



*Good News*  
**Bible Reading Program**

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, an *International Association*

**— March 2003 —**

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 Mar	Hosea catalogs Israel's sins	Hosea 4
2 Mar	King Uzziah of Judah usurps priestly duty and God strikes him with leprosy; King Menahem of Israel pays tribute to Assyria; Death of Menahem; Pekahiah king of Israel	2 Chronicles 26:16-21; 2 Kings 15:5, 19-24
3 Mar	Israel and Judah warned of impending judgment	Hosea 5
4 Mar	Eventual repentance, but not until then	Hosea 6
5 Mar	Coming destruction	Hosea 7
6 Mar	Israel's idolatry	Hosea 8
7 Mar	Israel will be judged	Hosea 9
8 Mar	National punishment for sin	Hosea 10
9 Mar	God's love for Israel will bring Israel back	Hosea 11:1-11
10 Mar	God brings charges against Israel and Judah	Hosea 11:12-12:14
11 Mar	Destruction imminent; Repentance and restoration	Hosea 13-14
12 Mar	Sins of Israel and Judah like scarlet	Isaiah 1
13 Mar	Coming peace on earth; Day of the Lord to precede it	Isaiah 2
14 Mar	God will punish His people; Zion to be restored	Isaiah 3-4
15 Mar	Song of God's vineyard; Will destroy it	Isaiah 5
16 Mar	Isaiah's vision and calling; Pekah kills Pekahiah of Israel and usurps throne; Death of Uzziah; Jotham king of Judah	Isaiah 6; 2 Kings 15:25-28, 6-7; 2 Chronicles 26:22-23
17 Mar	Reign of Jotham of Judah	2 Kings 15:32-37; 2 Chronicles 27:1-8
18 Mar	Micah announces judgment on Israel	Micah 1
19 Mar	Ahaz king of Judah; 1st Syro-Ephraimite war; Israel returns Jewish captives; Assyria won't help Judah; Ahaz's apostasy	2 Kings 16:1-4; 2 Chronicles 28:1-25
20 Mar	2nd Syro-Ephraimite war; Isaiah sent to Ahaz; Prophecy to Ahaz & David's house of the birth of Immanuel by the virgin	2 Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7
21 Mar	Prophecy of Israel's fall to Assyria; Fear God & His Word	Isaiah 8
22 Mar	The coming Messiah and His rule; Israel to be punished	Isaiah 9:1-10:4
23 Mar	Judgment on Assyria; The remnant of Israel will return	Isaiah 10:5-34
24 Mar	The Messiah, His message and the world under His reign	Isaiah 11-12
25 Mar	2nd Syro-Ephraimite war continues; Assyria intervenes against Syria/Israel; 1st Assyrian deportation of Israel; Hoshea kills Pekah and usurps throne; Ahaz before Assyrian king in Damascus; New pagan altar; Jotham dies	2 Kings 16:6-9; 15:29-31; 1 Chronicles 5:23-26; 2 Kings 17:1-2; 16:10-18; 15:38; 2 Chronicles 27:9
26 Mar	Hezekiah reigns in Judah; Cleanses temple and restores temple worship	2 Kings 18:1-3; 2 Chronicles 29

27 Mar	Hezekiah's Passover and eradication of paganism; Destruction of high places and the bronze serpent	2 Chronicles 30:1–31:1; 2 Kings 18:4-6
28 Mar	Hezekiah reorganizes the Levitical system	2 Chronicles 31:2-21
29 Mar	Fall of Samaria; Rest of Israel deported	2 Kings 17:3-23; 18:9-12
30 Mar	Assyrians resettle Mesopotamians in Samaria	2 Kings 17:24-41
31 Mar	Oracle against Babylon; God still chooses Israel	Isaiah 13:1–14:2

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## Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

### Cataloging Israel's Sins (Hosea 4)

**March 1**

As Israel went through its final rulers, Hosea's preaching continued. The prophet now lists many of the sins of Israel, evident in his own day as well as in the end time.

Verse 1 mentions an absence of truth, mercy and knowledge. Actually, the phrase "no truth or mercy" can also be translated "no faithfulness or loyalty," as it is in the New Revised Standard Version (see *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament Section, "Loving-Kindness," explanation of Hebrew *hesed*). God had been faithful and loyal, but the Israelites hadn't—to God or to each other. Concerning their lack of knowledge, as we read earlier in the book of Amos, "They do not know to do right" (3:10). Thus, it was not knowledge in general that they lacked, but right *moral knowledge*. Hosea 4:2 mentions violations of five of the Ten Commandments. And the people's unrestrained murder causes the land to "mourn" (verses 2-3) because the land is defiled by it (Numbers 35:33-34). In our own day, criminal justice systems often fail to appropriately deal with murderers—contributing, along with wayward societal values, to high murder rates. Worse still, consider the "legal" murder of well over a million unborn children every year in the United States alone.

References to the people's "unfaithfulness" clearly illustrate a fundamental truth obscured within traditional Christianity today—that in a covenant relationship with God, human beings have obligations divinely imposed on them. And God holds people to those expectations. Of course, the behavior He expects from people for their part of the covenant relationship is all for their ultimate good.

Hosea then turned his attention to the priests and prophets, the ones responsible for teaching the people moral standards. The Hebrew of verses 4-5 of chapter 4 isn't clear and has been variously translated. The New Living Translation renders it as: "Don't point your finger at someone else and try to pass the blame! Look, you priests, my complaint is with you! As a sentence for your crimes, you will stumble in broad daylight, just as you might at night, and so will your false prophets. And I will destroy your mother, Israel."

Jeroboam I, under whom the northern kingdom had formed after the death of Solomon, had rejected the true Levitical priests, and many of them had left and gone back to Judah where they had a better chance of teaching the truth and practicing God's way of life (2 Chronicles 11:13-16). Jeroboam had appointed his own priests from other tribes instead of doing it God's way (1 Kings 13:33; compare 12:31). Furthermore, there were false prophets in the land. Many of these priests and prophets claimed to represent the true God but, of course, did not. The situation parallels that of religion today, with all manner of people serving as supposed ministers of God throughout the world yet who really don't serve Him—indeed, don't even *know* Him, rejecting His holy laws.

In Hosea 4:6, we learn that the lack of knowledge noted in verse 1 is the reason God's people are destroyed. And we also learn that their lack of knowledge is due to a willful rejection of God's truth by the religious leaders. How true this is today! Many preachers today teach in direct contradiction to God's Word, even though they ought to know better, supposedly having studied the Bible. They refuse to accept that the Bible means what it says. Perhaps some indeed *do* know better but have selfish motivations for continuing to misrepresent the Bible's teachings.

In verse 8, the priests are seen glorying in the nation's lawlessness because this allows them to "eat up the sin" of the people. In Hosea's day, this referred to sin offerings. The more people sinned, the more they brought sin offerings that the priests could eat, thereby providing these counterfeit priests with some of their livelihood (compare 6:6; 8:11-13; 1 Samuel 2:12-17). Even today, some try to relieve their guilt for their own sins through monetary offerings to a church—and there are religious leaders who actually encourage this type of thinking, though not directly stated.

Next, God addresses the spiritual harlotry of His people (Hosea 4:10-14). They turn to false religion, following worthless popular custom rather than worshiping God the way He intended (see Jeremiah 2:11; Matthew 15:9). Also, they become enslaved to habits and addictions, including alcohol, drug and sexual addictions (Hosea 4:11).

Judah is then given a warning to not follow Israel's evil example (verse 15). At this point in Hosea's prophecy, it appears that Judah was not mired in one of its idolatrous periods. It seems likely that chapter 4 was written either while Uzziah still reigned over Judah or during his son Jotham's reign. In any event, God tells Judah not to go up to Beth Aven (verse 15), "which means 'House of

Iniquity’... a sarcastic reference to the important religious center Bethel, which means ‘House of God’ (see Amos 5:5)” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 15). Yet Judah had sinned in other respects, and God knew they would soon follow in Israel’s footsteps (5:5).

Chapter 4 ends with a reference to Ephraim, which afterward becomes a routine reference to the people of the northern kingdom and their descendants throughout the remainder of the book. Ephraim was God’s firstborn (Jeremiah 31:9), spiritually speaking, and instructions or warnings given to the firstborn would also apply to the rest of the family, because the firstborn is considered responsible for guidance and leadership.

### **Uzziah’s Sin and Leprosy; Israel an Assyrian**

#### **Vassal State (2 Chronicles 26:16-21; 2 Kings 15:5, 19-24)**

**March 2**

**In Judah:** The demise of Uzziah’s (Azariah’s) spiritual life should serve as a warning to us all. We can’t continue living on the basis of our past good works and faithfulness. Our loyalty to God must continue to the very end of our human existence. Uzziah’s pride in his power was such that he tried to usurp the role of the priests. “In parallel Near Eastern cultures, semidivine kings also served as priests. Perhaps Uzziah’s determination to burn incense reflected an arrogant intent to exalt himself” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, note on 2 Chronicles 26:16-23). The king soon learned that God would not tolerate intrusion into service He had reserved for the sons of Aaron, and the Almighty dealt him a severe blow, afflicting him with leprosy. As mentioned in the highlights for Amos 1, Josephus says that the huge earthquake of Uzziah’s reign (Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:4-5) accompanied this punishment. According to Scripture, Uzziah’s leprosy lasted the rest of his life, which lasted more than a decade beyond this.

It isn’t clear whether Uzziah repented. The Bible does say he knew he couldn’t remain in the temple with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:20), a fact laid down in the law God gave (see Leviticus 22:2-6; Numbers 12:10, 15). Of course, Uzziah’s “obedience” at this point may have simply been a knee-jerk reaction to flee further divine wrath rather than a desire to now obey what was right. Yet it is hoped that, on further reflection, his newfound fear of God helped to restore him to a right state of mind. We are not told that he turned to a life of wickedness—only that he sinned in this matter. And God did not bring him to the grave by violent death as He did certain other rebellious rulers of Judah. Rather, Uzziah was allowed to live many more years in his humbled condition. The situation, then, appears similar to that of Moses when he disobeyed God (see Numbers 27:12-14)—and David when He sinned (see 2 Samuel 12:13-14). A degree of punishment had to be meted out to the leader as an example to everyone else, even when he himself repented.

During Uzziah’s house quarantine, his son Jotham took over the official duties as coregent. Again, the Bible doesn’t give details, but it is possible that Uzziah still remained in control, working through his son. In its note on 2 Kings 15:1-2, *The Nelson Study Bible* states: “The nature of Jotham’s duties (v. 5), the assigning of a full 52 years of reign to Azariah, and Isaiah’s dating of his call to the year of Azariah’s (or Uzziah’s) death (Is. 6:1) may indicate that Azariah retained the power of the throne until the end.”

**In Israel:** “Pul” was another Babylonian name for the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-Pileser III (see 1 Chronicles 5:26; *Nelson*, note on 2 Kings 15:19). “To understand the complex events of the late eighth century BC, a word must be said concerning the Assyrians. After nearly a half-century of decline, Assyria reawakened with the usurpation of the throne by Tiglath-Pileser III in 745 BC. Indeed he and his successors in the Neo-Assyrian Empire were to effect a drastic change in the balance of power in the ancient Near East. Having solidified the kingdom in the east, Tiglath-Pileser turned his attention to the west in 743. Although the exact course of his western campaign is difficult to follow, it seems clear that all of Syro-Palestine submitted to the Assyrian yoke. Among those nations and kings whose tribute is recorded in his annals is the name Menahem of Israel, thus confirming the biblical account” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 2 Kings 15:16-22).

### **Judgment to Come on Israel and Judah (Hosea 5)**

**March 3**

As mentioned earlier, from this point on in the prophecy, the tribe of Ephraim gets special mention. It is Ephraim that receives the greatest condemnation. The Bethel altar was in Ephraim, which meant that it played a leading role in influencing the whole nation. And, being the leading tribe of Israel, Ephraim “is used here to represent the entire northern kingdom” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 4:17-19).

The reference to “snare” and “net” in verse 1 is to tools for trapping prey. “The figure is that of people being hurt, as if hunted and trapped, by the religious and civil leaders of the day”

(*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 1). Mount Tabor was in the northern part of the northern kingdom while Mizpah was in the extreme south, just north of Jerusalem. "From top to bottom, from north to south, seemingly on every hill in the land, idolatrous traps were set to ensnare the Israelites in sin" ("Gotcha!," *Word in Life Bible*, 1998, sidebar on 5:1).

Israel is pictured wallowing in spiritual harlotry (verses 3-4). Hosea says, "They do not know the LORD" (verse 4). As we later learn from the apostle John: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). Israel, refusing to obey God, does not know Him. The people "seek" the Lord, wanting the benefits of His blessings (verse 6), but they aren't prepared to follow His ways (verse 7). They have even corrupted their children (verse 7). "The 'illegitimate' children [as the NIV renders it, 'pagan' in the NKJV] are literally 'strange' (*zar*). Their parents' sins have twisted them as well. Never suppose that our sins have no impact on our children. They do!" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verse 7).

Hosea then turns his attention to Judah. Gibeah and Ramah (verse 8) were strategically important cities of the tribe of Benjamin on the northern border of Judah (Benjamin was a part of the kingdom of Judah). Beth Aven apparently being a reference to Bethel through a play on words—common in the Hebrew Bible—the warning is even more important since Bethel was on the southern border of Israel, close to the Benjamite cities. "Thus Benjamin faced a dual challenge: to resist the corrupting spiritual influence of the North, and to prepare to resist the Assyrians who would soon invade Israel" (note on verse 8). Yet Judah's leaders are also shown to be behaving badly. Hosea likened them to someone who moves the boundary lines of property, intent on stealing (verse 10). Therefore, God pronounces judgment on both nations (verses 10-12). End-time Judah, the Jews of today, have likewise followed the modern descendants of ancient Israel in many sins.

We next see Israel and Judah looking to Assyria for help. While Hosea preached, Israel began paying tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19-20) and Ahaz of Judah sought assistance from Assyria (16:5-9). The reference to King Jareb (verse 13) is uncertain. There is no historical Assyrian reference to such a king, but the word *jareb* meant "warrior," "fighter," or "he will contend." Some translate "King Jareb" as simply "the great king." Most commentators believe this to be a reference to Tiglath-Pileser III. Yet, as the prophecy is likely also, or even primarily, for the last days, the reference would seem to apply first to the end-time Assyrian ruler, apparently the coming European dictator referred to in the book of Revelation as "the beast."

Verses 14-15, while perhaps having some application to the ancient Assyrian invasion, refer mainly to the coming Great Tribulation, as Hosea 6:1-3 makes clearer. (We will examine this further in our next reading, which includes these verses.) In fact, it appears that Israel and Judah are shown here being devastated at the same time (5:14). This did not happen in ancient times, but it is going to happen in the future. The chapter ends with God going away until His punishment has its intended effect of bringing Israel and Judah to repentance.

### **Fleeting Faithfulness (Hosea 6)**

**March 4**

At the end of chapter 5 we saw Israel and Judah being punished together, at the same time, for their failure to follow God's ways and God telling them that He would leave them until they repented.

Chapter 6 opens with Hosea presenting what Israel will finally say. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* concurs with the view that verses 1-3 are connected to the previous chapter: "For three verses, Hosea gives the words of Israel in their day of repentance. The section carries a close relationship in thought with 5:15, which notes that this time of repentance will come only with the beginning of Christ's millennial reign. Israel as a nation has never yet prayed like this.... After the inserted words of repentance, Hosea returned to his main theme of warning the people against their sin" (note on verses 1-3).

Verse 1 uses the analogy of sickness and God's healing power—healing the "sickness" and "wound" of 5:13. The Bible has much to say about physical sickness and God being our Healer (e.g., James 5:14-15; Psalm 103:3).

However, Scripture also uses sickness as a metaphor for spiritual problems, which seems to be the primary usage here in Hosea. *The Dictionary of Bible Imagery* states: "The book of Isaiah begins with an oracle that uses the imagery of 'wounds and bruises and open sores' (Is. 1:6) to describe the effect of God's judgment on the nation of Israel. Other prophets use similar language. Jeremiah often uses pictures of disease and healing to describe the destruction and subsequent restoration of Jerusalem (e.g., Jer. 10:19; 14:19; 15:18; 30:12-17; 33:1-9; see. also Mic. 1:9). False prophets who proclaim an optimistic future are said to 'dress the wounds of my people as though it were not serious' (Jer. 6:14

NIV; see also Lam. 2:13-14). The prophet Nahum uses similar terms to describe the fate of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh (Nah. 3:18-19). Along the same lines the prophet Hosea uses pictures of sickness and sores to illustrate the effects of invading forces on the territories of Ephraim and Judah (Hos. 5:8-15) (“Disease and Healing,” 1998, pp. 208-210). In writing to Timothy and Titus about their tasks as ministers, Paul employs the analogy of health for the spiritual condition of the Church and for good doctrine, using the word “sound,” which has the meaning of “good health” or wholesome (Titus 1:9, 13; 2:2, 8; 1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3).

Some have speculated that the references to “after two days” and “the third day” refer to the resurrection of Christ. This is based on the false assumption that Christ was in the grave for only one day and two nights (Friday evening to Sunday morning), not three days and three nights as He prophesied (Matthew 12:40; compare Jonah 1:17). “Jonah 1:17, to which Christ referred, states specifically that ‘Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.’ We have no reason to think these days and nights were fractional. Nor is there any basis for thinking that Jesus meant only two nights and one day, plus parts of two days, when he foretold the length of time He would be in the grave. Such rationalization undermines the integrity of Jesus’ words” (*Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*, p. 14).

What, then, is meant by the prophetic statement, “After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up”? We should view it in context. As we’ve already seen, being raised up in Hosea 6:2 is parallel with a humbled and repentant Israel emerging in verse 1—around the time of Christ’s return—from the terrible punishment described at the end of chapter 5. So the period of punishment to which Hosea refers is not of his own day. Rather, God enables him to look down through the ages to the end time. The book of Revelation mentions a coming period of three and a half years of horror unparalleled in human history. The first part of this period is a time of punishment on Israel called “Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7) or the “great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21-22). It is followed by the Day of the Lord, of which Isaiah 34:8 states, “For it is the day of the LORD’s vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion.” Introduced by dramatic heavenly signs (Revelation 6:12-17), the Day of the Lord would thus seem to be the final year leading up to Christ’s return.

Observe also that it is a time for punishing Israel’s *enemies*, thereby “raising up” Israel. Therefore, since the Day of the Lord is the last year of three and a half years, Israel must be punished in the Tribulation for the first two and a half. Interestingly, there are other passages where days are used to represent years in prophecies dealing with Israel (Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6). Hosea 6:2 is no different when it states that “after two days” (i.e., after two years) and “on the third day” (i.e., during the third year—indeed, halfway through it as we’ve seen), God will raise Israel out of the Tribulation, reserving the final year before Christ’s return to rain destruction on Israel’s foes.

