

63: The People of God and the Other Nations

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Introduction

Today, as you see from the title, we are going to look into the background of the other kingdoms that surrounded Judah.

Now, one of the reasons why we feel it's good to give more background to the kingdoms that were surrounding Israel and Judah during this time is because it helps to understand why the people of God reacted the way they did. It also helps to understand what God was doing and why. When we studied about Abraham, we studied a bit about Sumer; when we studied about Moses and Joseph and so forth, we studied a bit about Egypt. Now we're in the period of the prophets, and so we need to know a bit about Assyria and Babylonia and Persia. What on earth was the situation in those areas, and why did they come to such prominence at the time that they did?

Before we go into that, one of the major missiological questions that we need to consider is, What was God thinking about it? What was God's plan, for instance, for the deportation of the children of Israel? What was His plan when they went into Egypt and then fell into captivity in Egypt? Did God have a plan? When they went to Babylon, was it only that they would be punished? Or did He intend them to be missionaries there, like He intended Jonah to go as a missionary? Was the book of Jonah not just a sample of one individual whom God was dealing with? Was it a sample, for instance, of a nation that He was trying to do the same thing to? So what does this mean for us today?

Those of you who have taken the Perspectives course will remember in the historical section we spoke about the "Go-Come Mechanism" of missions. That means that down throughout the whole Bible, you have the sense of God sending people, and also bringing people back to where His people are resident, where the gospel is resident. But in both cases, they go, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes kicking and screaming like Jonah did. Sometimes the people who did not know God came voluntarily, like the Queen of Sheba. Or they would come involuntarily, like the people who are coming to our country today as refugees. This is true also in the time of the Bible, and it is

particularly noticeable when we get to the period of the prophets. When God sent off His people into Babylon—did He expect them to be a witness? Do we have any evidence of that in the Bible?

Let's study a little bit about what the Assyrians were like, because they were the first great empire that we hear about in this period of time. There had been other empires: the Hittite empire and, of course, we know about the Egyptian empire. The Hittites, interestingly enough, we knew very little about until some 50 years ago, when suddenly they discovered a whole library of clay tablets up in Ecbatana. They began investigating, and realized that the Hittites were a massive empire at one period of history. But about 1200 BC, they just disappeared. Disappeared! And we don't know for sure whether it was because of the sea peoples (the Phoenicians) who destroyed them, or who destroyed them. But they were gone.

After that, possibly because they were now gone and were not a force to contend with, the Assyrians began to rise. They had been mainly farmers first; you know, not well-educated. But they began to rise, began to send some of their people down to Babylonia to learn how to read and write, and they picked up some of their skills of carving. One of the things that we know the Assyrian empire for is their massive carvings—beautifully done, but quite often very vicious.

We catch the names of several Assyrian kings in the Bible. We mainly know about Shalmaneser, for example, because he was the one that invaded Israel and carried the Israelis off into essential oblivion (2 Kings 17:3-7). And Sennacherib was the one who came against Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18.

One of the things that was fascinating to me about the Assyrians was that, by this time, they had become quite an advanced civilization. They not only had a strong military might. They also had devised a new kind of warfare, you might say. They were the ones who decided that chariots were not the best way to go about fighting; instead they had cavalry. They got rid of the chariots and fought from off the horses themselves. It was much faster.

They were the ones who decided that you could divert rivers, and change the course of a war by just digging. In a major river they had, they

decided to dig a number of little channels so that the water would be shallow and they wouldn't have any trouble crossing it. That same idea has been used many times since then, most recently perhaps during the Civil War by the Northern general Grant who was besieging Vicksburg.

The Assyrians also had these siege machines that were double-deckers, so that on the one level they would be ramming the gate, but on the upper level they would be shooting arrows with fire that would catch buildings on fire. The Assyrians were the ones who first built huge earthen ramps leading up to the gates of the city they were besieging. Because of these ramps, they were able to get so close to the walls that their infantry was able to shoot the people defending the walls while their siege machines were ramming the gates below. It was very rare that any city would be able to withstand such a siege for more than just a few months. Incredibly, Israel's capital, Samaria, was able to withstand the Assyrian siege for three years. But it was very difficult.

