

## Chapter Four — Pride and Political Intrigue

### **Political Intrigue, Sex, Social Injustice, Mercenary Preachers!**

What a story! Political intrigue, bloody assassinations, sex, social injustice, and mercenary preachers —blockbuster themes found in the latest steamy Hollywood movie? Or maybe a best-selling raunchy paperback by some famous Washington journalists about America’s politicians and social elite? Surprise! These are themes sounded by the biblical prophets who wrote about the northern kingdom of the Ten Tribes of Israel.

Is there really anything new under the sun? If I had a time machine and transported a cross-section of moderns back in time to ancient Israel in the mid-700s B.C., to the stable, prosperous reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.), they would probably feel right at home once they got used to racing around in chariots instead of cars, or sharpening daggers instead of loading handguns.

Predatory business types would rub their hands with glee at the highly competitive business environment undergoing a remarkable, long-lasting expansion. The rich were getting richer, while the poor were getting poorer. But hey, that was the price of pursuing market efficiency. By having large plantations producing export cash crops instead of giving every family a little plot of land for subsistence farming, ancient Israel was producing a lot more growth in their GDP—and increasing tax revenue for the king! Those who had the wealth flaunted it. Modern party animals would feel right at home with those rich Israelites who led the good life at their luxurious estates, enjoying a seemingly endless round of babes, booze and feasting.

Sleazy lawyers would be reassured that the ancients weren’t so backward once they checked out the court system and discovered that it, too, offered the best justice money could buy. Even the religiously inclined might find inspiration in the rich liturgy conducted with great pomp and ceremony at the well-attended official worship services. And if those weren’t stirring enough, there were always plenty of high energy, motivational “preachers” who would prophesy with charisma, for a small donation, about the health-and-wealth gospel of good times getting even better in the soon-coming day of the LORD (cf. Amos 5:18-20). Yes, many today would feel right at home in the Israel of Jeroboam II.

Israel enjoyed... prosperity unequalled since the days of Solomon. A rich merchant class developed and merchants and nobles alike built elaborate houses and revelled in the comforts which wealth made possible. The poor, however, did not share in the prosperity. Small farmers were put out of business to make room for the estates of the wealthy. Society was divided between the dissolute rich and the embittered poor. The rich thronged the religious shrines and offered expensive gifts and sacrifices as a means of securing greater material blessings. Prosperity was interpreted as proof of God’s blessing. Priests and prophets were delighted to be honoured by the wealthy.<sup>1</sup>

The “good times” of the first half of 8th century B.C. can be comparable to life today in some rather unsettling ways. Still, materialistically speaking, those were the good old days when compared to the rest of the story concerning the ancient kingdom of the northern Ten Tribes.

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<sup>1</sup> Pfeiffer, p. 328,

## Bloody Kings of Unrighteousness and Injustice



Mesha Stele — House of Omri

Politically speaking, the northern Ten Tribes suffered immeasurably from instability. During the kingdom's first 80 years after seceding from the Union established by David and Solomon, there were 10 kings from 5 different dynasties. After Jeroboam I died, his son, Nadab, was assassinated and the entire family of Jeroboam slaughtered by a man named Baasha, just as Ahijah the Shilonite had prophesied. After Baasha died, his son, Elah, succeeded him, but ruled only two years before he and the entire family of Baasha were killed in a palace coup led by an ambitious usurper named Zimri. This, too, was according to a prophecy of God, (cf. 1 Kings 16:1-4). Zimri's succession, however, was short lived, only seven days. The army decided they preferred their commander, Omri, as king. So they encircled Zimri who committed suicide rather than be captured.

Omri proved to be an able administrator who consolidated the Kingdom of Israel both politically and economically. He concluded a peace treaty with Judah, ending the periodic internecine warfare that weakened both Hebrew states, subjugated Moab putting it to tribute, and forged an alliance with the Phoenicians that was sealed by the marriage of the Tyrian princess Jezebel to Omri's son Ahab. Omri's reputation was such that foreign nations like Assyria started referring to Israel as the "House of Omri."<sup>2</sup>

However, what appeared to be a successful administration in geopolitical terms, was a disaster in spiritual terms. Ahab and Jezebel seemed to have a synergistic effect on each other that led them to do increasingly evil things in God's sight. In respect to his wife's religion, Ahab made Baalism an official religion of the nation (cf. 1 Kings 16:31-33). When it came to social justice, Jezebel and Ahab were not above secretly murdering a neighbour in order to seize his property (cf. 1 Kings 21:1-18).

