

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Peoples of the Bible: The Assyrians**

*NOTE: The Assyrians were known for their extreme violence and torture, which we discuss in some detail in this teaching. Viewer discretion is advised.*

The Israelites are the people most prominently featured in the Scriptures, but other peoples are mentioned as well. In this series, we examine what the Scriptures and history tell us about these other peoples. Who were they, where did they live, what was their culture like, and what did God have to say about them? In this teaching, we will focus on one particular people: the Assyrians.

#### **Who Were the Assyrians?**

The Assyrians were descended from one of the grandsons of Noah, named Asshur (Genesis 10:22). Their homeland was along the Tigris river (Genesis 2:14), in what today is northern Iraq (J. Maxwell Miller & John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, Second Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2006), p. 234). The most prominent Assyrian cities were Asshur, Calah, and Nineveh, each of which served as the Assyrian capital at different points in time. Nineveh was Assyria's last and greatest capital, and it was located in the same place as the modern city of Mosul. The Assyrians spoke a language called Akkadian, which was the same native language that the Babylonians spoke.

Also, it is worth mentioning that the Assyrians were not the same as the Syrians. Because these two names sound similar in English, these two peoples can be confused for each other, but they were in fact different. The Assyrians were from the city of Asshur, which is located in northern Iraq, whereas the Syrians were from the region of Syria, which is near the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

#### **What Were the Assyrians Known For?**

The Assyrians are best known for forming a world empire. In the late eighth century B.C., they set out

on a campaign of conquest and came to dominate most of the Middle East. They collected tribute from those who surrendered to them, but they crushed everyone who stood in their way. Their fearsome empire stood for about a hundred years.

Assyrian culture was in many ways very similar to Babylonian culture, but one thing that set Assyria apart from Babylon was their legendary cruelty. The Assyrians committed many horrible atrocities while they were expanding and maintaining their empire. Of course, war is full of horrors and atrocities by its very nature, but the Assyrians went above and beyond. Also, their atrocities were not performed by rogue soldiers, but by direct order of the king. For example, here are some of the deeds the Assyrian king Ashur-Nasir-Pal bragged about in one of his annals:

“With battle and slaughter I stormed the city and conquered it. Three thousand of their warriors I put to the sword; their spoil and their possessions, their cattle and their flocks I carried off. Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I captured alive. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses and their ears...and the eyes of many I put out. I made one heap of the living, and another of heads, and I bound their heads to vines round about the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire, the city I destroyed and laid waste, I burned it with fire and consumed it.

- Annals of Ashur-Nasir-Pal, column 1, line 115-column 2, line 1 (translation by E. A. Wallis Budge & L. W. King, *Annals of the Kings of Assyria: The Cuneiform Texts with Translations, Transliterations, etc. From the Original Documents in the British Museum* [London: Harrison and Sons 1902], pp. 294-295)

The Assyrians were also known to decorate the walls and gates of captured cities with the skins of the captured people (Annals of Ashur-Nasir-Pal, column 1, lines 89-93), or to impale their captives' bodies upon stakes and set them up for everyone to see (Annals of Sennacherib, column 3, lines 8-10). It is assumed that the purpose of these horrifying acts was to scare the rest of the world into submission, but some of them are so psychopathic and evil that it makes one wonder what was really going through the heads of some of these kings. In any case, these actions have certainly left the Assyrians with a reputation as a cruel and sadistic people.

Another thing the Assyrians were known for was their policy of relocation. When they conquered an area, they would frequently exile a large amount of that area's population to other places within their empire. Historians estimate that over three and a half million people from all over the Middle East were uprooted from their homelands and resettled elsewhere by the Assyrians (Karen Radner, "The "Lost Tribes of Israel" in the Context of the Resettlement Programme of the Assyrian Empire", *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel*, edited by Shuichi Hasegawa, Christoph Levin and Karen Radner, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019, p. 101). This policy obviously had a massive effect on the people in the region. The intent of the policy was likely to split up conquered people groups to prevent them from banding together with their countrymen and revolting. Perhaps the Assyrians also thought that people would be more likely to take on Assyrian customs if they were removed from their native lands, where they already had their own established laws and traditions. While this policy of relocation may have been effective toward these ends, it also caused widespread resentment toward the Assyrian empire.

## How Did the Assyrians Worship?

Assyria had many gods which were depicted as graven images and worshiped in temples. Three of the

most prominent gods were *Asshur*, the god of the city of Asshur and patron deity of the Assyrian nation, *Inanna*, goddess of sex and the queen of heaven, who also went by the name *Ishtar*, and *Enlil*, the lord of wind. These gods were worshiped using a variety of rituals, including soliciting prostitutes in the temples (Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Westport: Greenwood Press 1998) p. 151), and mourning the death of Ishtar's husband Tammuz (see *Inana's Descent to the Nether World* lines 384-410 and *Inana and Bilulu: an ulila to Inana* lines 27-30 (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature [Oxford] <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>)). The Assyrians also strongly believed in omens and magic, in which the gods' power was harnessed in order to predict and change the future.

