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The Syro-Ephraimite War: Context, Conflict, and Consequences

Vann D. Rolfson

The Syro-Ephraimite War holds a salient position in the history of Ancient Israel. This article explores the causes and conditions of the war and its role in the scattering of Israel.

The Syro-Ephraimite War was a conflict that would be the catalyst for the prophesied scattering of Israel. Choices made within the war led to the total destruction of Syria, the later fall of Israel, and to the subsequent captivity and deportation for most of Judah. This war finds its place in the writings of Isaiah:

And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it. And it was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim. (Isaiah 7:1–2)

The Syro-Ephraimite War occurred just before the destruction and deportation of Israel. Most countries of the ancient Near East had been claimed by the expanding Assyrian Empire as provinces or vassal states. Judah was one of the few states which retained her independence. Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, endeavored to enlist Judah in a coalition to fight the Assyrians. When Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to join their coalition,

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Pekah and Rezin combined their forces against Judah in an effort to replace Ahaz with a king more favorable to their cause.

Though often enemies, previous successful military coalitions between Syria, Israel, and Judah provided a powerful precedent for uniting against Assyria. Syria and Israel's reaction to Judah's refusal to join their coalition resulted in the Syro-Ephraimite War. The downfall of these three countries stemmed from decisions made during this war. Therefore, acknowledgement of this war is crucial to understanding the scattering and gathering of Israel.

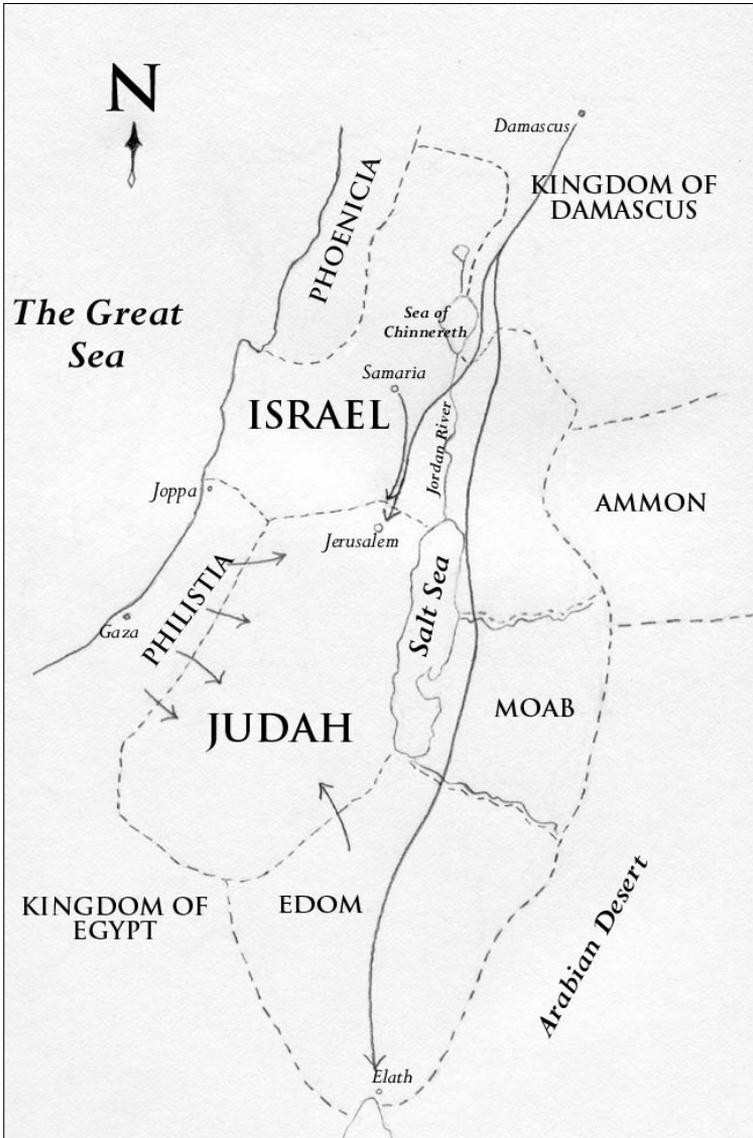
Historical Context

Animosity between Syria, Israel, and Judah began before the death of Solomon and the separation of his kingdom (see 1 Kings 11:23–25; 1 Kings 12:4). Solomon's son Rehoboam became king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah while Jeroboam became king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. War quickly ensued between the two and Solomon's vassal territories took the opportunity to establish independence.¹ The early kings of Israel and Judah were continually at war (see 1 Kings 14:30; 1 Kings 15:7, 16).

