

I. *Historical Background – 7th Century BC*

02-Mar-03

Theme: God raises up and destroys nations through His sovereign will for His own glory.

Key Verses: Habakkuk 1:5-6 “⁵Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you. ⁶For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs.”

Introduction

Ask class what they know about Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (shouldn't take too long!). Go over outline of class (page 1). Note that as we go through the Biblical text, we will be using Dr. O. Palmer Robert's translation and arrangement from the original Hebrew – contained in the handouts. The course will also depend heavily on Dr. Robertson's treatment in his commentary.

The prophets Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah come onto the scene in the 7th Century BC in the tiny land of Judah. What was their calling? What was their message? Why did they write? Are their messages still alive for us today? To understand these and other questions, **we need to understand the historical background so we can put them into their historical context.** Once we understand the world they lived in, we can understand their message for the listeners of their day and then begin to apply it to our contemporary situation.

So today, we will look at the historical situation of the 7th Century BC, which was a century of upheaval and change on the international scene. Next week, we will go over an introduction to all three prophets, and then in the third week we will start with Nahum. We will cover each prophet in a 3-week period, one chapter per week. At the end of the class, we will have a review session. The first several weeks will be primarily lecture style, but the intent of the class is to be interactive, especially after the first two weeks, when we get into the study of the prophets themselves.

To help with the names, places, and events of the historical background, I've provided several different summary aids in your handouts. You should have a table with kings and prophets of the time period, a list of key dates, a timeline chart, and also a map of the Near East during this time period. As I go through the historical background, please use these references to help orient yourself on what is happening in and around the nation of Judah.

Exposition

A. Prologue: The Rise of the Assyrian Empire and the Fall of the Northern Kingdom (755-722)

Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC), perhaps Assyria's strongest ruler, restored Assyria's empire. He had achieved success first to the south in Babylonia and also in the north against the Urartu before crossing the Euphrates and again coming west. He was very successful in this direction, and he instituted policies that differed from his predecessors. Rather than institute nominal control and demand tribute which often resulted in constant revolt, **Tiglath-pileser incorporated conquered land as Assyrian provinces and deported native leaders** who might instigate

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revolution. This policy proved effective and was copied by his successors. His **campaign of 743 BC** reached all the way to **Israel (northern kingdom), which became a vassal state.**

Israel took a strong anti-Assyrian position and allied with Damascus against the great eastern power. Tiglath-pileser III returned to the west to put down this rebellious alliance at the request of Ahaz of Judah. Jerusalem had been besieged by Israel and Damascus, hoping to force Ahaz to join their rebellion, but Ahaz would not; instead he asked for aid from the Assyrian ruler. Tiglath-pileser moved down the coast in 734 BC as far as Philistia and subdued the cities there, especially Gaza, apparently to cut off Egyptian assistance to the coalition. Later (**733 BC**) **he marched into Israel, destroying cities all across Galilee and taking many people captive.** Finally, in 732 BC, he moved against Damascus, devastating the country, capturing the capital city, and executing the king. The king of Israel was assassinated from within. **All the territory north of the Plain of Jezreel and the Israelite lands in Transjordan were detached from the kingdom and reduced to the status of Assyrian provinces.** The upper strata of the population of these areas were deported to other parts of the Assyrian Empire and replaced by colonists from elsewhere.

The Transjordanian provinces lost their Israelite character and remained predominantly Gentile ever since; the territory north of the plain of Jezreel remained predominantly Gentile until it was conquered and judaized by a Hasmonaean king at the end of the second century BC. The change in the population of that area is indicated by the name now given to it - "the circuit (Heb. *galil*) of the nations," or Galilee. Only the central portion of the land, around **Samaria was left as the truncated kingdom of Israel, vassal state to Assyria.**

