

Chapter 8: The Great Southern Invasion

By the mid-7th century BCE the old Assyrian Empire was in a weakened condition and the geopolitical situation in the ancient Near East was in flux. The Assyrian king Esarhadon had married off one of his daughters to a Scythian king in order to seek Saka help in fighting off attacks from the rising Median Empire. The Saka obliged for a while, but they had their own problems and interests.

The turbulent Saka were noted for their internal strife.¹ They were composed of many tribes and clans, who did not always get along. A more recent parallel could be drawn from the historically bloody internecine struggles amongst the Scottish clans, or between the Scots and the neighbouring Norman-Anglo-Saxons. Among the Scythians, when there was a falling out, the weaker party had to move, and move quickly.² All related males on the losing side of a dispute were usually killed to avoid a continuing blood feud. This was true in individual, clan, or tribal disputes.

During the 630s and early 620s BCE, there was a lot of bad blood between the main group of Scythians and a smaller group of Scythians to whom the label Cimmerians has been affixed.³ The Scythians decided to kill or chase most of the Cimmerians out of their territory—but not all of them. Some “renegade” Cimmerians actually assisted the main body of Scythians in attacking their fellow tribesmen.⁴ Why? What was the controversy about?

Herodotus noted that the Scythians were very zealous in forbidding idolatry and the worship of “foreign gods.” In one of his accounts a Scythian king Saulius executed his own brother for participating in the rites of a Greek “mother-goddess” festival and wearing “images” associated with the mother-goddess. In another incident a certain King Scyles was discovered participating in the orgiastic rites of the Greek god Bacchus. As a direct consequence the majority of Scythians rebelled against him as ruler! Fleeing with his loyalist supporters, Scyles was pursued into Thrace by his own brother, Octamasades, at the head of a rebel army. The apostate Saka king was captured by the rebels and beheaded near the Danube River for treason.⁵ By some strange quirk,

¹ Piotrovsky, Galanina, Grach, p. 15.

² “Herodotus refers to a group of rebel Scyths who had broken away from the main clan and migrated to the north-west of Lake Balkhash, settling in an area which he called Sacae. It seems probable that pockets of other equally independent-minded Scyths existed elsewhere in the steppe, **and it may even have been dissenters similar to these who penetrated to Prussia,**” Rice, p. 55.

³ As previously, mentioned, the Persian Behistun Rock monument equated the names “Scythian” and “Cimmerian” as synonymous. Still, in modern times many scholars have felt the Cimmerians preceded the Scythians in the Black Sea region. But the ancient Persians and Assyrians didn’t draw this distinction.

⁴ Rice, p. 44.

⁵ Herodotus , *The History*, 4.76, 4.78-80.



King Scyles Ring

<https://www.livius.org/pictures/romania/corbu/corbu-seal-ring-of-king-scyles/>

Scyles' heavy gold signet ring was discovered in recent times near that border of ancient Thrace!⁶

Perhaps the Scythian-Cimmerian dispute had to do with religious observance. Remember, the Israelites who were exiled from their Promised Land left at different times under different circumstances, which was probably a reflection of their different spiritual conditions. The main group of exiles who fled voluntarily seemingly had a more repentant attitude and willingness to listen to God than the other two groups that were taken captive. This information explains a potential variation of religious sentiment between the Black Sea Scyths and the Cimmerians. However, the reason for their dispute might have originated with something more prosaic like cattle rustling, grazing rights, or politics.

Whatever the reason, the Scythians pushed a large body of Cimmerians out of the Black Sea region in the mid-630s BCE into Asia Minor.

These Cimmerians ravaged Phrygia and Lydia, plundering the Greek coastal cities (the area of modern western Turkey). The fleeing Cimmerians then “disappeared from sight” taking their loot with them.⁷

About this same time, Herodotus records the beginning of a massive Scythian invasion that would shake the Near East:

A numerous horde of Scyths, under their king Madyes, son of Protothyas, burst into Asia in pursuit of the Cimmerians who they had driven out of Europe, and entered the Median territory... the Scythians [had] turned out of the straight course, and took the upper route, which is much longer, keeping the Caucasus upon their right. The Scythians, having thus invaded Media, were opposed by the Medes, who gave them battle, but, being defeated, lost their empire. **The Scythians became masters of Asia.**⁸

After defeating the Medes, the Scythians invaded Assyria and sacked much of it leaving only the pathetic remains of the once mighty Assyrian army shut up behind the stout walls of Nineveh. Around 624 BCE the Scythians moved on and launched a massive invasion to the south, and occupied western Asia Minor, Syria, Philistia and Samaria— the old territory of the Kingdom of

⁶ Rolle, pp. 126-127.