Many of the wars between Israel and Judah centered on their bordering territories—essentially the land of Benjamin. Though Rehoboam's successor, Abijam, at one point gained an upper hand, neither country gained clear lasting control over the area.² After King Baasha of Israel regained much of the land captured by Abijam, Asa, Abijam's successor as king of Judah, removed the treasures from the temple. He then gave them to Ben-Hadad I, the king of Syria, and entered into a treaty with him. Ben-Hadad I accepted and then attacked Israel from the north. The first coalition between these countries had favorable results. The attack

¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 227–228.

² Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-yonah, *The Modern Bible Atlas* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), 122.



Map of Israel, Judah, and surrounding regions during the Syro-Ephraimite War.

diverted Israel's attention from its conflict with Judah in the south to Damascus in the north giving Judah an opportunity to regain control over its borders.

Meanwhile to the east, Assyria was nearing the end of a century-long period of political and cultural stagnation. The Assyrians rose to power again in 911 B.C. under Adad-Nirari II. He liberated his country from invaders, primarily Arameans whom he pushed back into Aram (Syria). By revitalizing Assyria, Adad-Nirari II created a means for his successors to establish a new Assyrian Empire.³

Ashurnarsipal II followed Adad-Nirari's example of military leadership by expanding Assyria's borders. He used tactics of torture and fear to exact tribute from his neighbors. Caught by surprise and terrified by Ashurnarsipal's horrific methods of dealing with captives, many nations quickly capitulated and gave him the requested tribute. In a western campaign he reached the Mediterranean Sea. While there, he exacted tribute from the coastal cities of Arvad, Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre.⁴

Recognizing the danger of Assyrian conquest, many of the kingdoms within Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria formed a coalition to defend against an Assyrian invasion when Ashurnarsipal's successor, Shalamasnesar III, turned his forces to conquest in the West in 853 B.C. The Assyrians met the coalition at Qarqar (Karkara). The Assyrian Monolith Inscription is the only extant record of this battle:

I destroyed, tore down and burned down Karkara, his royal residence. He brought along to help him 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalymen, 20,000 foot soldiers of Adad-'idri (Ben Hadad) of Damascus, 700 chariots, 700 cavalymen, 10,000 foot soldiers of Irhuleni from Hamath, 2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers of Ahab, the Israelite, 500 soldiers from Que, 1,000 soldiers from Musri, 10 chariots, 10,000 soldiers from Irqanata, 200

³ Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

soldiers of Matinu-ba'la from Arvad, 200 soldiers from Usanta, 30 chariots, 1[0?],000 soldiers of Adunu-ba'lu from Shian, 1,000 camels of Gindibu', from Arabia, [...],000 soldiers of Ba'sa, son of Ruhubi, from Ammon—these were twelve kings. They rose against me [for a] decisive battle.⁵

Since the only record of the battle is Assyrian, and as always the Assyrians claimed victory, we may infer that the battle was a tremendous success for the coalition. The Assyrian objective of conquest and exacting tribute from these nations was thwarted and Shalmaneser did not launch another western campaign for at least four years.⁶ The coalition's primary objective was to turn the Assyrians from their lands. This was met as the Assyrians abandoned their plans for conquest. Traditional enemies such as Ahab of Israel and Ben Hadad of Syria had become allies to resist the Assyrians.

Aharoni, a modern scholar, contends that Judah probably also joined in this coalition against the Assyrians though they were not mentioned in the Monolith Inscription. He supports this inference by referring to military cooperation between Israel and Judah against the Syrians during this period.⁷ I Kings 22:1 notes a period of peace between Syria and Israel: "And they continued three years without war between Syria and Israel." This time of peace occurred between the Battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.) and the death of Ahab (850 B.C.). An alliance between Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and Ahab by the marriage of Jehoshaphat's son to Ahab's daughter likely occurred within or before that period of peace (see 2 Chron. 18:1). Ahab requested the help of Jehoshaphat against the Syrians—not knowing the exact dates, it is possible to conclude that this could have been the second time Ahab had enlisted

⁵ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:190.

