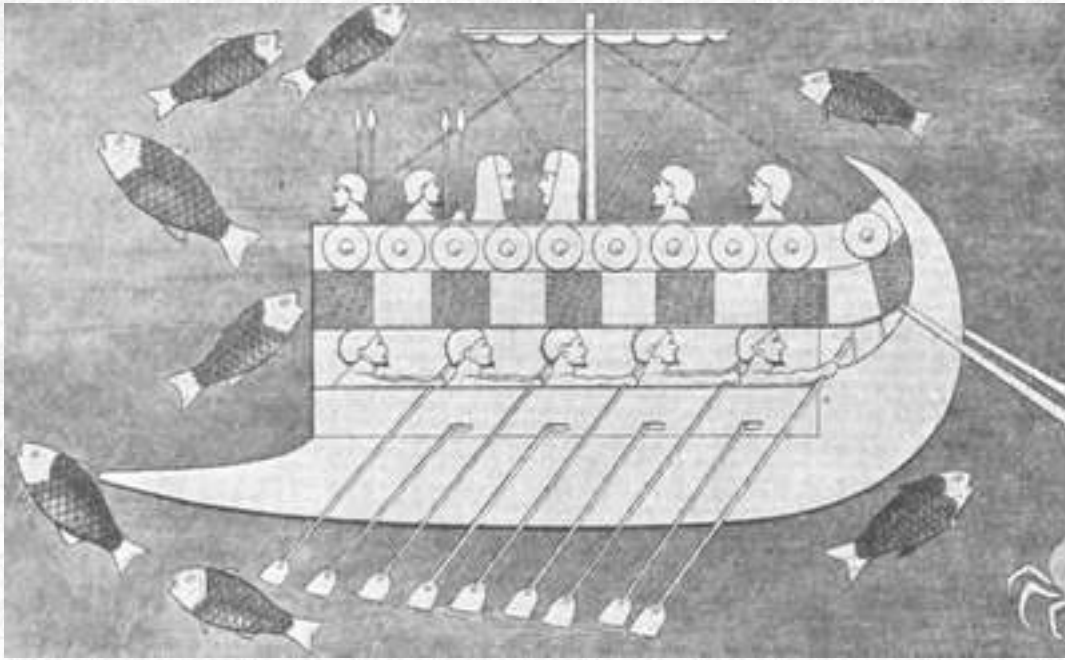


Chapter Four - The Rise And Fall Of Israel

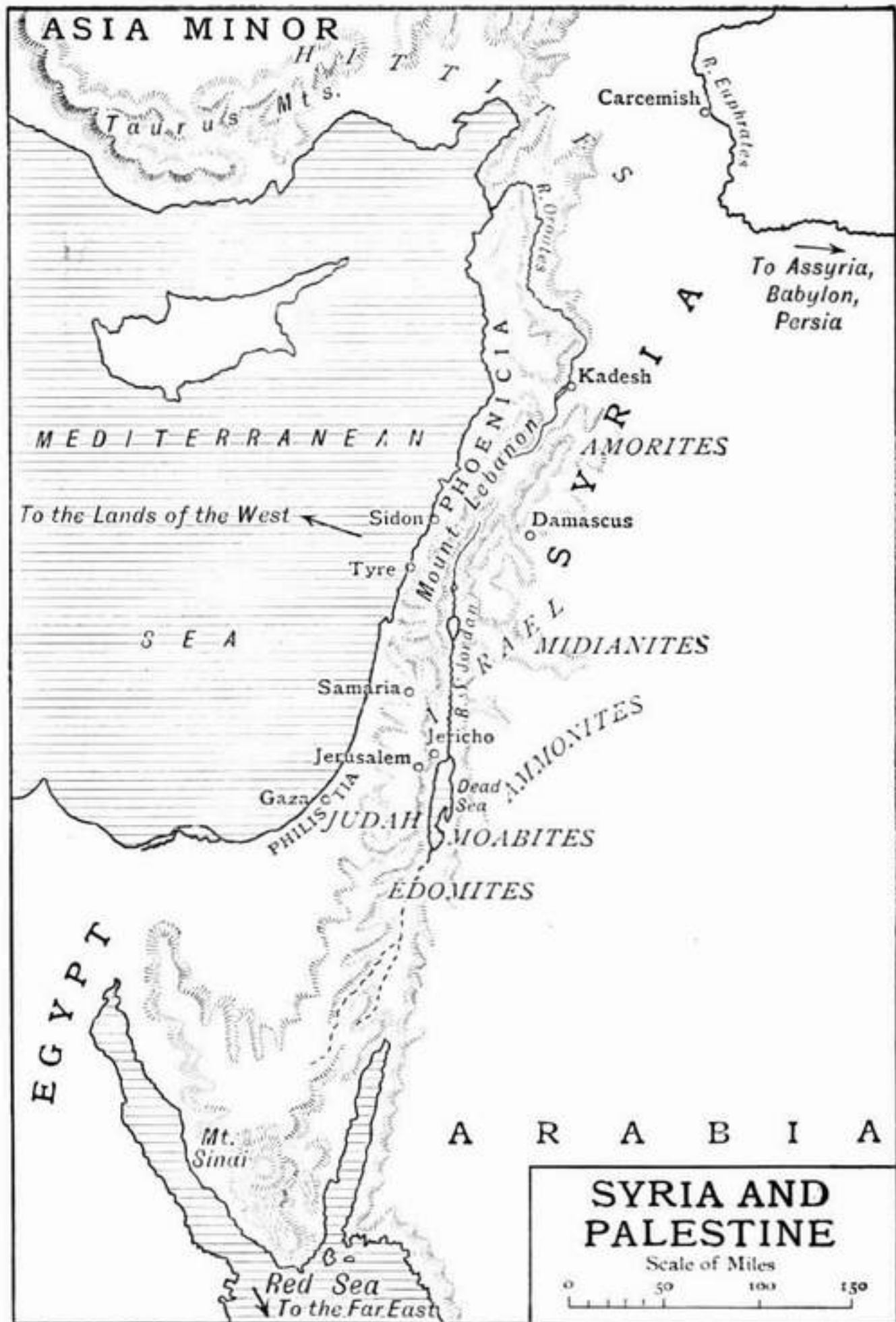


A Phoenician Warship

A. The Early Hebrews, The Philistines And The Phoenicians

From what we have just been reading, we gather that between the years 1200 and 1150 B.C. the Hittite Empire vanished, and the Egyptian Empire, though it escaped disaster, had exhausted itself. We also find that during this period the long Kassite rule at Babylon (p. 48) came to an end and was followed by anarchy, while what was left of Cretan civilisation after the disaster of 1400 (p. 58) died out completely. We might therefore expect that the smaller nations that lay between the old empires should rise into greater prominence during this period. And that is just what happened.

First of all let us talk about the Hebrews. You probably know something of their early history already from your reading of the Old Testament. You remember how Abraham left Ur, a Sumerian city (p. 42), and crossed the desert to the land of Canaan, which later came to be known as Palestine.