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<sup>2</sup> The Assyrian cuneiform texts referred to Israel as "Bit Kuhmri," which translates as "House of Omri." Since it was during Ahab's reign that the Assyrian Empire first came into conflict with Israel, and Ahab made a deep impression on them at the battle of Qaqr, the Assyrian logic is understandable. See *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 16.

## *Your Roots Your Destiny*

Justice is not a peripheral issue to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He considers it fundamental and critical. Why? Because justice is an essential, ingrained part of the divine nature. The way of the LORD is exemplified by doing *righteousness* and *justice* (cf. Genesis 18:19). Justice in the biblical sense means establishing not only what is right or true, but also indemnifying the one who is in the right through fair and legal means. While “righteousness is that quality of life in relationship with others in the community that gives rise to justice.”<sup>3</sup> This means living within God’s covenant relationship. It means paying attention to the whole teaching of God as codified and preserved in the Holy Scriptures, and not just picking and choosing what seems convenient at the moment. Whether king or commoner, powerful kingdom or small community of believers, God’s will is that all embrace righteousness and practice justice. The consequences of injustice and unrighteousness are grave for king, nation, spiritual community, or individual.

God ordered Elijah the Tishbite to confront Ahab regarding his perversion of justice and his lack of righteousness. Israel’s God prophesied of the wholesale destruction of the Omride dynasty, just as the dynasties of Jeroboam I and Baasha had previously perished (cf. 1 Kings 21:17-24). Divine justice, however, does not mean a stiff mechanistic form of legalism. The covenant between God and His people is not just about mutual legal obligations, but it is also about mutual concern and feeling. For His part as Sovereign of all humanity, God is just, but also merciful because His ultimate interest is long range, transformative and transcendent.

When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house (vv. 27-29, NRSV).

The Scriptures say that there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do what was evil in God’s sight (cf. v. 25). However, when Ahab merely showed humility (there is no indication he abandoned Baal worship), humbling himself before the words of a divine messenger, God rearranged His plans to delay the punishment (vv. 28-29) of one whom even the Bible admits was the most reprehensible of a group of royal disappointments. Is this surprising? Consider the explanation for this divine mercy given by Jesus of Nazareth many years later:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous [cf. 1 Kings 18:41-46]. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48, NRSV).

Eventually, the words of God do have their full effect, as they did in the time of the Ten Tribes of Israel. During the reign of Ahab’s son Joram, Elisha—Elijah’s successor—had Jehu, son of Nimshi, anointed as king over Israel. God ordered Jehu to destroy Jezebel and all of Ahab’s dynasty to pay for the innocent blood that they had shed (cf. 2 Kings 9:6-10).

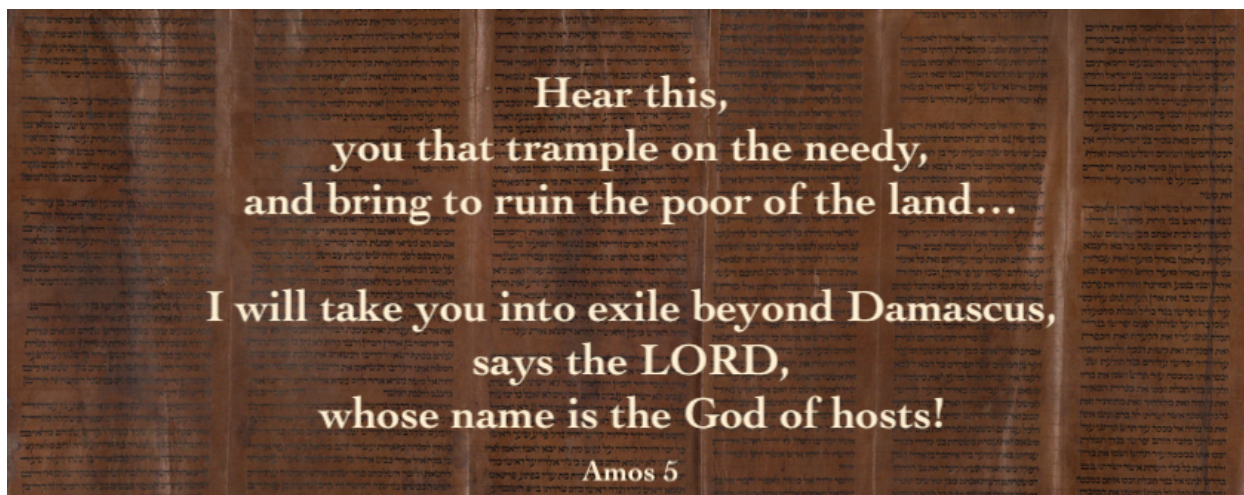
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<sup>3</sup> Annotated notes by the Society of Biblical Literature, Amos 5:24, *ibid.*, p. 1364.

