

Chapter 5: The Collapse of the Northern Kingdom

A year or two after the successful invasion of Judah by the coalition of Israel and Aram, Tiglath-pileser III made another sweep of western Asia. He killed King Rezin and decimated Aram, deporting its population to Kir. Then the Assyrians swept into the northern Galilee, and Gilead regions of Israel, deporting the entire populations of the tribes of Naphtali, Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh.¹ Maybe a third to a half of Israel's total population was deported at this time. With support from the Assyrians, Hoshea son of Elah successfully launched a coup d'état and assassinated Pekah.

The tribes remaining included Ephraim, half of Manasseh, Asher, and parts of Zebulun, Issachar, and Dan. As long as Hoshea paid tribute he sat on his throne. But when Tiglath-pileser died in 727 B.C. many states in western Asia sought a way out from under the heavy Assyrian yoke. Hoshea's Samaria was one those states. They decided to play politics and seek help from the other major power in the area — Egypt. The Egyptians promised to help. But when the new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, went west in 725 B.C. to put down Hoshea's revolt, Egypt didn't respond to the urgent Israelite pleas.

Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria; for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in Halah, on the Habor, the river of Gozan,² and in the cities of the Medes.

This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God.... Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes.... They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant.... **Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight; none was left³ but the tribe of Judah alone....** The people of Israel continued in all the sins that Jeroboam committed; they did not depart from them until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight as he had foretold through all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria (2 Kings 17:5-7, 13-15, 18, 22-23, NRSV).

¹ Assyrian cuneiform records confirm the assertion of 2 Kings 15:29 that the entire tribe of Naphtali was taken captive in Tiglath-pileser's invasion. See Keller, *The Bible as History*, p. 244.

² Archaeological discoveries in ancient Gozan confirm the arrival of captive Israelites in that city as "texts [were found that] mention some of the exiles' descendants." See *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, "Gozan," p. 357.

³ It is well known that the Assyrians used massive population deportations and resettlement to break the conquered people's will to resist in an effort to effect permanent conquest. Also, the Assyrians needed massive numbers of slaves to make their empire function. See *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, "Assyria," 1985, p. 78. From the writings of the prophets and the policy of the Assyrians it is extremely doubtful that any significant numbers of Israelites remained in the Promised Land, just a few straggler survivalist types. Second Kings 17:25 states that lions became numerous in the ruined territory of Israel. A great increase in such large predators would be typical of a land that had been emptied of most of its human occupants (cf. Exodus 23:29).



Assyrian Invasions of Israel

Shalmaneser didn't live to see the capture of Samaria. It was his successor, Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) who claimed the victory. At Sargon's palace in Khorsabad, the king boasted,

I besieged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it.⁴

Is this the end of the story of Israel? Did the Ten Tribes of the northern kingdom become lost, disappearing forever from history? Orthodox history thinks so. But was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob finished with Israel? Is that what his prophets said?

Who Has the Final Word?

Most biblical scholars realize that the Scriptures have some powerful things to say prophetically about the "Lost" Ten Tribes of the House of Israel and the House of Judah during the "latter days." If the nations comprising the Ten Tribes have ceased to exist as living, breathing entities then the literal fulfillment of the Bible's prophecy is impossible. This, of course, calls into question the Bible's claims to divine inspiration. Is the Bible merely a "pious fraud," a collection of ancient myths and incredible legends. This is a common perspective held by many today

At this point in time, it is a question of faith as to whether God will fulfill what is written or not. But no one should have any doubt that while the Scriptures predicted the destruction of the political entity of Samaria, the Kingdom of Israel, they did not prophesy the destruction of the people of the Ten Tribes. Otherwise, most of the seed of Israel would have been lost and unable to fulfill its prophesied destiny.(cf. Jeremiah 31:35-37).

⁴ Cited by Charles E. Pfeiffer, *ibid*, p. 335.

God's relationship with Israel and Judah is based on covenant. The word meaning of "covenant" implies permanence, steadfastness, and mutuality (cf. Psalm 111). Many today think of the "Old Covenant" in terms of a legalistic, unforgiving tether, a harsh ball and chain, or an inflexible straight jacket. Such people miss the point that to have a relationship with God Almighty means living in a dynamic covenant relationship with this great spiritual Being, who adopts physical humans beings as His own kin through this covenant. The Eternal One loves His people, gives them His teaching, and when necessary punishes them for their own good. God does not lose control and throw temper tantrums when He intervenes to correct His human children. He carefully weighs His actions. His goal is not to destroy, but to transform.