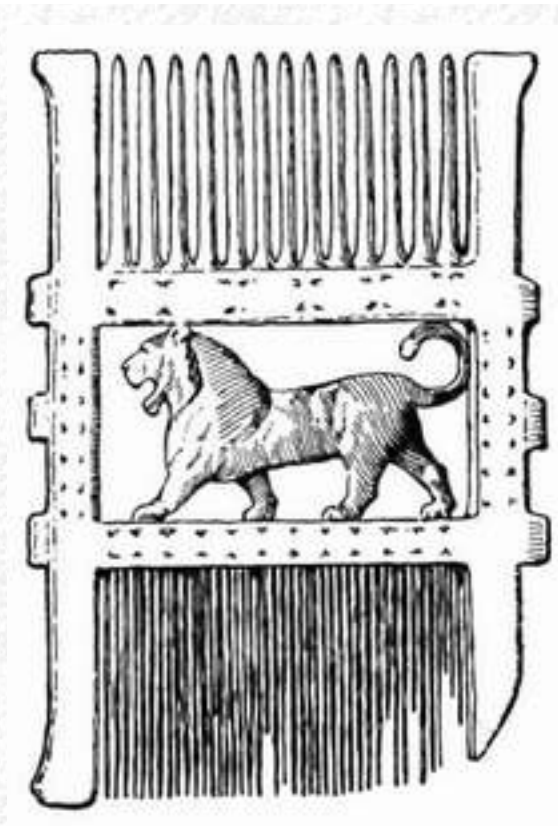


Map - Syria and Palestine

He and his descendants prospered there and their flocks and herds multiplied, for the ancestors of the Hebrews were wandering shepherds. From time to time they visited Egypt, and in the story of Joseph we read how one of them rose to a high position there. Then we next hear that the Hebrews or Israelites were slaves in Egypt and how Moses won their freedom, gave them a sacred code of laws and led them across the Sinai peninsula back to the land of Canaan which God had promised Abraham that his descendants should occupy. Moses died just before they entered the land, but they found a new leader in Joshua. Round the south end of the Dead Sea they went, and up the east shore so that they had to cross the Jordan to enter Palestine. Then they attacked and conquered first Jericho, and later other cities.

The Bible story tells us in a simple and dramatic fashion what was probably a very long and complicated business. It is a strange thing that no Egyptian records tell us anything of these events. We know that an Egyptian governor of Syria complained to Pharaoh of the raids of "the Habiru," but it is very doubtful whether these were the same as the Hebrews. Other Semitic tribes from the desert were constantly trying to establish themselves in Palestine and Syria, but they never got beyond the eastern fringe. The Israelites reached the heart of the land, but their position for a long time was insecure. First the previous inhabitants of Canaan in their walled cities resisted stubbornly for a long time. Then the envious Semites who had been stopped on the eastern boundaries, the Edomites, Moabites, Midianites and others, made serious raids. To the north-east of the Israelites there grew up later the rival city-kingdoms of Syria, the strongest of which was Damascus. To the north the Phoenicians occupied the two best ports, Tyre and Sidon, and were building up a trading empire. On the south-west they were shut off from the sea again by the Philistines (p. 74) in their city strongholds.

Against the latter there was a bitter and, for long, unsuccessful struggle. Out of it rose the earliest kings of the Israelites, first Saul, and then his bold and clever captain and son-in-law, David, who began to reign about 1000 B.C. Under David and his son Solomon, the Hebrew kingdom enjoyed its short spell of power and prosperity. It included two distinct districts, the southern, more mountainous and poorer half, inhabited mainly by shepherds, and the more prosperous northern area, in which there were more cities, which shared the civilisation of their neighbours, and too often their religion also.



Phoenician Ivory Comb

But the Hebrews, in spite of their numerous backslidings, were developing a new idea of God. Even when He was looked upon simply as the jealous tribal God of the Hebrews, He was their One and Only God, and an invisible spirit who had no images, a great advance this upon any previous religions. The southern and more lonely area, where life was simpler, tended to hold purer religious ideas. The north was inclined to be more tolerant of its neighbours' gods.

But David and Solomon welded the two provinces for a time into unity, and David selected the stronghold of the Jebusites, a defeated tribe, to be the capital, Jerusalem. In it his son built the first permanent temple to the invisible God, Jehovah, from the proceeds of a prosperity which resulted from a united kingdom, some sort of control over the Syrians, friendship with Egypt and a close alliance with Phoenicia. The Phoenicians were finding their way right across to the other end of the Mediterranean and even into the Atlantic, the Cretans and the Egyptians being no longer able to check them.



War-standard of the Assyrians.

They were bringing the products and arts of the East to the backward West, and though they thought simply of profits, they were spreading civilisation. Possibly the Phoenicians also wanted to link up with sea traffic from the Far East via the Red Sea, and it would therefore be to their interest to keep on good terms with the well-organised realm of the Hebrews, which lay across the route to the south. But the glory of Solomon, such as it was, was a short-lived thing of no great importance. His temple, judging by the measurements given in the Old Testament, was a small chapel compared with the mighty edifices of Thebes and Babylon. Solomon himself was not faithful to the God whose temple he built. On his death the kingdom split up into two hostile realms, the southern, known as Judah, keeping Jerusalem as its capital, while the north came to be known as Israel, with a capital at Samaria. They were both trodden underfoot in turn by two strong empires which were growing up to the east. It was the religious ideas which the Jews developed in suffering and exile which give them their important place in History. We shall deal with these in due course.