The king of Israel revolted again against Samaria, and this time the end had come. **In 724 BC, Shalmaneser V marched on Israel. The siege lasted 14 months from 724 to 722 BC. Finally, however, the inevitable happened and Samaria fell, bringing the days of Israel as a sovereign nation to a close.** An Assyrian governor was placed over the land, thus incorporating all of Israel into Assyria's provincial system. Many Israelites were taken captive by Assyria, either prior to the final collapse or at that time, and in place of these a foreign upper class of people were imported. This manner of mixing populations had also been instituted by Tiglath-pileser III, as a means of diminishing chances of rebellion among subjugated people. No doubt it served that purpose here in Israel, but it also worked religious havoc. The foreigners brought with them their own native ideas of deity and manner of worship. This influx resulted in a **syncretized religion**, in which both the false deities and Yahweh were revered. This mixing of population resulted also in intermarriage between the Israelites who were left in the land and the new foreign people. **The descendants of these marriages came to be called Samaritans.**

B. The Triumphs of Faith in the Days of Hezekiah (715-687 BC)

Hezekiah (728-686 BC) was one of Judah's finest kings in the sight of God. He is given the high accolade of having acted as David. Drastic reform was needed after the deliberate idolatry of his father Ahaz, and Hezekiah effected it. The doors of the Temple were again opened, and the priests and Levites were instructed to remove all foreign cult objects. Then they were to clean and restore all the proper items so that true worship might be reinstated. Further, Hezekiah ordered the Passover to be observed once more (probably in 715 BC). Apparently this had been neglected for many years. Hezekiah invited Israelites from Beersheba to Dan to take part in the festal occasion. This in turn led to a cleansing of the land generally; thus it was that high places, images, Asherah poles, false altars, and even the bronze serpents made by Moses in the wilderness were destroyed. Still further, Hezekiah revitalized the organization of priests and

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Levites and their support by the tithes of the people. Never before had the land undergone so thorough a reformation.

Hezekiah was anti-Assyrian, in contrast to his father Ahaz. He did not, however, openly rebel against the eastern power so long as Sargon II (722-705 BC) was ruling. When Sargon's son, Sennacherib (705-681 BC) came to the throne, however, Hezekiah did join in such a pact. Hezekiah made thorough preparations for an expected retaliation by Sennacherib. He constructed further fortifications, made new weapons, and reinforced his military strength. He provided a convenient water supply for his own people by digging the now famous Siloam Tunnel from the Spring of Gihon, through the hill of Ophel to a place within the city lower than the starting point; a truly remarkable piece of engineering.

Hezekiah suffered a severe illness during, or just prior to, Sennacherib's invasion of the land. Hezekiah prayed to God that he might recover; and God answered through Isaiah, promising the king fifteen more years of life, as well as deliverance from the Assyrian power. It is likely that Hezekiah's concern over his sickness was accented by his anxiety for the country.

After 4 years of maintaining Assyrian control over Babylon, **Sennacherib came in 701 BC to put down the revolt in the west.** He crushed the resistance in Tyre first; Sennacherib then punished the city of Ashkelon. It was probably at this point, with the coastline in his control, the Sennacherib moved inland toward the third leading city, Jerusalem. On the way he stopped to lay siege at Lachish. At this point, he received tribute from Judah, indicating Hezekiah's recognition that the cause of revolt was lost. But Sennacherib was not satisfied with this show of submission by Hezekiah, so he sent 3 lieutenants and a large force of men to pursue psychological warfare against Hezekiah and his people. Their threats were effective in causing the people to fear and in prompting Hezekiah to consult with Isaiah, from whom the king received a comforting word from God. At this juncture, Sennacherib heard that Egypt's army was coming to the aid of the coalition, and turned to meet it rather than continuing on immediately to Jerusalem. From Sennacherib's report, we learn that he did encounter an Egyptian force and defeat it near Ekron. **All of Sennacherib's activity was suddenly brought to an end by the slaying of no less than 185,000 troops of Assyria by the "angel of the Lord."**

Sennacherib later suffered the double humiliation of being slain by his own sons—in the house of his own gods! (2 Kgs 19:36-27). So in the midst of the marching of a mighty tyrant, the interceptions of a second world empire, and the internecine intrigues of a royal family, the covenant God of Israel was showing Himself faithful to the promises made to David and his sons. **Hezekiah's faith in the sovereign purposes of God was stronger than human armies.** God's purposes to provide a way of redemption from sin proved stronger than the purposeful strivings of human beings.