Israel will finally recognize its need to “pursue the knowledge of the LORD” (verse 3), the lack of which has brought them destruction, as earlier stated (4:6). We are then told that the coming of God is as certain as the sun’s rising (6:3). In the same verse, we are told, “He will come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth.” *The Nelson Study Bible* states: “The *latter* rains of Israel came in the spring and caused the plants to grow. The *former* rains came in the autumn and softened the ground for plowing and sowing” (note on 6:3). This ties in with the seasons for God’s annual festivals (see Leviticus 23). When God came the first time in the person of Jesus Christ, He fulfilled the spring festivals—“like the latter rain.” When He comes the second time, He will fulfill the fall festivals—“like the former rain.” And since Christ fulfilled the spring festivals on the very days the festivals occurred, it seems logical that He will fulfill the fall festivals on their calendar dates as well—though we can’t know this for sure (for more details see *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*).

In the meantime, God reflects on the fact that any repentance of Israel and Judah before their ultimate repentance of the end time would be short-lived—as fleeting as fog or morning dew (Hosea 6:4). God doesn’t just want Israel’s sacrifices and religious rituals (Isaiah 1:11-17; 43:22-24; Jeremiah 7:21-23; Amos 5:21-25; Micah 6:6-8). While He had commanded that they be kept, they were only valid if offered in a right spirit (Psalm 51:17; 107:22; Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5). God wants *mercy*. The Hebrew word translated mercy in verse 6 (*hesed*) is the same word used for “faithfulness” or “love” in verse 4. Israel was not merciful or faithful in love, and Hosea goes on in verse 7 to describe their crimes.

“Even Ramoth Gilead and Shechem, which were cities of refuge where manslayers could find asylum, had been contaminated by bloodshed” (*Nelson*, note on verse 10).

**A Cake Unturned (Hosea 7)****March 5**

In chapter 7 we see Israel's widespread corruption. Again Hosea warns Israel of its failure to heed the warnings. Samaria, the capital, may be representative or symbolic of the whole nation.

Hosea uses "fire" and "oven" in several similes here (verses 4-8). The word in verse 6 translated "baker" in the New King James Version is translated as "passion" or the like in other versions. "The people in their zeal for this sin were compared to a heated oven—a striking illustration of lust. The oven was so hot that a baker could cease tending the fire during an entire night—while the dough he had mixed was rising—and then, with a fresh tending of the fire in the morning, have sufficient heat for baking at that time. In...verses [5-7] the prophet gave an example of the kind of sin that resulted from such inflamed passion: the assassination of the king. Hosea saw it happening on a special day, a festival day, for the king. During the festivities the ringleaders planning the crime became drunk, and the king with them. Keeping the figure of the oven, the prophet stated that the hearts of the plotters were hot with desire to perform their treacherous deed. Each time they were near the king, their hearts flamed up, as they contemplated their deed. They waited during the night, however, with their passion smoldering like the baker's fire, anticipating the morning" (*Expositor's*, note on verses 3-7). "The background of these verses is the political turmoil of the northern kingdom. During a 20-year period (752-732 B.C.), four Israelite kings were assassinated (see 2 Kin. 15)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note Hosea 7:4-7).

Israel's sins were not only internal, but extended to their relations with other nations. The language of verse 8 ("mixed himself") indicates that entanglement in foreign alliances, and adoption of their ways, was deliberate on Israel's part. "The Israelites associated with and adopted heathen people and customs. *a cake not turned*, i.e., like a pancake that is burned on one side and uncooked on the other and is therefore altogether useless" (*Harper Study Bible*, 1991, note on verse 8). There is certainly a parallel here for Christians. Spiritually, while we are to interact with the world, we are not to become entangled in it or adopt its ways, particularly its ways of worship. Quite the contrary, God says, "Come out from among them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17).

In mixing with the nations, Israel sought help from Egypt and Assyria, flitting back and forth between them "like a silly dove" (Hosea 7:11)—foolishly forgetting that their real help should have been from God. If they had followed God, they wouldn't have needed to go to other nations. Yet they even plotted *against* God (verse 15).

Paradoxically, God says, "They return, but not to the Most High" (verse 16). This shows some kind of repentance, but not to the true God. He says, "They did not cry out to *Me* with their heart when they wailed upon their beds" (verse 14). So just who *do* they cry out to in a form of repentance? Notice this regarding their assembling together (apparently a religious service) for grain and new wine: "God sent a drought that took away Israel's grain and new wine. Yet instead of turning to Him in repentance, the idolatrous Israelites demonstrated their devotion to Baal. [In fact, many mistakenly equated Baal, meaning "Lord," with the *true* Lord.] According to Canaanite religious beliefs, prolonged drought was a signal that the storm god Baal had been temporarily defeated by the god of death and was imprisoned in the underworld. Baal's worshipers would mourn his death in hopes that their tears might facilitate his resurrection and the restoration of crops" (*Nelson*, note on v. 14). Perhaps another way to look at this is to think of people assembling in congregational worship services praying, "Give us our daily bread," yet refusing to obey the true God and practice His ways.

This would have served as quite an indictment against the Israelites of Hosea's day. Yet even so, religious people of the *modern* nations of Israel usually pray to a totally false concept of God as well (with worship customs curiously similar to those ancient Israel adopted from the Canaanites)—and will cry to this "Lord" loudly when trouble becomes hard. Only when they rediscover the true God of the Bible and call upon Him will God ultimately deliver them. Thankfully, God will make sure that they *do* at last rediscover Him.

**"Israel Has Forgotten His Maker" (Hosea 8)****March 6**

Here again we see the root cause of Israel's problems—their broken covenant with God (verse 1). This is a serious matter, and Hosea must proclaim the warning as if with a trumpet (Hebrew *shofar*, ram's horn), an analogy of sounding an alarm familiar to readers of Bible prophecy (Isaiah 58:1; Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 33:3-6; Joel 2:1,15; Amos 3:6; Zephaniah 1:16; Zechariah 9:14; Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). Continued disobedience has removed Israel farther and farther away from God—to a point where, Hosea says, "Israel has forgotten his Maker" (Hosea 8:14), which, in turn, has led to even greater disobedience.

As in other verses, the eagle of verse 1 is most likely a reference here to Assyrian invasion: “Just as an eagle swiftly swoops down and snatches its prey, so Assyria would invade Israel and take its people into captivity” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 1). And as a bird of prey rends and tears its prey, so would Assyria deal with Israel.

Israel setting up kings against God’s will does not refer to the monarchy in general. Rather, “this phrase alludes to the political turmoil surrounding the throne of the northern kingdom during the eighth century B.C., when,” as referred to earlier, “four kings were assassinated during a 20-year period (7:4-7)” (note on 8:4). Since so much of Hosea’s prophecies apply in some degree to the end-time, perhaps there will be similar assassinations and coups in the future. How strange this concept seems in the context of modern Israel’s stable democracies. But much will change between now and the prophesied crisis at the close of this age.

The expression “your calf is rejected” (verse 5) literally means, in the original Hebrew, “your calf stinks.” “Here again the golden calves of Bethel and Dan, which were so odious to God, are in view.... The rhetorical question at the close of the verse implies that there would never be a time when the idolatry of Israel would not be sinful” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 5). In this sense, the calves are metaphorical for Israel’s continuing idolatry in general. It’s worth noting that the same Hebrew word is used for “rejected” in verse 3. In this case, the implication is that Israel thinks that *God’s* way stinks.

Israel has sown nothing but “wind” (verse 7), representing, as it does in Ecclesiastes, vanity and emptiness. “Morally speaking, Israel had planted wind, symbolizing its moral bankruptcy, and would reap a whirlwind, symbolizing the coming judgment” (*Nelson*, note on verse 7). “Wind is one of the most powerful forces of nature.... It is no surprise, then, that the O[ld] T[estament] uses the imagery of a powerful windstorm to picture calamity and irresistible divine judgment” (“Whirlwind,” *Dictionary of Bible Imagery*, p. 943). The whirlwind mentioned here refers to a high wind such as a tornado. Other Bible passages also refer to the whirlwind as one of God’s methods of judgment against evil (Jeremiah 23:19; 30:23; Ezekiel 13:11, 13, Amos 1:14; Zechariah 7:14; Proverbs 10:25; Job 21:18).

Israel cannot win against God’s wrath. The crop will be so damaged that it cannot produce grain—and what little it might produce will be consumed by foreign powers. The warning is just as much for today as for the time of Hosea. No matter how great and powerful the nations of modern-day Israel have been, they will be swallowed up. Even going to other nations such as Assyria for help (going to Europe for help in our time) will not ultimately profit. Indeed, hiring “lovers,” or allies, will backfire, bringing Israel under the increasing yoke of the “king of princes” (Hosea 8:9-10)—i.e., the Assyrian emperor. The Assyrian emperor of the end time, who seems to be the primary reference here, will apparently be a dictator over a united Europe. In the book of Revelation he is called “the beast.”

Israel’s “altars for sin,” where sins are supposed to be atoned for through sacrifices, have become “altars for sinning” (verse 11). Religion itself, instead of being a means of worship and seeking God, becomes a means of sin—rejected by God. God’s law is spurned by the Israelites as “strange”—unfamiliar and unwelcome (verse 12). He had given specific instructions about how He was to be worshiped, but Jeroboam had set up his own altars in Bethel and Dan. Likewise, the nations of modern-day Israel have followed false Christianity’s numerous changes of God’s method of worship, replacing His commanded worship on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week (Exodus 20:8-11), with worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, and replacing God’s Holy Days (Leviticus 23) with ancient, pre-Christian pagan festivals such as Easter and Christmas. In its entry on “Easter,” *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* states: “*pascha*... mistranslated ‘Easter’ in Acts 12:4, KJV, denotes the Passover (RV).... The term Easter is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven.... From this Pasch the Pagan festival of ‘Easter’ was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt Pagan festivals to Christianity” (New Testament Section). And all this despite God’s clear instruction that we not incorporate pagan worship practices into our worship of Him (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Because Israel’s worship places, considered places for seeking divine forgiveness, are actually places where teachings and practices contrary to God are promoted and participated in, God will *not* forgive and forget the Israelites’ sins through them. Instead, He will “*remember* their iniquity and *punish* their sins” (Hosea 8:13). God is so unhappy with Israel as to send the Israelites back into the captivity they came out of when they left Egypt. We should realize that what God desires of people

is all for our own good. He's unhappy with the Israelites harming themselves and knows in His wisdom that the extreme measure of captivity is necessary to bring them to repentance.

While verse 13 seems to say that Israel will actually go to Egypt, 9:3 makes it clear that Egypt is being used metaphorically of exile and slavery—and that the actual location of captivity will be Assyria, parallel with Amos' warning of "captivity beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). However, as explained in tomorrow's highlights, a number of Israelites will apparently end up in Egypt as well.

While certainly a warning of ancient invasion and deportation, this is also a warning of calamity that is yet future. Indeed, the warning of coming fire on the cities of Israel and Judah that will devour palaces was also directly given, practically word for word, by Amos as a reference to, primarily, end-time destruction (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5).

### Days of Punishment and Recompense (Hosea 9)

March 7

Hosea 9 continues with God's warning of impending punishment. This is not a time of celebration. God's warning is too serious. "This was spiritual idolatry.... The mention of threshing floors probably carries through the figure of prostitution, for the Canaanites frequently used threshing floors and winepresses [because of their association with the harvest] as places for carrying out their fertility rites. In v. 2 the implication is that, because of insufficient rainfall, the threshing floors and winepresses would fail to produce enough food for the people" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-2).

For their sin, the Israelites would be evicted from the land in which God had permitted them to dwell, and they would be left to suffer in Assyria (verse 3). They would be deprived of any freedoms and their uncleanness there would render them unfit to participate in true worship. Indeed, where they were going, they wouldn't be able to sacrifice to God or keep His Holy Days, even if they wanted to.

In verse 6, Egypt is again used symbolically of captivity, and the statement that "Memphis," an ancient capital of Egypt famed as a necropolis of cemeteries and tombs, would bury the Israelites signifies that they would die in captivity. Indeed, as we earlier read in Amos 5:3, only one tenth of those taken into captivity would ultimately survive. Yet it should also be noted that, in the end time, many Israelites will apparently end up in *literal* Egypt and other Arab nations through the coming slave trade prophesied in the Bible (compare Revelation 18:11-13)—as Israel's captives are ultimately seen returning from Assyria *and* Egypt in a great second exodus (Isaiah 11:11-12; Hosea 11:11). Consider also that since the forces of the end-time "Assyrian" ruler, apparently the European dictator called the "king of the North" in Daniel 11:40, are prophesied to invade and take over Egypt and surrounding territories (verses 42-43), they will undoubtedly set up military posts in these lands to which Israelite captives may be shipped to serve as laborers. So perhaps some latter-day Israelites truly will die in Memphis, which is in the vicinity of modern Cairo.

Behind them, the Israelites' homeland is left rather desolate: "The fine estates or villas which they had purchased by their money, being now neglected and uninhabited, are covered with nettles; and even in their tabernacles, thorns and brambles of different kinds grow" (*Adam Clarke's Commentary*, note on 9:6).

Raising a trumpet of warning again, Hosea announces, "The days of punishment have come; the days of recompense have come" (verse 7). While the days of Israel's ancient captivity fulfilled this in part, the message is mainly for the end time. Speaking of the coming Great Tribulation, Jesus Christ stated: "For *these* are the days of vengeance.... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations" (Luke 21:22-24). But Israel will not accept this message. Indeed, God's servants, who proclaim such warnings, are viewed by sinful Israel as raving lunatics (Hosea 9:7).

The Israelites have become utterly corrupt, "as in the days of Gibeah" (verse 9). "The reference here is to the rape and murder of a young woman by the men of Gibeah, an event that started a civil war (see Judg. 19). Those who witnessed this violent deed remarked that it was the worst crime committed in Israel's history until that time (see Judg. 19:30). However, the sins of Hosea's generation rivaled the infamous Gibeah murder" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Hosea 9:9)—as do the sins of the generation on which God's stern correction of the end time will come.

When Israel was a young nation, they were unusually delightful to God, like grapes in the desert (verse 10), but the delight didn't last long. Even before they entered the Promised Land, they were participating in Baal worship at Peor in Moab with its insidious fertility rites. Now, Israel had returned to such vile promotion of fertility through its return to Baal worship. As punishment, God

would *take away* fertility, causing the population to dwindle through barrenness of womb. And the children that *were* born would be killed in the coming invasion (verses 11-14).

The Jewish Tanakh translates the first part of verse 15 as, “All their misfortunes (began) at Gilgal, for there I disowned them.” Gilgal was the place from which Israel had conquered Canaan (Joshua 4:19–5:12) and where the monarchy was later instituted (1 Samuel 11:15). Yet it had now become a center of false worship (Hosea 4:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4; 5:4-5). “It also served as a resort area for the wealthy who oppressed the poor in Israel. As a center noted for its false religion and social oppression, ‘Gilgal’ probably serves here as a metaphor for the nation” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Hosea 9:15). The language of verse 15, it should be noted, implies divorce: “The Lord would reject (*hate*) His unfaithful wife (see Deut. 22:13; 24:3), *drive* her from His *house* (the land), and remove His protective care (*love*) from her” (*Nelson*, note on verse 15).

The final verse of chapter 9 summarizes Israel’s situation. They have consistently failed to listen to God’s warnings—now they will wander among the nations.

### “Break Up Your Fallow Ground” (Hosea 10)

March 8

God isn’t finished with Israel yet. Chapter 10 continues the correction, giving even more detail of the people’s sins and impending captivity.

It starts with another reference to Israel’s early history and its prosperity, which actually led to more and more sin and idolatry. Notice this paraphrase of verse 1 in the Living Bible: “How prosperous Israel is—a luxuriant vine all filled with fruit! But the more wealth I give her, the more she pours it on the altars of her heathen gods; the richer the harvests I give her, the more beautiful the statues and idols she erects.”

The people’s divided heart (verse 2) appears to refer to insincerity—a heart that says one thing and does another or wants to serve God and mammon or the true God and Baal. The Hebrew word can be used for “dividing,” in the sense of dividing land into shares or allotments. But it is also occasionally translated as “flattering” or “smooth” (insincere) and, in this verse, as “deceitful” (NIV), “false” (NRSV) and “fickle” (New Living Translation). Here are people who claim to serve God, but in reality serve Baal. They are in some respects like the people who assembled at Mount Carmel in the time of Elijah, when he asked: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

But this case is even worse. Notice this paraphrase of verse 3: “Then they will say, ‘We deserted the Lord and he took away our king. But what’s the difference? We don’t need one anyway!’” (Living Bible). Thus, more than mere apathy toward God, the people express defiance. Their real worry is over protecting their false religious ideology, which has allowed them to follow the whims of their human nature—contrary to the law of God. Yet the center of this false worship, represented in verse 5 by the calves of Beth Aven (“House of Evil”), referring to Bethel and national worship in general, will be given over to the ruler of Assyria. In ultimate fulfillment of these verses, much of the wealth and adornment of America and Britain’s false religious institutions—that is, whatever is not destroyed in future disasters and invasion—will go into the coffers of end-time Assyria and its dictator. Yet so much will suffer destruction. Just as ancient Bethel was to be destroyed, so too will be the great cathedrals and churches of the modern nations of Israel (verse 8). The obliteration of these national shrines will accompany mass destruction of cities. It will be so fierce that people will seek refuge in caves beneath the mountains (verse 8; Isaiah 2:19-21). Indeed, Jesus Christ quoted Hosea in this regard concerning the coming Tribulation (Luke 23:30).

(See our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for proof of the Israelite identity of these modern nations and further information regarding what the Bible says will happen to them in the years ahead.)

Hosea emphasizes the Israelites’ sins by once again referring to the sin of the men of Gibeah (Hosea 10:9). The last clause of this verse is apparently mistranslated in the New King James Version. There should be an “it” between “did” and “not” and a question mark at the end of the sentence, because the battle did indeed overtake the Gibeahites (Judges 20). Notice the NIV rendering of the end of Hosea 10:9: “Did not war overtake the evildoers in Gibeah?” The point is that just as punishment overtook the Gibeahites, so would punishment from God eventually overtake the Israelites, who now followed in the sinful footsteps of the Gibeahites.

Verse 10 says the punishment will be for “two transgressions.” The *New Bible Commentary: Revised* explains this as “their idolatry and their reliance on outside help. AV [Authorized Version, i.e., the King James Version] follows Targum [early Aramaic paraphrase], ‘bind themselves in their

two furrows.’ In the [Middle] East ploughing together means acting in concord as friends (*cf.* 2 Cor. 6:14). Here the reference may be to their union with Baal and the nations” (note on Hosea 10:10).

