

CHAPTER 10

The Fall of Samaria

THE death of the strong king of Judah, Uzziah, marked the end of an era for both kingdoms. The careful dating of the prophet Isaiah's call, "in the year of King Uzziah's death" (Isaiah 6:1), may well have significance beyond the chronological. Now both the long-lived and competent Hebrew kings were dead, and the Assyrians were once more on the march, led by one of their most able kings ever, Tiglath-pileser III. (See plate 3 facing p. 80.) The Syrian kingdoms had weakened themselves by a bitter struggle between themselves, Israel had fragmented, and Judah on its own was no match for the Assyrians. The old treaty friendship between Phoenicia and Israel had broken down, as is clear from the denunciation of Tyre by Amos (1:9), although such quarrels would no doubt have been patched up in face of a common enemy. But the general weakness of the Syrian and Palestinian states was such that the initiative lay wholly with the Assyrians. As it became evident that these invaders were now embarking on permanent conquest (a new policy on their part), the hapless Syro-Palestinian states must have cast around in their minds for potential allies, and naturally enough their thoughts turned to Egypt. An old enemy, Egypt, had not interfered in Palestinian affairs for many long years, so past hostilities could be conveniently forgotten. As for the Egyptians, they had no particular affection for their small northern neighbours, but they had no wish at all to see a powerful nation like Assyria establishing its position on Egypt's frontiers, and were accordingly ready to listen to pleas for help. Thus Egypt begins to come back into our story.

The Assyrian records relating to "Azriau of Yaudi" are broken and difficult to read, but there is no doubt that the anti-Assyrian coalition suffered a defeat, as a result of which tribute had to be paid

to Tiglath-pileser III by no few local kings, including Uzziah himself, Menahem of Israel, and Rezin of Damascus.¹ The tribute which Menahem had to pay is detailed in 2 Kings 15:19f.;² it was a crippling sum, and one that did nothing to make Menahem a popular figure in Samaria, but at least it served to keep Assyrian troops out of Israelite territory, in itself no small gain.

For a short while the Assyrians left the Levant in peace, but the peace was not security, nor indeed was the interval uneventful. The king of Damascus, Rezin, retained his throne, but in Judah Uzziah's death was followed fairly soon afterwards by the death of his son Jotham, while in Israel similarly Menahem's son and successor Pekahiah had a very brief reign. Before long, accordingly, the three kings of these states were Rezin, Ahaz (Uzziah's grandson), and Pekah respectively. Pekah we have mentioned before; it seems quite probable that he had been virtually king in Transjordan since the death of Jeroboam II, and he made his bid for the whole kingdom once Menahem died. To raise the tribute for Assyria, Menahem had been obliged to levy a 50-shekel tax (roughly the price of a slave)³ on all the land-owners of his realm, some 60,000 in all;⁴ and 2 Kings 15:20 suggests that Menahem went so far as to enlist Assyrian support in order to retain his throne. Small wonder, then, that there was plenty of support for Pekah when he challenged Menahem's son and successor.

Thus Pekah usurped the throne in Samaria, and probably the throne-name of his predecessor too, for "Pekah" and "Pekahiah" are simply variant forms of the same name. We do not know what his personal name was. It is reasonable to assume that his "election-manifesto", so to speak, included a pledge to take firm and effective action in the face of the Assyrian threat, and to renounce the sort of pro-Assyrian policy which Menahem had perforce embraced. Rezin of Damascus was more than willing to make alliance with him and to join him in making urgent military preparation for the inevitable conflict with Tiglath-pileser of Assyria. A strong coalition seemed to offer the only hope. Some smaller states were prepared to support them in the enterprise; but Judah declined to do so. King Ahaz lacked the courage and ability of his grandfather Uzziah, but in fact he was very prudent to stand aloof from such a project, foredoomed to failure as it was. At least, it is difficult to suppose that Tiglath-pileser with the full weight of the highly-trained Assyrian armies could have been successfully withstood by a confederation which included all the states of Syria and Palestine.

