

WHY NATIONS CRUMBLE
Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER
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Background Scripture: 2 Kings 17; Hosea 1–3
Key Passage: 2 Kings 17:5–14

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This lesson brings us to the end of Part III on “Appeals to Recommitment Rejected” and to the end of this thirteen-week study on “The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God’s Call to Responsible Decision.” This lesson is filled with the tragedy and suffering of a nation in the throes of death. At the age of two hundred years, Israel, composed of the ten northern tribes, was wiped off the map of the ancient Near East. Ancient Israel celebrated its bicentennial birthday with a funeral march and lamentation as it walked into exile, renewed bondage, and finally into oblivion.

When the Northern Kingdom was in its infancy, it underwent a period of political turmoil characterized by repeated political assassinations. According to the traditions recorded in I Kings 15:25–27 and 16:8–18, the bloody events can be summarized as follows: Nadab (901–900 B.C.), the son of Jeroboam, was murdered by Baasha after a short reign of two years. Elah (877–876 B.C.), the son of Baasha, ruled for only two years and was assassinated by his chariot commander, Zimri. After one brief week of rule as the king of Israel, Zimri (876 B.C.) committed suicide in preference to being executed by the publicly acclaimed king, Omri (876 B.C.).

Prior to the demise of the Northern Kingdom, the nation went through a similar period of bloody political chaos.

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According to 2 Kings 15:8–30, King Zechariah (746–745 B.C.), the son of Jeroboam II (786–756 B.C.), was murdered by Shallum. After a one-month reign in Samaria (745 B.C.), Shallum was assassinated by Menahem, who in turn became king and ruled for ten years. Menahem's son and successor, Pekahiah, was murdered within a two-year period by Pekah, who became the new king of Israel. Pekah's reign was ended by the work of an assassin who aspired to the throne, namely Hoshea, who became the last king to exercise power from Samaria.

In summary, during the two hundred years from the beginning to the end of the Northern Kingdom, ten of the nineteen monarchs were assassins and/or assassinated: four Israelite kings inherited the throne but were murdered, three assassins who made themselves king died natural deaths, and three other assassins were murdered or forced into suicide after they had seized power.

Holy-war theology could not negate the fact that even with the chosen offspring of Abraham, those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword. When the ten tribes withdrew from the United Kingdom of Israel, in the quest for freedom from Solomonic-style oppression, they abandoned the house of David, including two major political contributions from the reign of David: (1) recognition of the inviolability of the anointed king and (2) recognition that God desired peace rather than bloodshed. Warfare became an honored institution in Israel's foreign policy, and assassination became an accepted element in domestic politics. There are many ingredients that contribute to the crumbling of a nation, and the idealization of war and the rationalization of murder are two of the basic ingredients. How different the fate of ancient

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Israel, and consequently the fate of the modern world, would have been had the covenant established with Abraham been used as the lyrics for the national anthem of Samaria: “By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Genesis 12:3)!

The Historical Setting

Israel and Judah were two small kingdoms situated between two world powers struggling for world domination. The eastern power was Assyria, and the western power was Egypt. The fate of Judah and Israel fluctuated with the imperial designs of these two powers. The lands of Palestine offered a buffer zone between these rival nations, and whoever controlled the buffer zone could guarantee the security of his empire. Moreover, political or military control of Syria-Palestine carried with it the advantages of access to the timbers of Phoenicia and the trading routes of the entire Mediterranean area. Except when Egypt and Assyria were preoccupied with internal problems, the city-states of Syrian Palestine did not have the power to control their own destinies. A variety of coalitions were attempted to combat the larger imperial powers. The death blow of the Northern Kingdom was the result of an unsuccessful anti-Assyrian coalition.

Tiglath-pileser III (also named “Pul” in 2 Kings 15:19 and 1 Chronicles 5:26), the king of Assyria, moved into Syria as early as 743 B.C. in a war with Azirau of Yaudi (most certainly the Azariah/Uzziah of Judah). Tiglath-pileser prevailed, and most of the city-states of Syria were forced to pay him tribute, including Damascus and Samaria. Menahem, the king of Israel, paid the tribute by taxing the rich—“fifty shekels of silver from every [rich] man” (2 Kings 15:20). While taxation of the poor could have been tolerated, [page 37] assessing the

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rich was another matter. Once Tiglath-pileser withdrew from the area, content with collecting tribute rather than occupying the conquered territories, the flames of rebellion shot forth.