In verse 11, God describes Israel as a cow that, though domesticated, prefers to be unrestrained or at the most engaged in only very light work, able to simply lean down and eat grain. As *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* explains, threshing was for a cow “a far easier and more self-indulgent work than ploughing. In treading corn [i.e., grain], cattle were not bound together under a yoke, but either trod it singly with their feet, or drew a threshing sledge over it (Isa. 28:27, 28); they were free to eat some of the [grain] from time to time, as the law required they should be unmuzzled (Deut. 25:4), so that they grew fat in this work. [This provides] an image of Israel’s freedom, prosperity, and self-indulgence heretofore” (note on Hosea 11:11). But Israel’s rebellious spirit demands that God employ harsh methods—putting a yoke on Israel and Judah and forcing them to engage in hard labor. Israel’s ancient service in Egypt was a forerunner of this bondage and hard labor—as were the Nazi labor camps in which the Jews were made to suffer terribly at the hands of cruel oppressors (for while many Jews were immediately killed, many others were forced into hard work until death or until their physical stamina gave out, and *then* they were killed.)

In verse 12, Hosea calls on the people to repent. If they would sow righteousness, that is, commit to obeying God (see Psalm 119:172), then they would reap mercy from Him. “Break up your fallow ground,” the prophet instructs. The analogy speaks to the need to have the natural hardheadedness of every human being loosened up and made receptive to the seed of God’s Word. This is vital to true repentance. “Plowing and planting are the necessary preliminary steps to growing a crop, which eventually sprouts when the rain falls in season. In the same way, repentance would set the stage for restored blessing, which God would eventually rain down on His people” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 12). But verse 13 describes the awful reality. Instead of righteousness, the people had “plowed wickedness”—lived a life of sin and rebellion—and would suffer the consequences, some automatic and some directly from God. The spiritual principle of reaping what we sow was later stated by the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:7-9.

Shalman (verse 14) could be Salamanu, King of Moab and tributary of Tiglath-Pileser, who invaded Gilead around 740 B.C. It is also possible that the name refers to Shalmaneser V of Assyria (2 Kings 17:3-6). *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* favors this view, stating: “Shalmaneser, a compound name, in which the part common to it and the names of three other Assyrian kings, is omitted; Tiglath-pileser, Esar-haddon, Shar-ezer. Arbel was situated in Naphtali in Galilee, on the border nearest Assyria. Against it Shalmaneser, at his first invasion of Israel (II Kings 17:3), vented his chief rage” (note on Hosea 10:14). However, this is an assumption, since neither the identity of Shalman nor the location of Beth Arbel is clear. The city is “identified in Eusebius *Onom.* 14.18 as Arbela in the region of Pella in Transjordan, and now generally as Irbid (Irbil), 20 mi. (32 km.) NW of Amman” (“Beth-Arbel,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979). If Shalmaneser V is meant, then this part of Hosea’s prophecy would seem to have been written following the Assyrian invasion of Israel, since the destruction is referred to as an event that is well-known to the people. Of course, it is possible that it had not yet occurred. God knew the event was coming even if the people didn’t. And perhaps the intended audience in this case was exclusively readers of the end time. That is, Hosea was perhaps specifically telling *us* that just as ancient Israel was plundered, so will end-time Israel be plundered with like ruthlessness.

### “How Can I Give You Up, Ephraim?” (Hosea 11:1-11)

March 9

Chapter 11 begins the description of Israel’s restoration as a result of God’s immense love for His people. God had specially chosen Israel as his son (Hosea 11:1; Exodus 4:22-23; Genesis 12:2-3). Hosea 11:1 also had a dual fulfillment, as it foretold Jesus, God’s literal son, returning from a period of exile with his family in Egypt as a child (Matthew 2:13-15).

The first few verses of Hosea 11 show the sadness of Israel’s behavior. It is God who has consistently taught them, been kind to them and fed them, but they were too blind to recognize His love.

Lifting the yoke off their neck is a reference to lifting the yoke “away from the face of an ox so that it might eat more comfortably.... ‘Bent down to feed them’ presents a beautiful picture of God’s gracious condescension in his loving provision for his undeserving people” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 4).

Verse 5 appears to contain another mistranslation in the New King James Version. Rather than stating that Israel shall not return to Egypt, the verse, it seems, should be a question, since we see Israel returning from Assyria *and* Egypt in verse 11. Verse 5 is apparently correct in the New

International Version: “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?” (A number of other translations convey the same sense.) Thus, Israel’s failure to respond to God’s great love would result in their captivity by Assyria, with some of them going to Egypt. Therefore, their plans for survival wouldn’t be of any benefit.

Yet, in His great love for Israel, God asks, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?” He asks Himself if He can make Israel like Admah and Zeboiim (v. 8), cities overthrown with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 10:19; 14:2, 8; Deuteronomy 29:23). The answer, as we saw also in Amos 9:8, is, thankfully, no (v. 9). Notice this from *The Dictionary of Bible Imagery*:

“Perhaps the most striking use of *heart* in the Bible is in reference to God (Gen 6:6; 8:21). The usage is similar to that applied to humankind and should be a reminder that we are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). God, after all, is a personal being who thinks, feels, desires and chooses. One of the most intriguing passages in this connection is found in Hosea 11. The prophet quotes God as saying that, while he will indeed punish Israel for their rebellion, he will not completely destroy them. The decision to refrain from their utter destruction was not easy; it was the result of God’s inner turmoil: ‘My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused; I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again.’ (Hos 11:8-9 NIV) In the verse that follows, God justifies his change of mind on the basis of his divinity. Humankind, when angered, is naturally inclined toward a course of destruction of those who offend. But God is divine, not human, so his grace wins out” (“Heart,” p. 369).

Though God will tear them as a lion (Hosea 13:7-8), punishing them in order to bring them to their senses, His final roar will not be to destroy them. Rather, He, in the person of Jesus Christ, the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5), will roar with an earthshaking sound to summon His people back to their land (Hosea 11:10). Included in their physical return is their spiritual return to their duty to God under His covenant. “These verses,” says *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “are like a window into the heart of God. They show that his love for his people is a love that will never let them go. Like the beautiful final chapter of the book, these verses look forward, beyond the chastisement of the immediate future, to the time, still distant, when Israel will truly return to her God and he will bless her once more. Ultimately it must be the millennial kingdom that is finally in view here. No other period in Israel’s history, past or prospective, fits the picture” (note on verse 8).

Then, notice: “His sons shall come trembling from the west... from Egypt... [and] Assyria” (verses 10-11). While Egypt is located to the southwest of the land of Israel, Assyria was located to the northeast. And yet Assyria is the primary place of captivity. How do we explain this? The answer must be that this is a reference to Israel’s return from *end-time* captivity. Indeed, the northern kingdom of Israel never returned to dwell in the Holy Land in the past. Yet they will in the future—this time from the land of modern Assyria, which (as we will delve more into when we later read Isaiah 10) apparently lies in the heart of Europe, to the northwest of the land of Israel. The Israelites, then, will indeed return from the west, from both Europe and Egypt. Also, as explained in the next highlight on Hosea, modern Israelites may today be found in, among a few other places, North America and Northwest Europe, including the British Isles. And, putting Jeremiah 31:8 (KJV) together with other verses (see Isaiah 41:1, 8-9; 49:1, 3, 12), it appears that some Israelites will also return from these homelands at this time—i.e., those who will have managed to avoid deportation, yet will have nonetheless suffered along with the rest of the modern descendants of Israel under European invasion and occupation. These come from the west also. And, from all of these places, “trembling like a bird” following their horrendous ordeal (Hosea 11:11), the children of Israel will at last be humbled and ready to serve and obey their great God, finally able to experience the fullness of His graciousness, love and generosity.

### **God’s Charge Against Israel and Judah (Hosea 11:12–12:14)**

**March 10**

Hosea 11:12 is connected to the start of chapter 12. The prophecy now reverts to the previous theme of Israel’s sins.

At this time, it appears that Judah was still following God, which may indicate that this part of the prophecy was written during the revival under Judah’s faithful king, Hezekiah. In any case, Hosea apparently uses this as a contrast to Israel’s unfaithfulness. However, it should be noted that the meaning of verse 12 is not entirely certain. While most translations agree with the New King James Version that Judah here walks “with” God, the New International Version translates it as “against” God, presumably because God has a “charge against Judah” in 12:2. Yet it may simply be that God knew Judah’s faithfulness would be short-lived, just as it always had been.

In any event, we are immediately informed that Ephraim—again, the leading tribe of Israel and representative of the entire northern kingdom—“feeds on the wind” (verse 1). “Ecclesiastes offers one of the most memorable series of wind images, as the Preacher pronounces one after another sphere of human activity meaningless, a mere ‘chasing after the wind.’ The image, used repeatedly in a kind of refrain (Eccl 1:14, 17 NIV, etc.), expresses the monotonous futility of going after something and finding it to be nothing at all—like trying to capture the wind in one’s hands. What does any human being gain, the Preacher asks, ‘since he toils for the wind?’ (Eccl. 4:15 NIV)” (“Wind,” *Dictionary of Bible Imagery*, p. 951).

We are also told that Ephraim “pursues the east wind” (Hosea 12:1). *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* says this refers to “the simoon, blowing from the desert east of Palestine” (note on Hosea 12:1). Indeed, an east wind comes *from* the east and blows *west*. And yet when did Ephraim, or the rest of the northern tribes, go west? Their captivity carried them *east*. Since this prophecy is apparently for our day, these words would seem to be a clue from God to help *us* in locating the modern descendants of Israel. From other historical sources, it is evident that some time after Israel’s Assyrian captivity, they finally broke free of their slavery and began migrating west into Europe—eventually reaching Northwest Europe. As surprising as it may sound to many, the people of Britain, the United States and other democracies of Northwest Europe constitute many of the modern descendants of Israel (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more).

Hosea 12:3 refers to contrasting actions of Jacob. Jacob struggled with his twin brother Esau in the womb (Genesis 25:26), signifying the greedy, manipulative character he would demonstrate later in life. And yet later, after years of trial and learning the error of his ways, Jacob finally came to wrestle with God, recognizing his total dependence on God’s blessing, thus being renamed Israel (32:25-29). The *nation* of Israel should likewise have been striving with God to live up to its name and be blessed instead of chasing the wind. It was at Bethel (verse 4) that God confirmed the blessing already promised (35:1-15). Indeed, Bethel is where the true God spoke, not the false gods later worshiped here by a rebellious people. And the same true God would again bless the nation of Israel if it would only have the properly directed tenacity of Jacob. This idea is further expanded in verse 12 with the reference to Jacob’s endurance in waiting for Rachel.

Hosea instructs Israel, “Observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually.” Micah, writing around this same time, says basically the same thing: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). And, much later, Jesus Christ referred to these essential qualities of character as the “weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Thus, true faith constitutes waiting on God and walking humbly with Him.

Yet God views Israel as a “Canaanite” because of his sins (Hosea 12:7). But Israel says, “Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they shall find in me no iniquity that is sin” (verse 8). This is a very dangerous attitude. And yet, incredible though it is, many even in God’s true Church are pictured as adopting the same basic philosophy at the end of the age, saying, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” unaware that, spiritually, they are actually “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). May we all ask God for the discernment to see ourselves as He sees us—and repent accordingly.

### **Darkest Before the Dawn (Hosea 13–14)**

**March 11**

The reference to Ephraim in Hosea 13:1 appears to refer specifically to the tribe of Ephraim rather than being representative of the whole nation. Even in modern times, Ephraim (the United Kingdom and the British-descended nations of the Commonwealth) has exerted a powerful influence over other nations, but Hosea prophesied that this would cease.

Mention is made of Israel’s religious practices growing worse and worse (verse 2). Therefore, “God’s judgment would sweep Ephraim away quickly, just as the sun dispels fog and dries up the dew, or as the wind blows away chaff and smoke” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 3).

Though God mercifully led and dealt with the Israelites, they forgot Him (verse 6), thus making an enemy of Him—a consequence He had warned them about so many times before (see Deuteronomy 8:19; Psalm 50:22; compare 1 Samuel 28:16). “The Lord’s relationship with Israel would change drastically from caring Shepherd to ravaging Predator. Ironically and tragically, Israel’s rebellion had turned its Helper into a Destroyer” (*Nelson*, note on Hosea 13:6-9). The imagery is terrifying—and intended to provoke fear. But even in this extreme to which the Israelites have driven Him, God’s desire is for their good—to waken them out of their spiritual lethargy and

rebellion. God is a Father to Israel, seeking not to punish for punishment's sake, but rather to steer His children through punishment to repentance and spiritual restoration.

Only with God as its King, not by any *human* ruler, would Israel be able to find deliverance from its enemies (verses 9-10). Hosea reminds them that the only reason they had a human king in the first place was because they rejected God's direct rule, for which He had been angry with them (see 1 Samuel 8). God gave them Saul when they wanted to be like the nations around them. But just as He gave them a king, He could take the king away. Indeed, Hosea 13:11 says, "I...took him away in My wrath." Since this is past tense, it may refer to God's removal of Saul. However, it may also refer to Israel's king of Hosea's time. If so, then this part of Hosea was either written after the Assyrian invasion or written before it with the past tense signifying that God saw it as already done. It could also refer to the *end-time* ruler over Ephraim, the reigning monarch of the British royal family (see "The Throne of Britain: It's Biblical Origin and Future" at [www.ucg.org/brp/materials](http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials))—again describing an event as past even before it occurs. If so, perhaps the prophecy is specifically addressing Israelites in the Great Tribulation, when this will have already happened. Notice that verse 9 also uses the past tense: "O Israel, you are destroyed." Of course, this should serve as a dire warning to everyone who reads or hears this prophecy before the catastrophic events actually come to pass.

Verse 13 is another analogy that emphasizes God's final punishment for Israel. Mention is made of the pain of childbirth and then the pain of a son being born without "wisdom"—which seems to refer to the infant not being turned the right way to come out of the womb properly, especially given the next reference regarding the child remaining too long in the womb or birth canal (see NIV, NRSV, Living Bible). This makes delivery all the more difficult and painful—and all the more dangerous, perhaps even fatal. God's discipline, it might seem, had been to no avail. Yet once again (verse 14), we see God's intervention for Israel, His love for His people and His desire to not see them totally destroyed. God ransoms and redeems His people! This, we know, comes through the death of Jesus Christ for sin. Eventually, that ultimate sacrifice will be applied to Israel—and, indeed, to all mankind. In anticipation of that fact, God announces triumph over death and the grave: "Death has no power over God's redeemed. This great affirmation has many applications. In context, it is an encouragement to turn to God and live. In the N[ew] T[estament] it is a reminder [quoted by the apostle Paul] of God's final victory over physical death, won through Christ's resurrection, to be experienced by us at our own resurrection (1 Cor. 15:55)" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on Hosea 13:14).

Yet before then, prior to Israel's repentance, there will be horrendous devastation from Assyrian forces invading from the east to induce the humility and dependence on God required for true repentance (verse 15). (It should be noted that *modern* Assyria, in the heart of Europe, is also located to the *east* of the Israelite nations of Northwest Europe and North America.) Then, just when things seem darkest, with Israel languishing under its severest punishment ever, we arrive at chapter 14.

Hosea 14, notes the *Harper Study Bible*, "is different from the rest of the book. All that precedes it contains rebukes for sins and threats of the outpouring of the wrath of God. Now God exhorted his people to repent, promising them mercy if they would do so. In judgment he would wound them so that when they repented he would be able to heal them. It contains a refrain found everywhere in the writings of the prophets: 'For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them,' (v. 9)" (note on verse 1).

The prophecy thus turns to repentance. "The imagery of returning can also carry a profound spiritual meaning. To return is to repent from sin, thereby returning to a state of favor with God... The imagery of returning is thus more than a physical motion. The Biblical authors, notably the prophets, use the imagery of return to expound further on the nature of turning of a human heart. It is the return of a wayward covenant people back to their covenant Lord (Is 44:22; Jer 3:10-11, 14; 4:1; 24:7; Lam 4:40; Hos 6:1). Repentance, therefore, is a very important aspect of the image of return. The connection between repentance and returning to God is well illustrated in Hosea 14:1-2. The *return* imagery implies a wholehearted turning from reliance on one's own strengths and virtues and firm resting on the covenant character and promises of God (see also Joel 2:12-13). It is a fundamental redirection *away* from the path of sin and self-reliance and a subsequent *return* to a place of restored fellowship and peace. The image therefore illustrates vividly the dual nature of biblical repentance: turning away from sin and returning to God" ("Return," *Dictionary of Bible Imagery*, p. 712).

Hosea tells Israel to "take words" with them and even gives them the words to say. We should heed the instructions here too. "God does not ask us to bring gifts or sacrifices. Rather He asks us to

bring words when we come to Him. Three kinds of words are identified: words of confession ('forgive all our sins'), words of praise ('the fruit of our lips'), and words of commitment ('we will'). When [we]...come to God today, these three kinds of words [when they are truly heartfelt] are still the most important things we can bring to the Lord" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on Hosea 14:2).

God promises to restore Israel. What magnificent love God has for His people. No matter how unfaithful they have been, He has not returned the same to them. What a wonderful example to Hosea himself, who had to experience the unfaithfulness of an adulterous wife in his own life—and yet gained strength to deal with her in love and mercy through the wonderful example of the God He served—of the God we all serve.

The people of Israel should not take God's mercy for granted. They still need to repent and the only way this will happen is through immense trial and punishment. But it is out of love for them and the desire to see them turn around that God deals out His discipline.

In the end, repentant and renewed, Israel will at last be restored and wonderfully blessed by God. "The new Israel will have the beauty of the *lily* (cf. Mt. 6:28, 29) and the noble strength and stability of the *poplar* (lit. 'Lebanon'). The *olive* was noted for its shade and its fruit and *Lebanon* for the aroma of its coniferous forests. Christians [likewise] are to be attractive, stable, useful" (*New Bible Commentary: Revised*, notes on Hosea 14:5-6).

The book concludes with a deeply profound statement that all Christians should heed today. Notice this paraphrase of verses 8-9 from the Contemporary English Version:

"Israel, give up your idols! I will answer your prayers and take care of you. I am that glorious tree, the source of your fruit. If you are wise, you will know and understand what I mean. I am the LORD, and I lead you along the right path. If you obey me, we will walk together, but if you are wicked, you will stumble."

