one of these rulers, Piankhy, had already laid claim to Thebes and had taken upper or southern Egypt as a protectorate. He then went north and temporarily subdued lower Egypt to keep Thebes safe from an Egyptian counterattack. As the Assyrian influence expanded into Palestine-Syria and then toward Egypt, the pharaohs only occasionally committed major military forces to resist the Assyrian campaign. They preferred diplomatic intrigue through inciting the weak rulers of Palestine-Syria. As the Assyrians grew in power during Isaiah's ministry, they extended their control over Palestine-Syria to consolidate that area before attacking the real prize, Egypt. In the 730s, Pul of Assyria penetrated as far south as Gaza, and a decade later, Sargon II defeated the Egyptians at Raphia, having already taken Samaria in 721. Egypt, under the weak rulers of the twenty-fifth dynasty, finally took up an aggressive military campaign against the Assyrians. When Sennacherib attacked Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem in 705 B.C., the Ethiopian Pharaoh Shebiku sent his brother Terhakah to oppose Assyria. (See 2 Kgs. 19:9; Isa. 37:9.) It appears that the promise of Egyptian support prompted King Hezekiah of Judah to rebel against the Assyrians. It also appears that the Egyptians were interested only in keeping the Assyrians busy with revolts throughout their empire, thus making it impossible for them to mount a campaign against Egypt. A statement made by one of Sennacherib's generals to the soldiers of Jerusalem sums up both Egypt's perpetual weakness and Hezekiah's folly in relying upon Egyptian strength: he assured the Jews that their reliance upon pharaoh was like trusting a "broken reed" that could only injure him who leaned upon it. (Isa. 36:6.) After Sennacherib's setback at Jerusalem (Isa. 36), he eventually defeated the Egyptian forces at Eltekeh in southern Palestine in 700 B.C. In summary, the Egyptians figured very prominently in Israel's and Judah's history during the ministry of Isaiah. The Egyptian intrigues helped to bring about the downfall of Israel in 721 and greatly threatened Judah's security in 705 B.C. Egypt's greatest weakness always was her own internal disunity. No wonder the Lord counseled Judah not to trust in Egyptian chariots but in the God of Israel, Jehovah. (Isa. 31.) Historical and Religious Setting Isaiah was born about 770 B.C. during the reigns of two strong Israelite kings, Jeroboam II [king of Israel] and Uzziah [king of Judah]. In the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam II was beautifying Samaria and expanding his country's borders and influence to their greatest extent since Solomon's time. Likewise, in the southern kingdom of Judah, Uzziah was serving as Jerusalem's most powerful king since Solomon. This was a time of peace for both kingdoms, since neither Assyria (to the northeast) nor Egypt (to the southwest) had strong rulers who threatened that part of the Middle East [see Bible Map 9 to become familiar with the various nations surrounding Israel and Judah]. Both Israelite countries were becoming more cosmopolitan as increased trade and prosperity improved the wealth of the urban upper classes. Meanwhile, the lower classes and rural dwellers experienced increased taxes, land expropriations, and social inequities. Idolatry and wickedness permeated all social levels. Thus, wealth, social injustices, immorality, and growing pagan worship came to characterize both societies, with the greatest decadence being in Samaria. Israel and Judah During Isaiah's youth and early manhood, the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah was ruled by the strong King Uzziah (also known as Azariah). Uzziah expanded Judah's borders southward and eastward, thus controlling areas of Edom and territories reaching to Elath and the Red Sea. After Uzziah attempted to usurp some priestly functions and was stricken with leprosy (c. 750 B.C.), his son Jotham ruled with him as co-regent. (2 Kgs. 15:5; 2 Chr. 26:21.) In 740 B.C., the year of Uzziah's death, Isaiah received his calling as the Lord's prophet. (Isa. 6.) As can be seen from Uzziah's long reign of over fifty years, Judah experienced strong, stable rule during Isaiah's early life. In the north, political conditions were much more chaotic during this period. At the time of Isaiah's birth, Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom of Israel as the fourth king of Jehu's dynasty and one of Israel's most illustrious rulers. (2 Kgs. 14:23-29.) Because Assyria was preoccupied with other nations, Jeroboam II was able to advance aggressive expansionist policies, thus restoring Israel's boundaries almost to their extent under Solomon. (See Bible Map 4.) Jeroboam ruled for over forty years (787-746 B.C.), including the last ten years of his life, when he ruled as co-regent with his son Zechariah. Six