Exercises

1. Why are there no ancient Hebrew monuments or inscriptions?
2. What incidents can you remember in the Old Testament connected with the struggles of the Hebrews against (a) the cities of Canaan (b) the Philistines, (c) the Semite tribes across the Jordan (e) the Syrians?

B. Assyria, New Babylon, And The Fall Of Jerusalem

By far the strongest of the states that rose to prominence when the old empires declined was Assyria, a name that roused terror and hatred among all surrounding nations in the days of its might. It had grown up from the city of Ashur, high up the Tigris. It was founded about 3000 B.C., and copied the civilisation of the Sumerian cities. For centuries the Assyrians were subject, first to Babylon then to the Hittites. But steadily they improved their armies till they were strong enough to drive the Hittites from the Tigris and

the Euphrates, and expel the Kassites for a short time from Babylon.

The collapse of the old empires gave the Assyrians too their chance. Under the greatest of their early kings they marched westwards in triumph till they reached the Mediterranean on the coast of Phoenicia (1100 B.C.). But the Assyrians could not as yet sustain such a high pressure, and two hundred and fifty years elapsed before their period of supremacy really began. They were the least attractive of the early peoples. Organised as a whole nation for war, they did not produce artists, scholars, prophets of their own, nor were they useful even as enterprising traders like the Babylonians or Phoenicians. They were highly efficient, unscrupulous and brutal fighters, pure and simple, who lived on the toil of the countries they conquered. They had the "gangster" mind. Their worship of brute strength shows itself by the exaggeration in their sculptures of bulging muscles and thick sinews, and their beastly pleasure in cold-blooded cruelty is all too plainly shown in their hunting and war scenes. Wealth brought them greedy luxury rather than refinement.

The period of Assyria's triumph begins with their fighting some tribes on the upper Euphrates who, by controlling the fords, interfered with Assyrian caravan routes. Successful here, they were led on to challenge the Syrians of Damascus, who were sometimes supported by the kings of Israel. The best-known Assyrian king of this period was Shalmaneser III (859-824 B.C.). His successors for about a century were kept busy by their enemies nearer home, especially Babylonia, which, under the rule of the war-like Chaldeans (see p. 94), was constantly refusing to be treated as a subject state. But about 750 B.C. the Assyrians set themselves once more to become masters of the lands at the east end of the Mediterranean. Damascus was destroyed in 732 B.C., Samaria (p. 86) in 722. Many of the Jews were deported, and subjects from other parts of the Assyrian empire took their place. An Assyrian governor was put in charge, and so the kingdom of Israel came to an end.

For a time the kingdom of Judah, which had been careful not to provoke the Assyrians, was left alone. But the ambition of King Hezekiah, sily encouraged by Egypt and Babylon, led to the siege of Jerusalem and other cities by Sennacherib's armies, 700 B.C.

The Assyrians had greatly developed the art of besieging cities. While their skilful long-range archers, often including the king himself, poured volleys of arrows at the defenders on the battlements, ponderous battering-rams were thudding at the wall, those working them being often completely protected by thick screens of metal or leather. At length, with a crash and a cloud of dust, part of the wall collapsed, the spearmen and archers swarmed through the breach, and before long the sacred war-standard of the Assyrians, the archer-god Ashur with his winged disc, was planted on the walls.



Assyrians Besieging A City

However, Jerusalem itself resisted obstinately, partly owing to the faith of the prophet Isaiah, and was not actually captured, though Hezekiah at length agreed to pay tribute. Babylon, becoming more openly disloyal, was sacked by Sennacherib in 689; yet such was the respect of the Assyrians for its ancient renown that he helped to rebuild it again. He loved to express in building his pride as a conqueror. He chose for his capital a city which had also in earlier times been the capital of Assyria, Nineveh (opposite modern Mosul), high up the Tigris, about forty miles before it reaches the open plains.

A marshy tributary runs into the river here, but he diverted it, drained the swamps and built a huge brick mound as the foundation of his palace. The latter had noble arches for its doorways, and was adorned with large white slabs and columns of gleaming alabaster on which he illustrated his exploits. The pillars of the palace were cased in silver and gold, and Sennacherib was particularly proud of its human-headed, gigantic bulls and lions cast in bronze, fitting and common symbols of Assyrian might, and valuable as demon-scarers. For the citizens he laid out a large park, and among the novelties he introduced there was the cotton plant from India, "the tree that bears wool."



