

What is the significance of Assyria in the Bible?

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Assyria was an ancient nation that was a major world power for about a thousand years (1700–727 BC). According to the International Standard Bible Commentary, Assyria “extended from Babylonia northward to the Kurdish mountains and at times included the country westward to the Euphrates and the Khabur.” Not only did Assyria pose a major threat to Israel, but the Lord also used the Assyrians to chastise the northern kingdom of Israel. Central to the history of Assyria is its capital city, Nineveh, to which God sent Jonah to warn of coming destruction.

As part of the punishment for Israel’s persistent idolatry, God handed the northern kingdom of Israel over to the Assyrians. The Assyrian kings Pul and Shalmaneser V invaded Israel, and about 722 BC the latter “captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes” (2 Kings 17:6).

Hosea 11:5 had prophesied of the coming wrath of God through the Gentile nation. “Assyria, then in temporary decline, would awake like a sleeping giant and devour the Northern Kingdom of Israel as its prey” (John D. Hannah, “Jonah,” Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, ed., Victor, 1985, p. 1,461). As Isaiah and 2 Kings affirm, the Lord did this because they failed to obey Him and worship Him only (Isaiah 10:6; 2 Kings 18:12).

Some Assyrians were sent to live in Samaria after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. In fact, Ezra 4:2 mentions some of these men who were sent to live in Samaria by

Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, and claimed to worship the Lord. In spite of their claims to worship Yahweh, it is clear that “they had a syncretistic form of worship; they worshipped both Yahweh and others” (John A. Martin, “Ezra,” *ibid.*, p. 660). These descendants of the Assyrians, who had intermarried with other peoples, frustrated the Israelites’ efforts to rebuild the temple (Ezra 4:1-5). Not only did they seek to halt the rebuilding of the temple, but, according to The Pulpit Commentary, their descendants later became the Samaritan people (entry for Ezra 4:2).

In the years after the siege of Samaria, the southern kingdom of Judah was also threatened by Assyria. During the reign of Judah’s King Hezekiah, the Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked. The Assyrians first captured forty-six of Judah’s fortified cities (Isaiah 36:1). Then they besieged Jerusalem. Sennacherib boasted of Assyria’s strength and claimed that no one, not even the Lord God, could stop him from capturing Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13, 19-22, 33-35; 2 Chronicles 32:14-16). In desperation, Hezekiah sent gold and silver as a peace offering to Assyria, hoping to appease the power-hungry King Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13-16). Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord sent word to Hezekiah that the Assyrians would not step foot inside the city (Isaiah 37:33) and that the Lord Himself would fight against them. The Lord also rebuked the Assyrian king: “Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel!” (Isaiah 37:23). Sending the Angel of the Lord against the Assyrian army, the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers while they were sleeping, and Sennacherib abandoned his conquest of Judah. The Assyrians were unable to capture Jerusalem due to the Lord’s intervention (2 Chronicles 32:22). The Lord showed that He is the One True God, as opposed to the false gods of the Assyrians.

Jonah's trip to Nineveh in Assyria is a significant demonstration of God's mercy. God told the prophet Jonah to travel to Nineveh to warn the Assyrians of pending judgment against them. Because the Ninevites were Israel's enemies, and because the Assyrians were well-known for their brutality and aggression, Jonah refused to make the trip (Jonah 1:3). The sovereign God intervened, however, and Jonah ended up in Nineveh anyway, and the Assyrians responded to Jonah's message and repented of their sins (Jonah 3:6-10; Matthew 12:41). God had mercy on them and spared them from judgment at that time.

Eventually, the Assyrians' wickedness caught up with them, and their time for judgment did come. Their nation was destroyed (see Isaiah 10:5-19; Nahum 3:18-19; and Zephaniah 3:13). One prophet likened its demise to the felling of a tree: "A foreign army—the terror of the nations—has cut it down and left it fallen on the ground. Its branches are scattered across the mountains and valleys and ravines of the land. All those who lived in its shadow have gone away and left it lying there. The birds roost on its fallen trunk, and the wild animals lie among its branches" (Ezekiel 31:12-13).

Assyria played a significant role in biblical history as enemies of Israel and the nation God used to punish the Israelites for their unfaithfulness. He also used Assyria to display His preeminence over all other supposed "gods" and to demonstrate the extent of His mercy and grace.

Isaiah 19 contains a prophecy regarding Assyria that describes the condition of the Middle East during the millennial reign of Christ. The repeated phrase in that day in Isaiah 19 is a reference to the day of the Lord, when He sets all things right. According to Isaiah's prophecy, Assyria (modern Iraq) will join Egypt and Israel in

serving the Lord (Isaiah 19:23), and there will be political unity among Egypt, Israel, and Assyria. All three nations will be blessed by God (verse 25) and be a blessing to other nations (verse 24). Jesus truly is the Prince of Peace who can bring unity to these three former enemies. Because of Jesus, the future of Assyria is bright.