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Jehu proved to be more than equal to his task. He killed, Ahab's son King Joram, Jezebel, Joram's cousin King Ahaziah of Judah, 42 of King Ahaziah's kin, 70 of Ahab's remaining sons, plus an unknown number of friends, courtiers, and servants of the House of Omri. Jehu also slaughtered all the prophets, priest, and worshippers of Baal that could be found and then turned the temple of Baal in Samaria into a latrine. Because Jehu did what was asked of him, his dynasty continued to the fourth generation of his sons, about 100 years (cf. 2 Kings 10:30). This was the period of the longest dynastic stability in Israel.

### **The Prophets Speak Out**



Despite Jehu's zeal in destroying the Omride dynasty and Baalism, neither he nor any of his descendants turned from Jeroboam's original syncretistic religious "reforms" (cf. 2 Kings 10:31: 13:2, 11; 14:24). God wants wholehearted service to Him, not some spiritually pathetic substitute that combines truth with error.

From the divine perspective, to really live within His covenant means linking inner substance with outward form. It is not enough to just "look good"; one must also "be good." One without the other doesn't please Him. It was on both of these two points that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel condemned the kingdom of the northern Ten Tribes. He would accept neither a worship form that mixed elements of His covenant with seemingly innocuous idolatrous practices, nor would He accept a religion that had form but did not result in a sincere desire to practice His teaching, to live by His values every day of the week:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah [a unit of measure] small and the shekel [a measure to money] great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: surely I will never forget any of their deeds. (Amos 8:4-7, NRSV).



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I hate, I despise your feasts [held at times at variance with Scriptural teaching], and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings [in the correct form], I will not accept them, and the peace offering of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice [substance] well up as waters, and righteousness [sincerely living by every word of God] as a mighty stream.

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god [Mesopotamian deities], your images, which you made for yourselves [the calves of Bethel and Dan] **therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus**, says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts (Amos 5:22-27, RSV).

God took harsh steps to make His displeasure with Jeroboam's version of Yahweh worship felt by Jehu's dynasty:

In those days the LORD began to trim off parts of Israel. Hazael [the Aramaean king] defeated them throughout the territory of Israel: from the Jordan eastward, all the land of Gilead, the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the Manassites, from Aroer, which is by the Wadi Arnon, that is, Gilead and Bashan (2 Kings 10:32-33, NRSV).

With the Aramaeans pressing hard upon him, Jehu took tribute money to the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III to buy the Assyrians' assistance in attacking Hazael's eastern flank—rather than changing his ways and relying on God's help. The Assyrians dutifully recorded Jehu humbly prostrating himself before Shalmaneser on their famous Black Obelisk, which stands as a testimony in the British museum in London.

But the Assyrian pressure didn't last long, and the Aramaeans again began making destructive invasions into Israel. Forty years previously Ahab was able to easily spare some 2,000 chariots and 10,000 footmen out of his total forces for an alliance of western Asian kingdoms that frustrated the Assyrian's invasion plans at the battle of Qarqar on the Orontes River, north of Phoenicia, in 853 B.C. Yet under Jehoahaz, Jehu's son, the Ten Tribes's royal military was

reduced to 50 horsemen, 10 chariots, and 10,000 footmen. Israel was so militarily weakened that it was on the verge of losing its independence.