Sennacherib Is Told Of Victories In Palestine - Carved alabaster in the palace of Nineveh.

Sennacherib was murdered in Nineveh by his eldest son, who was jealous because a younger son, Esarhaddon, had been recognised as heir. The latter drove out his wicked brother, and not only established himself firmly in Assyria itself and in Babylonia, with the whole of Syria and Palestine at their greatest extent, but he also conquered Egypt, which was continually encouraging its northern neighbours to rebel.

On his death in 669 B.C. a younger son, Ashurbanipal, succeeded him, though the elder was allowed to rule Babylon. Under Ashurbanipal Assyria reached the height of its power and luxury. The conquest of rebellious Egypt was completed by the recapture of Memphis and the destruction of Thebes, though the Assyrians never completely subdued the country and had to allow native rulers to govern in their name. Elam, a warlike mountain kingdom east of Babylonia, which for centuries had raided the rich cities of the river valleys, was reduced to a vassal state. A revolt of Babylonia led by Ashurbanipal's brother and joined by the Elamites and northern Arabs was crushed.



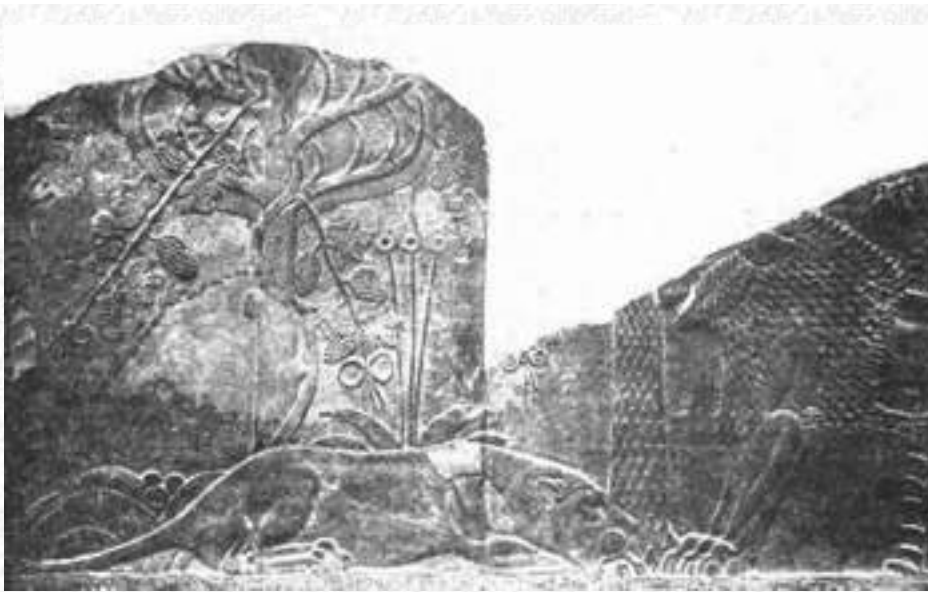
Assyrian Winged Bull

All this fighting occupied the earlier part of the reign. For about the last ten years the king in undisturbed peace enjoyed at Nineveh the luxury for which he became proverbial. He frequently enjoyed the royal sport of Assyria, lion-hunting from a chariot, and he kept lions in his palace grounds. He established a great library where the ancient stories, chronicles and scientific works of Babylonia were copied and carefully stored, and the records of Assyria were brought up to date under his supervision.



Assyrians Destroying And Looting A City

Thousands of clay tablets from this library are now in the British Museum. They were found by British excavators in the ruins of the library, scattered about as on the day when her bitter enemies sacked Nineveh. But no records of events after 639 B.C. have been found, though we know that the reign lasted till 626 and that Egypt became free again.



Lions In The Palace Grounds At Nineveh

The last years of the greatest of the Assyrian kings were darkened by his own illness, and strife within his own family and his kingdom. But he could hardly have foreseen how soon and how completely Assyria's power was to be shattered for ever. The long years of fighting had used up her reserves of "man-power," especially as the population was declining for other reasons. The civil war that arose in 626 exhausted her further still. To the south and to the north lay powerful enemies, the Chaldeans of Babylonia, and the Medes (see Section C), who had copied her methods of fighting and were awaiting just such an opportunity. They plotted together and struck hard.