⁷ Rice, p. 45.

⁸ *The Greek Historians*, edited by Francis R. B. Godolphin, 1942 and 1970, Random House, cited by *From the Lands of the Scythians*, p.18-19.

Israel. They went as far south as Egypt where Pharaoh Psammetichus paid them off with tribute money.⁹

The Scythians only dominated Western Asia and the north-central Mesopotamia part of the fertile crescent for a short time. Herodotus said they held it for 28 years, but some modern historians believe it was for only 10 years.¹⁰ While the Scythians waged total war against the Assyrians¹¹ and looted or extorted tribute payments from all the other nations they passed through, Herodotus noted that on their march through Canaan and Syria:

The majority of the Scythians marched by, doing no harm to anyone [or, “without doing damage”].¹²

The Scythians chose not to attack Jerusalem. They didn’t plunder Judah. Why didn’t the Scythians help themselves to a little Judean loot? There is an answer to this paradox.



Scythians Return to their Homeland (640-609 BCE)

⁹ *The Bible as History*, pp. 272-273; Ragozin, *Assyria*, p. 423.

¹⁰ Herodotus, 1.106; Werner Keller, p. 273.

¹¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 2, “Babylonia and Assyria,” p. 857.

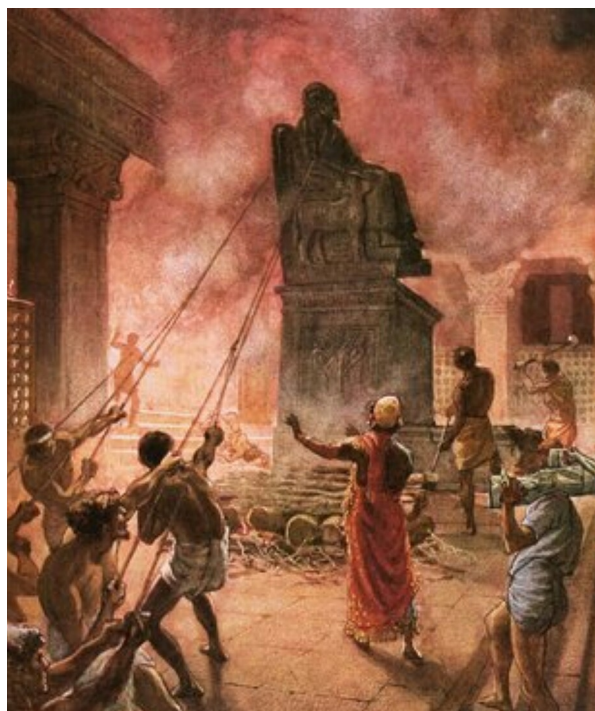
¹² Herodotus, 1.105, *The Greek Historians*, cited by *From the Lands of the Scythians*.

Joseph Is Still Alive—He Is Even the Ruler Over All the Land!¹³

If the Saka were merely barbarians originating in the far north in what is now Russia or eastern Siberia who had no roots in the Fertile Crescent, and their motive was simple conquest and plunder, why not profit from their overwhelming power and shake down the Jews? But if they remembered stories from grandfathers and elders about their original homeland from which the Assyrians had forced them to flee, then we could better understand both their harshness towards Assyria and their willingness to spare Judah. They would have recognized the Jews as brethren “Saka,” sons of Isaac. Implausible? Consider the evidence.

Beth-Shan, a city in the territory of the defunct Kingdom of Israel, located on the Sea of Galilee, was renamed Scythopolis to honor the Scythians. The name was voluntarily retained by the local populace for many years even after the Scythians had pulled out from the region.

The Scythian invasion occurred during the reign of Judah’s King Josiah (640-609 BCE). The Bible doesn’t mention Scythians being in the land at the time because, of course, “Scythian” was the Greek term for this people rather than the Hebraic one. Surprisingly, at the exact time of the Scythian invasion, the Bible does refer to the presence of Israelites as being once again back in their old homeland!