Jehu bows to Assyrian Ruler

Despite Israel's serious spiritual problems, God was by no means out of the picture. In 802 B.C. Jehu's grandson, Joash began to reign. The prophet Elisha was dying, and out of genuine concern for both Elisha and the grave situation of the nation, Joash visited the old prophet and wept.

Elisha, however, encouraged the king by prophesying that Joash would defeat the Aramaean forces three times (cf. 2 Kings 13:14-19).

This national rally that Joash began, was completed by his son, Jeroboam II.

## Your Roots Your Destiny

The Scriptures noted of this time:

The LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them; he turned toward them, **because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them....** [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah [the old limits of the northern part of the Solomonic Empire] according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet...**the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them** by the hand of Jeroboam son of Joash (2 Kings 13:23; 14:25-27, NRSV).

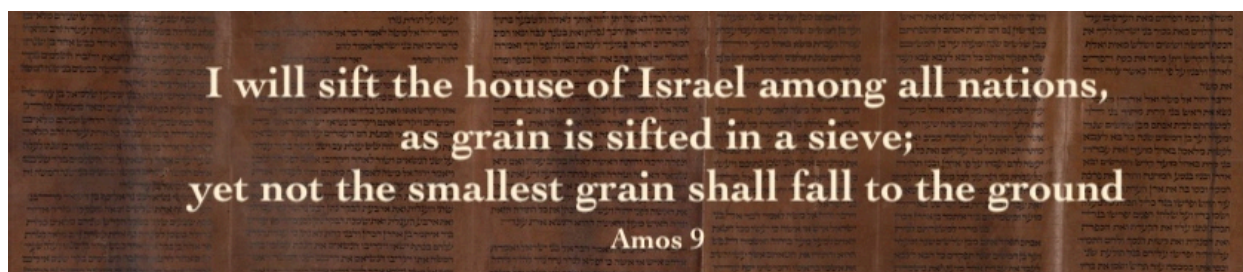
Another problem that God called Israel to account for was their pride and twisting of the concept of being the *chosen* people. It would appear that they despised others or thought themselves better than others, for having been chosen. But, God doesn't play favourites. No people or nation is outside of the divine interest. The book of Amos opens with God addressing the Aramaeans, Philistines, Tyrians, Edomites, Ammonites and Moabites in regards to their proclivity towards violence, absence of loyalty, and lack of pity. It did not matter that the Almighty didn't "know" them in the same way He "knew" Israel (cf. Amos 3:2, God had adopted the 12 tribes of Israel as His kin, the people of God, by covenant). The LORD still expected all those nations to abide by certain basic, universal moral standards, which they ought to have understood.

God's closeness to Israel does not translate into exclusiveness. The Holy One of Israel is not oblivious to the fate of other nations. Being chosen for a covenant relationship with God does not set the "chosen" above others, but rather simply makes such a covenant partner more profoundly accountable for his or her behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. This was a critical point the prophet Amos tried to explain to the northern Ten Tribes:

"Are you not like the people of Ethiopia [dark-skinned people often found in the slave markets at that time] to Me, O children of Israel?" says the LORD. "Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt [where they had been slaves], the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians [Aramaeans] from Kir? [God intervened in those non-Israelite peoples' national destiny.]

"Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom [the political entity], and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; **yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,**" says the LORD [in order to fulfill His covenant promises and divine purpose].

"For surely I will command, and **will sift the house of Israel among all nations,** as grain is sifted in a sieve; **yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground** [and be lost or wasted while being cleaned of chaff or refuse]. All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, 'The calamity shall not overtake us nor confront us'" (Amos 9:7-10, NKJV).



## *Your Roots Your Destiny*

Some Israelites heard the warning and took corrective action, but others did not. God made a distinction among different groups of people within a nation according to His spiritual criteria. The LORD can always make a way of escape or a way to bear a difficult problem for those who humble themselves. But He also knows how to confront the proud. As the prophet Amos explained during the reign of Jeroboam II, God measures men and kingdoms by His divine, absolutely true standards:

The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” The LORD said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of *Isaac* shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (Amos 7:7-9, NRSV).