Ashurbanipal Feasting In The Palace Garden At Nineveh - Notice the details in this picture. The queen's throne is similar to that of Sennacherib.

In 612 B.C. the proud city of Nineveh was turned into a heap of smoking ruins, and its pleasant park became a desert. The Assyrian armies fought on for some years, but were at last destroyed. The population was enslaved or submerged by its neighbours. The language disappeared. So were the curses

of Israel's prophets fulfilled.

We have already (pp. 87, 92) heard of the Chaldeans, one of the many tribes out of vast Arabia who had drifted northward. They had settled in the cities of the lower Euphrates, and their vigour won for them in time the control of Babylon. In the long reign of their great king, Nebuchadnezzar (650-562 B.C.) the son of the conqueror of Nineveh, Babylon again became the wonder city of the world. The Egyptians at first disputed the supremacy of the Babylonians, but they were soon driven out of Syria and Palestine. But the fall of Assyria had roused hopes of independence in Judah, and though the defeat of the Egyptians, their allies, compelled the Jews to submit at first to Nebuchadnezzar, they soon rebelled against him. All too soon he was battering at the gates of Jerusalem, which was captured in 597 B.C. Its chief men, including the king, Jehoiachin and the prophet-priest Ezekiel were taken to Babylon.

But the "kingdom" of Judah was left and Nebuchadnezzar appointed a new king, Zedekiah. The Jews were slow to realise the might of new Babylon. Ten years later, in spite of the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah, Zedekiah rebelled. Again Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was put in prison for advising surrender. The city was captured, the temple and palace pulled down and the whole town set on fire. Zedekiah and the remnant of his army were caught while trying to escape across the Jordan. He suffered the usual fate of rebels then, being at once blinded. Along with most of the population of Jerusalem he was taken to Babylon, and thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel, that Zedekiah should see the king of Babylon, should go to Babylon, but should not see the land of Babylon.

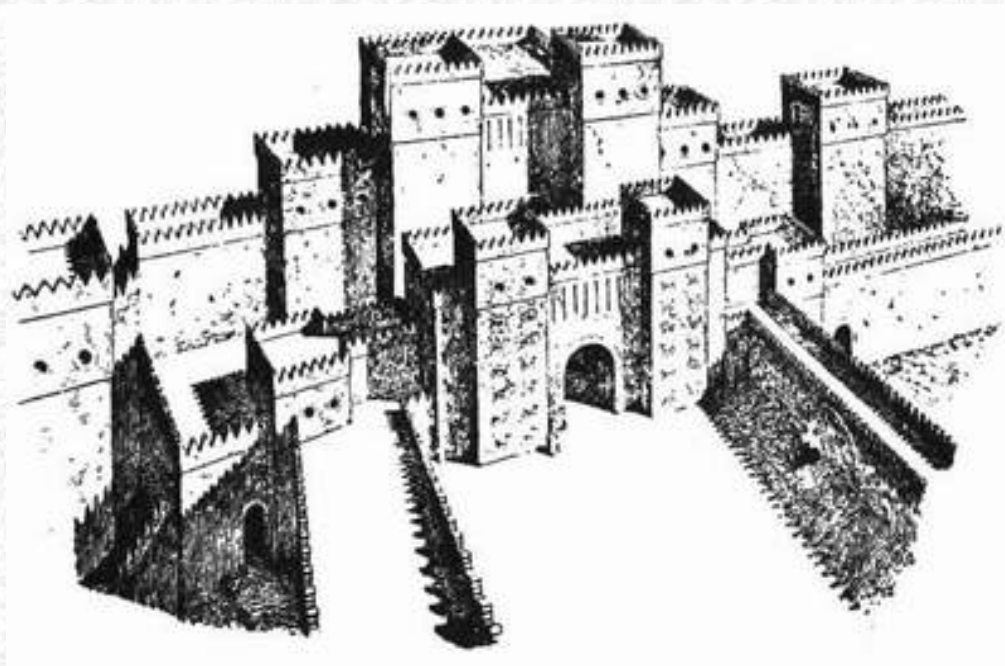


A View Of Babylon Today, Showing The Ishtar Gate

So ended the kingdom of Judah (586 B.C.). Jeremiah was at first made prisoner too, but was released