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father" [better translated by the intimate "Daddy"]. The Spirit ... bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:15-18, NKJV).



God administers discipline because He loves His people. God is love, after all (cf. I John 4:8). He testifies:

For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed O sons of Jacob (Malachi 3:6, NKJV).

The typical cycle for human society and individuals progresses through blessing, cursing, bitter repentance, spiritual awakening, and finally restoration. When ancient Israel went after its idols, the LORD used sexual adultery as the powerful human image to help them, and us, understand the emotional pain, the feeling of betrayal that such behaviour causes God! The LORD is not a passive spectator in His relationship with His people. He is wholly and intimately involved.

When God instructed the prophet Hosea to take a whore for a wife, the purpose was to reveal to the prophet the depth of feeling, the anger and frustration that God felt in dealing with His covenant partner Israel.

Plead with your mother [Israel], plead—for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts, or I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born.... Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns; and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them, and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then she shall say, "I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me then than now" (Hosea 2:2-3, 6-7, NRSV).

In anger God said to the Ten Tribes that they were “not pitied” and “not My people (cf. Hosea 1:8-9). But after punishment there was the hope of spiritual transformation, change, and growth.

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.” The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together and they shall appoint for themselves one head⁵; and they shall rise up from the land [that is, take possession], for great shall be the day of Jezreel [the day of Sowing]. Say to your brother, Ammi [My people], and to your sister, Ruhamah [pitied] (Hosea 1:10-2:1, NRSV; cf. Jeremiah 31:27-29).

The Kingdom of Israel was spiritually adulterous, sowing wickedness and reaping injustice. They trusted in their military and political maneuvering to protect them, but an irresistible enemy overwhelmed them and destroyed their state. Yet the people were not destroyed, rather they were to be spared, uprooted, and replanted elsewhere (cf. Amos 9:8-9). Why?

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim [cities famous for having been totally annihilated]? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; **for I am God and no mortal, and I will not come in wrath.** They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west... and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD (Hosea 11:8-11, NRSV).

God is not a human being! The difference between the God of Israel and us is that the depth and expanse of His love and forgiveness is boundless (Romans 8:38-39; Psalm 136).

He remembered us in our low estate
His love endures forever.
and freed us from our enemies.
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of heaven.
His love endures forever

The prophet Amos recounted how God sent or allowed drought, insect plagues, plant diseases, hunger, pandemic, and war in an attempt to bring the rebellious Ten Tribes of Israel to a change of heart. Often these plagues were merely the consequences, the negative effects of failed human policies. Yet, at other times they were the result of God taking a ‘hands-off’ approach and no longer protecting those who had strayed from the covenant. Realizing that Israel had failed to seek Him, God promised that He would seek them instead. The divine purpose for this meeting was not destruction, but salvation. This is what he meant when He said to ancient Israel then and the Israel of God today (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:29):

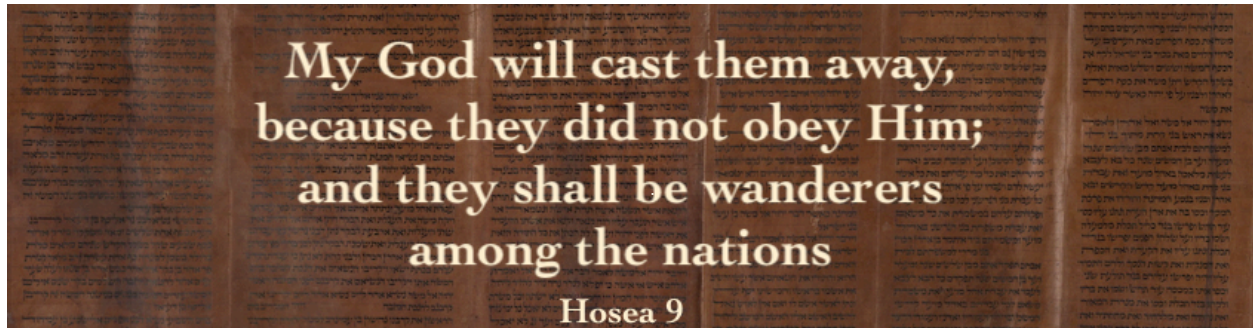
Prepare to meet⁶ your God, O Israel (Amos 4:12, NKJV)!