Josiah's Reformation

By William Brassey Hole (1846-1917) from “Old Testament History” (Eyre and Spottiswoode 1925).

The book of Kings (2 Kings 22:3) states that Josiah issued a decree to restore the Temple **in the eighteenth year** of his reign (622 BCE). During this renovation work a copy of the Torah of Moses was found (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures). King Josiah’s reign is famous for both its iconoclastic and “puritan” religious reforms that involved the destruction of idolatrous artifacts as well as a return to the Torah and a scriptural basis for worship. This included celebrating scriptural holy days like Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread:

And the children of Israel that were present kept the Passover... and the Days of Unleavened Bread... there was no Passover like to that kept *in Israel* from the days of Samuel... as Josiah kept... **and all Judah and Israel that were present** (2 Chronicles 35:17-18, NKJV).

Note the language: “all Judah and Israel that were present.” Distinction was clearly made between Judah and Israel. They were not blended or assimilated into one. They represented two distinct groups as was the

¹³ Genesis 45:26, NRSV.

historic usage. Modifying language is used to specifically qualify and take note of the Israelites from the Ten Tribes who were [worthy of remark] *present*. The presence of the children of Israel was indeed notable because they had been absent and not present for about 100 years! BCE

So the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; **none was left except the tribe of Judah** (2 Kings 17:18, NKJV).

The wholesale depopulation of Samaria of its Israelite inhabitants is confirmed elsewhere in the Scriptures as well. About four years before the Scythian invasion of Western Asia, **in the twelfth year** of Josiah's reign (628 BCE), after having purged Judah and Jerusalem of Asherah idols and altars to Baal, the Judean king went...

...in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon even as far as Naphtali, **in their surrounding ruins**, he also tore down the altars and beat the Asherim and the carved images into powder, and chopped down all the incense altars throughout the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 34:6-7, NASB).

Notice this, there is no mention of Israelites, just of cities in ruins. The Bible records that the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and placed them in the cities of Samaria **“in place of”** the Ten Tribes of Israel (2 Kings 17:24, NASB). Those foreigners were a superstitious lot. They thought the marauding man-eating lions that had taken over the depopulated region were the consequence of their not worshipping the “local god” correctly, along with their own deities. So they asked the king of Assyria to send back at least one of the syncretistic Israelite priests who had previously lived there so that he could “teach them the custom of the god of the land” (v. 27, NASB).

Notice, there was not even one informed Israelite still living in the ruined territory of Samaria who could help out those new settlers! “But,” as the Scriptures pointedly remark, “every nation still made gods of its own **and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria [the Israelites] had made [previously]**, every nation in their cities in which they lived” (2 Kings 17:29, NASB). Those syncretistic foreigners thought nothing of adding one more “local god” to their existing pantheon of deities.



Israelites Return after their Exile

If you believe the Bible to be a faithful witness, then it is clear the Ten Tribes of Israel were removed and exiled from their Promised Land. Otherwise the Bible contradicts itself and becomes a lying diviner, like a soothsayer worthy of death! So how is it possible that not only were portions of the Ten Tribes once again in Samaria, their homeland— and even more noteworthy—that they were interested and devout enough to want to go up to Jerusalem’s Temple to participate in God’s Holy Day services?

The logical answer is simple if astonishing. The Israelites who were present at the time of Josiah’s great Passover in 622 BCE were also called “Scythians” by the Greeks. They were the same people who according to history occupied Western Asia in 624 BCE all the way to the Egyptian border. Since Herodotus recorded that the Black Sea Scythians avoided idols, and even swine’s flesh, we know they were already keeping some aspects of the biblical commandments and statutes. These Scythians/Israelites according to the Scriptures were receptive to Josiah’s invitation to keep the Passover.

A people with a strong reliance on oral tradition could not have lost all understanding of who they were and where they came from in just 100 years. How long had it been since the last original exile had died, 50 years, 20 years, or maybe less? Here in Canada in 1999 there were veterans still living who fought in the Great War of 1914-18 more than 80 years earlier. And they were still telling their stories! People in the Caucasus are famed for living to great ages due to their simple lifestyles and goat milk. So it is reasonable to conclude that the people had knowledge of their grandparents or great-grandparents migration north to ‘Arzareth.’