1. Cf. *DOTI*, p. 54.

2. In this passage, Tiglath-pileser is called "Pul", the name by which he was known in Babylon. See p. 191.

3. Cf. D. J. Wiseman, *Iraq* 15 (1953), p. 135.

4. Cf. J. A. Montgomery, *The Books of Kings* (*ICC*: Edinburgh, 1951), pp. 450f.

The ringleaders of the coalition, Pekah and Rezin, were dismayed at the refusal of Judah to be implicated; indeed, according to Isaiah, they were "burning with rage" (Isaiah 7:4). King Uzziah had made Judah a power to be reckoned with among its neighbours, and the confederates could not afford to have a neutral, potentially hostile, Judah in their rear when the time came to confront the Assyrians. Without hesitation, therefore, they now attacked Judah, hoping to frighten Ahaz into joining the confederacy, or to frighten his subjects into deposing him, or else, at the worst, to render his kingdom powerless to pose any threat to their enterprise.⁵

The Syro-Ephraimite war (as it is often called) succeeded to the extent that it frightened Ahaz. "King and people", Isaiah records, "were shaken like forest trees in the wind" (Isaiah 7:2) — a graphic simile reminiscent of the boasting language of Assyrian monuments and inscriptions.⁶ Judah suddenly found itself ringed by enemies on all sides. The combined armies of Israel and Damascus swept resistance aside and besieged Jerusalem. The Syrian army also sent detachments to liberate Edom, Judah's vassal, according to the Hebrew text of 2 Kings 16:6. (Most recent translations and commentaries prefer to change the Hebrew text slightly, thus crediting Edom's liberation to its own endeavours.) The Edomites then swiftly captured Elath, Judah's Red Sea port, and began to raid southern Judah. Meanwhile, the Philistines were retrieving lost ground and taking over parts of Judaeian territory on the west.⁷ King Ahaz himself had an additional, personal cause for anxiety; his attackers had found a man they hoped would replace him as king of Judah, a certain "son of Tabeal" (Isaiah 7:6).⁸ It is not revealed who he was, but the name is Aramaic, which suggests that Damascus rather than Israel meant to take over Judah.

Jerusalem was not easily captured, however, and Ahaz held on grimly. But not unnaturally, he cast about in his mind for any avenue of escape from the nation's predicament, and the only practical and effective solution that occurred to him was to appeal to Assyria for assistance. The only other course was to do nothing, in the hope that Tiglath-pileser would sooner or later invade Syria from the north, whether or not Ahaz invited him to do so. From our vantage point in history, it is clear to us that Tiglath-pileser would soon have relieved the pressure on Jerusalem in any case, without

5. Judah's quarrel with Israel and Damascus was in itself nothing new — see 2 Kings 15:37. Cf. B. Oded, *CBQ* 34 (1972), pp. 153-165.

6. For example, the Assyrian king Sennacherib was later to claim that Hezekiah of Judah was "shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city" (cf. *DOTT*, p. 67).

7. See maps in *MBA*, p. 92.

8. The spelling "Tabeal" (AV, NEB) accurately represents the Hebrew, but the Hebrew is no doubt a deliberately contemptuous mis-spelling to give the meaning "no good".

any intervention on the part of Judah; but it may be doubted if the royal information service could have given Ahaz assurance of that fact. For the time being, at any rate, he delayed, while taking what practical steps he could to promote the welfare of his citizens. One urgent task was to ensure an adequate water supply — always a problem for Jerusalem in time of siege. He ventured in person beyond the city walls to check on the situation at one of the few water conduits; and it while thus occupied that he received intelligence from a source not available to modern national leaders, a prophet of Yahweh. He was confronted by the prophet Isaiah, who predicted the downfall of both Samaria and Damascus, and advised him to keep calm and do nothing except to exercise faith in God.

It was the first time a prophet had intervened so directly in a context of national crisis and emergency, and Ahaz was probably taken aback. In Isaiah 7ff. we have a full record of what Isaiah said to the king, but apparently the latter had little to say in reply; he declined even to ask for a sign from heaven to reassure him.

It is clear that Ahaz did not have the firm faith which Isaiah recommended to him; but there was more to it than that. Isaiah's advice, though we know it was in fact politically realistic, was not based on political calculations, and Ahaz felt reluctant to ignore the well-reasoned arguments of his political experts. Perhaps he weighed the issues carefully first, but in the end he decided to turn a deaf ear to the prophet's words. Professor W. McKane has described very effectively the dilemma and the choice that confronted Ahaz:

What Ahaz refused to do was just to abandon the well-charted routes of political negotiation and in this he would certainly have the backing of his professional advisers. Was he to scrap the ways of thinking and the attitudes which were universally current in diplomatic exchanges and political bargaining and to base the security of Judah on trust in Yahweh? We should not underestimate the revolutionary character of this demand nor wonder that the statesmen boggled at it and were moved to consternation and anger when it was formulated by a prophet of Yahweh.⁹