⁵ Restoration of the Davidic dynasty, cf. Amos 9:11

⁶ “According to the common interpretation, ‘to prepare’ in this verse means ‘to prepare for disaster,’ and ‘to meet’ means ‘to head for disaster.’ In biblical usage the Hebrew term ‘to meet’ (*likrath*) denotes either to go to a place to receive favourably a person upon arrival, or to oppose someone in battle; it does not mean to head for disaster [cf. Numbers 23:3]. The term ‘to prepare’ denotes to prepare for war or for a constructive achievement, not to prepare for defeat [cf. Exodus 19:11, 15; 34:2],” Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 37.

Escaping to Arzareth and Elsewhere?

When Tiglath-pileser III invaded Israel during the days of Pekah (732 B.C.), he deported roughly a third to a half of the nation of Israel to diverse regions within the Assyrian Empire (cf. 2 Kings 15:29). Ten years later the Assyrian King Sargon II could only boast of taking 27,290 captives at the fall of Samaria in 722/721 B.C. Given the monetary value of slaves it made no sense to destroy economically valuable commodities, and given the typically large egos of conquering potentates, if Sargon II had more to crow about he would have done so.



So what happened to the rest of the roughly one-half to two-thirds of the nation that remained after Tiglath-pileser III's deportation, but were *not* captured at Samaria's fall? Neither the Bible nor the Assyrian records make any direct claims that the remainder of the Israelite nation outside of those holed up in the capital city of Samaria went into captivity! The Scriptures only insist that everyone was to be uprooted and exiled from the Promised Land (cf. 1 Kings 14:15). Second Kings 17:5 shows that the Assyrians "went throughout all the land," yet they only found significant resistance at Samaria!

We know that only a few years previously, the Israelites still had enough manpower to field an army that could kill 120,000 Jews in a single day's battle and enslave 200,000 men, women and children. Such an Israelite army must have numbered several hundred thousand soldiers at least. The total population of Pekah's kingdom would have been at least one million persons, but more likely several million. During the days of King Menahem the tribute levy indicates there were 60,000 to 108,000 wealthy heads of household in the kingdom. Given that the income was poorly distributed, the rich probably represented only five percent or less of the population. So a population level of two million seems a reasonable, conservative estimate.

This means there were approximately 500,000 to 1,000,000 Israelites who went "missing." For the Assyrians to have left such a large number of people in their native land would have been contrary to the official Assyrian policy. It would also have been totally contrary to the testimony of the Scriptures, which maintained the land would be deserted of its population (cf. 2 Kings 17:18, 23-25; Amos 5:27). The prophet Hosea promised the Israelites a life in exile:

My God will cast them away, because they did not obey Him; and **they shall be wanderers among the nations** (Hosea 9:17, NKJV).

So the question is how and where? Let's notice something interesting about this large group of "missing" people. God makes changes in His plans when people humble themselves. We only have to look to the examples of Ahab and Rehoboam to understand this (cf. 1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Chronicles 12:6-8). In God's characteristic mercy He had warned Israel. The disappearance of those "missing" 500,000 to 1,000,000 Israelites could well be a testimony to those who took God at his Word. We know some of the Ephraimite clan chiefs and army captains humbled themselves before the LORD, acknowledged their guilt, and restored their brethren, the Jews, to their homeland according to the word of the prophet Oded (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:9-15). So what happened to those repentant leaders and their clans who had contact with God through the faithful prophets Oded and Hosea and were willing to listen and follow their directives?

Think about it. What would you do if you were in their shoes? Sit around in a dangerous location, knowing you didn't have the military strength to defend yourself from an overpowering enemy and believing what the prophets had said about the kingdom's future? Perhaps there would be space behind Samaria's walls for a few tens of thousands of King Hoshea's diehards as well as the big property owners. That group of the nation's elite would have had a big stake in fighting it out with the Assyrians. Probably they hoped they could buy them off once again.

Everyone else had to look after themselves. Expecting your enemy to come back soon for you and your goods, would you hang around and wait to be enslaved? You knew how they had treated your fellow clansmen during Tiglath-pileser's deportation. You knew exactly what to expect from Assyrian cruelty. So when you hear rumours from passing caravans that the Assyrian army was massing material and troops in preparation for another western campaign of plunder and terror in the coming spring, do you stick your head in the sand, or look for a way of escape?



Phoenician Ship

The only logical alternative was to migrate to some safer place, out of the Assyrians' reach. When Elisha prophesied of a seven-year famine, he told others to emigrate elsewhere to stay alive, and even Elijah found refuge among the Phoenicians during hard times (cf. 2 Kings 8:1-2; 1 Kings 17:1-16). So emigration wouldn't have been a novel idea. What was needed was a place that was sparsely populated in which you could continue your agricultural lifestyle of planting grain crops, and grazing your herds and flocks. You couldn't go south to Judah or Egypt because they wouldn't be safe either. Besides, you didn't trust them and for good reason. Directly due east was an inhospitable desert, while to the west was the ocean.

