

Who were the Assyrians in the Bible?

The Assyrians were the inhabitants of a country that became a mighty empire dominating the biblical Middle East from the ninth to the seventh century BC. They conquered an area that comprises what is now Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. In the seventh century BC, Assyria occupied and controlled the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The capital of Assyria was Nineveh, one of the greatest cities of ancient times. Excavations in Mesopotamia have confirmed the Bible's description that it took three days' journey to go around this city (Jonah 3:3). The Assyrians were a fierce and cruel nation who showed little mercy to those they conquered (2 Kings 19:17).

The Assyrians were a thorn in the side of Israel. Beginning in 733 BC under King Tilgath-pileser, Assyria took the Northern Kingdom's land and carried the inhabitants into exile (2 Kings 15:29). Later, beginning in 721 BC, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser besieged Israel's capital, Samaria, and it fell three years later (2 Kings 18:9-12). This event fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that God would use Assyria as the "rod of His anger" (Isaiah 10:5-19); that is, the Assyrian Empire was implementing God's judgment against the idolatrous Israelites. The sovereign God takes full credit as the source of Assyria's authority (compare Isaiah 7:18; 8:7; 9:11; and Daniel 4:17). Secular history records that in 703 BC Assyria under King Sennacherib suppressed a major Chaldean challenge.

Given the Assyrian threat against Israel, it is understandable that the prophet Jonah did not want to travel to Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-3). When he eventually arrived in the Assyrian capital, Jonah preached God's impending judgment. After hearing Jonah's message, the king of Assyria and the entire city of Nineveh repented, and God turned His anger away for a time (Jonah 3:10). The grace of God was extended even to the Assyrians.

In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign, in 701 BC, the Assyrians under Sennacherib took 46 of Judah's fortified cities (Isaiah 36:1). Then they laid siege to Jerusalem—the Assyrian king engraved upon his stele that he had the king of Judah caught like a caged bird in his own country.

However, even though Sennacherib's army occupied Judah up to the very doorstep of Jerusalem, and even though Sennacherib's emissary Rabshakeh boasted against God and Hezekiah (Isaiah 36:4-21), Assyria was rebuffed. Hezekiah prayed, and God promised that the Assyrians would never set foot inside the city (Isaiah 37:33). God slew 185,000 Assyrian forces in one night (Isaiah 37:36), and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where he was slain by his own sons as he worshiped his god Nisroch (Isaiah 37:38).

In 612 BC, Nineveh was besieged by an alliance of the Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians, and the city was so completely destroyed that even its location was forgotten until British archaeologist Sir Austen Layard began uncovering it in the nineteenth century. Thus, as the Babylonian Empire ascended, Assyria dropped off the pages of history.