

“Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths” Isaiah 2:3

Introduction In the days of Ancient Israel all was not well. ((Some resources consulted for this article include: Hershel Shanks, *Ancient Israel*, (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999). John Bright, *A History of Israel 3rd Edition*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Francolino Gonçalves, *L'Expédition De Sennachérib En Palestine Dans La Littérature Hébraïque Ancienne*, (Louvain-La-Neuve : Université Catholique De Louvain, 1986).)) A careful study of the Biblical record reveals that a near continual battle existed between those seeking to establish the worship of Jehovah and those seeking to establish the worship of other gods and goddess who competed for the time, resources and affection of the Israelites. This ongoing battle traces a cycle of wickedness, decline, repentance, prosperity and then a return to wickedness again. The history of Israel as well as the lives and words of her prophets can in part be defined by this battle over proper worship. When righteous leaders were in power a solemn invitation centered on temple worship was in effect:

Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths. Micah 4:2

When wicked rulers sat on the throne they followed the pattern of rebellious ancient Israel in the wilderness who made a golden calf and declared, “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). Essentially they substituted the true power of revealed worship found in the Gospel and in temples for that of the world. In order to more fully appreciate the reality and significance of this ongoing battle between wickedness and righteousness, between the ways of the world and the ways of God as revealed through His temples let us step back into the religious and political world of the ancient Israelites and their neighbors.

Ancient Near Eastern Politics and History 920 BC - 700 BC

Of course we cannot cover all that occurred in the course of 220 years (just think that is as much time as the U.S. has been a nation). But the events of that time had a significant impact on the peoples of Palestine, the words that the prophets uttered as well as the significant acts undertaken by righteous kings and prophets. We will first look at what caused the break between the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah and then review several highlights of history from the broader Ancient Near Eastern region that had bearing upon the peoples and practices in Palestine.

Political History in Palestine

At the death of Solomon (922 BC) his son Rehoboam followed the unwise counsel of his young peers to impose heavier taxes upon the Israelites (1 Kings 12). This move exacerbated the already strained relationship between Israel in the north (the 10 tribes) and Judah in the south. So under the leadership of Jeroboam the 10 tribes broke away from political allegiance with Judah, forming a separate political entity that survived for about 200 years until the time of Tiglath-pileser the dominating and conquering king of the Assyrian Empire who reduced the once prideful and haughty northern kingdom to a heap of ruins around 722-721 BC. But more of that in a moment. One of the first things that Jeroboam did in order to secure his position and the strength of his new kingdom was to create a separate identity for his people. One of the most important ways to create an identity for a people is to establish a central religious gathering place where people can worship God and offer up their sacrifices and oblations. From a political standpoint this was a brilliant idea for

then Jeroboam’s people would sever old ties with the former religious center of Jerusalem and it would create a firmer economic foundation for the Kingdom of Israel. Since pastoral-agrarian society was intimately tied up with sacrifices, worship services, festivals and economic trafficking this meant greater revenues to the Kingdom of Israel, derived from the aforementioned activities. Additionally it created a greater sense of identity as a member of the Kingdom of Israel. Sadly, however, to secure his political power and kingly position Jeroboam instituted national idolatry, establishing two golden calves at the northern and southern points of his kingdom (Dan and Bethel), incurring the wrath of the Lord much as Aaron and the children of Israel did in the Wilderness:

Then Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah. Whereupon the king took counsel, and make two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: before thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And he set up the one in Bethel, and the other put he in Dan. 1 Kings 12:26-29 (compare to Exodus 32)

After the break up of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah the antinomy and internecine conflict existed for over two centuries until outside forces destroyed the entity called Israel—the Assyrian empire played this pivotal role.

The Assyrians

Where do the Assyrians come from? The Assyrians were a Semitic stock people who had poured into the Fertile Crescent during the 3rd millennia BC. Eventually, their empire was established in the land between the two rivers, more commonly known as Mesopotamia. ((Mesopotamia is a Greek word that means “between the rivers.” The rivers that create the boundaries of Mesopotamia are the Tigris and the Euphrates.)) Beginning around 870 BC the Assyrian kings sallied forth from their cities to dominate and subdue their neighbors. The many small kingdoms neighboring Judah and Israel quickly formed alliances to protect themselves from these Assyrian imperial advances. However, the Assyrian war machine was relentless and brutal. Increasing advances were made over the years and slowly the military alliances of Israel’s neighbors crumbled. Those who would not submit to paying tribute were brutally destroyed. ((Comparable examples would be King Zeniff and his people under tributary bondage to the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon.)) The Assyrians were masters of psychological warfare. Brilliantly tactical, the Assyrians used fear to cause their enemies to submit to paying tribute. Initially the Assyrians would conquer a prominent city and then they would take the leaders and impale them in public before the eyes of all conquered prisoners. They would then cut off the fingers and toes or put out an eye or two of many prisoners and send them running to the next city with the tale of what had befallen them. The hope was that the next city would be wise enough to avoid such an awful fate. For the Assyrians it was a powerful and effective means of conquering without depleting the resources and lives of the army.