The Assyrian armies also used inflated goat skins to cross rivers when they needed to. They would get underneath the water and not be seen as an army crossing because of the goat skins that they would get under.

But the main thing that we remember about the Assyrians was that they used terror as a means of controlling the people. Like we heard before, they would skin people alive. Fifteen hundred corpses were found buried outside the city of Lachish, which was a Judean city that they had conquered. By the time they came to the area of the major capitals, they had already destroyed the minor cities of the country they wished to conquer.

When Sennacherib was besieging Jerusalem, Hezekiah went to prayer. This is one of the stories that is told in three different places: in Kings (1 Kings 18:13 - 19:36), in Chronicles (2 Chron 32:1-22), and in the book of Isaiah (chapters 36 and 37). You don't have a lot of stories in the book of Isaiah, but this is very prominent, because God delivered Jerusalem in a way that was just incredible. Usually, after a siege of maybe three months, the city would capitulate. It reminds you of Hitler in the Second World War, where all he had to do essentially was to call the bluff of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland—and they would overnight give up.

Sennacherib tried the same tactic. But after Hezekiah's prayer, God sent his angel to destroy 185,000 of the Assyrian troops overnight, and the army departed in terror. In his own (secular) records, Sennacherib said he shut up the king of Judah in a cage like a bird, but he never claimed to

have conquered him. Jerusalem was one of the few places that he didn't conquer.

The Assyrians were also great builders. When Sennacherib went back home, he started massive building projects using the people that he had taken captive from Israel to build beautiful parks, massive buildings, and to make all those beautiful carvings. One of the things that the Assyrians did also—I didn't realize this started that early—they paved roads all over the empire so that if one of the king's officials needed to inform him of a rebellion in the making, he could get to him within a matter of a few days, and the rebellion would be squelched. To pave roads for this purpose was very common among the Romans later on; but the pattern started away back in 600 BC with Assyria.

You will remember that in 2 Kings 17:24-35, the Bible speaks of Shalmaneser bringing in other peoples from other places he had conquered, and settling them in Israel, in Samaria. These people became what we know in the New Testament as Samaritans. One of the synonyms that they used for them is the *Amhararis*. After they were forcibly resettled in Israel and other areas, the people began to feel that they were being attacked by the many lions in the area because they didn't worship the god of the land. So they sent away and asked the king for some of the Israeli priests to be sent to them to teach them how to properly worship the gods of this land. Shalmaneser sent them one priest, who began to instruct them. But they mixed their own pagan worship with the worship of the God of Israel. Also the Israelites who had been left in the land began more and more to intermarry with these other peoples, and the result was the group of people known in the New Testament as the Samaritans.

The theology of the Samaritans was, of course, considered very heretical, especially by the people down in Judea. This is why, when Jesus came to Judea from Galilee with his 12 disciples, all of whom except Judas Iscariot were from Galilee, the leaders in Judea didn't respect them. They were not Samaritans, yet because they came from the wrong place—north of where the Samaritans lived, and far removed from southern Judea—they were “tainted.” You might say that to come from Galilee caused trouble for Jesus. But He deliberately chose to come from there. Remember, that Isaiah 9 speaks of “the land that has sat in darkness has seen a great light”—the land of Naphtali. Way back in the time of Isaiah, God purposed to bring the light back to the Children of Israel who were not yet taken away into captivity, but who had forsaken the worship of God for a number of generations.

Let's go on, then, to the Babylonian Empire. They were much less cruel than the Assyrian Empire. In fact, when we speak of the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians, we need to recognize that each succeeding empire seemed to be kinder than the one which preceded it. It's almost as if God said, "I will not tolerate this kind of cruelty," and sent another empire to destroy the one which was so cruel.

You see this kind of thing again when we come later to the Aztecs, and then also, in our own day, to Hitler and the Nazis. If they're extremely cruel people, their kingdom does not last very long; partly because the minute somebody important dies, the people rise up in rebellion and try to take over—and do.