## Introduction to Isaiah (Isaiah 1)

March 12

The prophet Isaiah was contemporary with Hosea. They delivered their prophecies during the reigns of the same four kings of Judah (1:1; Hosea 1:1). Hosea also mentions a king of Israel during Uzziah's reign, perhaps because the primary focus of Hosea is the people of the northern kingdom. Isaiah's message is directed toward Judah and Jerusalem, and those nations that interact with them. Yet sometimes, it should be noted, Jerusalem is a reference to all 12 tribes of Israel, as they were at one time united under it. In any case, although the message was relevant for the people of Isaiah's day, it was also written as a prophecy for the *end-time* nation of Judah, Israel and the other nations of the world.

Isaiah's actual calling appears to be recorded in chapter 6, and occurs in the final year of Uzziah's reign. The first five chapters serve as a long introduction to the book. The name "Isaiah" means "The Eternal Saves" or "The Eternal Helps" and the deliverance of Judah and Israel, as well as the gentile nations, is a central theme of the book. Isaiah is called the messianic prophet for an obvious reason—his many wonderful prophecies of the coming Deliverer, the Messiah, and the Messiah's coming reign over all nations. That Messiah would, as all professing Christians understand, be revealed as Jesus Christ. Speaking of Jesus, John 12:41 says that Isaiah "saw His glory and spoke of Him." (Isaiah is quoted or referred to 85 times in the New Testament—from 61 separate passages.)

Isaiah is referred to 13 times as the son of Amoz, which may suggest that his father was a man of some prominence. According to Jewish rabbinic tradition in the Babylonian Talmud, this Amoz was a brother of Judah's King Amaziah. If so, this would make Isaiah first cousin to King Uzziah, and a grandson of King Joash—and thus a man of the palace, being of royal blood. Growing up in such an environment, he would have been familiar with international relations and other affairs of state. According to the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, Isaiah was martyred when King Manasseh, apostate son of Hezekiah, had him fastened between two planks and "sawn asunder" (to which Hebrews 11:37 appears to refer).

"Critical" scholarship—that based in the view that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God nor written when it claims to be—has denied Isaiah's authorship of chapters 40-66. Instead it attributes this section to a later unknown author it calls "Deutero-Isaiah," i.e., "Second Isaiah" though not actually named Isaiah. Others have argued for a third author (Trito-Isaiah) for chapters 55-66. The New Testament, however, quotes from all three sections of the book, attributing each quote to the one biblical prophet Isaiah himself (compare Isaiah 1:9 and Romans 9:29; Isaiah 53:1 and Romans 10:16; Isaiah 65:1 and Romans 10:20).

Why do critics try to post-date Isaiah? *Mainly because Isaiah accurately prophesied future events.* (For example, Isaiah names the Persian ruler Cyrus 200 years before he came to power, Isaiah

44:28; 45:1.) The critics, you see, have a choice: they must either admit that an overseeing supernatural power and intelligence inspired these prophecies or find some other way to explain them. They have gone with the latter solution—redating the prophecies, moving the date of composition forward a few centuries so that the prophecies appear to have been written after all of the prophesied events had already occurred. This has been true of “higher criticism” for most prophetic books.

But with Isaiah, resolution is not achieved by merely pushing the date forward. The critics have had to distort the book—attributing various parts of it to the fraudulent writings of between two and five authors! Why? To understand, we must remember the “fundamental axiom of criticism.” Having decided that a prophet cannot foretell the future, it is essential for the critics that the ‘pseudo-author’ be writing for his own generation. Starting with this assumption, the scholar then looks to history for a historical context into which each prophet can be fit. But that alone doesn’t work with Isaiah, as there is no historical situation into which the book as a whole can be squeezed (i.e., Isaiah appears to have been writing across multiple generations and periods). The answer? Isaiah had to be sawn asunder! Applying literary criticism, a “first Isaiah” is supposedly distinguished from a “second Isaiah”—and a “second” from a “third”—solely on the basis of changes in writing style.

But writing style isn’t the real crux of the matter. Nothing definite can be determined by counting particles, articles, conjunctions or any other “characteristic traits” of a person’s writing. The fact is that an accomplished author’s writing style will change over the years, and with the subject matter—so evidence based on writing style is tenuous. To illustrate the problem, modern computer-based literary analysis has mistakenly claimed that Ian Fleming didn’t write *James Bond*, and that the works of the 20th-century writers Graham Greene and G.K. Chesterton had “more than one author.” So literary variation can’t legitimately be the main reason for the critics’ determination. Clearly, the real criteria for breaking Isaiah down into sections are the fulfilled prophecies it contains. No one, they assume, could have written them as “prophecies.” And anyone who wrote them as “histories” had to have been present in several eras of Israelite history.

### **“Though Your Sins Are Like Scarlet...” (Isaiah 1)**

**Mar. 12 Cont’d**

As the book opens, we see in the first chapter God’s utter exasperation with Judah and Jerusalem. The message here is directed primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah, as only Jewish kings are mentioned (verse 1), the “faithful city” (Jerusalem) is reprimanded (verses 21-26) and the sacrificial temple system is discussed. The sacrificial system has ceased to serve its purpose of focusing the people on God and the need for righteousness (compare Micah 6:6-8). Indeed, the people display a form of religiosity—yet it is form without substance (compare 2 Timothy 3:5).

Those with antinomian—anti-law—mindsets often twist verses 13 and 14 to support their contention that Jesus Christ came to earth to abrogate God’s laws. They would interpret these verses to mean that the observance of God’s Sabbath and festivals were never worth much in the first place. But such a misinterpretation contradicts much of the rest of the Old Testament and New Testament. The point here is that the character of the people has degenerated to the point that the manner in which they keep the Sabbath and religious festivals has become offensive to God. Their attitudes and approach had so degenerated that the Holy Day observances were hardly recognizable to God as having originated with Him. They were no longer *His* feasts, but the wayward *people’s* feasts. Indeed, besides observing God’s true festivals in a wrong manner and attitude, Israel had even instituted its own substitute holidays and participated in pagan observances. And the people of the modern nations of Israel have followed in the same course—both in practice and attitude. Note the combination of “iniquity” (lawlessness and evil) and “the sacred meeting”—what incongruity, hypocrisy and blasphemy!

Because of the people’s defiance, we see that God has ceased listening to their prayers. This is a theme echoed through many of the prophets. Neither the leaders nor the general populace are properly executing righteous judgment and relieving those who are oppressed. God will not accept such hypocrisy.

Such conditions exist even today. In the United States, for example, spirituality is widely sought—yet most of those seeking it pursue *everything but* God’s actual truth and live in increasing disobedience to Him. Yet God pleads with His people to change—and promises that someday, whatever it takes, they ultimately will.

The word pictures of Isaiah 1, as in much of Isaiah, are powerful and memorable. The metaphors of an owner (verse 3) and of sickness and injuries (verses 5-6), and the similes of total forgiveness

(verse 18) are famous passages, although most of the world has not responded to the important lessons.

### **Swords to Plowshares (Isaiah 2)**

**March 13**

One of the other contemporaries of Isaiah and Hosea is Micah, whose prophetic book we will be reading from soon. The well-known passage that begins Isaiah 2 is repeated in Micah 4, although Micah adds another element, as we will later see. The prophecy in both passages concerns the establishment of the “mountain of the LORD’s house” (Isaiah 2:2). Though at times literal, mountains in prophecy are often symbolic of kingdoms or governments (compare Daniel 2:35, 44). The mountain of God’s house being established above the mountains and hills thus represents the Kingdom of God taking control over the kingdoms and smaller nations of this world, when a voice in heaven will announce, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” (Revelation 11:15).

Outside the United Nations headquarters in New York stands a famous statue of a man beating his sword into a plowshare. Indeed, “Swords to plowshares” is a popular UN motto. But the international organization has not really even *begun* to recast the world’s implements of war into farming tools or other peaceful equipment. In fact, as much as ever, the world is frantically beating plowshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears (Joel 3:10). The efforts of a wayward mankind will not bring about world peace. Rather, as Isaiah later attests to God of Christ’s return to this earth, “LORD, *You* will establish peace *for us*” (Isaiah 26:12). But it will not come instantaneously. Rather, as Isaiah 2:4 and other scriptures show (compare Zechariah 14:16-19), it will take some time to break the hardhearted recalcitrance of humanity. Yet it *will* be accomplished.

From the Messiah’s future throne in Jerusalem, which will be the new capital of the world, the Word of God will be proclaimed to all the earth (Isaiah 2:3), including “the law”—*God’s* law. Most of modern Christendom holds to the inconsistent and incoherent teaching that God does not require obedience to His laws in this age, in spite of the myriad scriptures showing that Christ confirmed, amplified and emphasized these laws during His earthly ministry and that He will enforce them throughout the entire earth after He returns in power and glory.

There is a constant shifting in Isaiah between the problems of the nations due to their wickedness and the promises of the glorious future that will occur once God has corrected the problems and mankind as a whole is taught to live by His laws. While chapter 2 begins with the description of peace to come, it soon returns to the chastisement of Israel for letting their wealth, military might and idols fill them with pride—for which God will humble them (verses 5-22).

Indeed, two major recurring themes in Isaiah are how disgusted God is with the “proud and lofty” and His abhorrence of oppression of the weak through might. The arrogant and tyrannical of this world are in for a rude awakening. They will be brought low and humbled when the omnipotent God “arises to shake the earth mightily” (verses 19, 21). Godly leaders use authority to *serve* those under their charge, just as Jesus later taught the early leaders of the Church of God.

### **Punishment and Eventual Restoration (Isaiah 3–4)**

**March 14**

These chapters appear to be a continuation of the prophecy started in chapter 2. God will remove the people’s food (3:1) and their leadership (verses 2-15). With immature, incompetent and inexperienced rulers (“babes,” verse 4) and everyone oppressing or seeking selfish advantage over each other (verse 5), a state approaching anarchy will prevail. The people will turn to those who appear outwardly successful (verse 6). But they either simply don’t want to get involved or, perhaps, are themselves overwhelmed by the increasing mess (verses 6-8).

By the look in the eyes of the people, along with their words and deeds, it is clear that they are arrogant and defiant against God and His law—indeed, brazenly and shamelessly as Sodom (verses 8-9)—and they will reap what they sow (verses 10-11; compare Galatians 6:7-8). The immature leaders lead the people astray and exploit the poor (verses 12-15). The “daughters of Zion” are vain, haughty and wanton, obsessed with appearance, fashion and materialism, drawing undue attention to themselves (verse 16). While perhaps a literal reference to the women, this may also be a figurative reference to Israel and Judah in general. Sadly, they will get more attention than they seek—as we see them left stripped and violated in fitting repayment of their anti-God moral revolution (verses 17-26). Verse 17 could imply sexually transmissible diseases.

Isaiah 4:1 may indicate a lack of children, as was prophesied of Israel by Hosea (compare Hosea 9:11-16). The verse seems to imply that there will be a lack of husbands and fathers—perhaps because many men die or because very few men will commit to marriage and family in the dire circumstances into which society will ultimately crumble.

Verses 2-6 give the wonderful hope of the future Kingdom of God—the promises of good times to come once God has cleaned up the people. “The Branch of the LORD” is here a dual reference—both to the earth yielding its fruit and to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, a “branch” of the family of David, yielding spiritual fruit (compare 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8; John 15:1-8). War-racked Jerusalem will, in the glorious age of Christ’s 1,000-year reign over the earth (compare Revelation 20:4-6), finally see true peace and safety.

This future age is pictured in the observance of God’s Feast of Tabernacles (see Leviticus 23:33-43 and our booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*). And at that time, the inhabitants of Zion will dwell beneath the tabernacle of the cloud and fire—the same that led Israel through the wilderness as they trekked to their permanent home (Exodus 13:20-22; 40:34-38; Numbers 9:15-23). The cloud and fire gave constant reassurance of God’s presence plus practical shade in the day and light at night.

A tabernacle represents a temporary dwelling. And even the millennial Jerusalem will be a temporary dwelling—as its inhabitants will await the permanent habitation of the New Jerusalem that will follow the Millennium (compare Revelation 21–22). Yet the millennial Jerusalem will become the most dazzlingly beautiful temporary dwelling imaginable. And the millennial age will be, in essence, one long and increasingly expanding “Feast of Tabernacles”—wherein the *actual* Feast of Tabernacles will be observed year by year, first in Jerusalem and eventually throughout the whole world (Zechariah 14:16-19).

### **Song of the Vineyard and Impending Woes (Isaiah 5)**

**March 15**

God begins this chapter with a song of Israel as a vineyard. This analogy is used elsewhere in Scripture as well (compare Psalm 80:8, 14, 15; Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1; Matthew 21:33-46). “It is a mournful song indeed,” notes *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, “as God laments the necessary abandonment of the ‘garden of His delight,’ the people He has cared for so patiently” (Isaiah 5 chapter summary). Despite His loving care, the people bring forth not the pleasing fruit of righteousness, but the bitter fruit of sin. So six “woes” follow—indictments of those “who monopolize land ownership (vv. 8-10), live profligate [unrestrained, self-indulgent] lives (vv. 11-17), make evil their life’s work (vv. 18-20), distort [the definitions of] good and evil (v. 20), are self-important [believing themselves wise] (v. 21), and corrupt justice (vv. 22-25)” (same note).

Verse 10 illustrates how unproductive the land would become. Estimates of the modern equivalent of a bath vary, but a number of sources give it as six gallons (22 liters). This is not much of a yield from 10 acres. Even more dramatic, a homer of seeds (about six bushels full) would produce only one ephah—a tenth of a homer (compare Ezekiel 45:11) or just over half a bushel—of produce. Yet worse punishment lay in store for this nation in rebellion against God.

The moral failure of Judah, and the house of Israel, can be seen today as well. Calling evil good and good evil (verse 20) is an earmark of our day. Adherence to God’s definition of right and wrong is now called intolerance. Traditional values are labeled backward and repressive. The patriarchal family is called chauvinistic. Opposition to the murder of the unborn is branded anti-choice or restricting a woman’s freedom. Rejection of homosexuality is called homophobia, hatemongering and bigotry. On the other side, an acceptance of all views except the belief in absolute truth is referred to as being open-minded, accepting and understanding. The denigration and marginalizing of husbands and fathers is called equality. Promiscuity and perversity of every form is lauded as freedom and self-expression. Homosexuality itself is simply an “alternate lifestyle.” Support for abortion is labeled pro-choice. And what amounts to murder of the elderly or infirm is called euthanasia (or “good death”).

For their arrogant rebellion, viewing their way as better and more righteous than that defined in God’s law of true love, God’s anger burned against the people of ancient Judah and Israel. Just so, His anger burns against our societies today. His anger, of course, is different from that which a human ruler might feel at subjects who don’t keep his word. Ego taints human anger. But God’s anger is because people are hurting themselves and each other. They are so wrongheaded and stubborn that He has to take drastic action to bring them around to change. And as He brought foreign armies to carry out His judgment on the people back then—so will He do in our future. Though it was apparently not yet an accomplished fact when Isaiah wrote the words, it was, in the eyes of God, as certain as done. That’s why the captivity of the people is recorded in the past tense (verse 13), even though it appears that it had not yet happened. For God calls “those things which be not [yet] as though they were” (Romans 4:17).

**Isaiah Sees the Lord and His Seraphim; Monarchies in****Transition (Isaiah 6; 2 Kings 15:25-28, 6-7; 2 Chronicles 26:22-23)****March 16**

Here we read the story of Isaiah's calling in the year Uzziah died. As with Ezekiel some years later (see Ezekiel 1; 10), Isaiah sees a vision of God on a throne, attended by spirit beings, at the heavenly temple. These angelic spirits, identified as seraphim, could be a different class or type of angel from the cherubim in Ezekiel. The seraphim are not described extensively, except that they have six wings instead of Ezekiel's four. However, these beings may not be so different after all.

The word *seraph* has been left untranslated here. It literally means "burning one." Yet it is rendered elsewhere in Scriptures as "fiery serpent," indeed with another word later in the book of Isaiah as "fiery flying serpent" (14:29; 30:6; compare Numbers 21:6, 8; Deuteronomy 8:15). Notice Numbers 21:6 in the Tanakh, the newer Jewish Publication Society translation of the Holy Scriptures: "The LORD sent *seraph* serpents against the people." It is commonly thought that fiery (i.e., burning) serpents connotes the sting of their bites. Yet it may actually refer to the reflective quality of their glassy scales, by which they are *shiny*. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for serpent, *nachash*, literally means "shining one." Indeed, a literal translation of Numbers 21:6 would be: "And sent Yahweh among the people the shining ones, the burning ones, and they bit the people." And notice verse 8 in the Tanakh: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard.'" And Moses made a bronze *nachash* or serpent (verse 9). In fact, the word for bronze is another form of *nachash*, apparently because of its shiny quality. In any case, it appears that *seraph* and *nachash* are interchangeable terms (see also E.W. Bulinger, *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 19).

What then of the seraphim Isaiah sees? According to *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, "it may imply either a serpentine form (albeit with wings, human hands, and voices) or beings that have a 'glowing' quality about them" (1985, Old Testament Section, "To Burn"). Of course, every angel, it should be noted, is a shining being of light (compare Revelation 10:1), described as a "flame of fire" (Hebrews 11:7). All of this is rather interesting when we consider that Satan is referred to in Scripture as a serpent and even a "fiery red dragon" (Revelation 12:4, 9). This seems too much like "fiery flying serpent" (i.e., *seraph*) to be mere coincidence. And yet Satan is distinctly referred to in Ezekiel 28:14-16 as a cherub. Perhaps, then, a cherub and a seraph are the same thing. Granted, there do appear to be a few minor differences between the creatures Isaiah and Ezekiel saw—and later the apostle John (compare Revelation 4:6-8). In that case, perhaps cherubim are a class of seraphim, yet different from the class Isaiah saw. However, it could be that Ezekiel's cherubim were actually the same creatures Isaiah saw, but viewed in a different activity so that Ezekiel did not see the extra pair of wings Isaiah and John did. Or perhaps these creatures are capable of shape shifting even in the spirit realm—sometimes having six wings and sometimes four, sometimes having four faces and sometimes one. Though we may not be able to ascertain a reason for this, we should not suppose it out of the question—since righteous angels are even able to appear to us as human beings, which is not their natural form.

In any case, the main focus of Isaiah's vision was not the seraphim. It was the One they praised—the King, the Eternal God of Hosts. Hearing such wonderful praise for God, Isaiah knew painfully well that he was the only one there who did not, and had not his whole life, uttered such praise. He knew that he was a sinner whose life had not honored God. His speech had no doubt been wrong and impure on many an occasion. But with a coal from the altar, Isaiah was symbolically cleansed, illustrating that God forgave his sins. This should remind us that all sin is forgiven only through sacrifice—indeed, through *one* sacrifice—for the sacrifices on the temple altar pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, only with a censer of burning coals from the altar could Israel's high priest enter the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement—using it to burn holy incense, producing a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke representing the prayers of God's people (Leviticus 16:12-13; compare Revelation 5:8). Thus, God seems to have granted Isaiah a *personal* atonement or reconciliation with Him, in which the prophet appeared, through vision and prayer of cleansed lips, in God's very throne room. And like Isaiah, we too can, through repentance and prayer, "come boldly before the throne of grace" by the same sacrifice (Hebrews 4:16; 9:6-14).