The Assyrians believed their gods wanted to conquer and civilize the whole world, and it was their king's religious duty to conquer more land every year (Bradley J. Parker, "The Construction and Performance of Kingship in the Neo-Assyrian Empire" *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (FALL 2011), pp. 363, 365, 367). So, for the Assyrians, war itself was also considered to be an act of worship.

## What Did God Say About the Assyrians?

As we might imagine, God denounced the Assyrians' horrific and abominable practices. Assyria's idolatrous religious rituals are prohibited and condemned throughout Scripture. For example:

### Deuteronomy 23:17

None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, and none of the sons of Israel shall be a cult prostitute.

### Deuteronomy 18:10-12

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD [YHWH].

### Ezekiel 8:14-15

Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD [YHWH], and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these."

(see also 2 Kings 17:17-18)

God also directly addressed Assyria as a nation on numerous occasions. An entire book of the Bible, the book of Nahum, is full of pronouncements of judgment upon Assyria's capital city, Nineveh. Here are just a few of those pronouncements:

### Nahum 1:14

The LORD [YHWH] has given commandment about you: "No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile."

### Nahum 2:13

Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in

smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard.

### **Nahum 3:18-19**

Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?

Nahum was not the only prophet that God sent to the Assyrians; God also sent the prophet Jonah to preach to the city of Nineveh. At first, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh, and he took a ship in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3). However, Jonah eventually went to Nineveh and preached there, and after he did, the people of the city repented from their ways, so God had mercy on them (Jonah 3:1-10). However, the Ninevites eventually did evil again, and so God declared that the city would indeed be destroyed. In the book of Zephaniah, he said:

### **Zephaniah 2:13**

And he will stretch out his hand against the north and destroy Assyria, and he will make Nineveh a desolation, a dry waste like the desert.

(see also: Isaiah 14:24-27)

For more on these prophetic books that pronounced judgment on Assyria, we recommend these teachings from our Minor Prophets, Major Messages series: [Nahum: God Will Not Clear the Guilty](#), and [Jonah: Be Merciful, Even as Your Father is Merciful](#).

In 612 B.C., God's word through his prophets was fulfilled when the Babylonians conquered the city of Nineveh. Babylon then proceeded to conquer all of the lands that Assyria had previously controlled. Once that happened, Assyria's days as an empire came to a permanent end.

Surprisingly, God also had some good things to say about the Assyrians—specifically, God declared that Assyria would become “the work of his hands,” and they would worship him alongside both Egypt and Israel. Here is what he said:

### **Isaiah 19:23-25**

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD [YHWH] of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

Jesus, whose Hebrew name was Yeshua, also commended the Assyrians who repented at the preaching of Jonah. While he was condemning the unrighteous people in his generation, he said this:

### **Luke 11:32**

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

So, while God had very harsh things to say about the Assyrians who committed idolatry and cruelly

mistreated other people, he also had words of comfort and commendation for those Assyrians who repented of their evil ways and turned to him.

## **How Did the Assyrians Affect God's People?**

Before God destroyed the Assyrian empire, he used it to exile the people of the rebellious nation of Israel. Assyria attacked Israel several times, each time carrying more of Israel's people captive until many of them were scattered throughout the world. These attacks are recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles:

### **1 Chronicles 5:26**

So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, the spirit of Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and he took them into exile, namely, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and brought them to Halah, Habor, Hara, and the river Gozan, to this day.

### **2 Kings 18:9-12**

In the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it, and at the end of three years he took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria and put them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD [YHWH] their God but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD [YHWH] commanded. They neither listened nor obeyed.

By taking the Israelites out of their homeland and scattering them throughout the world, the Assyrians changed the course of Israelite history forever. These Israelites now had to try to find a way to return to the roots of their faith while being separated from the land that was promised to their father Abraham. This is a situation that many of God's people today also have to contend with, and it all started at the hand of the Assyrian empire.

After they decimated Israel, the Assyrians also attacked the nation of Judah, which contained the remaining tribes of God's people. However, God protected Judah from the Assyrians. While there were times that the Jewish kings paid hefty tributes to the king of Assyria (2 Chronicles 28:16-21; Nemet-Nejat 40), Judah never fell under direct Assyrian control. In fact, during the reign of the Jewish king Hezekiah, God killed hundreds of thousands of Assyrian soldiers who were about to attack Jerusalem.

### **2 Kings 19:32-36**

Therefore thus says the LORD [YHWH] concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD [YHWH]. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." And that night the angel of the LORD [YHWH] went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh.

So, God showed his power through the Assyrian empire, both by using the Assyrians to punish his people, and by miraculously saving his people from them.