This is what happened with Babylon. Babylon had been a major empire before and had gone under; and now, when Sennacherib and the ones who immediately followed him died, the people in Babylon—the Medes and the Babylonians—rose up and conquered Assyria. Here you have this massive war machine; and within three months Nineveh was destroyed. At that time Nineveh had a very large library. It was all destroyed.

Well, the Babylonians were not faint, either, as we know from Scripture. But instead of slaughtering people wholesale, like the Assyrians had, they deported a lot of them. In fact, in the first major deportation of Nebuchadnezzar, they took away, in 597 BC, ten thousand of the leading citizens of Jerusalem. I'm sure you remember that Daniel was one of the princes of the kingdom; in the first deportation, a lot of those carried off to Babylon were of royal blood. But the fact that he put some of them into positions of authority was a sort of a pacifying thing to do. If you give the people a little bit of authority, a little bit of prestige, they're less likely to rebel. He had a certain amount of wisdom in that.

Nebuchadnezzar himself was a very superstitious kind of guy; he had all sorts of fears, that if he didn't do this for one god and didn't do this for the other god something terrible would happen to him. I guess he had some reason to have those fears. But nevertheless, his rule over the people and his methods of doing warfare, though brutal, were not nearly so brutal as those of the Assyrians. The reason why Scripture speaks a lot of the Chaldeans and the Babylonians (more or less interchangeable terms) is because the Scripture by that time reflected only Judah; the people in Israel had already been carried away. Remember that Judah—at least its seat of government and its king—was not captured by the Assyrians. They

were carried away by the Babylonians. So you have that as the emphasis there.

Very interestingly, when the Babylonians took over Assyria, the Medes had helped the Babylonians. But when Babylon had risen to its height, Nebuchadnezzar was now dead; Nabopolassar who followed him had died, while he was out on a campaign. Belshazzar, his son, you know, saw the writing on the wall which Daniel interpreted. This period of time was a period of unrest, but not nearly as much as it had been before. Cyrus was just a nobody from nowhere, you might say, when he was growing up out there and decided to start moving.

The Persians at that point were under Median influence; and the Medes were under Babylonian influence. But when the Medes and the Persians got together and came into Babylon, it was one of those things that could not have been expected. They were not, you would think, technically strong enough. But Cyrus, like I say, came as a nobody into power in a way that was very interesting.

The various minor prophets have a great deal to say about Assyria—especially Nahum and Jonah. But the major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—speak a lot about the Babylonians. I found it especially interesting that 200 years or so before it was to happen, Isaiah (in chapter 21) speaks of the fall of Babylon. In verse 5, he speaks of the great banquet, interrupted by an attacking army. Daniel in chapter 5 fills in the details. Isaiah (21:5) warns, "Put a watchman on the city wall to shout out what he sees. When he sees riders in pairs on donkeys and camels, tell him, 'This is it!'"

According to secular sources of history, when Cyrus attacked Babylon, he came with not only small horses but also with camels—the first time they had been used as cavalry animals in an attacking force. Their presence so frightened the chariot horses of the Babylonians, that they bolted.

Also, in Isaiah 45, it says that the gates of Babylon will not be shut any more to Cyrus. Again, history tells us that Cyrus had his soldiers divert the Euphrates river so that all the water tunnels leading into the city became dry and the invading army slipped into the city through these tunnels.

After conquering Babylon, within one year Cyrus had decided to send the Hebrews home. He felt that you needed to be as kind as possible to all the peoples who were subjugated if you wanted them to stay happily within your kingdom. The way to prevent rebellion was not to threaten violence, as the Assyrians did, but to treat subjugated people with kindness. So he

deliberately set out to be kind. And one of the first peoples he was kind to were the Hebrews that were in the Babylonian Empire. The kings who followed him were not necessarily that kind; but he was.

Cyrus was a rather humble man. Whereas most of the kings made magnificent carvings telling about all their exploits, he did not. Even his tomb is a very simple tomb that still exists today. He's almost an enigma among the rulers of these huge empires, he was so different. It helps you understand a bit more why he's spoken of in Isaiah as "Cyrus, My servant."

