

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF ISRAEL

Chapter 23 from *Royalty and Ruin* (Contemporary version of Ellen G. White's *Prophets and Kings*)

 For use in *Animated/Engaged Learning*.

The closing years of the kingdom of Israel saw violence and bloodshed beyond even the worst periods under Ahab's dynasty. For two centuries the ten tribes had been sowing the wind; now they were reaping the whirlwind. King after king was assassinated. "They set up kings, but not by Me," the Lord declared of the godless usurpers. "They made princes, but I did not acknowledge them." Hosea 8:4. Those who should have stood before the nations of earth as the depositaries of divine grace "dealt treacherously with the Lord" and with one another. Hosea 5:7.

Through Hosea and Amos God sent message after message, urging repentance and threatening disaster. "You have plowed wickedness," declared Hosea, "you have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you trusted in your own way, in the multitude of your mighty men." "At dawn the king of Israel shall be cut off utterly." Hosea 10:13, 15. Unable to discern the disastrous results their evil course would bring, the ten tribes were soon to be "wanderers among the nations." Hosea 9:17.

Some leaders felt keenly their loss of prestige and wanted to get it back. But they continued in evil, deceiving themselves into thinking that they would get the political power they desired by alliances with the heathen—making "a covenant with the Assyrians." Hosea 12:1.

The Lord had repeatedly shown the ten tribes the evils of disobedience. But in spite of reproof and appeals, Israel had sunk still lower in apostasy. The Lord declared, "My people are bent on backsliding from Me." Hosea 11:7.

During the last half century before the Assyrian captivity, the iniquity in Israel was like that of the days of Noah. In their worship of Baal and Ashtoreth the people broke their connection with everything uplifting and ennobling and became an easy target for temptation. The misguided worshipers had no barrier against sin and yielded themselves to the evil passions of the human heart.

The prophets lifted their voices against the rampant oppression, flagrant injustice, the unbridled luxury and extravagance, the shameless feasting and drunkenness, and the gross immorality. But their protests were in vain. "They hate the one who rebukes in the gate," declared Amos, "and they abhor the one who speaks

uprightly." Amos 5:10. Finally nearly all the land's inhabitants had given themselves over to the alluring practices of nature worship. Forgetting their Maker, Israel became "deeply corrupted." Hosea 9:9.

Hosea's Gracious Appeals

The transgressors were given many opportunities to repent. In their hour of deepest apostasy God gave them a message of forgiveness and hope. "O Israel," He declared, "you are destroyed, but your help is from Me. I will be your King; where is any other, that he may save you?" Hosea 13:9, 10. "Come, and let us return to the Lord," the prophet pleaded, "for He has torn, but He will heal us. . . . Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth." Hosea 6:1–3.

"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely," the Lord declared. "'I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall grow like the lily. . . . Those who dwell under His shadow shall return.' . . . For the ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them." Hosea 14:4–9.

"Seek Me," the Lord invited, "and live." "So the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." Amos 5:4, 14, 15.

The words of God's messengers were so contrary to the people's evil desires that the idolatrous priest at Bethel sent a message to the ruler in Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words." Amos 7:10.

The evils that overspread the land had become incurable, and God pronounced the dread sentence on Israel: "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone." "The days of punishment have come; the days of recompense have come. Israel knows!" Hosea 4:17; 9:7. The ten tribes of Israel were now to reap the harvest of the apostasy that had begun when Jeroboam set up the strange altars at Bethel and at Dan. God's message was: "All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, The calamity shall not overtake nor confront us." Amos 9:10.

"The houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end." "Israel shall surely be led away captive from his own land." "Because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" Amos 3:15; 7:17; 4:12.

Judgments Held Back for a Season

For a while God delayed these predicted judgments, and during the long reign of Jeroboam II the armies of Israel gained great victories. But this time of apparent prosperity brought no change in the hearts of the unrepentant ones, and it was finally decreed, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive from their own land." Amos 7:11.

The boldness of this utterance was lost on the unrepentant king and people. Amaziah, a leader among the idol-worshipping priests at Bethel, was stirred to anger by the plain words spoken against the nation and their king. He said to Amos, "Go, you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread, and there prophesy. But never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is the royal residence." Verses 12, 13.

To this the prophet firmly responded: "Israel shall surely be led away captive." Verse 17.

The words Amos spoke against the apostate tribes were fulfilled literally, yet the destruction of the kingdom came gradually. In judgment the Lord remembered mercy. When the "king of Assyria came against the land" (2 Kings 15:19), Menahem, then king of Israel, was permitted to remain on the throne as a vassal of the Assyrian realm. The Assyrians, having humbled the ten tribes, returned for a while to their own land.

Menahem, far from repenting of the evil that had brought ruin to his kingdom, continued in "the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin." Verse 18. A little later, "in the days of Pekah" his successor (verse 29), Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, invaded Israel and carried away a multitude of captives living in Galilee and east of the Jordan. These he scattered among the heathen in lands far removed from Palestine. The northern kingdom never recovered from this terrible blow. Only one more ruler, Hoshea, was to follow Pekah. Soon the kingdom was to be swept away forever.

In that time of sorrow and distress God still remembered mercy. In the third year of Hoshea's reign, good King Hezekiah began to rule in Judah and instituted important reforms in the temple service at Jerusalem. He arranged for a Passover celebration and invited not only Judah and Benjamin but the northern tribes as well.

"Then the runners went throughout all Israel and Judah" with the pressing invitation, "Children of Israel, return to

the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; then He will return to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. . . . Now do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the Lord; and enter His sanctuary. . . . For if you return to the Lord, your brethren and your children will be treated with compassion by those who lead them captive, so that they may come back to this land; for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him." 2 Chronicles 30:6-9.

From city to city Hezekiah's couriers carried the message. But the remnant of the ten tribes who still lived within the once-flourishing northern kingdom treated the royal messengers with indifference and even contempt. "They laughed at them and mocked them." A few, however, "from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem . . . to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread." Verses 10, 11-13.

Swiftly the End Came

About two years later, the Assyrian armies besieged Samaria, and multitudes perished miserably of hunger and disease, as well as by the sword. The city and nation fell, and the broken remnants of the ten tribes were scattered in the provinces of the Assyrian realm.

The destruction of the northern kingdom was a direct judgment from Heaven. Through Isaiah the Lord referred to the Assyrian armies as "the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand," He said, "is My indignation." Isaiah 10:5.

Because the children of Israel refused steadfastly to repent, the Lord "afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them from His sight," in harmony with the plain warnings He had sent them "by all His servants the prophets."

"So was Israel carried away from their own land to Assyria," "because they did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed His covenant." 2 Kings 17:20, 23; 18:12.

In the terrible judgments on the ten tribes the Lord had a wise and merciful purpose. What He could no longer do through them in the land of their fathers He would seek to accomplish by scattering them among the heathen. Not all who were carried captive were rebellious and unrepentant. Some had remained true to God, and others had humbled themselves before Him. Through these He would bring multitudes in Assyria to a knowledge of His character and the blessings of His law.