Maybe some with money and a stomach for a sailing adventure or with Phoenician religious, cultural affinity might have decided to take passage to one of Tyre and

Sidon's many colonies and trading posts scattered along the coastlands of the Mediterranean and northwestern Europe, including the British Isles. After all the Israelites shared with the Phoenicians a common language, alphabet, plus a long history of trading relationships.⁷

But, only a minority would have or could have chosen a maritime escape route. Space on a Phoenician boat would have gone for a premium because even many Phoenicians would have wanted to leave the area. Everyone would want to get out. But most of your people were relatively poor agriculturists having a few sheep, goats and cows plus farming implements. They had relatively little cash. And even the better off had been bled by Assyrian tribute payments and local taxes. If you were going to leave it would have to be by a land route, leading to a sparsely settled area beyond the Assyrians' reach. The only option was to go north. So you would consult your merchant contacts and those who had traveled for information as to the best route north.

Next, you would organize the remaining Israelite clans from Manasseh, Ephraim, Asher, Zebulun, Issachar and some of Dan, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps as many as a million people, and get them ready to travel. Security would be assumed by the veteran army captains and warriors who had participated only a few years earlier in the invasion of Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 28). A month before you estimated the Assyrians would launch their campaign, you hit the road as a group of migrants organized in your traditional clan groupings for mutual assistance. You would first pass through friendly Phoenicia, moving quickly to the north.

How hard is it to motivate great multitudes of people to leave their homeland for an unseen wilderness? Fear does amazing things. Think about the refugee columns exiting Kosovo—close to one million people. Or the North Africans or Syrians fleeing to Europe by boat. In the aftermath of World War II, millions of people wandered around Europe seeking new homelands beyond tyranny's reach.

Those refugee Israelites of the 8th century B.C. had effective leadership to guide them, no doubt accompanied by faithful prophets like Oded and Hosea. Would God take such a group of Israelites who humbled themselves before Him and guide them out of Samaria and into another land for their exile? What does the word of God say?

Therefore I will now allure her, *and bring her into the wilderness*, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor [a route of trouble] *a door of hope*. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt....

On that day I will answer, says the LORD, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer "God sows" [Heb. *Jezreel*]. And I will *sow* him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamath [no pity], and I will say to Lo-ammi [not my people], "You are my people" and he shall say, "You are my God." (Hosea 2:14-15, 21-23).

Colonel J. C. Gawler, the keeper of Queen Victoria's crown jewels researched the disappearance of the Ten Tribes of Israel. He found both Jewish and Armenian historical sources alleging that a mass of Israelite refugees migrated through Armenia into the region north of the Black Sea, which was in more recent times known as Tartary. Anciently, the region east of the Black Sea and

⁷ There is some interesting evidence to suggest the successful Phoenician colony of Carthage did receive many Israelite emigrants. See Steven M. Collins, *The "Lost" Ten Tribes of Israel...Found!* CPA Books, 1995, p. 75.

north of Armenia had been called *Iberia*.⁸ In Hebrew, English “i’s” are often pronounced like long “e’s.” *Iberia* is evidently named in honour of the great-grandson of Noah’s eldest son Shem, *Eber*, who was the father of the Hebrews (Gen. 10:21).

One of the sources Col. Gawler consulted was a 16th century map by Abraham Ortelius. Gawler wrote:

In his description of Tartary, notes the kingdom of *Arsareth*, where the ten tribes retiring... took the name of *Gauthei*, because, he says they were very jealous of the glory of God.⁹



Escape to Arsareth?

There is a passage in the apocryphal/deuterocanonical book of Second Esdras¹⁰ that discusses Arsareth:

These are the ten tribes that were taken away from their own land into exile in the days of King Hosea, who Shalmanezzer, king of the Assyrians, made captives; he took them across the river, and they were taken into another land. **But they formed this plan for themselves**, that they would leave the multitude of the nations and go to a more distant region, where no human beings had ever lived, so that there at least they might keep their statutes that they had not kept in their own land. And they went in by the narrow passages of the Euphrates river. **For at that time the Most High performed signs for them, and stopped the channels of the river until they had crossed over. Through that region there was a long way to go, a journey of a year and a half; and that country is called *Arzareth*** (2 Esdras 13:40-45, NRSV).