Menahem's son, Pekahiah, who succeeded him may not have been vigorous enough to satisfy the Israelite rebels. He was violently removed from office and succeeded by his assassin, Pekah. Pekah was joined by the king of Damascus in an anti-Assyrian coalition. Both kings wanted the support of Judah, and if the king of Judah would not cooperate with them, they were willing to do to him as they had done to the former king of Israel. They would kill him and replace him with a more cooperative person. As noted in the previous lesson, Ahaz, the king of Judah, did not join the coalition but instead invited Tiglath-pileser to deliver him from their mutual enemies, northern Israel and Syria.

Tiglath-pileser responded to Ahaz's plea, and in the years 734 to 732 he moved through Syria-Palestine all the way to the borders of Egypt. According to 2 Kings 15:29, many of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom were forcibly deported from their homeland and carried into captivity in Assyria: “. . . Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria.”

Despite the beating which Jerusalem had taken from Syria and Israel (2 Chronicles 28:5–15), the words of Isaiah were coming true. These two hostile nations were being eliminated from the land of the living. Following Tiglath-pileser's crushing of the Syro-Ephraimitic coalition, all that remained of the Northern Kingdom was the territory of the tribes of Ephraim and western Manasseh. An assassin removed the rebellious King Pekah from power; and he, Hoshea (732–724 B.C.), became the new king over the vastly reduced Northern

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Kingdom. In 732, Damascus was completely destroyed by Tiglath-pileser, and the rebellious Rezin, the Syrian king, was quickly executed. After many of the citizens of Damascus were deported to varied Assyrian provinces, Syria was divided into four new Assyrian provinces.

In 727 B.C., both Tiglath-pileser and Ahaz died. Death gave life to the fever of rebellion. While Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.), the successor of Tiglath-pileser III, was trying to consolidate the empire, Hoshea attempted to secure Egyptian help in throwing off the bonds of Assyrian power. Hoshea's activity was futile. Although Egypt offered no assistance, the king of Assyria learned of the intrigue and the attempted rebellion. His response was to attack Samaria. In 724 B.C. Hoshea was taken prisoner (probably when he attempted to appear before Shalmaneser and seek forgiveness). The city of Samaria, without a king, continued to resist the Assyrian siege. During the prolonged three-year siege the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser, died and was succeeded by Sargon II (721–705 B.C.). It was Sargon's pleasure to strike the death blow to Samaria. According to Sargon's own testimony, he led away 27,290 prisoners from Samaria and introduced into the depopulated territories exiles from other rebellious territories. The Northern Kingdom of Israel became the Assyrian province of Samaria, and Sargon stated, "I placed an officer of mine as governor over them and imposed upon them tribute as (is customary) for Assyrian citizens."¹

1. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 284.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

2 Kings 17:4—“... for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and offered no tribute to the king of Assyria.”

The Egyptian ruler of the Delta between 726 and 716 B.C. was Tefnakhte. His capital was Sais (Egyptian, *s'w*). The biblical name “So” was not the name of the pharaoh but of the capital city, and the preposition “to” should be repeated before the words “king of Egypt” so that the phrase reads: “. . . he sent messengers to Sais, to the king of Egypt.”²

Once a territory was conquered, the Assyrians did not use native-born Assyrian military forces to occupy the land. The vassal state was expected to pay tribute. Failure to pay tribute or any form of rebellion resulted in depopulation of the citizens and annexation of the territory into the Assyrian empire. Capable prisoners were “recruited” to become Assyrian military colonists in other remote provinces far removed from one’s homeland. Hoshea could have been a happy taxpayer; instead he played the fool and eventually paid with his life.

2 Kings 17:6—“... the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to . . . Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”

The biblical writer does not note the death of Shalmaneser V and the rise of Sargon II. He wrote as though it were the same king who initiated the siege of Samaria and led the

2. Hans Goedicke, “The End of ‘So, King of Egypt,’” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, vol. 171 (October, 1963), pp. 65–66. See also John Gray, *First & Second Kings: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 642.

