

Forced Exile

Commentary for April 1, 2019 — Israel's Exile and Forced Emigration

Events surrounding the forced exile of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian army are the subject of this month's article, "Israel and Judah: 34. Death of the Kingdom of Israel." I encourage you to read the "[April 2019 Newsletter](#)" before you read the article.

The ten northern tribes of Israel were deported when their kingdom was destroyed. There are always people who are willing and able to flee "before the storm" to escape the danger of approaching war. There are always means of communication about such things. Most important is the news brought by trading caravans from the wealthiest part of the world at the time, the kingdom of Assyria. The money from plunder and trade flowed to Assyria and flowed from Assyria to purchase goods unavailable in their land. One reason Assyria attacked countries was because that was where the money was.

At the height of the [Neo-Assyrian Empire](#), the Assyrian armies most every year went somewhere to threaten, attack, or invade other kingdoms and peoples. When the Assyrian army was on the move, that was big news, especially if the armies were coming your way. The kingdom of Israel was invaded twice before a final invasion ended with a successful siege of its capital city of Samaria. The kingdom was dismantled and people were deported. (Earlier, Syrians were deported by Assyria, 2 Kings 16:9, and so were Israelites, 1 Chronicles 5:26.)

Some Fled

Most who fled went to the southern kingdom of Judah. Some went to Egypt, transiting through the land of the Philistines or through Judah to get to Egypt. Others perhaps fled to the southeast. Still others may have taken to the sea to islands or lands where other Israelites lived. Those who fled would have lost their distinctive Israelite religious identity after a generation or two. After all, the entire problem between God and Israel was that they worshiped other gods, and did so eagerly. Eventually they would easily blend into any pagan society they settled into. YHWH told those individuals that they would not find rest.

Only those faithful to YHWH who fled to Judah would have maintained their religious identity and lineage. Or, perhaps the Israelites who went to Judah for safety further influenced the people of Judah to stray from exclusive worship of YHWH. However, the people of Judah already worshipped other gods besides YHWH, following the example of King Solomon himself whose actions caused YHWH to divide the united kingdom into north and south kingdoms (1 Kings 11:4–13). Destruction and deportation of Judah were a matter of time.

YHWH had to show all peoples and nations that His chosen people had no special consideration when it came to their disobedience and rejection of the covenant their fathers had made with YHWH. If they did not fear YHWH, His judgment upon them required they would fear men. That happened first to Israel and later it happened to Judah.

Living in Exile

What happened to those in exile? Surprisingly many prospered in the new lands. A troop of charioteers from the defeated Israelite army became an elite “royal contingent” of troops as mentioned in Assyrian records.¹ Names of Israelite exiles appear in Assyrian records as indicated by distinctive elements of Israelite names. For example, a charioteer named *Nadbi-Yāu* (meaning, “Impelled by Yahweh”) is found in one Assyrian record. YHWH was not the name of a god in Assyrian.

The Assyrian King Sargon II built a new capital city of Dur-Šarruken. In letters to his chief builders Sargon wrote, **“Provide all the Samaritans ([LÚ.Sa]-mir-i-na-a-a) in your charge with work in Dur-Šarruken.”** They were to be treated well as befits skilled laborers. Later the text referred to these people as “deportees” with little prejudice attached to the term. “Samaritans” was the Assyrian term for Israelites, whose capital city was Samaria. Most of the Israelite exiles originated from there (Radner, 116–117).

Another city the Israelites were deported to was Gozan as we are told in 2 Kings 17:6. The Assyrians called it Guzana (Radner, 118):

“There are two Assyrian archival texts that demonstrate the presence of Samaritans in Guzana (Tell Halaf). [1] The first is a sale contract from the year 700 BCE featuring a Samaritan selling real estate in that city whereas [2] the second text is a letter from late in the reign of Esarhaddon that mentions a Samaritan as the source of incriminating information about a prominent family in Guzana.”

• Radner, 118

Nehemiah Tells the History of Israel to His Day

Nehemiah was leader of the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon, and the Persian governor of Judea. Nehemiah gave a short history of Israel from the Exodus to their present day. He told them about Israel’s sins against YHWH, but **“In Your great compassion You did not forsake them in the wilderness”** (Nehemiah 9:19). All Israel sinned again and YHWH punished them, but **“in Your great compassion You gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their foes”** (Nehemiah 9:27). Israel sinned still again:

“Yet in Your great compassion You did not make an extermination of them, and You did not forsake them ... [in spite of] our kings, our chiefs, our priests and our prophets, on our fathers and all of Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day. You have been in the right regarding everything that has come upon us; for You acted faithfully, yet we, we did wickedness.”

• Nehemiah 9:31–33, Concordant Old Testament

YHWH’s great patience has limits, yet His **“great compassion”** brought Israel home again.

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¹ Karen Radner, “The ‘Lost Tribes of Israel’ in the Context of the Resettlement Programme of the Assyrian Empire” in *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel*, editors: S. Hasegawa, C. Levin and Karen Radner (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), 113–117.