Isaiah is then permitted to participate in the heavenly court. God is looking for a "volunteer" to carry His message to Judah, and Isaiah is willing after God cleanses him. But in a warning cited several times in the New Testament (Isaiah 6:9-10; compare Matthew 13:14-15; John 12:37-41; Acts 28:24-29), it is to be a message God knows they will not heed. Indeed, He pronounces utter devastation and national captivity (Isaiah 6:11-12). Yet, while ancient Israel and Judah were invaded

and the people taken captive, their cities were not, for the most part, utterly devastated (save for Jerusalem eventually and a few other major settlements)—and the people *still today* have not truly heeded Isaiah’s words—indicating that this prophecy is primarily a reference to coming *end-time* devastation (compare Ezekiel 6:6).

Isaiah 6:13 is translated awkwardly in the New King James Version. It is easier to follow in the Living Bible’s paraphrase: “Yet a tenth—a remnant—will survive [following the captivity of the previous verse]; and though Israel is invaded again and again and destroyed, yet Israel will be like a tree cut down, whose stump still lives to grow again.” This parallels Amos 5:3, which is addressed to the house of Israel. While two thirds of the modern descendants of Israel and Judah apparently will die initially from war and famine in the end time, another third will evidently be taken into captivity (compare Ezekiel 5:12, which we will examine in more detail when we come to it in our reading). And of that last third, these verses seem to say that only a tenth will remain to flourish anew and multiply under the rule of Jesus Christ.

As mentioned above, Isaiah was called the same year that Uzziah (or Azariah) of Judah died (ca. 740 B.C.). Uzziah’s son Jotham then became chief ruler (*his* son Ahaz apparently assisting him as coregent)—although Jotham had already been functioning as king for 12 years while his father Uzziah remained in seclusion with his leprosy. Furthermore, this was the same year that Pekahiah of Israel was replaced, in yet another northern kingdom coup, by Pekah. This usurper reigned over Israel from around 740 B.C. until his death around 732 B.C. But since a reign of 20 years is attributed to him (2 Kings 15:27), it is evident that he must have reigned as king for 12 years prior “in his own district during the unsettled days of Shallum, Menahem, and Pekahiah (752-740 B.C.)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 15:27). Pekah will cause some grief to Judah, as we will soon see. But more importantly, it is his reign that will witness the beginning of the end for Israel.

### **Reign of Jotham (2 Kings 15:32-37; 2 Chronicles 27:1-8)**

**March 17**

Jotham was a fairly good and successful king, following the positive example set by his father Uzziah and avoiding his father’s big mistake. But the wickedness of the people continued. Still, Jotham re fortified Judah, as the Assyrians and other possible enemies were increasingly a threat. He reasserted control over Ammon, which had apparently broken free of its tributary status under Uzziah. And he became a “mighty” ruler. Finally, it is explicitly stated that God enabled all this because Jotham “prepared his ways before the LORD his God” (2 Chronicles 27:6).

Jotham, we are told, reigned for 16 years (2 Kings 15:33), including a 12-year coregency with his father Uzziah. Yet verse 30 mentions Jotham’s 20th year. So it would appear that Jotham, four years before that 20th year, turned the rule of the nation over to his son Ahaz, who would prove to be a wicked king. It was apparently sometime during these four years—when Ahaz was sole king even though Jotham was still alive—that God began to allow Syria under Rezin and Israel under Pekah to begin menacing Judah (2 Kings 15:37), a turn of events we’ll see more about in an upcoming reading.

### **Introduction to Micah (Micah 1)**

**March 18**

During Jotham’s days, God sent yet another prophet in addition to Hosea and Isaiah. Micah, who prophesied during the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, seems to have preached in Judah as well, but his message involves the northern kingdom more directly than Isaiah’s work did (compare Micah 1:1). And unlike Isaiah, who apparently grew up with connections to royalty, Micah grew up far from the court life of Jerusalem—in the rural village of Moresheth Gath (verses 1, 14), also known as Maresha (verse 15), in the Judean lowlands near Philistia.

Nevertheless, many of his themes, actions and examples echo those of Isaiah. Compare, for example, Micah 1:8 with Isaiah 20:2-4—and Micah 1:9 with Isaiah 1:5-6. Micah also gives important details about the coming Messiah, as Isaiah did. And Micah 4:1-5 is nearly identical to Isaiah 2:1-4. Whether Micah borrowed this passage from Isaiah or vice versa, or both of them wrote it independently of the other, one thing is certain: God inspired both of them in any case.

### **Micah Announces Judgment (Micah 1)**

**Mar. 18 Cont’d**

Micah announces that judgment is swiftly bearing down on Samaria, the capital of Israel. Yet this is not addressed to Israel directly. Rather, the prophecy is to all the peoples of the earth (1:2). They are to observe the punishment that is coming on God’s people. This is to serve as a warning that a holy God will not let sin go unpunished. Even believers today must heed this warning. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 11:19-22: “You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off [i.e., physical Israelites were rejected from being God’s chosen people] that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief [and resultant disobedience, compare Hebrews 3:18-19] they were broken off, and

you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, *if you continue in His goodness*. Otherwise you also will be cut off.”

Of course, God always acts in love, even when He has to use a heavy hand. He enhances the natural negative consequences of sinful action to bring home the realization that people hurt themselves and others by their wrongdoing. His motive is to stir people to repent—that is, to change the way they live, in order that they might receive His full benefits. But let us not allow this realization to minimize the terrible punishment coming on the descendants of Israel—which will indeed be unimaginably severe, as this is what will be required to bring them to repentance. And this is to be an example to all nations.

Certainly, the people of *Judah* should have awakened to the impending danger, which was also a threat to *them* (Micah 1:9). As *The Nelson Study Bible* notes: “With skillfully written wordplays on the names of Judah’s cities, Micah prophesied of the coming destruction of Judah (1:3-16). He turned around the meaning of a number of town names as a way of describing the world being turned upside down. Shaphir, meaning ‘Beautiful,’ would be shamed (1:11); and Jerusalem, a name suggesting ‘Peace,’ would be disrupted (1:12). Lachish, a name sounding like the Hebrew word for *swift steeds*, would flee on its horses. All the agitation was caused by God’s judgment on Judah for worshiping other gods on the high places. In fact, idolatry was so rampant that Micah describes Jerusalem and Samaria, the capital cities of Judah and Israel, as high places themselves (1:5)” (“Geographical Puns in Micah,” 1997, p. 1503).

We will read the rest of Micah in harmony with the Kings and Chronicles accounts of the reign of Jotham’s grandson, King Hezekiah.

### **First Syro-Ephraimite War (2 Kings 16:1-4; 2 Chronicles 28:1-25)**

**March 19**

“In his private ‘museum,’” says the book *The Bible Is History*, “the London antiquities collector Shlomo Moussaieff has... a clay seal impression. It is less than half an inch wide, with an inscription set on three lines reading [in Hebrew letters]: *’l’hz.y/hwtm.mlk.yhdh,*’ which translates as ‘Belonging to Ahaz (son of) Yehotam (i.e. Jotham) King of Judah.’ From scientific analysis there is general agreement that it is genuinely derived from the Biblical King Ahaz’s time, and is thereby the first positively-known seal impression for a Biblical monarch. It even bears on its left edge a fingerprint that may be Ahaz’s own, together with impressions of the texture of the papyrus document it sealed and the string with which this was tied” (Ian Wilson, 1999, p. 154).

The name of Ahaz also occurs in the surviving annals of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, “who specifically boasted of having received tribute from Ahaz, whose name his scribe rendered as Iau-ha-zi, or Yeho-ahaz, showing that its full form, not given in the Bible, included the divine name Yahweh, even though he followed the Biblically-disapproved deviant Canaanitic practices” (p. 155). Of course, we know from the Bible that *Jehoahaz* was a name of other Israelite and Jewish kings. That Ahaz (his name in Scripture and on the seal impression) was a shortened form of Jehoahaz should not surprise us.

Tiglath-Pileser, or Pul, had campaigned westward in 743 B.C., and Israel’s king Menahem (ca. 752-741 B.C.) bought him off with tribute (compare 2 Kings 15:19-20). Indeed, Israel and Syria became tributary states to Assyria. Pekahiah, Menahem’s son, who followed his father on the throne for two years (ca. 741-740 B.C.) probably continued in the tribute. But when Pekah, the son of Remaliah, next came to power in Israel (ca. 740-732 B.C.), he apparently decided to break the chain—as did Rezin of Syria, and the two formed an alliance, which was essentially a rebellion against Assyrian domination. It is then probably because Ahaz (ca. 736-720 B.C.) refuses to join their alliance that they invade Judah to topple him and replace him with their own puppet ruler (compare Isaiah 7:6), thus touching off the brief period historically referred to as the Syro-Ephraimite wars (Ephraim being the leading tribe of Israel and the territory of the capital, Samaria). As noted a few highlights back, 2 Kings 15:37 says the attack began in the days of Jotham, probably during his last four years (ca. 736-732 B.C.) when it appears that Ahaz was already on the throne. Indeed, it must have been during the first two of these years, since it had to precede Tiglath-Pileser’s second western campaign (ca. 734-732 B.C.).

Judah was sorely defeated. In fact, during the siege and battles that take place, 120,000 Jewish troops die in just one day (2 Chronicles 28:6). Many are taken captive to Damascus by the Syrians (verse 5). Still others are taken by the Israelites themselves to be slaves.

Only the intervention of a prophet of God, Oded, put a stop to the nation being stripped of people and property (verses 8-15)—for the time being. This should have been a clue to Ahaz concerning where he ought to have been looking for deliverance. But instead he appeals to Tiglath-Pileser. After all, Pekah and Rezin are fighting Ahaz because he won't join their revolt against Assyria. The Assyrian king does come down to the area. We know from Assyrian records that in 734 B.C., during his second western campaign, Tiglath-Pileser and his forces moved south along the Mediterranean coast all the way to the border with Egypt. This did take care of much of the Philistine problem Ahaz was facing. And from Scripture we see that Ahaz took tribute with him plundered from Judah's national and temple treasuries and the nobility and gave it to the Assyrian king. But, with the fighting over and other matters pressing, Tiglath-Pileser gave no help concerning the Edomites or Ahaz's main problem, Israel and Syria (compare verse 21), which sent Ahaz into a fit of distress. He believed (and rightly so) that, despite the scattering of the Israelite troops over a warning from God, Pekah and Rezin still aimed to depose him and would soon manage to press their forces against him again.

But instead of repenting and asking God for help, Ahaz begins worshiping the gods of the Syrians, who seem so victorious at the moment—saying, in effect, “Because *their* gods *help* them” (compare verse 23), implying, of course, that the true God does not (even though He has just stopped Judah from being wiped out). And Ahaz spitefully defiled the implements of God's worship system.

### “Behold, the Virgin Shall Conceive” (2 Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7)

March 20

Israel and Syria are mounting a new offensive against Judah, either sometime later in 734 B.C. or, more likely, in 733 B.C. (as Assyria invades Israel immediately after, in 733). Isaiah, with his son Shear-Jashub (meaning “Remnant Shall Return”), is sent to meet Ahaz and tell him that the Syro-Ephraimite alliance will not prevail. This was announced not for the sake of Ahaz himself but for the line of David. God would not allow the line of David to be removed at this time. Furthermore, it was time for Israel's national punishment—and this would serve as a warning to all Judah.

Isaiah 7:8 says Ephraim, representative of the northern tribes, would cease to be a people—a visible nation—within 65 years. If the message was delivered around 733 B.C., then this prophecy was given around 11 years before the final fall of Samaria (722 B.C.). And while that *would* fit a time frame of “*within* 65 years,” 65 seems a peculiar number of years to indicate an indefinite period. So where does counting 65 years from 733 B.C. put us? The year 668 B.C. At this time the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.) was succeeded by his son Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.), called Osnapper in the book of Ezra. And these two kings were responsible for resettling the land of the northern kingdom with people from other parts of the Assyrian Empire who became known as Samaritans (compare 2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2, 10)—though they were completing a process that had begun earlier. No doubt there still were a few Israelite escapees left in the land following the Assyrian deportations. But even they were no doubt completely overwhelmed by the introduction of great numbers of foreign settlers. And the Israelite tribal territory names, such as Ephraim, then disappeared from the land. This, then, would seem to be the most likely fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

During the course of the prophecy, Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask for a sign from God that this would happen. When he refuses, God gives His own sign, over which there has been much debate: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel...” (Isaiah 7:14). Throughout Christianity, this is rightly understood to refer to Jesus Christ's supernatural conception in the womb of Mary, who was a virgin at the time of conception—for Matthew 1:23 quotes the prophecy in this regard. However, Jews, who don't believe in the virgin birth of Jesus—or that He even was the Messiah—assign different meanings to the prophecy. And even many Christians allow for a secondary, partial fulfillment that was more immediate to when the prophecy was spoken than was the coming of Christ, which was yet more than 700 years away.

Controversy surrounds the Hebrew expression translated “the virgin,” *ha'alimah*. Some maintain that this word may be translated “young woman of marriageable age.” Yet the early Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, rendered the word as *parthenos*, “a word that has the specific meaning of ‘virgin.’” But what does the Hebrew mean? When all the passages in the Old Testament are investigated, the only conclusion one can come to is that the word means ‘virgin.’ To date, no one has produced a clear context, either in Hebrew or in the closely related Canaanite language from Ugarit (which uses the cognate noun *glmt*), where *'almah* can be applied to a married woman. Moreover, the definite article with this word must be rendered ‘*the* virgin’—a special one God had in mind. Added to this is the question of what would be so miraculous (‘sign’) about a ‘young woman’

having a baby?” (Kaiser, Davids, Bruce and Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 1996, note on Isaiah 7:14).

Yet some fulfillment of this prophecy in Isaiah’s day is still plausible. For it may be that a particular woman was a virgin when Isaiah spoke but would soon marry and bring forth a son. The miraculous sign in this case (and remember that it’s a sign that Ephraim would be gone within 65 years) would not be so much the birth itself—but that Judah’s dreaded enemies, Israel and Syria, would be spoiled lands forsaken by their kings in a very short time, while the child was still an infant. And indeed, Israel and Syria were waylaid within the next couple of years by Assyria.

Some have put forth the possibility that Isaiah was telling Ahaz that Ahaz’s royal wife would bring forth an heir, referring to his illustrious son, the righteous Hezekiah. Of course, this would have to have been a woman not yet married to Ahaz in order to have been a virgin. But the real problem with this idea is that various chronologies of the period reveal that Hezekiah was already born when the prophecy was given—and was even already between 9 and 22 years old. Of course, the reference could still have been to *another* son of Ahaz who was not yet born.

Others believe the reference was to a new son of Isaiah. For, while the prophet already had a son, he fathers another son in the very next chapter, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (meaning “Quick to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil”). And a very similar prophecy to the one in chapter 7 is given about him: “...for before the child shall have knowledge to cry ‘My father’ and ‘My mother,’ the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be taken away before the king of Assyria” (8:4). He even appears to be addressed as “Immanuel” (8:8), although some believe this is a reference to Judah as a whole. In either case, Immanuel (meaning “God With Us”) would refer to God’s intervention and guiding of events. (Incidentally, for the prophesied child of chapter 7 to be Isaiah’s new son of chapter 8, the prophetess of 8:3, the child’s mother, would have to have been a new wife of Isaiah—not the mother of any previous children.)

Given such possibilities, it may be that a child born in Isaiah’s day was part of what God intended by the prophecy of Isaiah 7. But we might wonder why the sign to Ahaz was not simply the soon-coming defeat of Syria and Israel. Why even include the child? And here we come to a much deeper meaning of the prophecy. This sign was not just for Ahaz. It was for the whole “house of David” (verse 13). The Lord, it says, “will give *you* [the Hebrew is plural] a sign...” (verse 14). And as the prophecy concerned the deliverance of God’s people, He gave them the sign of their *ultimate* deliverance—the Son born of the virgin. This Son would be an heir of David. And even beyond that, He would be the *true* Immanuel, for He would be very God made flesh (“Mighty God,” as the “Child...born” and “Son...given” of Isaiah 9:6 is called, which appears to tie directly back to the Son of Isaiah 7:14). Moreover, His coming into the world would be a sign that all dread enemies would one day be no more.

“It is not uncommon,” explains *The Nelson Study Bible*, “to have one level of fulfillment in the immediate future, and a final fulfillment many years later in the person and work of the Savior, Jesus. Thus the pregnancy of Isaiah’s new wife and the birth of her son (8:3) could have been a sign to King Ahaz. However, this would have been *a* fulfillment, not *the* fulfillment. The prophecy was completely fulfilled in the coming of God’s only Son to the earth. He is the only Child who can truly be called Wonderful, Counselor, and Prince of Peace ([again] see 9:6)” (“INDepth: Immanuel,” sidebar on Isaiah 7:14).

Verses 18-25 of chapter 7 may be dual, focusing on the invasions and destruction of Israel in both Isaiah’s time and in the latter days—“in that day” (verses 18, 21, 23).

### “Bind Up the Testimony” (Isaiah 8)

March 21

Chapters 7–12 is a major section of Isaiah containing “a series of prophecies related specifically to the Syro-Ephraimite wars—the invasion of Judah by Rezin and Pekah. These prophecies aimed to call Judah back to faith in God” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 7:1–12:6). Of course, these prophecies have a much broader application than this, but they *were* given in this time frame and no doubt carried some significance for those who heard them. That the prophecy of this chapter is tied to the previous one is most easily discernable from the reference to Immanuel (8:8; compare 7:14). The name means “God With Us,” a phrase repeated in verse 10 as a warning of destruction to all the enemies of God’s people, including Assyria.

Verses 13-15 discuss how Isaiah (and those trying to follow in his steps) was to trust in God who would be his help, but that God would be a stumbling block to Israel and Judah. The apostle Peter later discusses the same subject, and he quotes from this passage in making his point, applying it to Jesus

Christ, who was God in the flesh (1 Peter 2:7-8). Combined with Isaiah 28:16, verse 14 also finds its way into Paul's writings (Romans 9:33).

We then see the words: "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples" (Isaiah 8:16). This may refer back to verse 1, where Isaiah was told to write the prophecy on a scroll. Perhaps Isaiah's followers were to protect and preserve his words. Yet in verse 20 we see the statement: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." Here "the law" is generally understood to refer to the first five books of the Bible, while "the testimony" refers to all Scripture beyond them. "This word," then, is the *Word of God*. If people want to seek God, they must search His Word and heed those who faithfully *teach* and *live by* that Word. Instead, people were looking to paganism and the occult for answers—just as they do today—which was clearly a violation of the law and the testimony (verses 19-20).

