

The Hebrew Corner

Why did God send Elijah, Elisha, and other prophets to a country that was destined to be conquered by Assyria, a country that was ruled by a series of ungodly kings (19 in all), a country that was engaged in idol worship and would not repent?

The patience and longsuffering of God are at no time more evident than in his treatment of the northern kingdom of Israel, formed subsequent to Solomon's reign after the schism resulting in the two nations Judah (ruled by Rehoboam) and Israel (ruled by Jeroboam). Northern Israel was ruled by 19 consecutive kings that were judged to have done evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet God sent the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Hoshea, and Amos to prophesy to the people and rulers of Israel.

The northern kingdom of Israel, and its capital, is also referred to in the Bible as Samaria, or in Hebrew, Shomron (שֹׁמְרוֹן, SHOHM-rohn). This name was taken from a hill that was owned by a man named Shemer that was bought by a king of Israel, Omri, from which came the name.

Elijah the Tishbite prophesied to Samaria under the rule of Ahab and Ahaziah. Though the message of this prophet was not well-received, even the king respected the authority of the prophet, as shown in the following passage (1 Kings 18:16-20):

“So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him: and Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab

said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim. Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto Mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table. So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together together unto Mount Carmel.”

The word prophet in Hebrew is navi (נביא, nah-VEE), and a prophet, in essence, is a spokesman for God. Sometimes the prophet is called upon to carry out the judgment of God, as in the case of the prophets of Baal in the passage above, in which Elijah executed them after they were shown to be powerless false prophets.

Sometimes the prophet to Samaria would provide aid to them in battle. The prophet Elisha, successor to Elijah, advised the king of Israel (Jehoram) against Syria, as the following passage records (2 Kings 6:8-12):

“Then the king of Syria warred against Israel, and took counsel with his servants, saying, In such and such a place shall be my camp. And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that thou pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down. And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of, and saved himself there, not once nor twice. Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not shew me which of us is for the king of Israel? And one of his servants said, None, my lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is

in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber.”

The prophet is given the power of God to do miracles such as healing of disease, hearing and seeing events from a distance, and foretelling the future. Yet, although the prophets to Samaria demonstrated these powers, the rulers and people of this country continued to worship Baal. Hosea, who prophesied during some of the last days of Samaria during the reign of Jeroboam II, delivered a final message of judgment to Israel, exemplified by the following (Hosea 8:3-8):

“Israel has cast off the thing that is good: the enemy shall pursue him. They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not: of their silver and gold have they made them idols, that they may be cut off. Thy calf, O Samaria, hast cast thee off, mine anger is kindled against them: how long will it be ere they attain to innocency? For from Israel was it also: the workman made it; therefore it is not God: but the calf of Samaria shall be broken in pieces. For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind: it hath no stalk: the bud shall yield no meal: if so it be yield, the strangers shall swallow it up. Israel is swallowed up: now shall they be among the Gentiles as a vessel wherein is no pleasure.”

The word translated as Gentiles, who are people not of the tribes of Israel, is the Hebrew word *goyim* (גוים, goh-YEEM), whose alternate translation is nations. So northern Israel was to be conquered by the Gentile nation of Assyria.

The prophet Amos, a herdsman of Tekoa in Judah, states the judgment in even more stark terms (Amos 4:12):

“Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.”

The final epitaph of Samaria is recorded in 2 Kings 17, an excerpt of which is in the following passage (2 Kings 17:20-23):

And the LORD rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight. For he rent Israel from the house of David; and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king: and Jeroboam drave Israel from following the LORD, and made them sin a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; Until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day.”

However, the prophet Isaiah indicates that the divided nation of Israel would be reunited. In this passage, Israel refers to the northern kingdom, and Judah to the southern kingdom (Isaiah 11:11-12):

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather

together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.”

We should learn from the failures of Samaria, and follow the instructions and promises of the Lord, and trust in him, knowing that he is patient and longsuffering, and faithful even when we are not. Praise God for his goodness, and give thanks to him for his blessings. Shalom!