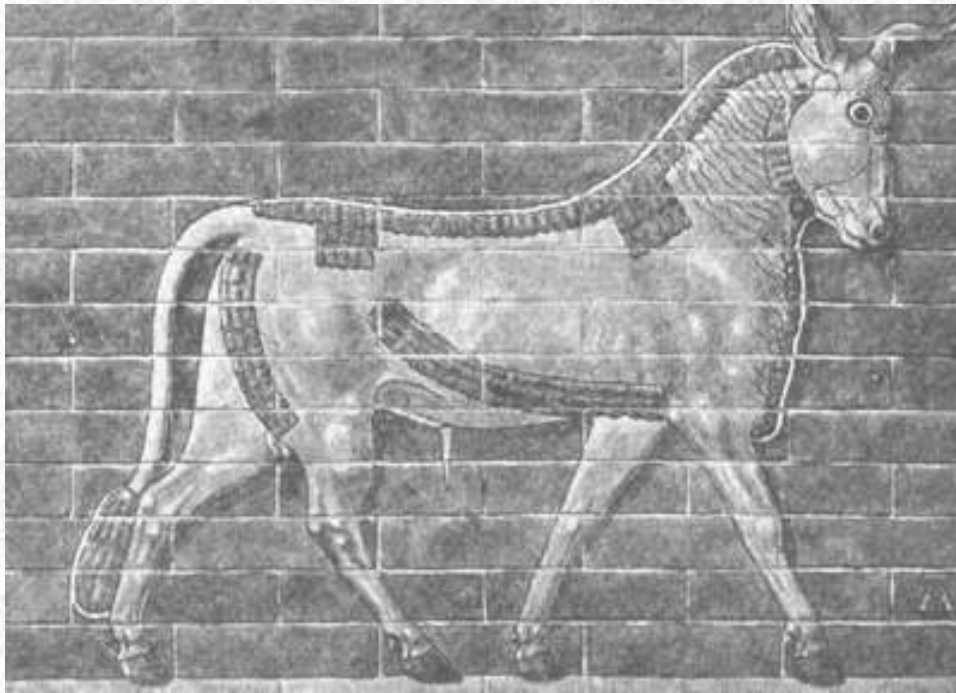
with a number of others, because they had not agreed to the rebellion. Even now the remaining Jews would not keep the peace in Jerusalem, and with a heavy heart Jeremiah went away to Egypt.

The exiled Jews were not oppressed in Babylon. Some of them were dazzled by its wonders, and settled down soon without any great discomfort in what was the greatest city, perhaps excepting Rome, of the ancient world.



The Ishtar Gate, As It Was

It was in the shape of a triangle, the base of which ran along the left bank of the palm-fringed Euphrates. In the northern angle lay the mighty ziggurat of Marduk and the docks and business part of the town. In the southern angle were the restored temples of the old Babylonian gods. About the centre of the base towered the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, with its lofty terraced gardens, "the Hanging Gardens of Babylon," which were one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. A broad highway, used in solemn processions, joined the palace to the temple district, and where it began there was a particularly fine gateway, dedicated to the goddess Ishtar (p. 47). The twin towers of this gate, decorated with beautifully coloured glazed tiles and animal designs, are the most important relic of the vanished glory of Babylon as yet unearthed. The tiles, no doubt, protected the bricks from weathering away (p.43). Mighty walls of incredible thickness surrounded the city.



A Bull On The Ishtar Gate

Some of the Jews, then, adopted the ways and even the much inferior religion of Babylon, thinking of the God they had worshipped in Jerusalem as a tribal god who had deserted his people. A few, the most thoughtful, pondered on the teaching of Jeremiah that true religion was not confined to the temple of Jerusalem with its altars, sacrifices and ritual. They began to realise that the true worship of God was an attitude of the human spirit towards the Divine Spirit, not confined to any particular place or even to any particular people. But many of the Jews still longed passionately for Jerusalem, and dreamt of returning there some day and restoring the Temple. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps. ... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember thee not, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Psalm 137).

These Jews looked with growing hope at the rising power of the Medes, once the allies of the Chaldeans against Assyria, now their most dangerous rivals, especially as Nebuchadnezzar's successors were weaklings.