### **Coercion, Pride and Humility**

When Jeroboam II died of natural causes, his son Zechariah reigned in his place—but for only six months before being assassinated in public by Shallum son of Jabesh. As had been prophesied, Jehu’s sons sat on his throne to the fourth generation. Shallum ruled from Samaria for just one month before Menahem son of Gadi murdered him and took the throne for himself. The prophet Hosea, who was active from the last days of Jeroboam II to the final collapse of the northern state, called the usurper Menahem “like a vulture” (Hosea 8:1, NRSV). Why did Israel have such political instability and bad leadership?

Because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my *Torah* [divine teaching, law]. Israel cries to me, “My God, we—Israel—know you!” Israel has spurned the good; the enemy shall pursue him. They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge (Hosea 8:1-4, NRSV).

During Menahem’s reign (745 to 737 B.C.) a new, energetic ruler assumed Assyria’s throne. The Bible calls him King Pul, but to history he is known as Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.). This powerful Assyrian king marched west and exacted a heavy tribute of 1,000 talents of silver from Menahem. The tribute King Pul demanded amounted to about 75,000 to 135,000 pounds of silver, depending on whether the Israelite or Assyrian unit of weight is being referred to!<sup>4</sup> Menahem proved to be a creative fund-raiser equal to the task of preserving his head. From all the wealthy of his nation Menahem exacted 50 shekels of silver, which by coincidence was the price of a slave. Given that 50 shekels weighed about 20 oz., this means there were between 60,000 to 108,000 wealthy men in Israel at that time who couldn’t refuse the king’s offer: pay the price of a slave or take a little trip to Assyria for a long working vacation!

Menahem was succeeded by his son Pekahiah (737-736 B.C.), who lasted just two years before being assassinated in his palace by an army captain, Pekah son of Remaliah. Pekah evidently came to power with the help of a conspiracy by the wealthy of Gilead, who didn’t favour continuing to make the high yearly tribute payments to the Assyrians. Instead, Pekah and his supporters formed a coalition with Rezin of Aram, the Phoenicians, and the Philistines against the Assyrians. The coalition sought the support of Ahaz, king of Judah, but he refused. So the

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<sup>4</sup> Annotated notes by the Society of Biblical Literature, *ibid.* p. 566-567; *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, “Weights and Measures,” p. 1127.