⁶ Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-yonah, *The Modern Bible Atlas* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1977), 127.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

Jehoshaphat's military support and the Battle of Qarqar the first time. Regardless of Jehoshaphat's participation in the Battle of Qarqar, he made a lasting bond with Israel when he responded to Ahab, "I am as thou art, my people are as thy people, and we will be with thee in the war" (2 Chron. 18:3).

Though Ahab died in the campaign, Jehoshaphat continued his policy of cooperation with Israel through the reigns of Ahab's successors, Jehoram and Ahaziah.⁸ With their union, a meaningful precedent for coalition against outside forces had been set.

The Syro-Ephraimite War

Over the next century Assyrians continued their campaigns west eventually taking as vassals Syria, Israel, and many other kingdoms that had opposed them at Qarqar.

After the death of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, in 746 B.C., the throne passed to five different kings within ten years. Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, was killed by Shallum who was in turn murdered by Menahem. Menahem gained stability and spared Israel from Assyrian conquest by voluntarily paying tribute and becoming a vassal state to Assyria.⁹

In 737 B.C., Pekah, a captain in the Israelite army, usurped the throne of Pekiahah, who had inherited the throne of his father Menahem only months earlier.¹⁰ Pekah distinguished his reign by rejecting Israelite vassalage to Assyria and joining with Syria in revolt. They realized that individually or combined, neither of their

⁸ When Moab rebelled against Israel, Jehoshaphat went with Jehoram to battle against Moab (2 Kings 3:7). At another point, Jehoshaphat entered into a joint venture to build ships with Ahaziah. Together they endeavored to build a fleet at Ezion-geber to do trade with Tarshish.

⁹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 271.

¹⁰ Nadav Na'aman, "Forced Participation in Alliances in the Course of the Assyrian Campaigns to the West," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, ed. Mordechai Cogan (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1991), 92.

countries had the military capability to successfully withstand the Assyrian army. Thus, they sought to follow precedent in fighting Assyria by creating a coalition of nations.

Nearly all of the nations in the area sympathized with Syria and Israel's views, since they also felt the yoke of Assyrian oppression. Philistia and Edom both joined their effort. Judah was the one essential nation that refused membership from the anti-Assyrian coalition.

The coalition apparently felt that to enlist Judah in their cause they would need to replace Judah's king with a more cooperative ruler. They chose the son of Tabeal, a member of Judah's aristocracy who was governor of Gilead. In Isaiah's warning to Ahaz he explains Syria and Israel's intention:

Let us go up against Judah, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tabeal. (Isaiah 7:6)

The coalition attacked Judah on three fronts. Rezin and Pekah, along with the son of Tabeal, attacked northern Judah. Though the numbers recorded in the Chronicles account are clearly over-inflated, the number slain and taken captives were probably substantial.¹¹

Wherefore the LORD his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Syria; and they smote him, and carried away a great multitude of them captives, and brought them to Damascus. And he was also delivered into the hand of the king of Israel, who smote him with a great slaughter. For Pekah the son of Remaliah slew in Judah an hundred and twenty thousand in one day, which were all valiant men; because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers. And the children of Israel carried away captive of their brethren

¹¹ Jeffrey R. Chadwick, personal interview by Vann Rolfson, Brigham Young University, 27 Feb 2002. He estimates one tenth the number stated in Chronicles.

two hundred thousand, women, sons, and daughters, and took also away much spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Samaria. (Chronicles 28: 5, 6, 8)

At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drave the Jews from Elath: and the Syrians came to Elath, and dwelt there unto this day. (2 Kings 16:6)

Rezin and Pekah then laid siege to Jerusalem. The Philistines and the Edomites, both traditional enemies of Judah, took advantage of Judah's war in the north by attacking towns in the south-east and southwest.¹² Surrounded by enemy forces, Ahaz reacted by allying himself with Assyria. He took the silver and gold from the temple and the royal treasury and sent it to Tiglath-pileser with a pledge to serve him and a plea for his help against the coalition.¹³

So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria saying, I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me.