Discounting the prophet's advice, therefore, "Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria to say, 'I am your servant and your son, Come and save me from the King of Aram and from the King of Israel who are attacking me.' Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent them to the King of Assyria as a bribe" (2 Kings 16:7f.). These two verses indicate something of the humiliation and financial cost of Ahaz's appeal to Assyria. But one might be tempted to ask, was not that a small price to pay for

9. W. McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (SBT, 44: London, 1965), p. 115.

national security? And if Tiglath-pileser meant to attack Rezin and Pekah in any case, did it make any serious difference to the situation whether Ahaz made overtures to him or not? The answer is that Ahaz's action had long-term effects which were anything but beneficial to Judah. First and foremost, Judah lost her right to independent political policies; hitherto she could be hostile to Assyria or neutral, as she pleased, but now she was to be firmly under Assyrian direction, a mere puppet kingdom. A small, inland state, she might have been relatively undisturbed by the Assyrians; by her own choice, she had drawn Assyrian attention to herself. The other long-term effect was religious. 2 Kings 16:10-18 is a passage which is not altogether easy to interpret, but it is stated plainly in verse 18 that the purpose of some at least of the innovations at the Jerusalem temple was "to satisfy the King of Assyria". Foreign idolatry had again come to Judah, and not this time at the hands of a usurper like Athaliah. The royal acquiescence in idolatrous worship was bound to have its effects on the religion of the nation;¹⁰ and with the religious decline went social injustices too, which had already begun to affect Judah during Uzziah's prosperous reign. Isaiah and Micah in Judah found nearly as much apostasy and social injustice as Hosea and Amos had had cause to denounce in Israel a few years earlier. A century and more later the prophet Ezekiel, in his outspoken allegory of the two fallen women (Ezekiel 23), maintained that Jerusalem's degradation occurred later chronologically but ultimately proved deeper and blacker than her sister Israel's.

But at least Ahaz reaped the short-term benefits he was seeking: "The King of Assyria listened to him; he advanced on Damascus, captured it, deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin to death" (2 Kings 16:9). Thus the spotlight turns from Judah back to the northern confederates, Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Samaria, who could but withdraw their armies from Judaeon soil and wait and see what strategy Tiglath-pileser would adopt. The precise sequence of events is uncertain, but it seems most probable that in three successive years' campaigns (734-732 B.C.) the Assyrian armies attacked and conquered the coastal plain, from Tyre down to the Egyptian border, the northern and eastern parts of Israel, and finally the kingdom of Damascus.¹¹ The first campaign served to outflank the confederates, and to place Assyrian troops down on the Egyptian frontiers, in order to forestall any Egyptian support for the Palestinian states. The Philistine city of Gaza was taken, and its king Hanunu fled to Egypt.¹²

10. Undoubtedly much of the idolatry in the reign of Ahaz was not specifically Assyrian in origin, but was indigenous to Palestine and Phoenicia: see J. W. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians* (SBT ii, 26: London, 1973), *passim*.

11. Cf. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, pp. 328-333. For alternative reconstruction of events, see Noth, pp. 258-261; Hayes and Miller, pp. 427-432.

12. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 55.

The fate of Damascus is briefly told on the Assyrian Nimrud Tablet:¹³ "The widespread territory of Damascus in its whole extent I restored to the border of Assyria. My official I set over them as district-governor." In other words, not only was Rezin executed and some of his citizens deported (as 2 Kings records), but the kingdom became a mere Assyrian province, its political integrity a thing of the past.

But our chief interest lies in the kingdom of Israel, which seems to have felt the main thrust of Tiglath-pileser's second campaign of these three years. The capital, Samaria, and the central and southern part of the kingdom, Ephraim, emerged unscathed; but that must have been small comfort. The full weight of the Assyrian armies fell upon the north of the country, Galilee, and the great fortress city of Hazor fell; it was ruthlessly destroyed, and was never rebuilt. Further south, the no less important city of Megiddo suffered a similar fate; it was the Assyrians themselves who rebuilt it. Tiglath-pileser lists some of his captures in Galilee, and the evidence permits us to trace his three-pronged attack on Israel.¹⁴ From Hazor some of his troops marched west, and mastered the coastal plain in the area of Acco and Dor; some marched south-west and destroyed Megiddo; and the third army marched south and east into Israelite Transjordan, making that territory their own.