Isaiah's book is indeed part of the testimony constituting Holy Scripture. Yet it may be that this prophecy was intended to imply far more than the inclusion of his book. In fact, it would seem to imply the completed written revelation of God, laying down the full requirements of His laws. Perhaps it is *God* speaking in verse 16, saying *His* disciples would seal or complete His revelation to mankind. In that case, this would appear to be referring to God's written revelation being finished by the disciples of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. This seems quite reasonable considering the other prophecies of Christ in immediate proximity.

Verses 17-18, explaining how Isaiah and his children are signs to Israel, are quoted in part in the book of Hebrews (2:13).

### **"Unto Us a Child Is Born" (Isaiah 9:1–10:4)**

**March 22**

Verse 1 makes it clear that this is a continuation of chapter 8, the "gloom" having been brought up in 8:22. Chapter 9 begins with the prophecy of a "great light" upon the lands mentioned, which even Jewish teaching has acknowledged as being a messianic reference. Matthew cited it as being fulfilled by Jesus (Matthew 4:13-16). When the prophecy was written, the northern kingdom territories of Galilee and Naphtali were about to be enslaved and taken captive: "The ancient tribal allotments of Zebulun and Naphtali (Josh. 19:10-16, 32-39), which included Galilee, were the first to feel the brunt of the Assyrian invasions (2 Kin. 15:29). The three phrases at the end of the verse—the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles or 'nations'—indicate administrative districts of the Assyrian conqueror Tiglath-Pileser III as a result of the three campaigns he waged in the west around 733 B.C." (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Isaiah 9:1). The oppression of these lands changed hands over time, in Jesus' day being under the dominion of the Edomite Herods, who themselves were subject to Rome.

A few verses later, it is explained that the reason light will shine upon these lands is the birth of a Child, a Son (verse 6)—seemingly the same Son mentioned in Isaiah 7:14. Yet this is clearly no child of Isaiah the prophet or of anyone else of his day, for this Son is called Mighty God. This, then, is a reference to Jesus Christ alone. Yet some may find the term "Everlasting Father" confusing. Jesus is not God the Father, even though Trinitarians mistakenly argue that they constitute one and the same being while somehow existing as distinct persons. The Father and Son are indeed divine members of the same one God—that is, the one God family—albeit two distinct Beings (see our free booklet *Who Is God?* for a fuller explanation). And some may be surprised to learn that like God the Father, Jesus is the Father of all creation—for God the Father created all things *through* Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:9). This is how Jesus, as God and Creator, was the Father of Adam and thus mankind (compare Luke 3:38). And it is why He is called the Everlasting Father.

In the same passage, that is, Isaiah 9:6-7, we have a perfect example of how a prophecy can skip ahead in time with no obvious indication. For the reference to the Child being born is to Jesus' first coming in human flesh 2,000 years ago, while His rule of a government is a reference to His second coming, which has not yet occurred.

This wonderful promise of the future, however, is followed by a series of four chastisements of Israel for their present disobedience—each ending with the same statement about God's anger we first encountered in Isaiah 5:25: "But His hand is stretched out still." While the unwary people contemplated aggrandizements of their buildings (9:9-10), God had already set events in motion that would carry the people away. The Syrian king Rezin's adversaries (verse 11), the Assyrians, would soon swoop into Israel, with the subjugated Syrians then pressed into Assyrian service (verse 12).

The Israelites would be taken as prisoners of the enemy (10:4). In siege and then captivity, with little food to go around, the Israelites would be set against one another in a fight for survival (9:18-21). The end of verse 21 seems to indicate that Judah is part of this infighting in captivity—though

it is possibly a reference to Israel's former attacks on Judah, for which Israel is being judged. It should be noted that the Assyrians, under a later ruler Sennacherib, did deport vast numbers *from Judah* 20 years after the fall of Samaria—so that many Jews then joined the northern tribes in captivity. Yet the ancient invasion and captivity of Israel and Judah by Assyria, it should be mentioned, was a mere forerunner of end-time events yet to come. That this prophecy has a dual application to the last days appears likely from the description of the *emergence* from captivity at the time of Christ's return (see 11:1–12:6). The ancient captivity of Israel came to an end more than 2,000 years ago—but this was not accompanied by the coming of the Messiah or even a return to dwell and remain in the Promised Land. In fact, the descendants of Israel have *never* returned en masse to the Holy Land. Thus, a captivity ending with the Messiah's coming and a resettlement of the Promised Land must be yet future.

(It should also be noted that only a small percentage of Jews returned from the later Babylonian captivity. The majority remained in Babylon and their descendants later migrated to other lands. Of the small number who did return from Babylon, their descendants were later expelled by the Romans. Thus, for the most part, the Jews of the world have remained scattered. The minority who have returned to the land of Israel in the past century certainly does not fulfill the prophecy of Israel and Judah returning as a whole from captivity at the coming of the Messiah.)

Thus, there *is* a future captivity coming. Let us, therefore, take warning. For as it was in Isaiah's day, God's hand is stretched out still.

### **Assyria, the Rod of God's Anger (Isaiah 10:5-34)**

**March 23**

Again, there is indication that the prophecy is a continuation of the one begun in chapter 7 to Ahaz. Remember that Isaiah was accompanied by his son Shear-Jashub, meaning "Remnant Shall Return." And here we find these very words in 10:21. Similarly, verse 6 contains the phrase "to seize the spoil, to take the prey," which is reminiscent of the name of Isaiah's second son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" ("Quick to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil"), introduced in chapter 8.

Assyria is used by God to punish Israel. Verse 11 states the Assyrian leader's intention to attack and plunder Jerusalem as well as Samaria. As mentioned in the comments on our previous reading, the Assyrians under the later king Sennacherib invaded Judah around 20 years after the fall of Samaria. We will soon go through this episode in detail when we come to it in our regular reading. Sennacherib is successful in destroying and plundering a major portion of Judah. He actually besieges Jerusalem, but in the end God miraculously devastates his army. Isaiah 10 certainly appears to apply to these events.

But there is a broader picture here we should also consider. This chapter seems to flow right into the next one, Isaiah 11, which clearly concerns the end-time return of Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom over all nations. Indeed, as already explained, Isaiah 7–12 seems to be one long, related section of prophecy. Throughout it, we find a number of messianic references, building to a crescendo in the clearly millennial prophecies at the end. All of this provides a basis for looking on much of the prophetic material in these chapters as dual in interpretation—applying to the events of Isaiah's day, but as a forerunner of even greater events that will transpire in the end time. Thus, while God speaks in Isaiah 10 of bringing Assyria against Israel and Judah, he may well have been referring both to the ancient invasions that took place in Isaiah's time *and to another* Assyrian invasion of the end time. Indeed, the next chapter shows Israel returning from Assyrian captivity at Christ's second coming (11:11), so this seems rather likely.

We might ask, then, who are the Assyrians today? The ancient Israelites who were taken into Assyrian captivity eventually migrated into northwest Europe (see our booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more). Likewise, the Assyrians, after their empire fell in 612 B.C., migrated into Europe behind them. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder located the Assyrians north of the Black Sea in his day, the first century A.D. (*Natural History*, Book 4, sec. 12). A few hundred years later, Jerome, one of the post-Nicene Catholic fathers, applied Psalm 83:8 to the Germanic tribes invading western Europe along the Rhine: "For Assur [the Assyrian] also is joined with them" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Letter 123, sec. 16). And of the Germanic peoples, *Smith's Classical Dictionary* states: "There can be no doubt that they...migrated into Europe from the Caucasus and the countries around the Black and Caspian seas" ("Germania," p. 361). Indeed, a significant portion of the Germanic people of Central Europe today appear to be descended from the Assyrians of old. (A more detailed study paper on this subject is currently in the works, though it will not be available for some time.)

To bring divine punishment on the Israelites from a foreign power in Isaiah's day, Assyria was the logical choice. Ancient Assyria, as we've seen, was the preeminent empire of the day. It was also one of the most warlike and imperialistic nations in history. "Its imperialistic ethic was embodied in the Middle Assyrian coronation ritual, in which the officiating priest solemnly charged the king: 'Expand your land!'" ("Assyria," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 1993, p. 63). And lest we think such national motivation is just ancient history, we should remember Adolf Hitler's more recent cries for *lebensraum* ("living space"). Of course, many nations have engaged in imperialism and territorial expansion in modern times. Nevertheless, it is significant that this thread is still found in the modern history of the Assyrian people along with other Europeans. In fact, in the years ahead, a resurgence of imperialism is prophesied to grip the European continent.

Various biblical prophecies show that a European-centered revival of the Roman Empire—called "the Beast" and Babylon—will be the dominant power in the world just prior to the return of Jesus Christ (see Daniel 2, 7, 11; Revelation 13, 17–18). From Isaiah 10 and other prophecies that seem to indicate the Assyrian ruler and people as important players on the end-time scene and as the principal agents of wrath against Israel, it appears that these Central European people will constitute the leading force in the coming power bloc—as was the case in a number of *past* revivals of the Roman "Beast" system. Indeed, it makes even more sense when we realize that they make up around one third of the population of Europe—clearly a dominating force. Yet there certainly will be other national groups making up the coming European empire as well.

Europe's subjugation of the Israelite nations of the end time will be fierce—as a look back at ancient times reveals. Panels from Assyrian archaeological sites depict graphic scenes of the gruesome savagery with which these ancient conquerors treated their subjugated peoples. Even so, God indicates here in Isaiah 10 and in other prophecies, such as Nahum, that the Assyrians of the *end time* will go overboard in *their* harsh treatment of the *modern* Israelites. Indeed, this must be the case since the time of trouble yet to come on the peoples of Israel will be worse than anything that has ever happened before (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:21).

Failing to see themselves as tools in God's hands, His rod of punishment on Israel, the Assyrians arrogantly view their subjugation of Israel as a mere conquest of their own doing in their struggle to take over the world (Isaiah 10:5, 7, 15)—and so it will also be in the end time. The same basic attitude is shown in Habakkuk 1 to be shared by the Babylonian Chaldeans. And, as we will see when we later consider a prophecy of Babylon in Isaiah 13, the Babylonian Chaldeans will make up another significant portion of the latter-day European alliance.

But in considering the problems of the Assyrians and Babylonians, let us not lose the focus that God is severely displeased here with His own people Israel, calling them "an ungodly nation...the people of My wrath" (10:6). Despite the blessings He has showered on them, they flagrantly sin and rebel against Him. That is why God sends these other peoples to deal with them. Afterward, God will punish the Assyrians and Babylonians as well for their arrogance and cruelty—and Israel will at last go free. (Later in Isaiah, we will see Assyria and Israel dwelling happily with one another under the rule of Jesus Christ, 19:24-25.)

The slaughter of Midian in Isaiah 10:26 is a reference to the defeat of the Midianites by Gideon and Israel's release from Midianite oppression (Judges 7:25). The same story was alluded to in Isaiah 9:4. We also see mention of the Red Sea crossing and Israel's release from Egyptian oppression. These are used as types of the release from Assyrian oppression (10:27).

Verses 28-32 are describing a journey from Aiath, or Ai, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem, to Nob, which *overlooks* Jerusalem. Indeed, each city listed is one step closer to the Jewish capital. This describes the terror of the inhabitants of those areas as the Assyrian forces inexorably march on Jerusalem. Though disputed, this could be the route Sennacherib's invasion would take. (We do know that he plundered a large part of Judah.) But it could also describe the final advance of a future Assyrian commander on Jerusalem from the gathering place at Megiddo in the north of Israel (compare Revelation 16:14-16; 19:19; Zechariah 14:12). In either case, God will destroy the enemy (Isaiah 10:33-34).

### **Ushering in World Peace; the Second Exodus (Isaiah 11–12)**

**March 24**

This wonderful section concludes the prophecies begun in chapter 7 relating to the Messiah. With the power of God's Spirit, He will judge the earth, establish righteousness and bring to reality the dream of ages, world peace—even throughout the whole of nature, transforming the world into an Edenic paradise (compare Isaiah 51:3; Ezekiel 36:35).

Indeed, Isaiah 11:6-9 explains that the very nature and perhaps even physiology of many animals will be changed, thus requiring, it would seem, a restructuring of the global ecosystem. Isaiah repeats this amazing prophecy in Isaiah 65:25. But, it should be noted, the animals here may well also be symbolic of the nations of the world, with their peacefully dwelling together representing an end of war between people. The lamb, kid, calf, fatling, ox and cow are often used in Scripture to symbolize the generally peace-loving Israelite peoples. The wolf (the wild dog-kind) may be a reference to the descendants of Esau or to certain other Arabs (the Edomite Herod was referred to as a fox by Christ in Luke 13:32). And the great cats (leopard and lion) and the bear are used in Daniel 7 to symbolize great gentile kingdoms. These parallels are perhaps most clearly seen in Jeremiah 5:6, where the lion, wolf and leopard are widely understood to represent Israel's enemies. In God's millennial reign the wild nature of the "beasts" among men will be changed, as was figuratively portrayed by Nebuchadnezzar when he (the Babylonian lion, compare Daniel 2 and 7) was made to eat grass with the oxen (4:33).

Isaiah 11:9 dramatically foretells the time when the knowledge of God will be universal. Just as there are no gaps in the oceans where water doesn't flow, not a single individual will be missed by Jesus Christ and His glorified saints as they educate and evangelize the world. Paul loosely paraphrases verse 10 in his letter to the gentile Romans to show *their* inclusion in God's Kingdom (Romans 15:12).

Isaiah 11:11 describes the wonderful second Exodus that will follow the end-time captivity of Israel and Judah. The people are shown returning from these locations: Assyria (designating Central Europe in the end-time context of this prophecy); Egypt; Pathros (southern Egypt); Cush (Sudan and Ethiopia or perhaps greater parts of Africa); Elam (which could denote Iran or perhaps, based on end-time settlement, Eastern Europe); Shinar (Mesopotamia and, therefore, Iraq, northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey); Hamath (in northwestern Syria); and "the islands of the sea." This last location could also be translated "coastlands of the sea" (NRSV). It is understood to mean from all around the world. When we compare this prophecy with others showing the end-time Israelites dwelling in the "isles afar off" (Jeremiah 31:10; see 41:1, 8-9) and that God will bring them back "from the coasts of the earth" (31:7-9), this last location in Isaiah 11:11 must denote their latter-day homelands—the British Isles, Northwest Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the United States.

Putting this account together with other passages, it is evident that most of the Israelites who are still alive when their countries are conquered and invaded will be carried away captive to other lands soon before Christ's return. Notice again that those returning from their homelands are listed last—evidently the minority. Assyria is mentioned *first*—as the place of captivity. So why are other lands mentioned? As was noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Hosea 9, two major factors will likely contribute to the scattering of captive Israelites throughout what appear to be Muslim territories. First, Revelation 18:11-13 shows that end-time Babylon, of which modern Assyria will be a leading player, will engage in slave trade, no doubt of the captive Israelites and perhaps other peoples. Second, since the end-time European ruler, known in Daniel 11 as the "king of the North," will sweep down and occupy a number of Muslim territories (verses 40-43), it seems likely that the Europeans will set up military bases and labor camps in these areas and then ship down Israelite slave labor from Europe to work at them. Of course, it could also be that some Israelites and Jews will be taken captive by Muslim powers even before the final European invasion.

Isaiah 11:12-14 shows the Israelites returning to take back the Holy Land. Verses 15-16 describe the return as a miraculous one, guided by God with great power as He led the Israelites out of Egypt of old. Again, God will smite the Red Sea but this time also "the River"—commonly understood to mean the Euphrates—as His people will be returning to the Promised Land from both the south *and* the north. Thus, there will be a highway—an unimpeded path—for those coming from both directions.

Chapter 12 is very short, but contains the beautiful scripture, "Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (verse 3)—pointing ultimately to the offering of God's Spirit to all mankind (compare 44:3; John 7:37-39).

Furthermore, Isaiah 12 is one of many passages in the Bible that exhort us to worship God with music and singing (verses 5-6). In fact, the Bible shows that one of the most important uses of music should be to worship God. Today, with modern recording and playback technology, there is more listening to music (which can be fine and good depending on the music), but regrettably there is much less singing and *making* music. And sadly, only a very small percentage of music is sacred music—music that is reverential to God. And not all of that is even biblically accurate in lyrics, with

so-called gospel or Christian music—and even many church hymns—often misrepresenting God’s Word. It is as important to *sing* the truth as it is to *speak* the truth.

Finally, notice this interesting phrase in verse 2: “For YAH, the LORD, is my strength and song [or “song of strength”]; He also has become my salvation.” The same words are found in Exodus 15:2 and Psalm 118:14, which means that they occur in each of the three parts of the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Often a stirring melody or rousing anthem is able to strengthen and encourage us. Yet in nothing will we experience greater strengthening than in God Himself.

(Incidentally, some take the reference to the Hebrew “YAH” and similar scriptural references as proof that this or the fuller form Yahweh—or some variant spelling of the word—is how we must always refer to God. But this is not biblical. We have a free reprint article on the subject of sacred names for those who wish to study the matter further.)

### **Assyrian Invasion and First Israelite Deportation (2 Kings 16:6-9; 15:29-31;**

**1 Chronicles 5:23-26; 2 Kings 17:1-2; 16:10-18; 15:38; 2 Chronicles 27:9) March 25**

We learned at the beginning of Isaiah’s prophecy to Ahaz that Pekah and Rezin would not succeed in overthrowing the Jewish king (Isaiah 7:7). But it turned out far worse for them than that.

Syria managed to expel the Jews from Elath in the south of Judah on the Gulf of Aqaba—enabling Edomite raiders to take it over. But thereafter Syria was doomed.

God had said through Isaiah that Assyria would destroy Israel and Syria. Perhaps this encouraged Ahaz to make another appeal to Tiglath-Pileser III. If so, it was superstition rather than trust in God. For if he had trusted in God, he would have made no appeal to Assyria at all—particularly when Isaiah had warned that Assyria was a threat to Judah as well.

Again he sends tribute. And this time Assyria helps him. But it would have happened anyway, as God had already ordained it.

In 733 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser made the second offensive thrust of his second western campaign—and he made a third and final thrust the next year, in 732. In these two invasions, Israel and Syria suffered terrible defeat, with most of their populations being carried away captive. “It was ancient practice [by empires such as Assyria] to deport large numbers of influential citizens of a conquered country or city to decrease the possibility of rebellion (see [2 Kings] 25:11, 12; Ezek. 1:2, 3)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 17:5-6).