C. The Dark Days of Unbelief under Manasseh (687-642 BC) and Amon (642-640)

Manasseh (697-642) reigned the longest of any king in either Judah or Israel. He followed the pattern of his Law-defying grandfather, Ahaz, in **doing evil in the sight of God.** He restored the offensive cultic objects that Hezekiah had destroyed, replaced altars of Baal throughout the land, and recognized the Ammonite deity, Molech, by sacrificing children in the Valley of Hinnom. He approved various forms of pagan divination and even erected an image of the Canaanite goddess, Asherah, in the Temple. He killed those who protested, shedding much innocent blood, perhaps even killing Isaiah. Manasseh is said to have caused the people to do more evil than

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nations whom God had dispossessed from the land centuries before. By these pollutions, **he sealed Israel's fate in spite of subsequent repentances.**

Despite his wickedness, Manasseh survived the rulership of three Assyrian monarchs: Sennacherib (705—681), Esarhaddon (681-669), and Ashurbanipal (669-627), but not without a price. The records of Esarhaddon report on the submission of Manasseh. During this time, the determination of Assyria to subdue Egypt reached its fever pitch. As a consequence, aggressive Assyrian military and political power was felt in Palestine throughout this period. So it is not surprising to see **Manasseh listed among those forced by Ashurbanipal to aid him in his incursions into the depths of Egypt.** Whether Israel's troops were forced to accompany the king for the entire 400- mile trip down the Nile **to the sack of Thebes** is not indicated. The tale of this unbelievable conquest was well known to the inhabitants of Judah, as seen by the prophecy of Nahum.

Assyrian presence in Israel reaches its zenith at the time when the monarch of Israel shows little or no faith in the one true living God. One can hardly overlook the fact that the time of Assyrian expansionism corresponded with the dark days of unbelief under Manasseh. The God of all nations would not allow the people bearing his name to deny him with impunity.

During most of his long reign, Manasseh was the obedient vassal of Assyria. He accepted all the religious as well as the political implications of such a policy, and his reign marked a complete break with the reforming policy of his father and a reversion to the policy of Ahaz. Manasseh's long reign allowed the retrograde tendencies of religious syncretism to become ingrained in the life of the people, and their moral effect was such that no subsequent reformation, like that sponsored by his grandson Josiah, could undo the evil; nothing would serve but the purgatory of national collapse and exile.

Another chapter in the life of Manasseh is reported by the writer of Chronicles. According to this account, **Manasseh was carried away to Babylon** by the captain of the host of the king of Assyria, **where he repented, humbled himself**, prayed to the Lord, and was brought again to Jerusalem. Upon his return, he instituted certain building projects **and initiated a number of religious reforms** (2 Chr. 33:11-20).

The Assyrian empire reached its zenith under Ashurbanipal. He subdued his brother, the ruler of Babylon in 648 BC, and humbled Elam further to the east in 639 BC. With the return east and the triumph over the Elamite capital of Susa in 639, the Assyrian empire could not have looked stronger. From Egypt to Elam they dominated all the nations of the world. Yet **Nahum** does not hesitate to declare their doom. **Nahum's prophecy has a single theme and focus: the destruction of the capital of Assyria—Nineveh.** The reform of Manasseh, small though it might have been in comparison with the long years he had spent laying a solid foundation for an enduring apostasy, may explain why Nahum says little or nothing about the guilt of God's people.

Amon (642-640 BC) ruled only two years. He reverted to the idolatrous practices his father had pursued for the major part of his rule, apparently not being impressed by the reform of the closing years. He was assassinated by his own servants. The people at large executed the assassins and Amon's 8-year old son, Josiah, became king.

D. Reformation under Josiah (640-609 BC)

Josiah (640-609 BC) became king at age 8 and apparently had God-fearing advisors who offset any influence of his evil father Amon. **At age 20 he began to cleanse the land of the idolatrous objects** his father and grandfather had brought into the land. He was so successful in Judah that he even pursued similar activity to the north in Israel, where Assyria now held nominal control. **At the age of 26**, he put forth still greater effort to bring about what is called **the most thorough reform in Judah's history**. This special endeavor was prompted in particular by the **discovery of the "Book of the Law" in the Temple** (probably the Pentateuch). All idolatrous influences (foreign cult objects, idolatrous priests, prostitution, child sacrifice to Molech, high places, etc.) were removed. Josiah fulfilled a 300 year old prophecy (I Kgs. 13:1-3) by burning the bones of the false priests and destroying the false altar and high place at Bethel in the land of Israel. Perhaps the most significant feature of Josiah's reform was the observance of the Passover in the 18th year of his reign. A Passover had not been kept as carefully since the days of Samuel the prophet.