One of the reasons why some people feel that there were two different people who authored the book of Isaiah is because it was a long time after Isaiah had penned the passages about Cyrus before anybody even knew anything about this Persian king to come. How did Isaiah get his name, and so forth? But most evangelicals feel that this is one of the things that God revealed—that there was a man who would come whose name was Cyrus, who would be kind and who would see that they got back to their home.

So they were under Persian rule for the next period of time, with God having His hand on them, even then. There was Daniel, there was Darius and the stories you read in the Bible. Here again you have example after example of the children of Israel being a witness to those who had conquered them.

Now one question which we have here on your sheet is: In Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel, we have magnificent prayers of repentance on the part of of these people—Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah—for their rebellious nation. Not a single one of them mentions any sense of failure to be a light to the nations, even though, several hundred years before, Isaiah had spoken of their need to be a light to the nations. Why?

So we'll leave you with that. You have some things that are reviews, some things that are new. I just wish that we had a little bit more information because the assigned materials are a little sketchy. But I think you will enjoy reading them.

Review

Before I begin answering these questions, I want to comment a little on missiology. What is missiology? I also want to say that the kind of questions which we want to give you are missiological questions. I don't think we've ever commented on what we mean by the word missiology, which is rather strange. Missiology is not the facts of missions. It's rather looking at

whatever—not just missions, but whatever—and trying to see the implications of what God is doing in terms of evangelizing the world. In other words, we could be talking about Hitler's Germany and bring in a missiological question. We could be talking about the March for Jesus and bring in a missiological question. It doesn't matter what we talk about; missiology is the way we look at it. What is God doing that has impact on the nations of the world?

So when we speak about the three conquering empires—Assyria, Babylonia and Persia—we're not just interested in the facts. We are interested in facts because we need to know a bit about these empires in order to understand what God was doing. But we mainly want to look at the facts of history and question, What is God doing? Is it just that these things are happening and God has nothing to do with it? No, as a follower of God you know that He has His hand over all things. As it says in Scripture, even secular kings are underneath His control.

1. Why did God allow a nation as brutal as Assyria to conquer His people? Describe how the "go-and-come mechanisms" of missions are involved here.

So our question here is a missiological question. Why did God allow a nation as brutal as Assyria to conquer His people? Of course, the first answer is the one that's given repeatedly in Scripture: because He wanted to punish them. They had gone after other gods, and had disobeyed Him. And He had told them through Moses, back at the time of the Exodus, that if they didn't follow Him, if they turned aside from Him, He would allow them to be taken captive by other peoples.

But the other question here—Are the go-come mechanisms of missions involved?—is the missiological question, you might say. Yes, we believe these mechanisms are involved here. God wanted His people not only to be punished, but also to be forced into the midst of this brutal, brutal nation in order to be a witness to these people. You say, "How could slaves be a witness?" Well, we have examples throughout Scripture of slaves being witnesses. The prime example that you might think of is the little Hebrew girl who became a witness to the wife of Naaman, the Syrian, and told her about Elisha. It's not God's best way, of course, of sending missionaries. But if we understand history, we understand that often God has used this mechanism of forcing His people out

involuntarily, in order to make them be a witness to a people group who were very brutal and very cruel, much more so than their own people.

A follow-up question to that, which I didn't put on your sheet, was: Why is it that the first nation that conquered them, the Assyrian nation, was so much more brutal than the second, the Babylonian, which in turn was more brutal than the Persians? In other words, as they went along, it seems that each conquering empire was less brutal. Was this perhaps because of the witness of the Israelites during this time? By the time they got down to the Babylonians, you already had Nebuchadnezzar choosing Daniel to be a force in his empire. You have the magnificent chapter in Daniel 4, where there's a wonderful testimony of Nebuchadnezzar, after he lost his mind and was out in the fields for those seven years, because of the testimony of Daniel. So you have evidence, especially in the Babylonian Empire, of the witness of the children of Israel.