The citizens of Samaria could not doubt that it would be their turn next, unless something were done swiftly to dissuade Tiglath-pileser from further attacks. The action they took is stated succinctly by both the Bible and the Nimrud Tablet, in slightly different but complementary terms. "Hoshea son of Elah", says 2 Kings 15:30, "formed a conspiracy against Pekah son of Remaliah, attacked him, killed him and usurped the throne." Tiglath-pileser records of the people of Israel that "Pekah their king they deposed and Hoshea I set as king over them."¹⁵ In other words, Hoshea came to the throne as leader of a pro-Assyrian faction, and the Assyrian king was content to ratify his position (on receipt of tribute).

Thus Israel, like Judah, became a mere puppet kingdom of Assyria. Worse than that, she forfeited a great deal — at least two-thirds — of her territory, for the Assyrians did not return the conquered areas to the control of Samaria. Instead, Tiglath-pileser reorganized his conquests as Assyrian provinces, administered by Assyrian governors. Isaiah, who watched these events from the safety of Judah, alludes to Tiglath-pileser's invasion in 9:1, and may be referring to the three new provinces when he speaks of "the way of the sea" (i.e. the province of Dor, on the Mediterranean coast),

13. *Ibid.*

14. See *MBA*, map 147.

15. *DOTT*, p. 55.

“the land beyond the Jordan” (the province of Gilead), and “Galilee of the nations” (the province of Megiddo — the Assyrians rebuilt the city to serve as the administrative capital).¹⁶ The old tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali, to which Isaiah also refers here, were among those lost to Israel, and many of their inhabitants were deported to far-off Assyria.¹⁷ Deportation was no innovation in the ancient world, but this was the first time that either Hebrew kingdom was subjected to it.

What remained of the kingdom of Israel must have been both smaller and weaker than Judah, and the proud citizens of Samaria chafed at the humiliations to which Tiglath-pileser had subjected them, though for the moment there was little they could do about it. Hoshea dutifully paid his tribute to the Assyrian king, and ignored the unrest of his subjects. The death of Tiglath-pileser five years later (727 B.C.) no doubt seemed a propitious moment to the more rebellious spirits — there was always hope of internal weakness in any kingdom on the death of a king, and Tiglath-pileser had usurped the Assyrian throne. As it happened, however, Tiglath-pileser’s son, Shalmaneser V, found no difficulty in succeeding to the throne, and any hopes of independence harboured by the citizens of Israel were foredoomed. We have no way of knowing what Hoshea’s own personal view was; it may be that he, like Judah’s last king, Zedekiah,¹⁸ was forced into rebellion against his better judgment. His own advisers may well have counselled revolt, and nobody doubts that the Egyptians were urging him to defy the Assyrians; the tentacles of Assyrian power were by now much too near the borders of Egypt for the latter’s comfort. At any rate, whether willingly or reluctantly, King Hoshea rebelled, and thereby signed the death-warrant of his kingdom: he himself faced arrest and imprisonment, his capital was to undergo a long siege with all that that implied, many of his citizens faced deportation, and his kingdom was fated to become just another Assyrian province.

Once again, the precise chronology and sequence of events is uncertain and disputed.¹⁹ The biblical account of the fall of Samaria is rather concise, and not without some difficulties; and the Assyrian inscriptional records of the event raise their own problems. Two consecutive kings of Assyria undertook military campaigns against Israel, Shalmaneser V (who died in late 722 or early 721 B.C.) and his successor Sargon II (see plate 4 facing p. 81), and the basic problem is, which of them successfully concluded the siege of

16. Cf. Isaiah 9:1, RSV; but NEB translates the verse rather differently. There are several difficulties about this verse; cf. J. A. Emerton, *JSS* 14 (1969), pp. 151-175. See *MBA*, map 148, for Tiglath-pileser’s provincial structure in Palestine and Syria.

17. Cf. 2 Kings 15:29; *DOTT*, *ibid*.

18. See below, p. 129.

19. See especially *DOTT*, pp. 58f.; *AOTS*, pp. 347f.; and J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 60ff.

Samaria? The Babylonian Chronicle suggests that it was Shalmaneser; but Sargon, in one of the last inscriptions of his reign (though no earlier), claims the credit.²⁰ What does the Bible say? In 2 Kings 17:3 reference is made to Shalmaneser by name, but in the following verses the attacker is simply called "the King of Assyria" without further identification. In the following chapter there is equal ambiguity about the Hebrew text: "Shalmaneser King of Assyria came up against Samaria, and besieged it. And at the end of three years they took it" (2 Kings 18:9f. RV). Most modern English translations, however, prefer to translate "*he* took it", a reading which would explicitly identify Shalmaneser as the conqueror.²¹ Thus on the one hand the biblical evidence is unclear, while on the other the claims of Sargon may have been exaggerated.²²