Based on the locations given in 2 Kings 15:29 (likely the record of the 733 campaign), this first of Israel’s two national captivities (the second came a decade later), is known as the “Galilean Captivity.” It involved massive deportation over a huge area—from Galilee, the Plain of Sharon to the west, and, as shown in 1 Chronicles 5:26 (likely the record of the 732 campaign), territory across the Jordan to the east. In fact, this was around three fourths of the territory of the northern kingdom, so that only a small “rump state” around the capital city, Samaria, remained intact.

Stated Tiglath-Pileser in his records: “...Bet Omri [that is, the House of Omri, the Assyrian name for Israel] all of whose cities I had added to my territories on the former campaigns, and had left out only the city of Samaria.... The whole of Naphtali I took for Assyria. I put my officials over them as governors. The land of Bet Omri, all its people and their possessions I took away to Assyria.”

The account in 1 Chronicles 5 states that the deported Israelites were taken to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river of Gozan (verse 26). These places were located in Assyria in northern Mesopotamia, in what is now southeast Turkey, northeast Syria and northern Iraq (see Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 1977, pp. 96-97). In fact, scholars identify Hara as Haran, the city in which Abraham dwelt and where most of his family remained (also where Isaac’s wife Rebekah came from and where Jacob lived, married and fathered his sons before God sent him back to the Promised land). So when God expelled the Israelites from the Promised Land, He sent them back to the land from where their forebears had come!

This, then, was the beginning of the end for Israel. And it was *the* end for Pekah and Rezin. For in 732 B.C. both rulers were killed. In fact, Tiglath-Pileser’s campaign seems to have spawned a pro-Assyrian faction in Israel (of the mentality that says, “I want to be on the winning side, whichever side that is”). It was in this way that Pekah was assassinated and replaced by Hoshea. The new usurper apparently received some encouragement, and possibly help, in the deed. Tiglath-Pileser’s annals record, “They [the Israelites] overthrew their king Pekah and I placed Hosea as king over them” (quoted by Wilson, *The Bible Is History*, p. 155).

The northern kingdom, or what was left of it, was now on its last legs.

In Judah, Ahaz's apostasy only worsened. Instead of acknowledging God for the overthrow of his enemies, Ahaz presented himself before the Assyrian king in Damascus as a tributary subject. And while there, he sent instructions home to Jerusalem for building a replica of an impressive pagan altar he saw in the Syrian capital to replace the bronze altar at the temple of God. God's altar is then shoved aside—and the pagan altar put in its place. Yes—even after Syria's defeat at the hands of Assyria. These and many other activities continued to provoke God to anger, and eventually helped to bring about the destruction of the Jewish nation.

During all these events, Jotham, Ahaz's father, has apparently remained alive, as we see that Hoshea replaces Pekah during Jotham's 20th year (2 Kings 15:30). However, this is four years beyond Jotham's 16-year reign (verse 33). Evidently Jotham had abdicated in favor of his son four years prior. Perhaps he was infirm and unable to govern. He may even have been isolated and unaware of the troubles of the kingdom. Or perhaps, though weakened and powerless, he was teaching Ahaz's son Hezekiah, his grandson, the need to turn the nation back to the true God. In any case, Jotham likely died soon after the events we just read about, as there is no indication he is around three years later when Hezekiah becomes coregent and the record of his death mentions only Ahaz reigning in his place.

### **Dating Hezekiah's Reforms (2 Kings 18:1-3; 2 Chronicles 29)**

**March 26**

In our previous reading, we learned of the Assyrian campaign in which most of the populace of the northern kingdom of Israel was deported (733-732 B.C.). Later, we will read, in 2 Kings 17, of the final fall of Samaria around 722 B.C., when the rest of the northern kingdom is deported.

We come now to the reign of Ahaz's son, the righteous King Hezekiah. There is some debate over the chronological placement of Hezekiah's reforms and great Passover observance. There are many chronological difficulties in sorting out the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah. We examine this particular matter now for two reasons. First, to explain why we are presently skipping over the fall of Samaria and Israel's second captivity in 2 Kings 17 and are proceeding to the reign of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18.

Second, many contend that the significant presence of Israelites in the northern tribal territories at the time of Hezekiah's Passover (2 Chronicles 30) proves that the final Assyrian deportation of Israel left many people in the land—and that it was through them, later commingled with the Jews, that God would fulfill the national promises made to Abraham. Yet this notion is based upon an apparent *misdating* of Hezekiah's Passover—for that Passover likely came *before* the fall of Samaria, as we will see.

The discussion that follows can become somewhat tedious because of all the dates and lengths of years given. It is presented here for the sake of substantiation and for those who are interested.

Let us consider, then, the dating of Hezekiah's reign. Two decades after the fall of Samaria, in 701 B.C., the Assyrian Empire will make an assault on *Judah*, carrying away much of *its* citizenry. This event is biblically dated to the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign (2 Kings 18:13), meaning Hezekiah's reign began around 715 B.C. Also, "in those days" (20:1)—apparently the days of Assyria's attack on Judah, as we will later read—God tells Hezekiah that he will live 15 more years (verse 6). Thus it appears that Hezekiah's death must have come around 686 B.C. And since we are told that Hezekiah reigned 29 years (2 Kings 18:2; 2 Chronicles 29:1), his reign is again shown to have begun around 715 B.C. (Realize and keep in mind as we go through these dates that most are approximations, yet probably accurate to within a year or so.)

Yet 2 Kings 18:1 says that Hezekiah began to reign in the third year of Hoshea, who became king of Israel in the aftermath of the Assyrian campaign ending in 732 B.C. This means Hezekiah's reign must have begun around 729 B.C. The apparent discrepancy is, as usual, the result of overlapping reigns. The late Edwin Thiele, a recognized authority on unraveling the dates of the Hebrew kings, normally accepted the accession years given in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament. But he considered this one and related scriptural statements showing overlap between Hoshea and Hezekiah to be late editorial mistakes (see Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 1983). Yet he should not have dismissed these figures, as they could have been fit into his overall chronology, as demonstrated by Eugene Merrill in his book *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987.

To reconcile the two different inauguration years for Hezekiah, there must have been a coregency between Ahaz and Hezekiah from 729-715 B.C. Ahaz's reign is given as 16 years (2 Kings 16:2; 2 Chronicles 28:1). If it ended with his death in 715 B.C., then the beginning of his reign would be reckoned at 731 B.C.—though we have seen in earlier highlights that Ahaz began his reign in 736

B.C. Perhaps 731 B.C. is the year that his father Jotham actually died (likely since other indications tell us that it was sometime between 732 and 729 B.C.). It is also possible that Ahaz's 16-year reign is reckoned from 736 to 720 B.C., which would mean that Ahaz abdicated the throne in 720—five years before his death in 715. In any event, Ahaz appears to have *all but* abdicated at a much earlier date, as we'll see. In fact, there is *another* way to date Ahaz's 16-year reign that seems to fit the best, which we will touch on shortly.

To see that, we first need to consider the magnificent reforms begun by Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29. We are told: "In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the LORD and repaired them" (verse 3). And from there things really snowballed in the right direction, leading to the great Passover celebration in 2 Chronicles 30 (which is our next reading).

When did these things happen? Was the first year of Hezekiah here the beginning of his coregency with Ahaz in 729 B.C.? Or was it the commencement of his sole reign in 715 B.C.? We should notice that in 2 Kings 18, both years are used to date his reign. In verse 13, as we've seen, the Assyrian attack on Judah (701 B.C.) is said to have occurred in the 14th year of Hezekiah—thus dating his reign from 715 B.C. But a few verses earlier, in verse 9, the siege of Samaria (725-722 B.C.) is said to have begun in the fourth year of Hezekiah and seventh year of Hoshea—thus dating Hezekiah's reign from 729 B.C. Here, then, is proof that the "first year" of Hezekiah could refer to *either* 715 or 729 B.C. So in which of these did his reforms begin?

Merrill and many others place them in 715. Yet there is a major problem with dating Hezekiah's first-year reforms and great Passover to 715 B.C.—which is frankly the crux of the matter for our purposes here. As we'll see in our next reading, 2 Chronicles 30–31 shows a substantial remnant of the northern tribes still dwelling in the lands surrounding Samaria at the time of this Passover. Yet as we will later see in 2 Kings 17, following the second Assyrian deportation of Israel soon after Samaria's fall (722 B.C.), there were no Israelites left in the north to speak of (verse 18)—except for perhaps a few scattered fugitives who had escaped death or slavery. (We do see some Israelites in the north later in Josiah's time, 2 Chronicles 34:9—but this was most likely due to a rather surprising historical development, which we will take note of later.) So that would seem to leave us with the reforms and Passover occurring in the early accession year of 729.

But at first consideration, this earlier date seems to be out of the question since Ahaz was still alive until 715. For how would Ahaz, a godless apostate, have stood by while his son made such sweeping reforms? Indeed, how would he have *continued* to stand by for 14 years? Yet consider that Ahaz could have developed some physical or mental problem or malady that made him unfit to govern—indeed God might have so stricken this wicked ruler to bring about the reforms He desired at this time.

This brings us to the other possible way to date Ahaz's 16-year reign. In 2 Kings 17:1, Hoshea is said to have become king of Israel, which we know happened in 732 B.C., in the 12th year of Ahaz. This would date the beginning of Ahaz's reign to 744 B.C., giving him a coregency with his father Jotham. If Ahaz's reign started in 744, 16 years later would bring us to 729 or 728 B.C. That lines up well enough with the 729 starting date for Hezekiah's initial reign for us to assume that Ahaz did indeed give up the throne to Hezekiah completely at this point (729/728), even though he lived 13 or 14 years longer.

Again, we must consider the possibility that Ahaz was unable to govern any longer. Remember that God was certainly orchestrating events. In fact, we are directly told, "God had prepared the people, since the events took place so suddenly.... Also the hand of God was on Judah to give them singleness of heart to obey the command of the king [i.e., Hezekiah]" (2 Chronicles 29:36; 30:12).

Furthermore, it is possible, though unrecorded, that Ahaz stood by for only a short time and later reasserted himself to some extent. Judah's commitment to God must have waned in the years following these events for God to later allow the Assyrians to invade and deport so many of its people. The actual reason for this, however, is not made clear in Scripture.

### **Hezekiah Restores Temple Worship (2 Kings 18:1-3; 2 Chronicles 29)      Mar. 26 Cont'd**

Hezekiah's grandfather, the relatively righteous Jotham, had abdicated the throne in favor of Ahaz around seven years before Hezekiah was first crowned. Judah, in the time *since* Jotham's abdication, had been twisted and corrupted by Ahaz's evil reign as sole king. Yet it appears that Jotham was still alive until two or three years before Hezekiah came to the throne, and Jotham may have instructed the youth in the need to turn the nation back to God. Besides the positive influence of his grandfather, Hezekiah probably also knew Isaiah, who by tradition was of royal blood, and

perhaps Micah. And Hezekiah's mother Abi or Abijah, given special mention in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, may have been a major influence in his doing "what was right in the sight of the LORD." Many of the kings of Israel and Judah were righteous when the father was unrighteous, or unrighteous when the father was righteous. This may have been partly the result of neglect by fathers who were too busy with governmental affairs to be the major influences in the lives of their children. Perhaps more significantly, the mother's name is often mentioned, probably indicating that she had the greater influence in how the son turned out. As the saying goes, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." (It may also be that since "queen mother" was an official role and position of honor, her name was simply mentioned for thoroughness.) In any case, Hezekiah saw the folly of his father's actions and set about to correct them as soon as he was empowered to do so.

Hezekiah wastes no time in making needed religious reforms in the wake of his father's apostate reign. He opens the doors to the temple, in contrast to Ahaz having shut them as an act of hostility toward God (see 2 Chronicles 28:24). In his instructions to the priests, Hezekiah describes how the sacrificial system has been abandoned. He also makes mention of the captivity of the people of Judah and Jerusalem (29:9), referring not to the deportation of the northern tribes by the Assyrians but to the Jews who had been carried captive—to Syria, Israel and Edom—during his father's reign (compare 28:5-8, 17—of the 200,000 taken to Israel, though many were clearly freed, it is possible that some were not).

Hezekiah leads the nation in entering into a renewed *covenant* relationship with God, pledging himself to lead the nation in faithfulness (29:10). He commands that atonement sacrifices be made for "all Israel" (verse 24)—showing his intention to bring all 12 tribes, including the remnant of the northern kingdom, back into alignment with God. We will see his appeal to this remnant in the next chapter.

Once the temple is cleansed, Hezekiah encourages the people to bring sacrifices again (verse 31). The word "sacrifices" in the King James and New King James Versions here apparently refers to peace offerings (Hebrew *zebach*), the most common type of personal offering. Except for a token cut of meat given to the priests—and the blood and fat burned on the altar to God—the meat of such sacrifices was eaten by the offerer and his family and friends. These sacrifices were more a part of a celebration than something the participants had to completely give up.

In contrast, the same verse goes on to add that "as many as were of a willing heart brought *burnt offerings*." Burnt offerings were entirely burned on the altar, so those who brought them were relinquishing all rights and benefits to these animals. And because the whole animal was offered, much more work was required, as described in the succeeding verses.

If Ahaz was indeed still alive at the time, as it appears he may have been, he was nevertheless somehow out of the picture as these reforms were set in motion. Through the swift and powerful intervention of God (compare verse 36), Ahaz was sidelined as events moved beyond his control. Hezekiah now reigned as king—and Judah was turning back to God (see 30:12).

### **Hezekiah's Passover (2 Chronicles 30:1–31:1; 2 Kings 18:4-6)**

**March 27**

The cleansing and reconsecration of the temple and priesthood wasn't finished until the 16th day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (2 Chronicles 29:17). This was during the Days of Unleavened Bread, two days *after* the date for the Passover, which was to be kept on the 14th day of the first month (see Leviticus 23:4-8). So Hezekiah and the people had missed the Passover and the start of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

But in Numbers 9:9-12 God had made provision for postponing the Passover to the 14th day of the *second* month for those who were unable to observe the regular Passover because they were far away on a journey or ritually unclean. Hezekiah "and his leaders" applied this rule to the priests, since they were not yet all consecrated—and by extension to the people, since they needed the priesthood (2 Chronicles 29:2-3). Thus, the festival would be observed this year in the second month. It should be noted that among Hezekiah's leaders was probably Isaiah the prophet, who was no doubt receiving instructions from God during this time.

Hezekiah even extends an invitation to those in the northern kingdom to join the people of Judah in keeping the Passover and participating in this religious revival. As in the previous chapter, we again see the phrase "all Israel," now with the addition of "from Beersheba to Dan" (verse 5), which was a common way of denoting the whole land of Israel prior to the divided monarchy—Beersheba being located in the far south and Dan being the extreme north. Though most of Israel had been taken captive in 733-732 B.C., Israel's final deportation had not yet taken place

and there was still a sizeable remnant population left at this time as part of the kingdom ruled by Hoshea, himself a vassal of Assyria.

Notice that the runners from Judah go only as far north as Zebulun (verse 10). This was evidently the northernmost territory of the remnant state of Israel at this time, the inhabitants of Naphtali to the *north* of Zebulun having already been deported by Tiglath-Pileser III (compare 2 Kings 15:29). Indeed, this is actually more proof that Hezekiah's Passover should be dated to the time *before* Israel's *final* deportation in 722 B.C. rather than after it.

Sadly, despite the invasion and captivity the Israelites have already suffered at this point, most of those who are left in the land do not take warning and repent. The people of the northern kingdom are so far from God that very few are interested in observing God's Passover. Indeed, they mock the messengers. But a few do respond (2 Chronicles 30:10-11).

Then came the actual observance of the Passover. While Hezekiah and the priests were very careful to do all that was required in the law of God (verse 16), some in the assembly, particularly those who did come down from the northern tribes, were not appropriately prepared for it. While the Passover was normally slain by the heads of household, and the priests only sprinkled the blood on the altar, in this case the Levites killed the Passover for those who were not clean (verse 17).

Even then, eating the Passover was technically not permitted (compare Numbers 9:6-7), but because of the special circumstances, and the fact that this was already the second Passover, Hezekiah prayed that God would look on the hearts of the people and forgive this transgression. And God did, "healing" the people—that is, their relationship with Him (2 Chronicles 30:18-20). The people also went on to keep the entire Feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month—and, moved by the religious fervor and revival, went on to keep *yet another* seven days of feasting and rejoicing.

Notice the emphasis on the joyous and zealous attitudes of the people: "who prepares his heart to seek God" (verse 19); "singleness of heart" (verse 12); "with great gladness" (verse 21); "with gladness" (verse 23); "great joy" (verse 26).

It is somewhat revealing to note that such major observances of the festivals at Jerusalem, while mandated by God, were not common during the monarchy. We are told that such a celebration had not taken place since the days of Solomon (verse 26). And a later Passover by Josiah is described as being unlike anything since the days of Samuel (35:18).

### **Eradicating Paganism (2 Chronicles 30:1–31:1; 2 Kings 18:4-6)**

**Mar. 27 Cont'd**

As the people returned home from two incredible weeks of spiritual recommitment and rejuvenation, they proceeded to destroy pagan shrines and images "*until they had utterly destroyed them all*"—even throughout the territories of Ephraim and Manasseh in the northern kingdom (31:1). This was a remarkably bold undertaking fraught with danger. For since only a few from the northern kingdom had responded positively to Hezekiah's invitation, this surely would not have gone over well there at all.

Hezekiah is praised for at last removing the high places, or pagan worship sites, from the land (2 Kings 18:4)—which, as was often lamented, even numerous righteous kings before him had failed to do. And, surprisingly, we also see him being praised for destroying something that God had told Moses to make. The bronze serpent had become an idolatrous image that people worshiped. So, as it had outlived its intended purpose and was now inextricably linked with sinful idolatry, a decision was made to destroy it. Indeed, it is possible that God Himself gave the order through Isaiah or through Hezekiah consulting the high priest with the Urim and Thummim.

### **Reorganization of the Levitical System (2 Chronicles 31:2-21)**

**March 28**

Hezekiah continues his religious reforms, restoring the priestly courses David had established and commanding the people to bring in their tithes and firstfruits for the priests as prescribed by God's law. One of the reasons God had designed this system was so that the Levites, who served as God's ministry in the Old Testament, could "devote themselves to the Law of the LORD" (verse 4). Rather than spending most of their time in other vocations or laboring in the field to provide for themselves and their families, God wanted the priests and Levites to be able to spend most of their time delving into His principles and instructions and teaching them to His people. God has similar desires for His ministry and people today (see Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 9:11; Galatians 6:6). (To see what God's Word has to say on the subject of tithing and the financing of His ministry today, request or download our free booklet *What Does the Bible Teach About Tithing?*)

The Levites were greatly blessed through the people's response to Hezekiah's commands, being abundantly provided for. And the people of the nation responding were, in turn, greatly blessed themselves for enabling far more godly instruction to come their way.