But it must have been there also in the time of the Assyrian Empire. We know, of course, as our question #2 speaks about, that Jonah was a witness, at least in the city of Nineveh. Why is it surprising that the book of Jonah is in the canon? As far as I see it, it's surprising because Jonah didn't want to go there; he was very reluctant. Like Jonah, the nation was very reluctant—they were taken captive, but they didn't want to be a witness, either. They felt that the Assyrians didn't deserve it. To look at it from the human standpoint, they didn't deserve it; but they desperately needed it.

2. Why is it surprising that the book of Jonah is in the canon? How do you think this happened?

Well, it must be that by the time they were putting together the books of the Old Testament canon, there were some people who were godly enough to see what God was doing. Maybe they knew and understood that this book was not just a book about a prophet going to Nineveh, but it was a book about God's expectations of Israel, of His own people: that He wanted them to be a witness to the nations, even the most brutal nation. We have heard it said—I don't know if it's true—that of all the books in the Old Testament canon, the book of Jonah is the one that is never read in the synagogues today. If it isn't, it would be understandable, because again, it's really a very critical book of the stand of the whole nation, the people of Israel—and I'm using the word Israel

here not to refer to the Northern Kingdom, but the descendants of Jacob. It's a critique of them.

As a whole they were not willing to be the Suffering Servant. But there were some who understood what Isaiah was talking about when he talked about the Suffering Servant. Some may have thought he meant the Messiah, although I doubt that, because they didn't recognize Christ when He was the Suffering Servant. But a few understood that God intended Israel as a nation to be a suffering servant. Even today, there are a few godly rabbis in Israel who understand why Israel has had to suffer, not just for punishment, but in order to be a witness.

3. In Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel we have magnificent prayers of repentance on the part of these men, for their rebellious nation. But not a single one of them mentions anything about a failure to be a light to the nations, as Isaiah 49:6 implies that they should be. Why not?

Interestingly enough, the prayers that I'm referring to are each one in the ninth chapter of those books by that name—Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9. The answer would be, in a sense, the same as what we have today when we speak of the Walk for Jesus, which happened here in Pasadena recently; or the Pasadena for Christ movement; or any of the various movements you have in the various countries of the world, speaking of their desire for their people to turn back to the Lord.

Local evangelism is a wonderful, necessary thing; but it is different from what you see in the Concerts of Prayer, where there is always that other factor coming in—the desire to pray for the other nations of the world, not just for our own nation. I think that it's a tremendous temptation, especially when you have people that feel under bondage, not to look beyond your own problems; you know, asking God to solve your own problem. We all do this. Yet, for those who truly understand the Word of God, He wants us to look beyond our own problems and to pray not only for our own people, but for the other peoples of the world.

4. Use your Hebrew concordance to trace the words translated as Assyria, Babylon and Persia, to get a feel for their distribution in the canon. Do the same for Sennacherib, Cyrus and Darius.

This is not a question that has an answer as such; but we just want you to get a feel for how prominent these particular words are in the Old Testament. Also did this experience of the Children of Israel in Babylon make as strong an impact on their national history as what had happened to them as slaves in Egypt centuries before?

After this period of time, we don't have any more books to be added to the Old Testament canon. Oh, you have a few when they were building the temple; but they had just come back from Persia under Cyrus. But we don't have the 400-year record following this time in our canon. So we don't know whether there was something that went through their souls, like went through the souls of the Hebrew children when the book of

Deuteronomy was written. Most scholars think that the book of Deuteronomy was written even after the Babylonian captivity; and if so, then that would in a sense be the record. But why doesn't it say anything about their experience there? No doubt it did really stir them up; it did have a lot to do with it.

We know that, during this next period of time, the synagogue pattern was set up. We know that during this time between the testaments you have the beginning of the Pharisees, who, according to Jesus, went all over the known world to where the Children of Israel had been dispersed in order to try to renew them in their faith. We know these things partially because of what is said about this period of time in the New Testament. But we know that this period of time—the captivity by Assyria first, by Babylonia second and by Persia third—was something which really reached deep into the Hebrew soul and changed their character. It should have prepared them for the Suffering Servant to come, who was Jesus. But we don't know that it really did that to most of them.