Prior to the celebration of the great Passover of 622 BCE, Josiah had decided to repair the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, which was in bad shape due to long neglect during the reigns of the previous unrighteous kings of Judah. But Josiah needed to do some fundraising to pay for this. Who did he turn to first for help in making the repairs?

And they came to Hilkiah the high priest and delivered the money that was brought into the house of God, which the Levites, the doorkeepers **had collected from Manasseh and Ephraim and from all the remnant of Israel**, and from all Judah and Benjamin and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 34:9, NASB).

The Israelites of the northern Ten Tribes who were now present in the land contributed generously to restore the Temple. They are named first, before those of the Judean kingdom. Why? Probably because they gave more! After all, if these Israelites, the remnant of Israel, were Scythians, then they would have been flush with money, having just collected large tribute payments from Pharaoh and others! Naturally, Josiah would have been delighted to invite them, “the sons of Israel who were present,” to his great Passover celebration of that same year.

But the Scythians/Israelites didn’t stay in their old homeland. Evidently after a few years they left. About 85 years later (537 BCE), after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE and after the exile of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon, the “heads of fathers’ households of *Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites* arose” (Ezra 1:5) and returned to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. These returned exiles began to rebuild the Temple of God. The people who then inhabited Samaria heard about this rebuilding project and approached the men of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4:1) and offered to participate.

They said to the Jews:

Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him **since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here** (Ezra 4:2, NASB).

But notice the Jews response:

But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel [represented by the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi] said to them, **“You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel”** (Ezra 4:3, NASB).

What a dramatically different reaction to the people living in Samaria in Zerubbabel's time, 537 BCE from the time of Josiah's 18th year in 622 BCE. What had changed? The prophecy of Jeremiah 3:8-12, given about 620 BCE,¹⁴ stated that the Ten Tribes of Israel were “more justified” than the Jews at that time. Most of the people in the Kingdom of Judah were simply following their king's anti-idolatry program for pragmatic reasons. They had not really experienced a change in heart. When Josiah died his religious reforms died with him.



New Arrivals Inhabit Samaria (681-627 BCE)

So why were the inhabitants of Samaria, 85 years later, rebuffed with the charge “you have nothing in common with us”? The change was that the Scythians/Israelites who had occupied most of Western Asia all the way to the Egyptian border in 624 BCE had withdrawn back into their new homelands located in the Eurasian steppes and the Caucasus. Probably the Scythians had pulled back their forces years before the end of King Josiah's reign in 609 BCE.

The land of the northern Ten Tribes was left to those whom at least two kings of Assyria, both Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (also called Osnappar, 669-627 BCE) had resettled in Samaria in place of the people of Israel. These people

from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim were definitely outsiders to Israel's covenant with God. They were people who were considered to have neither religious nor ethnic commonality with the men of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi who returned from exile in 538 BCE.

¹⁴ King James Version notes.

A Prophetic Paradox: the Destroyed Destroy the Destroyers

Is there any biblical indication that the Scythians/Israelites would have a part in destroying the Assyrian Empire and then come back, even if only for a short time, to reoccupy their old homelands and attend Holy Day services at the Temple on Mount Zion? The answer is surprising. Much of prophecy follows the principle of duality. Oftentimes there is a small or partial fulfillment and later a complete fulfillment. Let's notice a rarely read prophecy of the prophet Obadiah. Obadiah's name means "the slave of the LORD." Some scholars believe that Obadiah is only a *nom de plume* because it has neither pedigree nor biographical information of any sort.¹⁵ Obadiah's message was written to the Israelite exiles.

It addresses the house of Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim of the Ten Tribes), and Israelites exiled to Halah. These prophetic literary themes would have been appropriate to the 8th century BCE. The scroll appears to have been written shortly after the events mentioned in 2 Kings 16:6; 17:5 and 2 Chronicles 28:17. These events would place the book's writing sometime during the reign of Judah's evil king Ahaz, perhaps approximately 720 BCE. Ahaz's ungodly conduct (he defiled



Scythian Warrior

<http://warfare.tk/Ancient/Skythian-Relief-Warrior-Walters-Ig.htm>

the Temple and even shut it up) would lend credence to a prophet's desire to seek anonymity behind the pen name "Slave of the LORD."