Hezekiah was a living testimony to the well-known proverb, “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice” (Proverbs 29:2). Interestingly, this verse is one of the “proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied” (see 25:1). The last verse of the current reading summarizes what a great king and great man of God Hezekiah was.

### **The Fall of Samaria; Israel’s Captivity (2 Kings 17:3-23; 18:9-12)**

**March 29**

The destruction and removal of the northern kingdom finally arrives. God had given Israel ample warning and exhortation to repent through His prophets (17:13). But sadly, they would not heed.

As was explained in the highlights for 2 Kings 15:29-31, Israel’s last king, Hoshea, was initially installed in office as an Assyrian puppet ruler in the wake of the Assyrian campaign ending in 732 B.C. Yet he turned out to be an *unreliable* puppet. For when the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-Pileser III was forced to return to Mesopotamia to deal with turmoil in the state of Babylonia, Hoshea proclaimed himself free of Assyrian suzerainty—looking to the growing power of Egypt at this time as a possible counterweight to Assyrian dominance in the region.

Upon Tiglath’s death in 727, he was succeeded by his son Shalmaneser V. For two years, the new emperor remained occupied with the Babylonian uprisings his father’s last years had been consumed with. But then, in 725, the fourth year of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:9), Shalmaneser moved west to regain control over Syro-Phoenicia and Philistia, which included Israel.

Hoshea was again subjugated to Assyria and forced to pay tribute (17:3). But then Shalmaneser discovered that the Israelite ruler was plotting against Assyria with Egypt. Hoshea “had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt” (verse 4). According to Egyptian history as presently understood, there was a strong new leader in Egypt, Pharaoh Tefnakht, founder of its 24th dynasty. “Osorkon IV of [overlapping] Dynasty 22 ([believed by many to be] King So of the Bible) was apparently his [i.e., Tefnakht’s] vassal” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 1987, p. 415).

In retaliation, Shalmaneser laid siege to Samaria. The powerful Israelite capital withstood the assault for three grueling years, but it finally fell in 722 B.C. It is not clear at what point Hoshea was thrown into prison—either at the beginning of the siege or the final fall of the city. However, the fact that his reign is reckoned until 722 would seem to support the latter conclusion.

Sargon, Shalmaneser’s field commander—who would succeed him as king later the same year (as Sargon II)—would claim responsibility for the conquest of Samaria. But the Bible doesn’t name him in the account of its fall. Indeed, credit for victory at the time would actually have gone to Shalmaneser, as he was the king, not Sargon. Samaria was thereafter made an Assyrian province.

Then, in Israel’s second mass deportation, the remainder of the northern kingdom’s populace was captured and taken away. Sargon claims to have carried away 27,290 people. Yet this was only a tiny fraction of the total population of the remnant of the northern kingdom. It is likely that many more had already been carried away under Shalmaneser, and many more had died in battle or from starvation and disease during the Assyrian siege. And perhaps many before that had fled and migrated to other lands.

We should further understand from history that Samaria was not utterly and absolutely vanquished at this point. Shalmaneser died in 722 B.C. and Sargon took the throne of Assyria. In 720 he faced a new uprising in Babylonia. After it, “Sargon then immediately moved west to subdue a large Syro-Palestinian coalition led by Hamath [in Syria]. He retook Damascus and even Samaria, now considered an Assyrian province, and demanded a reaffirmation of Judah’s loyalty by the payment of a heavy tribute. [A footnote says that Samaria was thus taken twice.] He then moved through Ekron and Gaza to the very borders of Egypt.... Finally, he turned back north to Tyre and completed the siege of that stronghold which Shalmaneser had undertaken five years before in 725” (Merrill, pp. 408-409).

Another source, explaining the same events, says that the conquest of Samaria in 722 “did not prevent a further rebellion in Palestine and Syria in 720 B.C., also with Egyptian encouragement. Sargon reacted immediately and in a campaign along the coast of the Holy Land conquered Gaza and Raphia. He inflicted defeat upon the Egyptian force sent to aid another rebel, the king of Gaza. In consequence, Sargon received tribute from Egypt, and even from the Arabians. Samaria, too [that is, what was left of it], was involved in this rebellion, and in order to prevent its recurrence, Sargon [then, in 720] began extensive shifts of populations within his provinces. Many of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Israel were exiled to distant regions of the Assyrian Empire....” (Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 1977, p. 97).

In the prior deportation under Tiglath-Pileser (733-732 B.C.), the people had been carried to Assyria in northern Mesopotamia—to “Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river of Gozan” (1 Chronicles 5:26)—in what is now southeast Turkey, northeast Syria and northern Iraq. Yet notice where the Israelites of this second deportation were relocated: “in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (2 Kings 17:6; 18:11). Ancient Media, on the south side of the Caspian Sea in what is today northwest Iran, was a long way east of Assyria. And notice this additional detail from the first-century Jewish historian Josephus: “The king of Assyria...besieged Samaria three years and quite demolished the government of the Israelites, and *transplanted all the people into Media and Persia*” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 9, chap. 14, sec. 1). Persia was just south of Media.

Thus, those in the first Israelite captivity were taken primarily to locations in Assyria. A decade later, some of those in the second captivity were resettled in the same areas. However, it appears that the *vast majority* of those in the second captivity were marched right *through* these Assyrian areas on a great journey east—and then resettled in Media and Persia. (The Assyrians had only recently conquered these latter regions. They were thus unavailable for resettlement at the time of Israel’s first deportation.)

Amazingly, we can trace the the progenitors of the peoples of northwest Europe, the Celts and Scythians, to these very locations where the Israelite captives were resettled. Indeed, the Celts and Scythians first appear in secular history in these very places and at the very same time that Israel was taken into captivity. And this only makes sense—for they are, in fact, the same people. The Israelites were never regathered to the Promised Land. Instead, their descendants later trekked from the areas of their captivity, in a centuries-long migration, into northwest Europe. (To learn more, request or download our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Following Israel’s final deportation, the Bible states, “There was none left but the tribe of Judah alone” (2 Kings 17:18). To clarify, the Hebrew word for “tribe” here, *sebet*, can mean an entire nation with more than one tribe (compare Jeremiah 51:19, New Revised Standard Version). And in fact it *must* mean that here since the kingdom of Judah included, besides Jews, a significant number of Benjamites and Levites. The point is: “There was none left but the nation of Judah alone.” While there may have been a few hangers-on, the northern tribes of Israel were gone.

**Supplementary Reading:** “Were All the People of the Northern Kingdom Deported?,” *United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*, pp. 22-23; “The Bible and Archaeology: The Later Kings of Israel: A Kingdom’s Downfall,” *The Good News*, Sept.–Oct. 1998, pp. 18-20, 31.

### Resettlement of Samaria (2 Kings 17:24-41)

**March 30**

The Assyrian form of captivity consisted primarily of population displacement. Israel had been removed from the land and placed in cities north and east around the Caspian Sea. But the land of Israel was not left unpopulated. Instead, peoples from other nations were brought in.

The repopulating of the land with non-Israelites did not occur all at once right after the Israelites were taken into captivity. It *began* at this time. Of Samaria Sargon said, “The town I rebuilt better than it was before and settled therein peoples from countries which I myself had conquered” (Daniel Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1927, Vol. 2, Part 4: Sargon’s annals). And we do know that Sargon began extensive shifts in the population of his provinces, as was mentioned in the highlights for our previous reading.

But there are other indications from history and Scripture that the bulk of resettlement did not take place for several decades. Ezra 4:2 and verse 10 mention this task as having been carried out by the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.) and Osnapper (generally identified as Esarhaddon’s son and successor Assurbanipal, 668-626 B.C.), both of whom reigned during the days of Hezekiah’s son Manasseh.

History, as mentioned, also helps us understand what happened. The cities listed in 2 Kings 17:24 as the places of origin of the foreigners were in the Assyrian-controlled areas of Syria and Babylonia—Babylon being the principle place named.

While Babylon, the “holy city” of pagan Western Asia, had been the crown jewel of the Assyrian Empire, it nevertheless served as a constant headache for the Assyrian rulers. Over the past few decades, the state of Babylonia had erupted in rebellion several times. Notice the following about the early reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.): “The turmoil in Babylonia was of long standing but had been exacerbated by the arrival of Aramean immigrants, who, with the native stock, created a formidable political entity known as Kaldu (= Chaldeans). Eventually this would give rise to the Neo-Babylonian Empire” (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 393). It was the Neo-

Babylonian Empire that would eventually take Judah into captivity. But it would not appear for some time.

Tiglath's son Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) also had to deal with the Babylonian problem. Then, upon his death following the final overthrow of Samaria, the problem exploded once again. Assyria was now under the rule of the usurper Sargon II (722-705 B.C.). "Sargon's accession prompted numerous uprisings throughout the empire. In 720 he began to address these problems by engaging an alliance of Elamites and Babylonians at Der (Bedrai), eighty miles northeast of Babylon. He was probably defeated, though each side claims victory. The leader of the Babylonian forces was none other than Marduk-apla-iddina (Merodach-Baladan in the Bible [see Isaiah 39])" (Merrill, p. 408).

Merodach-Baladan, of the Sealands dynasty, had led the Babylonians in past conflicts with Assyria. Yet the previous year, he became the actual *king* of Babylon. The fact that he *remained* king until 710 supports the conclusion that the Babylonians probably won the battle of 720—or at least secured a draw. It is interesting to note that they were allied with Elamites in their fight against Assyria, for Elam was ancient Persia—the location to which much of the remnant of the northern kingdom of Israel had been moved only two years prior. Might there, then, have been Israelites fighting alongside the Babylonians against the Assyrians at that time? It is certainly possible.

Sargon returned to Damascus and Samaria immediately after this battle to put down a new rebellion throughout the Syro-Phoenician region, as we saw in the highlights for the previous reading. Perhaps, though failing to depose Merodach-Baladan in Babylon, he had managed to capture a great many Babylonians at this time and transferred them to Syria and Israel.

Merodach would be removed from office 10 years later but would reclaim the kingship for a short time in 703 B.C. before being put down by the Assyrians again. The back-and-forth struggle between Assyria and the Chaldeans of Babylonia would eventually lead to Babylon being sacked by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) in 689.

We would expect this sacking to have been followed by massive deportation. And indeed, as shown above, Scripture does corroborate the fact that Babylonian peoples were moved into Israel and Syria in the years after the sacking occurred by Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. Syria is included here because mention is made in Scripture of resettlement taking place not just in Samaria but in other places "beyond the River" (Ezra 4:10), meaning from the perspective of those east of the Euphrates (compare verse 11)—thus indicating the whole of Syria and Phoenicia. This makes sense because the Assyrians had deported not just the Israelites but also the original Syrians (the Aramaeans), having taken many of them far north to Kir at the time of Israel's first deportation (2 Kings 16:9; see Amos 1:5). Esarhaddon's records even state that after he destroyed the Phoenician city of Sidon, he restocked it with people from Mesopotamia.

Considering the events in Samaria described in 2 Kings 17, it is likely that the problem with wild animals (verse 25) happened early on when there were few settlers—probably in the time of Sargon. Whatever the case, the problem caused these settlers to conclude that they were not worshiping the local territorial god properly, so they arranged for one of the priests of Bethel to return and show them how to properly worship the god of the land. This resulted in a form of religion that mixed elements of the law of God, as corrupted by the apostate northern kingdom, with numerous forms of paganism. While these people in a sense "feared the LORD" (verses 32-33, 41), this was really only superstition, lip service and rituals—for they nevertheless "*served* their own gods" (verse 33). In fact, verse 34 says they did "*not* fear the LORD"—that is, not really.

What a bizarre turn of events this was, in light of the fact that the precise reason God eventually caused the downfall of Israel and then Judah was their corruption of the religion He gave them. Clearly at work was the unseen hand of the god of this world, Satan the devil, ever active in deceiving the masses away from the true God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9).

Descendants of these people were still in the land to cause grief to the Jews when they were permitted to return from Babylonian captivity. And some of these imported peoples continue in the land of Israel to the present day. By the time of Christ they had come to be called Samaritans—after the land of Samaria. Yet the Jews have also referred to them as Cuthites, after one of their lands of origin. These people worshiped then as now at Mount Gerizim (compare John 4:20-21).

Over time they conformed many of their teachings and practices to the Jews who returned from Babylon, having received from them the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses. And they began copying it and passing it down themselves. (The Samaritan Pentateuch is often used for comparison purposes, especially in producing new Bible versions.)

Yet while the Samaritans embraced much of the truth, their religion was still terribly corrupted with their former paganism. Indeed, there appears to be a connection between the Samaritans and the rise of a great counterfeit Christianity centered in Rome yet derived from the “Babylonian mystery religion” (see Revelation 17)—mixing the true worship of God and the knowledge about Christ with the ancient pagan practices of the Babylonian Samaritans, particularly under the early leadership of Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:9). We will see more connections between the Babylonian Samaritans and Rome in the highlights for our next reading.

### **Babylon, the Glory of Kingdoms (Isaiah 13:1–14:2)**

**March 31**

Returning to the book of Isaiah, we come to “the burden against Babylon” (verse 1). The word burden paints the picture of the prophet being heavily laden with a message from God that he simply must deliver because it is too heavy to carry.

As was mentioned in the previous highlights, the Assyrians sacked Babylon in 689 B.C. Some see the prophecy of Isaiah 13 as a reference to that episode. However, in verse 17 we see the Medes, not the Assyrians, as the ones conquering Babylon. And this did not happen until much later. The Babylonians eventually conquered the Assyrians, overthrowing the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Then the Neo-Babylonian Empire ruled the Middle East until its defeat by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C. This was the fall of ancient Babylon. And the prophecy does seem to anticipate this event, though it was written around 180 years in advance of it.

However, the passage appears to be primarily directed to a time long after that. It is heavily concerned with the Day of the Lord—a time yet future, which immediately precedes the return of Christ (verses 6, 9; compare Joel 1:15; Revelation 6:12-17). Indeed, the return of God’s people to the Promised Land in Isaiah 14:1-2 was not fulfilled by the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra. Only a paltry 50,000 then returned (Ezra 2:64-65), and a few more later—perhaps only 15 percent or so of the Jews in Babylonia. Notice further that Isaiah 14:1-2 says “the house of Jacob” and “Israel”—referring to *all 12 tribes*, not just the Jews. And in the return from Babylonian exile, the Jews did not then take their oppressors as slaves, as this prophecy says would happen.

It seems clear, then, that while the destruction of historical Babylon is in view here, Isaiah’s prophecy at this point is referring primarily to *end-time* Babylon—which is not merely a single city or province but an economic, political, religious and military power bloc centered in Europe that will seek to rule the world (Revelation 17–18). The leading national force in this union, as explained in the highlights for Isaiah 10, will be modern Assyria—apparently the Germanic peoples of Central Europe. Surprisingly, the European Union actually uses the symbol of the Tower of Babel to represent its forming superstate.

But Assyria is not the only ancient nation with a surprising identity today. Babylon itself may be found elsewhere. As explained in the previous highlights, a great many Babylonians were relocated to Syro-Phoenicia, including Samaria, even before the Chaldean Neo-Babylonian Empire. When Babylon finally fell to the Medes and Persians they set it up as their winter capital. Later, when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, he too set up Babylon as the capital of Asia in his Greek empire. When his successor in the region, Seleucus, took over, he declared himself the king of Babylon and made Babylon his first capital. Soon he decided to move the capital to a new location north on the Tigris River and invited those of Babylonia to relocate there. Later, he moved his capital west to Antioch in Syria. In fact, he built 30 new cities throughout his empire, most of them in Syria, and the vast majority of Mesopotamia relocated to them. Thus, though Seleucid Syria was a Greek kingdom in name and language, it was predominantly Babylonian in fact—with large numbers of Phoenicians of old Tyre and Sidon still dwelling along its Mediterranean Coast.

Great numbers of the Babylonian and Phoenician Syrians were later taken to Rome as slaves. Amazingly, in the centuries just before and after Christ, a massive change happened in the Roman population. Through wars and other socioeconomic factors, Italy’s native population dwindled. Many of the local freeborn citizens who were left migrated to other parts of Rome’s growing empire. At the same time, Rome brought in vast numbers of slaves, mostly from Syria. The first-century Roman satirist Juvenal wrote of them: “These dregs call themselves Greeks but how small a portion is from Greece; the River Orontes [in Syria] has long flowed into the Tiber [in Rome]” (Satire 3, line 62). Over time it became popular to free slaves in Rome—and thousands upon thousands of freed slaves, who were skilled at various trades, displaced even more of the freeborn citizenry. So, as incredible as it may seem, Italy eventually became almost entirely Syrian or—in actuality—Babylonian and Phoenician.

As for the Syrians who had *not* been taken from the Eastern Mediterranean as slaves, they gained notoriety as merchants and traders, carrying on in the tradition of the Phoenicians of old. Eventually, this lucrative pursuit would cause great numbers of them to spread throughout the entire Roman Empire—particularly through Spain, southern France, northern Italy, etc. (see Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 1911, pp. 107-109)—so much so that a great part of southern Europe is, in fact, Babylonian and Phoenician. Yet the center of modern Babylon is still Rome. So when God identifies Rome and its empire as Babylon in Revelation 17–18 (and as Phoenician Tyre in Ezekiel 27), He means what He says!

Eventually we will see modern Babylon (or Tyre) and modern Assyria fused together into the same power (as indeed has already happened in times past, such as with the Hitler-Mussolini Axis in World War II). This end-time power will conquer the modern-day Israelite nations and deport their remaining populations. The reference to the Medes coming against Babylon (Isaiah 13:17) may have an end-time fulfillment as well. They may be part of the massive force led by “the kings from the east” (Revelation 16:12) that attack the “kingdom” of “the beast” (verse 10). We will consider this further when we later read another prophecy of Babylon’s fall in Isaiah 21.

Babylon will be destroyed and abandoned—apparently referring to its end-time capital, Rome (Isaiah 13:19-22). The reference to wild animals dwelling in its ruins may be dual, as we will see in our next reading.

Clearly, Isaiah 14:1-2 is referring to the same future time—when end-time Babylon falls, Jesus Christ returns to this earth and all Israel returns to the Promised Land. The Israelites’ prophesied enslavement of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who had previously enslaved *them*, will be much different from the wretched picture of slavery our world has sadly witnessed in the past. For this coming short-term slavery, under the rule of Jesus Christ the Savior, will actually be to the benefit of the enslaved enemies. For at that time the Israelite slaveholders, with God’s Spirit poured out on them, will be converted in their hearts and minds to the ways of Christ. The gentile slaves, then, will see Christian kindness in action and learn the true ways of God. Once they learn and accept them, they too will be freed to live in the liberty of the truth of God. What a wonderful world God has in store for all peoples!

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