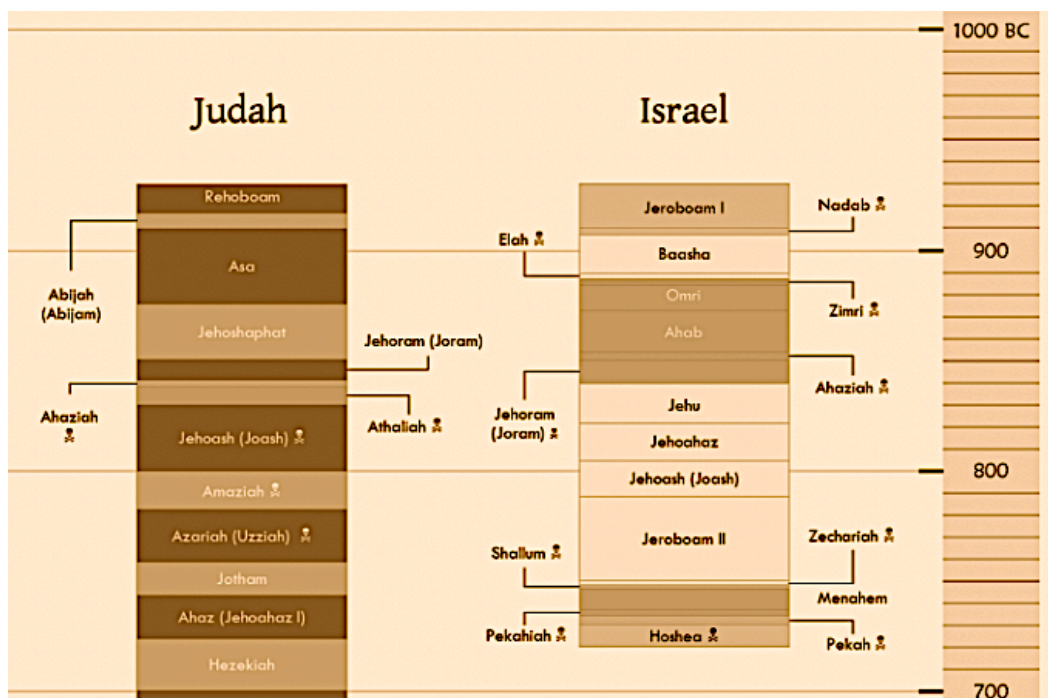
## Your Roots Your Destiny

coalition decided to invade Judah and place someone else on the throne more amenable to their plans.

When Ahaz and all Judah heard about those invasion plans their fear was palpable. The king of Judah knew he was in serious trouble. The prophet Isaiah told him not to worry. Isaiah understood that Ahaz lacked faith. So he said:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel [God is with us].... For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, **the land before whose two kings you are in dread [Israel and Aram] will be deserted....** On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.... On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briars and thorns; and as for all the hills [the hill country of Ephraim] that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briars and thorns (Isaiah 7:14, 16, 20, 23-25, NRSV).

Isaiah counselled faith in God, not fear of men (cf. Isaiah 8:11-13). But in the time of his distress, Ahaz of Judah chose instead to become increasingly faithless to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:22). The clear indication of Scripture is that during the reign of Ahaz the religious climate in the Northern Kingdom was better than that in the Southern Kingdom. Consequently, God delivered Ahaz and Judah into the hands of their enemies. About 734 B.C., the army of the northern Ten Tribes “killed 120,000 in Judah in one day, all of them valiant warriors, because they had abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors” (2 Chronicles 28:8, NRSV). The attacking Israelite army must have numbered at least that many men, but probably double that number, some 250,000 warriors, or more!



Kings of Israel and Judah



## Your Roots Your Destiny

Are such numbers improbable? Consider that 180 years before during a war between Abijah, the son of Rehoboam, (kingdom of Judah) and Jeroboam I (kingdom of Israel) the southern Jews fielded an army of 400,000 men, while the northern Israelite force had 800,000 of which 500,000 soldiers were killed in that one battle (cf. 2 Chronicles 13:3, 17)! Many today underestimate the population densities of those two ancient kingdoms.

In the battle with Ahaz, the Israelite forces slaughtered Ahaz' troops and took captive 200,000 of Judah and much booty, which they took to their capital, Samaria. But God was not pleased and gave them a warning.

But a prophet of the LORD was there, whose name was Oded; he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria, and said to them, "Because the LORD, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. Now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. But what have you except sins against the LORD your God? Now hear me, and send back the captives whom you have taken from your kindred, for the fierce wrath of the LORD is upon you.

Moreover, certain chiefs of the Ephraimites... stood up against those who were coming from the war, and said to them, "You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring on us guilt against the LORD in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel."

So the warriors left the captives and the booty before the officials and all the assembly. Then [the tribal chiefs of Ephraim] got up and took the captives and with the booty they clothed all that were naked among them; they clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kindred at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria (2 Chronicles 28:9-15, NRSV).

The monetary value of the slaves and plunder the victorious Israelite warriors left before the clan chiefs of Ephraim was probably three to four times more than they had paid in tribute to Tiglath-pileser III during the reign of Menahem several years earlier.



The clan chiefs willingness to forego such booty says several things. First, the status of Pekah as king was so low that he wasn't even mentioned or consulted in this account. Second, the power and influence of the clan chiefs among their people was great. Third, there was respect for Oded, as a prophet of the LORD. He was given a hearing. Fourth, many in Ephraim and among the other tribes were aware of the prophecies of Amos, Hosea, and perhaps others of their contemporaries like Isaiah and Micah. The victorious warriors recognized their sin and felt guilty so they meekly submitted to Ephraim's clan chiefs. Their restorative action showed they were humbling themselves before God, in the hopes of avoiding further grief at God's hand.