For our purposes the interesting part of Obadiah's prophecy is as follows:

For the day of the LORD is near against all the nations. **As you have done, it shall be done to you;** your deeds shall return on your own head. For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, all the nations around you shall drink; they shall drink and gulp down and shall be as though they had never been. **But on Mount Zion there shall be those that escape, and it [Mount Zion] shall be holy** and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those who dispossessed them. The house of Jacob shall be a fire, the house of Joseph a flame... **They shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria... The exiles of the Israelites who are in Halah** [where the Assyrians carried the Israelites captive from Samaria] **shall possess Phoenicia as far as Zarephath** [the northern border of Phoenicia]." (Obadiah 15-18, 19-20).

¹⁵ Many biblical scholars say the time of Obadiah's writing is unknown, or they guess that it was written after Jerusalem's destruction in 587, or after Judah's Babylonian exile. However, in the official canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the scroll of the minor prophets, Obadiah was placed between the writings of Amos and Jonah. This would indicate an approximate 8th century BCE setting for Obadiah. The internal evidence of Obadiah also suggests such dating. Clearly, Obadiah was not written about marauding Babylonians, but about treacherous Edomites and exiled Israelites.

This prophecy was fulfilled when the Scythians/Israelites destroyed the Assyrian Empire. The final holdouts of the Assyrian Empire were destroyed with Scythian/Judean participation. In 612 BCE Nineveh was sacked by Babylon and the Scythian king of Ecbatana.¹⁶ To the west the last Assyrian army was destroyed at Harran in 609 BCE by Babylonians and Scythians. King Josiah of Judah was killed during a Judean attack that successfully delayed the Egyptian attempt by Pharaoh Neco to relieve the Assyrian forces in Harran.¹⁷ Then the final blow against Assyria came when the combined forces of Babylon, Media, Persia, and Scythia fought against the Assyrian and Egyptian forces and won at the battle of Carchemish in the summer of 605 BCE.

The destroyed became the destroyers of those who had dispossessed them! The Scythians had occupied Western Asia including Phoenicia, and reclaimed, even if only temporarily, their former homeland in Samaria. These descendants of exiled Israelites then went up to worship the LORD on Mount Zion at a cleansed, repaired, and restored holy Temple for the Passover in Josiah's eighteenth year. Then, eventually they destroyed Assyria. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction!

Back to the Steppes

The Scythian domination of Western Asia and north-central Mesopotamia ended as quickly as it began. What happened? The Assyrian nemesis had been destroyed, but the Babylonians and Medes were eager to take their place as the arbiters of the Near East. The only problem was the turbulent and dangerous Saka. It was the Medes who came up with a winning strategy to overthrow their overlords. Rather than try to defeat them in open combat, the Medes decided to use deceit to exploit a well-known Scythian weakness. According to Herodotus:

At length Cyaxares and the Medes invited the greater part of [the Scythian leadership] to a banquet, and made them drunk with wine, after which they were all massacred. The Medes then recovered their empire, and had the same extent of dominion as before.¹⁸

Stunned and deprived of their leadership, the northern Scythians returned to their Black Sea steppes and Caucasian strongholds. The Saka around Lake Urmia and the cities of the Medes moved into the steppe land between the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Aral. These Saka joined with Dahai tribal brethren to form a group that would become known later in history as the Parthians.

The Scythian departure from the Near East left the Babylonians and Medes to fill the power vacuum. Babylon got the upper hand. The Egyptian effort to keep the Babylonians out of the western side of the fertile crescent had been crushed decisively by Nebuchadnezzar. The western road was open, and because of their rebellion against their covenant with their LORD God, the Kingdom of Judah was soon to follow their northern brothers into exile. God was not a respecter of persons. But unlike their Scythian/Israelite kin, who had been deported to "Halah, and Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" 130 years earlier, the Jews were deported to Babylon (2 Kings 24: 4-16; 25:11; Jeremiah 29).

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Babylonia and Assyria," p. 857.

¹⁷ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, "Assyria," p. 78.

¹⁸ Herodotus, 1, 106, *The Greek Historians*, cited by *From the Lands of the Scythians*, p. 19.