And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent it for a present to the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 16: 7-8)

At this point, the record in Chronicles and Kings diverges.

And the king of Assyria hearkened unto him: for the king of Assyria went up against Damascus, and took it, and carried the people of it captive to Kir, and slew Rezin. (2 Kings 16:9)

¹² 2 Chronicles 28: 17–18 “For again the Edomites had come and smitten Judah, and carried away captives. The Philistines also had invaded the cities of the low country, and of the south of Judah, and had taken Beth-shemesh, and Ajalon, and Gederoth, and Shacho with the villages thereof, and Timnah with the villages thereof, Gimzo also and the villages thereof: and they dwelt there.”

¹³ There are many spelling variations for Tiglath-Pileser. In Biblical quotes, I used the original spelling.

And Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria came unto him, and distressed him, but strengthened him not.
 For Ahaz took away a portion out of the house of the LORD, and out of the house of the king, and of the princes, and gave it unto the king of Assyria: but he helped him not. (2 Chron. 28: 20, 21)

With his tribute, Ahaz indentured Judah to Assyrian vassalage. Tiglath-Pileser led his armies west to deal with the countries that had refused to pay tribute, regardless of Ahaz's request for assistance.

Consequences of the War

In 733 B.C. the Assyrians sacked Damascus. The Assyrians killed Rezin and deported many people from Damascus to Assyria. In addition to taking Damascus, Tiglath-Pileser destroyed Rezin's birth city, Hadara, and 520 other cities in the area making them "like mounds after a flood."¹⁴ The independent kingdom of Syria was decimated. The Assyrians provincialized Syria, splitting it into four provinces. Damascus became a capital city of one of the provinces.

When Tiglath-Pileser attacked Israel he took much of its northern territory but did not proceed into the hill country and attack Samaria. In the Assyrian Annals this is described:

Israel . . . all its inhabitants (and) their possessions I led to Assyria. They overthrew their king Pekah and I placed Hoshea as king over them. I received from them 10 talents of gold, 1,000 talents of silver as their [tri]bute and brought them to Assyria.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wayne T. Pitard, *Ancient Damascus* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 187.

¹⁵ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:194.

Hoshea offered tribute to Assyria and killed Pekah; thus Tiglath-Pileser recognized Hoshea as a cooperative ruler and officially accepted him as the king of Israel.¹⁶

For its rebellion, Tiglath-Pileser deported many of Israel's northern inhabitants and made provinces of Israel's northern territory. He created the Assyrian provinces of Megiddo in Galilee, Dor on the Mediterranean coast, and Gilead in Transjordan.

Not long after Tiglath-Pileser's death in 727 B.C., Hoshea refused to pay his tribute. Shalmaneser V, Tiglath-Pileser's son, rose up against Israel and imprisoned Hoshea. He found that Hoshea had been in league with Egypt against Assyria. For Hoshea's defiance, Shalmaneser began a three-year siege of Samaria (2 Kings 17). In 722 B.C. his successor, Sargon II, completed the siege and deported its inhabitants. In his annals, Shalmaneser indicates that he deported 27,290 people from Samaria.¹⁷ This number only includes the inhabitants of the city—it may be extrapolated that up to 200,000 people were deported from the countryside.¹⁸ Sargon then rebuilt Samaria and filled it with deported people from other areas:

At the begi[nn]ing of my royal rule, I . . . the town of the Sama[ri]ans [I besieged, conquered] [for the god . . . who le]t me achieve (this) my triumph . . . I led away as prisoners 27,290 inhabitants of it (and) [equipped] from among [them (soldiers to man)] 50 chariots for my royal corps . . . [The town I] re[built] better than (it was) before and [settled] therein people from countries which [I] myself [had con]quered. I placed an

¹⁶ Nadav Na'aman, "Forced Participation in Alliances in the Course of the Assyrian Campaigns to the West," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, ed. Mordechai Cogan (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1991), 94. Na'aman argues that Samaria was punished, though not destroyed as was Damascus, because the Assyrians viewed the Israelite rebellion as a deviation from the past

¹⁷ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 2:2.