The Assyrians in Palestine

Eventually the Assyrian war machine arrived in Israel and continued its policy of domination. Beginning around 734 BC with the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser and ending some thirteen years later under the Assyrian king Shalmaneser IV, the capital city of the Kingdom of Israel (Samaria) was destroyed and a large portion of her people were taken into forced exile by the Assyrians. From there they drop out of the historical record and hence nothing more is known of the 10 Lost Tribes.

And what of Judah at this time? Well, the kings of Judah had been wise enough to pay tribute when the Assyrians brought their army into Palestine, though such a move was not always popular. Just like any other freedom loving people, the people of Judah had no desire to be subjugated to another political entity, let alone pay them money. Nevertheless, when it was politically expedient the kings of Judah made the wise choice. And thus had king Ahaz of Judah done. When he died around 727 BC his son Hezekiah assumed the throne.

Safety in Righteousness

By most accounts Hezekiah was a righteous and successful king. (“Hezekiah” is a Hebrew name which means “Jehovah is righteous.”) He sought the liberty and freedom of his people from the Assyrians and used several key strategies to accomplish his goals, much like Captain Moroni:

Now it came to pass that while Amalickiah had thus been obtaining power by fraud and deceit, Moroni, on the other hand, had been preparing the minds of the people to be faithful unto the Lord their God. Yea, he had been strengthening the armies of the Nephites...building walls of stone...round about their cities...And thus he was preparing to support their liberty, their lands, their wives, and their children, and their peace, and that they might live unto the Lord their God, and that they might maintain that which was called by their enemies the cause of Christians. Alma 48:7-8, 10

Perhaps Moroni had received his ideas by reading of Hezekiah’s righteous acts of preserving his people from the Assyrians. To protect his people Hezekiah commissioned two ambitious yet strategic projects. The first was to build the “Broad Wall” to encompass the city of Jerusalem ((This wall was discovered some years ago by archaeologists and is still visible in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem today.)) and then to ensure a constant water supply he engineered a secret tunnel from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam. ((This tunnel still exists today. For the adventurous visitor to Jerusalem it is possible to walk the course of this tunnel through frigid knee-high water. Its length runs some 1750 feet.)) Furthermore, he filled in many of the wells outside the city. That way if an opposing army ever laid siege against Jerusalem the enemies outside the gates would not have water while the people within the city would have plenty of water. Such “works of man” were important for Hezekiah and the people of Judah to be prepared in all things against the incursions of their enemies. This is only one aspect of preparation. Perhaps the most important preparation that Hezekiah undertook to protect his people in freedom against the Assyrians was to prepare “the minds of the people to be faithful unto the Lord their God” (Alma 48:7). He understood the principle articulated by the Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley in the final session of the October 2001 General Conference, “Our safety lies in the virtue of our lives. Our strength in our righteousness.” Hezekiah was not alone in his quest for teaching righteousness to his people. Isaiah the poet/prophet was a contemporary and close confidant of Hezekiah’s. Indeed many of Isaiah’s words were recorded during the reign of Hezekiah (particularly Isaiah 1-33). In order to establish righteousness throughout Judah, Hezekiah initiated profound and sweeping religious reforms that challenged the existing social environment. Foreign or inappropriate religious practices were major factors that he had to fight against to prepare his people spiritually for the challenges of their day. In fact, not only did Hezekiah have to seek to stamp out idolatry, pagan worship activities, and their designated “holy sites,” the religious center of the Jerusalem temple as well as the sacred religious activities that took place at the temple had fallen into a state of disuse and disrepair. We read the following words from 2 Chronicles 29:3-11 in the context of these circumstances:

In the first year of his reign, in the first month, [Hezekiah] opened the doors of the house

of the LORD, and repaired them. And he brought in the priests and the Levites, and gathered them together into the east street and said unto them, Hear me, ye Levites, sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the LORD God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the LORD our God, and have forsaken him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the LORD, and turned their backs. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense nor offered burnt offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. Wherefore the wrath of the LORD was upon Judah and Jerusalem, and he hath delivered them to trouble, to astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. For, lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. Now it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the LORD god of Israel, that his fierce wrath may turn away from us. My sons, be not now negligent: for the LORD hath chosen you to stand before him, to serve him, and that y should minister unto him, and burn incense.