The precise timing of the early beginning of Josiah's purge is significant for three reasons:

- (1) This early purge occurs in the twelfth year of his reign, which would be 628 B.C. The significance of this date is that it apparently falls before the death of Ashurbanipal, which is now confirmed to have occurred in 627. The mighty tyrant who had cowed Manasseh into aiding him with his assault against Egypt still lived. Yet Josiah presumed to move into the northern part of Palestine and exercise his prerogative as Israel's messianic-king figure. For a young man only twenty years of age, this action could be inspired only by folly or by faith in the rightness of the Lord's cause.
- (2) This early purge of Josiah preceded the call and ministry of Jeremiah and apparently of Zephaniah as well. As a young lad without prophetic backing, Josiah had the courage, the faith, and the strength of will to overthrow a religious, social, and political tradition that had regulated the whole life of his populace for the previous sixty years.
- (3) This early purge preceded the discovery of the "law book" in the temple by six or seven years. Even without this authoritative justification for his actions, the king introduced his radical program of reform.

With the death of Ashurbanipal in 627, an era came to an end. For the previous one hundred years, the might of Assyria had dominated the life of the people of Palestine. After a brief interlude under Ashur-etil-ilani (627- 623), his weak-willed brother Sin-shar-ishkun (623-612) presided over the **kingdom's rapid demise**. Within little more than ten years of his accession to the throne, Nineveh the great had fallen. No sooner had Ashurbanipal died than did Babylon assert its independence under the leadership of Nabopolassar (626-605), the first king of the Neo-Babylonian empire. A revived Media under Cyaxares (625-585) emerged to become more than merely a trouble some thorn in Assyria's side.

The net result of this development of new political threats from the east meant that the west could function relatively free of the fear of immediate Assyrian reprisal. While this new relief must not be seen as a primary factor in Josiah's reform movement, it did provide a climate most favorable to the king's intentions. **If the weakness of Manasseh's faith had corresponded to the time of Assyrian strength under Ashurbanipal, the strength of Josiah's faith corresponded with a time of unprecedented weakness for Assyria.**

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It was in this context that the “book of the law” that had been “given by Moses” was discovered in 622 (2 K. 22:8; 2 Chr. 34:14-15). Now the reform of Josiah took a significant leap forward. The powerful prophetic ministry of **Zephaniah** appears to have arisen just at this point. **Josiah found just the support he needed in the ministry of the prophet Zephaniah.** With language steeped in the covenantal formulations of the book of Deuteronomy, **Zephaniah presents a picture of covenantal judgment** without rival anywhere in Scripture for its **stark depiction of the terrors of the coming consummation.** At the same time, **his penetration into the love of God reaches dimensions that stagger the imagination.** Even in the context of coming devastation because of sin, the redeeming love of God for His people shall prevail.

The international scene was a period of upheaval. Sensing the growing strength of Babylon, Egypt aligned with Assyria. Cyaxares, king of the Medes, took Asshur, the ancient capital of Assyria in 614 BC. The Medes and Babylonians joined forces and **assaulted Nineveh itself in 612. The city fell after a three-month siege.** The Babylonians assumed the supremacy over this area about the Tigris while the Medes returned eastward. At the same time, a remnant of loyal Assyrian subjects established a new king and capital at Harran, approximately 150 miles west of Nineveh. Two years later, in 610, Babylon defeated the remaining Assyrian forces once more at Harran, although Assyrian resistance was not altogether eliminated.

Egypt began marching through Palestine north to support Assyria. It was at this point that King Josiah made his fatal move. Perhaps he saw the march of Egyptian forces through his territory as an affront to his expanded sovereignty. Perhaps he felt it absolutely necessary to resist any strengthening of the hand of an Assyria that had oppressed his nation for so long. In any case, Josiah strategically intercepted the Egyptian army at the pass of **Megiddo in 609. Having been fatally wounded, Josiah retreated to Jerusalem, where he died.** His senseless death marked the end of an era. It was the last glimmer of hope for Judah.