months after Zechariah ascended the Israelite throne in 746, he was murdered by Shallum, who by this act overthrew the Jehu dynasty and fulfilled an earlier prophecy. (2 Kgs. 10:30.) However, Shallum ruled only one month before he was cut down by another usurper, Menahem. Menahem (745-736 B.C.) suppressed several serious revolts against his rule and became a vassal of Pul (Tiglath-Pileser) to strengthen his position. (2 Kgs. 15:19-20.) Menahem's tribute payment to Pul brought Israel into the first stage of vassalage to the Assyrians. This alliance became disastrous for Israel and eventually ended in the complete annexation of Israel to the Assyrian Empire. W ith Menahem's death in 736 B.C., his son Pekahiah ruled and probably continued his father's unpopular policy of submission to Assyria. (2 Kgs. 15:23-26.) In the second year of his reign, Pekahiah was murdered by Pekah, a zealous nationalist. After the ascension of Pekah to the Israelite throne, the Assyrians became much more involved in Israelite politics. Israel's prosperity was threatened by the necessity of increased defense expenditures and tribute payments to Assyria. In order to recover assessments required by the king, the wealthy oppressed the poor even more. For example, consider the dilemma of a struggling rural farmer who found his taxes increased anywhere from one-third to one-half of his produce. This increase, along with additional assessments, was required regardless of good years or bad, rains or drought. Many farmers were forced to sell their lands and to become indentured servants or slaves to the wealthy, who became even more powerful. Religious conditions also deteriorated as pagan worship increased through Assyrian influence and as people became more insensitive to the needy and oppressed among them. Similar economic and religious problems developed in Judah to the south, although they were not as extensive or serious as in Israel. As opposition to Assyria grew in Israel and the surrounding states, Pul of Assyria moved his armies into the area in 734 B.C., plundered the seaports of Phoenicia, and imposed heavy tribute upon some Philistine cities. At this time, Judah was ruled by a young, new king, Ahaz, the son of Jotham. The events in Philistia were very near Judah's border, and Ahaz undoubtedly observed the harsh way in which the Assyrians dealt with opposition. Thus, when Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel attempted to draw Ahaz into an anti-Assyrian coalition, he refused. In 734 B.C., both Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel were under the first stage of Assyrian vassalage. However, for reasons unknown, they felt the time was right to unite in an anti-Assyrian coalition. They strengthened themselves politically and militarily and then attempted by diplomatic means to persuade Ahaz to participate in their coalition. W hen Ahaz refused, they prepared their troops to march against Jerusalem to place a loyal Aramaean upon the throne. Ahaz knew that Jerusalem could not withstand the combined Syrian-Israelite army, since Judah's forces were scattered throughout the country defending the nation against other ambitious neighboring states. (2 Kgs. 16:1, 5-6; 2 Chr. 28.) Against Isaiah's advice, Ahaz sent a contribution to Tiglath-Pileser III and requested Assyrian aid against the Syrian-Israelite coalition. In doing so, Ahaz deliberately moved his nation into the first stage of Assyrian vassalage. Tiglath-Pileser III immediately moved against the anti-Assyrian coalition. Rezin and Pekah were forced to move their troops away from Jerusalem and to fight against Assyria long before they had planned to. As was to be expected, the Assyrian army proved much stronger than their resistance, and it quickly defeated the combined Syrian-Israelite forces; Damascus was taken and its inhabitants deported, and Rezin's officers were impaled on stakes and his gardens were destroyed (a severe punishment for any people living near the desert). In dealing with Syria, Tiglath-Pileser skipped the second stage of vassalage and simply made all of the country into an Assyrian province. Israel, the weaker of the two nations in the coalition, received a much lighter punishment. Tiglath-Pileser appeared in Israel as early as 733 B.C. to annex Galilee and the area east of the Jordan and establish both areas as Assyrian provinces. Here too, he deported the urban upper class of the conquered territories to Assyria. The rural population remained and received a new foreign upper class. Pekah was not replaced, but he soon fell victim to a conspiracy among the ranks of a pro-Assyrian party in Samaria. The leader of this conspiracy was Hoshea, confirmed as Israel's king by his Assyrian overlord. He began his rule in 732 B.C. Assyrian control over Hoshea's ascension constituted the second stage of vassalage for the northern kingdom.