Hezekiah continued to move forward in righteousness, preparing his people in all things to stand against the powers of darkness of their day. He was ready and his people were ready for the advancing Assyrian army led by ruthless king Sennacherib who laid siege against Jerusalem around 712 BC (see 2 Kings 18-19). Hezekiah fled to the temple of the Lord and poured out his soul unto God. His prayers were answered and in a miraculous response the Assyrian army was destroyed by the hand of the Lord. In utter loss and dejection, Sennacherib found his way back to his homeland to petition for answers in a temple dedicated to the pagan god Marduk. The only response he received was a death blow from his traitorous son who sought the throne for himself. Thus ended the life of Sennacherib the one who sought to destroy the people of God. On the one hand was the true God answering the plea of his servant within the walls of the true temple; on the other hand was the prideful king who engaged in the false worship of a false god and who received his just reward. ((2 Chronicles 32:21)) Unfortunately for the Kingdom of Judah, the ways of wickedness were brought back to life soon after Hezekiah died. His unrighteous son, Manasseh was a lover of the neighboring cult practices and so once again those services were established. Thus patterns of wickedness and righteousness can easily be traced through the reigns of three generations of Jewish kings (grandfather to father to son). The following outline helps to highlight this cycle:

- Wickedness (Ahaz the father of Hezekiah)
 - The temple is left deserted
 - The priests and people no longer offer the sacrifices
 - The wrath of the Lord is kindled and the people are afflicted
- Repentance (Hezekiah)
 - A righteous king comes to the throne
 - He cleanses the temple
 - He has the priests sanctify themselves
 - He reinstitutes the sacred sacrifice services
 - He reinstitutes the sacred and holy days and festivals
 - He calls the people to repentance
 - He reminds the people of the stiffneckedness of their fathers and how that had brought ruin upon many.
 - He reminds the people that God is gracious and merciful to those that seek him
- Covenant making (Hezekiah)
- Prosperity (Hezekiah)
 - Hezekiah and his people are delivered by the hand of God from Sennacherib and the

Assyrian army

- Return to wickedness (Manasseh)
 - After the days of Hezekiah, his son Manasseh threw down the sacred works of his father and lifted up once again the idolatry of Baal upon the many high hills and sacred places throughout the land,
 - He built altars near the groves and high hills
 - He promoted idolatrous worship

Come to the House of the Lord

In the life of Hezekiah we discover that his first act as a young king of 25 years of age is to create an identity for his people (see 2 Chronicles 28:1-3). The identity of his people is centered on the true worship of God at his Holy and Sacred Temple according to the patterns that God had revealed and prescribed. In essence he was resurrecting that which was dead and inviting the people to return. We believe in the resurrection of each human soul, but how often do we speak of the resurrection of the most holy yet inanimate treasures? What Hezekiah did for his people in resurrecting the holy site known as the Jerusalem Temple is akin to what the Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley has done for the Lord’s people in the Latter-days in resurrecting the holy site that was once dead and defiled but is now vibrant and renewed—known to the world as the Beautiful Temple. ((In other words “The Nauvoo temple”. *Nauvoo* is an ancient and rare Hebrew word signifying beautiful. In fact the Hebrew word *Nauvoo* is quite significant in the context of the history of the Mormon experience at Nauvoo. Here are several of the meanings, “to rest (as at home)...*beauty*...to *celebrate* (with praises):—keep at home, prepare an habitation...*at home*; hence (by impl. of satisfaction) *lovely*; also (noun) a *home*, of God (temple), men (residence), flocks (pasture), or wild animals (den):—comely, dwelling (place), fold, habitation, pleasant place.” Found in James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers), Hebrew word numbers **5115** and **5116** (page 77 of Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible).)) It is in temples and in temple worship that our true identity is revealed. Indeed, we are defined by our relationship to God. But we cannot be in relation with Him if we do not know Him or if we do not know where He is. The more fully we know God, the more regularly we search for Him the more profound will be our relationship with Him and the more firm our foundation of personal identity. Without God we are nothing. We have no meaningful, purposeful identity when God does not exist in our lives. Temples are essential for there we learn more fully of God’s true nature, of his plan for our lives, and the covenants that He lovingly offers to us that we might bind ourselves to Him in an unbreakable relationship that defies death and time. May we return to the House of the Lord. May we find ourselves there as we find Him.