⁸ Gawler, *Our Scythian Ancestors Identified with Israel*, p. 9; Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, map between pages 78-79; and the *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 2, “Armenia,” p. 331.

⁹ Gawler, p. 9, citing M. Saiman’s 1818 book, *Researches in the East: an important account of the Ten Tribes*.

¹⁰ Second Esdras was constructed from several sources according to biblical scholars. The section quoted above was originally known as Fourth Ezra and was originally written in Hebrew by a Jewish author in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Society of Biblical Literature holds that Fourth Ezra is the work of one individual who drew at points on older, pre-existing blocks of material, including the cited material (cf. *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 1768).

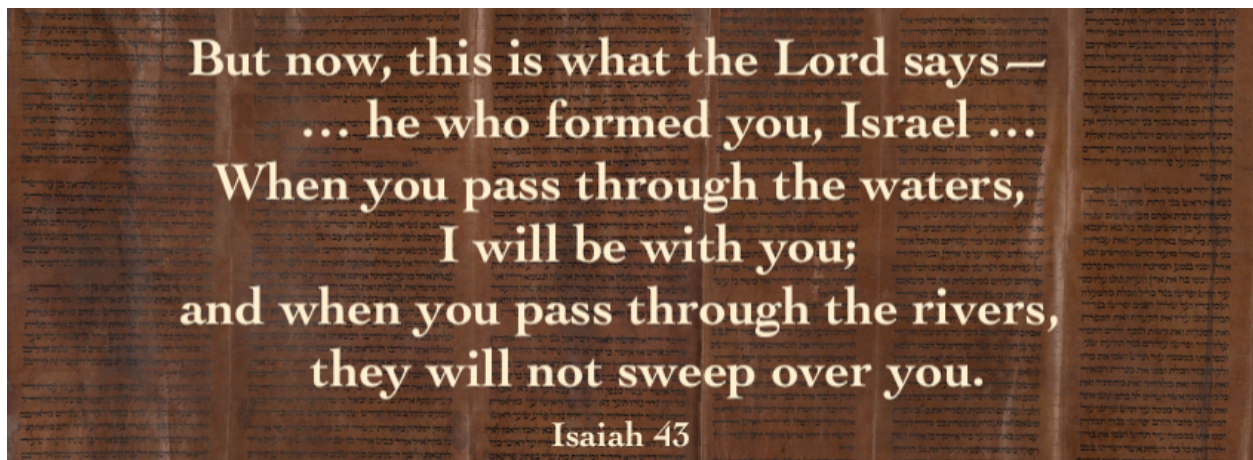
Is it merely coincidence that the prophet Isaiah wrote of Israel: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you” (Isaiah 43:2)? The name “Arzareth” does indeed appear to have come from the Hebrew *eretz acheret*, meaning “Another Land.” The phrase “Another Land” has a specific biblical reference in connection with the exiling of the children of Israel:

They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods who they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the LORD was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book. The LORD uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great wrath and cast them into *another land* (Heb. *eretz acheret*), as is now the case (Deuteronomy 29:26-28).

Ezra the Scribe (mid-5th century B.C.) who led a return of exiled Jews to Jerusalem is believed to have written this editorial comment at the end of the verse in Deuteronomy 29:28: “*as is now the case.*” Obviously Moses could not have written that comment before the children of Israel had even crossed the Jordan River to go into the Promised Land in the first place. Ezra knew the exiled children of Israel were in “Arzareth,” another land beyond the Euphrates. The first century A.D. Jewish history Josephus confirmed this when commenting on Ezra’s activities:

So he [Ezra] read the epistle at Babylon to those Jews that were there; but he kept the epistle itself, and sent a copy of it to all those of his own nation that were in Media; and when these Jews had understood what piety the king [the Persian ruler Artaxerses I] had towards God, and what kindness he had for Esdras [Greek for Ezra], they were all greatly pleased; nay, many of them took their effects with them, and came to Babylon, as very desirous of going down to Jerusalem; but then the entire body of the people of Israel remained in that country; wherefore there are but two tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans [Judah and Benjamin], **while the ten tribes are beyond Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers.**¹¹

God specifically promised in “the last days,” according to the prophet Jeremiah (cf. 31:8) to bring Israel back to the Promised land from the north country. The prophet Isaiah said the children of Israel would return to Zion from the north and west or northwest (cf. 49:12). Did Israelite refugees fleeing to Arzareth, another land, ahead of the Assyrian invasion make this arduous journey to the north? It seems both logical and possible. You be the judge.



¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 11, Chap. 5, v. 2.