¹⁸ Jeffrey R. Chadwick, personal interview by Vann Rolfson, Brigham Young University, 27 February 2002.

officer of mine an governor over them and imposed upon them tribute as (is customary) for Assyrian citizens.”¹⁹

In reaction to Rezin and Pekah’s attack, Ahaz, the King of Judah acted against Isaiah’s counsel not to fear Syria and Israel.

Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted for the two tails of these smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah. (Isaiah 7:4)

Ahaz offered tribute from the temple and the royal treasury to Assyria in return for protection from Israel and Syria.

So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me.

And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king’s house, and sent it for a present to the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 16:7-8)

Assyria gladly accepted the gift and turned his attention toward Syria. In the short term, Judah was freed from war with Syria and Israel. In the long term, by willingly becoming a tributary state to Assyria, Ahaz placed Judah into a difficult position from that time forward in being required to give tribute to Assyria. If Ahaz had not paid tribute to Assyria, there may not have been a pretext for the later Assyrian conquest of Judah.

The death of Sargon in 705 B.C. inspired dissention throughout the Assyrian Empire. Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, apparently had been making great preparations to revolt by building fortifications at key cities throughout Judah before Sargon died. At

¹⁹ James B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:195.

Sargon's death Hezekiah refused to pay tribute to Assyria.²⁰

Sennacherib, Sargon's son, lived up to his father's reputation as a cruel and powerful emperor. Sennacherib answered Hezekiah's revolt by invading Judah in 701 B.C.. He destroyed the Judean countryside capturing all of its 46 fortified cities and deporting 200,000 people.²¹ In his annals this is how Sennacherib refers to the incident:

As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities I drove out (of them) 200,150 people Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute . . . upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually.²²

Sennecharib's armies laid siege to but did not take Jerusalem. In desperation, Hezekiah agreed to exchange a massive tribute for peace with Assyria. To pay his raised tribute, Hezekiah stripped both the temple and the royal treasury.

And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house. (2 Kings 18:15)

Of all of Judah, only the city of Jerusalem was spared. We can estimate that the 200,000 people Sennacharib deported made up roughly ninety percent of the inhabitants of Judah.²³

²⁰ John Rogerson and Philip Davies, *The Old Testament World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 152.

²¹ F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 71.

²² James B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:200.

²³ Jeffrey R. Chadwick, interview, 2002.

Conclusion

Syria, Israel, and Judah's destruction all resulted from the Syro-Ephraimite war. Though the war itself was not the cause for the destruction of any of their countries, the war surely hastened it. Assyria was in a state of empire building and these countries were in its path. It is not likely that Assyria would have allowed any of them to remain as independent enclaves surrounded by the empire for very long.

By focusing their forces on controlling Judah, both Israel and Syria were caught unprepared to defend themselves from the Assyrians. The kingdom of Syria was completely obliterated; its inhabitants killed or deported and scattered. The Assyrians gave the Israelites another opportunity to exist as a vassal country. In essence the Assyrians allowed Israel the opportunity to change their ways but they would not. The writer of 1 Kings recounts Israel's punishment for refusing to change their ways.

Yet the LORD testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets.

Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the LORD their God.

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. (1 Kings 17:13, 14, 23)

Hoshea's refusal to pay tribute and his subsequent defiance to the Assyrians resulted in the destruction and deportation of all of Israel. The Ten Tribes of Israel were effectively lost as they were taken to Assyria and scattered.

The safety Ahaz sought by pledging tribute and loyalty to Assyria existed only a short time. It seems that Assyria needed little encouragement to demand Judah's vassalage. Ahaz simply made Assyria's work easier. Ahaz's vow of allegiance played a large part in the later destruction of Judah. When his son Hezekiah sought to establish Judah's independence, ninety percent of the country was destroyed or deported. Often unrecognized, this deportation is a key element in scattering of the tribes Israel. Only the city of Jerusalem was spared. Of Jerusalem the Lord said, "For I will defend this city to save it for my own sake, and for the sake of my servant David" (Isaiah 37:35).

The Syro-Ephraimite War was a key factor in leading to the fall of Syria, Israel, and the scourging of the Judean countryside and cities a generation later. These were the critical elements of the scattering of Israel.

The riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken before the king of Assyria And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel. (Isaiah 8:4,8)