What may be asserted confidently is that Shalmaneser besieged the city of Samaria, and that Sargon completed the subjugation of the Palestinian area.²³ The three-year siege may have ended as early as 723 B.C.,²⁴ though 722 is the most likely date. Later, Sargon was active in the west in several campaigns. The Philistines had not all taken warning from the fate of Damascus and Samaria, and they provoked an Assyrian assault in the year 720. Hanunu king of Gaza, who had fled to Egypt in 734 when Tiglath-pileser's armies had invaded Philistia, returned with the aid of an Egyptian army, to make common cause with the king of Hamath and other Syro-Palestinian states against the invader. Sargon advanced to the vicinity of the Egyptian border to defeat and capture Hanunu and force back the Egyptian army, in a battle at Rapihu. Other Philistine cities followed the example of Gaza, and it was not until 712 that Sargon finally broke the resistance of the last would-be rebels. Sargon's own records list his conquests in and around Palestine.²⁵ In one inscription²⁶ he calls himself "subjugator of the land of Judah", but there is no record of his taking major military action in Judah.

This protracted period of unrest and opposition in Syria and

20. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 59.

21. This rendering (the difference in Hebrew is very slight) has the support of the ancient Versions.

22. Cf. J. Gray, *Kings*, p. 61.

23. On Sargon's campaigns, see H. Tadmor, *JCS* 12 (1958), pp. 22-40, 77-100.

24. First suggested by A. T. Olmstead, *AJSL* 21 (1906), pp. 179-182. Cf. E. R. Thiele, *MNHK*, pp. 141-154.

25. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 59-62. The Egyptian commander-in-chief, "Sib'e" in *DOTT* and elsewhere, is now known to have borne the name "Re'eh". The puzzling name "So" in 2 Kings 17:4 cannot therefore be equated with a non-existent "Sib'e", and it probably indicates not the monarch's name but that of the important Egyptian city of Sais (cf. J. Gray, *Kings*, p. 642). The Egyptian king at the time was Osorkon IV; see K. A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (Warminster, 1973), §§333f. Kitchen's own view is that "So" is an abbreviation for "Osorkon".

26. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 62.

Palestine induced the Assyrian king to proceed further with the "pacification" of the conquered areas. His measures affected Israel in two respects. He made the newly-conquered remnant of the Northern Kingdom yet another Assyrian province, called after its capital city, Samaria, which he renovated. Thus the city itself, from a purely physical point of view, suffered little. It was otherwise with a large number of citizens; he records the capture and exile of no fewer than 27,280 people.²⁷ Large scale deportations like this served not only to wreak vengeance on those who dared oppose the Assyrians, but also to reduce effectively the likelihood of further rebellion, by removing from the scene the intelligentsia and the potential leaders.

Nearly 30,000 Israelites, accordingly, were transported, some of them as far away as Media, many miles to the east of Assyria. However one computes the population of Israel in its last days as a kingdom, this huge deportation must have formed a substantial percentage of the whole; Menahem had found 60,000 land-owners to tax, it will be recalled. But Sargon conquered enemies and subdued kingdoms elsewhere, and he applied the same deportation policy in the east as in the west, with the result that the gap created in the population of Israel was soon filled with people from Babylon and other areas.²⁸

The Kingdom of Israel thus came to an end. It lost its royal house and its independence, and it lost many of its citizens in battle and by deportation (presumably the exiles gradually intermarried and so disappeared from history, in their various places of exile). It had already lost the purity of its worship of Yahweh many years before, but the religious picture was made worse, from the biblical point of view, by the settlement in this territory of many foreigners, who imported a multitude of idolatrous practices, and settled down to intermarry with the local population. One can well understand the view expressed by the writer of 2 Kings 17. Israel lost its name (becoming the Assyrian province of *Samerina*) and in the administrative reorganization lost every vestige of its old tribal structure; in these senses (and no other) were the ten tribes "lost". There was of course some measure of continuity between the citizens of Israel before 721 B.C. and the Samaritan community of later years; to this day there is a small Samaritan community which seeks to worship the one true God. Jesus, it may be recalled, said of such folk that they did not know what they worshipped (John 4:22); He made no accusation of idolatry.²⁹

27. 27,290 is the figure in some of his records.

28. Cf. 2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2, 10 shows that the process of repopulation continued for a generation or two. For an estimate of the population of Samaria, see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: its Life and Institutions* (ET London,² 1965), pp. 65ff.

29. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*³ (London, 1963), pp. 125ff.