## Who Were Some Significant Assyrians in the Bible?

The most significant Assyrians mentioned by name in the Bible were probably the kings who exiled the Israelites: Pul, Tiglath-pileser, and Shalmaneser. Tiglath-pileser, in particular, was the most successful wartime king in Assyrian history. Not only did he weaken and partially conquer Israel, but he also defeated the Arameans and Urartians, and he was declared the king of the city of Babylon, which was a rare feat for a foreigner. The Assyrian empire reached its territorial and political height under his rule (Nemet-Nejat 37-38).

Another significant Assyrian mentioned in the Bible was the king Sennacherib. He is the one who besieged Jerusalem and had his army wiped out by the angel of YHWH. Sennacherib is also the king who built the Assyrians' famous Royal Road (Nemet-Nejat 106), and made the city of Nineveh into a world-renowned symbol of power and prosperity (Nemet-Nejat 40).

## How Did the Assyrians Influence History?

The Assyrians had a profound influence on the culture of the world. The Assyrians were the first civilization we know of to keep annals of their kings, in which they recorded what their kings did each year. These annals were copied and distributed throughout the empire as a form of pro-king propaganda (Parker 366). This practice of writing and publishing the king's annals was adopted by many of the other empires that rose later in history. Another groundbreaking Assyrian project was the first known "great library." This library, built by the king Ashurbanipal, was located in Nineveh, and it contained original copies and Akkadian translations of some 1,500 books that were collected from all over the world (Nemet-Nejat 63). This library may have inspired the much more famous Great Library of Alexandria, which was built much later by the Greeks. Also in Nineveh, the Assyrians built a huge "royal road," the first of its kind, which was made of paved stone and was an incredible 52 cubits wide (Nemet-Nejat 109). So the Assyrians literally paved the way for many of the prominent nations that rose up after them.

The Assyrians also showed future empires what *not* to do. Nations like Babylon, Persia, and Rome, who would go on to take Assyria's place as rulers of the world, learned a few things from Assyria's mistakes. For one, they did not lean so heavily on the Assyrian strategy of frightening and intimidating the peoples they conquered, preferring instead to emphasize the benefits of living under their rule. While these later empires certainly killed more than their fair share of people, they never reached the same depths of malice and cruelty that the Assyrians did, and their empires were more peaceful and prosperous as a result. They also did not continue Assyria's policy of relocating all of the peoples that they conquered. It was not only the Israelites that the Assyrians exiled from their homeland; they also did this to other conquered peoples throughout their empire (2 Kings 17:24; Radner 101). None of these peoples wanted to be removed from their homeland, and so when the Assyrian empire fell, many of these conquered peoples were happy to see it destroyed (see Nahum 3:7, 19). Later empires did occasionally relocate the people they conquered, but not nearly to the extent that the Assyrians did. So the Assyrians' mistakes did serve as a lesson to those who came after them.

One other noteworthy Assyrian contribution to history is the creation of the Samaritans. When the Assyrians exiled the Israelites from their land, they also imported people into Israel's territory from other conquered lands:

**2 Kings 17:24**

And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities.

(see also Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 10.9.7)

These peoples from all over the world eventually blended together with the few Israelites who remained to form one people known as the Samaritans. The Samaritans would go on to become bitter enemies of the Jews, as we see recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 4:1-6; Nehemiah 4, 6; see also Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.4.3-4, 9), the gospel accounts (e.g. John 4:9), and the writings of Josephus (e.g., *Antiquities of the Jews* 9.14.3; 11.8.6; 12.4.1, 5; 18.2.2).

## What Can We Learn From the Assyrians?

One thing we can learn from the story of the Assyrians is that God can use any situation for good. As it says in Romans:

### Romans 8:28

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Assyria exiled the Israelites and scattered them among the nations. But God has turned this situation around for good. Because the Israelites were scattered among the nations, when they started to turn back to God, they brought many people from the nations to repentance along with them. As it says later in Romans, speaking of the punishment upon Israel:

### Romans 11:11-12

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

(see also: Romans 15:8-12)

Because of Israel's faithlessness, God allowed the Assyrians to scatter them throughout the world. But, God is using that exact same scattering to bring salvation to the world as well—to make Israel into the blessing that they were always meant to be (see Genesis 12:3; Deuteronomy 4:5-8). He really does cause all things to work together for good.

Another lesson we can take away is that God wants to save us, no matter how bad we think we have been. Assyria practiced torture and murder as a matter of national policy. Their moral standards were, for all intents and purposes, similar to those of a serial killer. It's hard to imagine how a country could behave worse than they did. But even so, God sent a prophet, Jonah, to preach to them, and when they repented, God spared their city from the destruction they deserved. If God wanted to spare the Assyrians in Nineveh, he wants to spare us too. All we have to do is repent of our sins and turn back to him, just like they did. As the prophets said:

### Ezekiel 18:21-23

But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD [YHWH], and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?

**Joel 2:32**

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD [YHWH] shall be saved...

God wants to save everyone, even the worst of us. As Isaiah prophesied, there will be Assyrians and Egyptians alongside the Israelites, all worshiping YHWH together. Why should we not join their company?

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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