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Assyrian forces to victory. The fact that the siege took three years reflects the skill with which Omri and Ahab had constructed Samaria. But the difference between an immediate capitulation to the Assyrians and holding out for three years was thirty-six months of fruitless privation and suffering. Ahaz, king of Judah, did not live long enough to witness the prediction of Isaiah come true; but when the defeated inhabitants of Samaria marched eastward, the “smoldering firebrands” of Damascus and Samaria finally died out.

The Habor (Assyrian Khabur) was a tributary of the Euphrates, which flowed southward into the Euphrates midway between Aleppo and Asshur. The city of Gozan was about seventy-five miles east of Haran.

2 Kings 17:7–8—“. . . the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God . . . and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations”

The sin of Israel alluded to by the writer of the Book of Second Kings is spelled out in detail by the prophet [page 38] Hosea. Both the prophet and the theological historian pinpointed the idolatry of ancient Israel as the major reason for the collapse of the state. Second Kings mentions high places, pillars, and the Asherim (17:9–10); Hosea spoke of Baal worship, molten images of silver, and sacrifice to idols. (See Hosea 13:1–2.)

The idolatry of ancient Israel did not exist in a vacuum. The idolatry caused a chain reaction in which religious superstition replaced ethical and moral responsibility. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel carried with it moral stipulations which could not be fulfilled in a climate of religious syncretism, which superficially placated the national conscience without removing the evil itself. Down to the very end of the

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Northern Kingdom, the immorality and injustice decried by the prophets flourished. The idolatry of wealth and power, symbolically represented by Baal (the storm god) and silver idols, was supported by the false prophets' preaching the common Near Eastern doctrine that riches were a sign of God's pleasure and poverty was evidence of God's judgment. When Israel "walked in the customs of the nations" (2 Kings 17:8), it did so by adopting as orthodox many items of popular civil religion. Love, blessing, and peacefulness were not a part of Samaria's value system; nor were mercy and justice. Idolatry was bad enough, but the unethical behavior which idolatry tolerated made it all the worse.

2 Kings 17:13—“ . . . the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, ‘Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes.’”

The particular laws would have included the greatest and the second greatest commandments, as well as the Decalogue. We know the greatest commandment by the words, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Literally, the commandment should be translated, "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone!" The commandment contains the holy name of God. This name, which could be paraphrased as "The Creator," spoke of the nature of God, and the word "one" limited Israel to the worship of the Creator alone. Worship of anything else was worship of a part of creation. But a part of the creation could never take the place of the Creator. Therefore, Israel was to have "no other gods before me" (literally, "no other gods contrary to my will").

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Love was a part of the two great commandments, and responsible ethical behavior was an essential part of the Decalogue. When Israel abandoned the covenant with Yahweh and accommodated itself to the religious norms of its neighbors, it lost its sense of direction. Without the ethical pointers of the covenant and because of the repeated disregard of the prophetic word, the only way to go was down—down to destruction. The “loving heart” had been replaced by a stubborn will (2 Kings 17:14) and a closed mind. Repentance became impossible—not because God was unforgiving, but because the people were unwilling.

Applying the Lesson to Life

Since our nation is one of the major world powers and not a small state caught in the middle of an international power struggle, we could dismiss the lessons from ancient Israel as inapplicable to our situation. Our nation is not a new Israel, whose citizens are the chosen people of God. Nevertheless, we can appropriate much from the lessons of biblical history that will help Christians within the nation make responsible decisions for the good of the entire family of humankind.

We can call out in alarm when the *mistakes* of yesterday are desired as the *rules* for today. When assassination becomes an acceptable political instrument in the life of a nation, we have the first symptoms of a malignancy which could prove fatal. When we march to the martial tune of holy war, we are walking on the same road to self-destruction traversed by both Israel and Judah.

The reasons nations crumble are complex, but the reason Israel fell was simple: the nation had broken its covenant with God. God’s demands for peace, justice, mercy, love, and

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blessing had been abandoned in the quest for wealth and power from the gods of privilege.

Israel was promised a land of milk and honey, but it was polluted with violence and greed. Our land is, far more than Israel, a land of milk and honey; yet we pollute it with violence that would boggle even the imagination of Jezebel! The ingredients for the collapse of our own nation are piling up. The prophetic voice from God for a return to the covenant demands of justice, mercy, love, and blessing is being sounded in many quarters. The God of love can do for us what he wanted to do for Israel—he can save us and make us agents of his blessing and an example of his gospel of love through Jesus the Christ! But will we make that responsible decision?