E. Final Destruction under the Sons and Grandson of Josiah (609-587 BC)

From the point of Josiah’s death, the end came quickly. In rapid succession, three of Josiah’s sons and one of his grandsons ruled in Jerusalem until the fateful collapse of the kingdom to the Babylonians in 587. Why the reforms of good King Josiah did not reach into his own family is not explained explicitly in Scripture

Returning from a frustrating failure to win a decisive victory over Babylon, the Egyptian pharaoh took control of Judah. He deposed Jehoahaz, who had reigned only three months, and designated his older brother as his successor, changing his name to Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim early manifested a character that was particularly odious to Jeremiah. Jehoiakim returned to the idolatries of Manasseh and used forced labor to build luxurious palaces for himself.

In this hour of Israel’s greatest crisis, the prophet **Habakkuk declares essentially a single message: the person of faith “. . . shall live” (Hab. 2:4).** Even as Judah is primed to experience the ultimate of God’s judgments, a sinful person may be “justified by faith,” and so know that he is accepted by God despite his and the nation’s transgression of covenant law. Even as the mighty empires of the world are crumbling all about, the person of faith “shall live.” **He shall survive; he shall receive the blessings of the covenant, if only he will continue to believe no matter how bleak may appear the events of history. It is a message for the ages.** If under these circumstances the covenant promises of God hold true to the one who believes, God’s work of redemption can never fail.

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In 605 the international picture changed dramatically. As crown prince and eldest son of Nabopolassar, **Nebuchadnezzar** made his decisive move. He crossed the Euphrates and **assaulted the Egyptians at Carchemish**. Once the Egyptian resistance had been broken, Babylon could not be stopped.

After a few years of subservience to Babylon, Jehoiakim joined in a revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. In December of 598, the king of Babylon began his march back to Palestine. Having arrived, he besieged Jerusalem, and in March of 597 he took the city and captured the king. This king would have been Jehoiachin, a lad of eighteen years of age, since his father Jehoiakim had died while Nebuchadnezzar was already on the march.

This grandson of Josiah actually represents the farthest point of genealogical succession for the line of David. Although Zedekiah, a third son of Josiah, replaced Jehoiachin his nephew, serious questions were raised by his contemporaries about the validity of his succession. Texts in Babylon continue to mention the exiled Jehoiachin as “king of Judah.” Although **the actual destruction of Jerusalem came ten years later in 587**, in a real sense the succession to the line of David ended with the deportation of Jehoiachin, grandson to Josiah. From a new covenant perspective, the significance of these events becomes apparent. Not until the appearance of great David’s greater Son did the true throne of David, located at the right hand of God, find a worthy occupant (cp. Jer. 23:5-6).

Conclusion

The 7th century B.C. was indeed a time of the tramping and tromping of nations. Assyria reached the heights and plunged into the depths. Egypt strove for dominance, but it was Babylon that God raised up on the international scene. God raises up and brings down nations according to His redemptive purposes. In the middle of these international giants lay the tiny nation of Judah, who was impacted by all of these international powers. The secular eye of history would naturally focus on the “greats” of the world and overlook little Judah. But the Word of God gives us a different understanding of what was really happening in the 7th Century BC. To the eye of faith guided by the words of God’s prophets of old, a clearer vision may be gained concerning God’s purposes of redemption as they are being realized in history. God was moving in history, in international politics, for the sake of His people, and the glory of His name.

As we realize that God does not change, we can see through the eyes of faith that God continues to work in history today. Interestingly, the ancient cities of Babylon and Nineveh are located in the modern-day country of Iraq. The atrocities of Saddam Hussein are nothing new; the evils of ancient Assyria were just as bad. And like Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, like Nineveh and Babylon, the fate of Saddam Hussein is in the hands of a righteous and just God. God raised up prophets over 2600 years ago with a message for God’s people that continues to speak with revelational clarity even today. The word of God in Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah is still as fresh as tomorrow’s headlines.

Next week: Lesson 2 – Introduction to the 7th Century Prophets

Close in Prayer.