C. The Persians

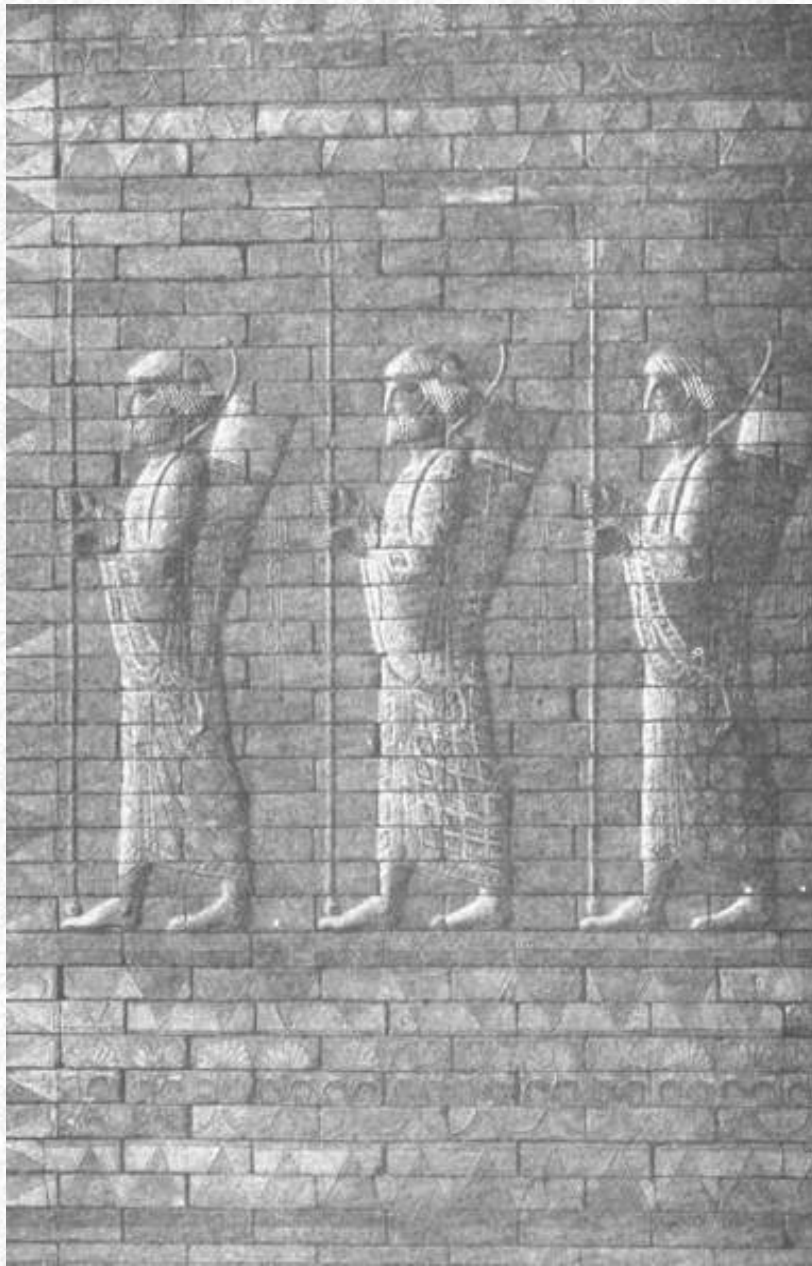
The Medes, and with them a closely related race, the Persians, came originally from what we call the steppes of Turkestan, where they had become better horsemen than any other previous race of the ancient world. They had wandered down by the shores of Lake Aral and the south end of the Caspian Sea and had settled, the Medes in the mountains to the east of the Fertile Crescent on the borders of Assyria, and the Persians on the east of their Gulf. By destroying Elam, and the strongly organised little kingdom which had long existed in the north round Lake Van, Assyria had removed their chief rivals, and when Nineveh fell, the Medes spread into and beyond north Assyria, into what we should call Armenia, and

beyond that to the river Halys, the old Hittite centre (p. 40). The Persians occupied Elam with its ancient capital Susa.

In 549 B.C. Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians, overthrew the Median king and easily joined the two kindred nations under his rule. The Persians thus began a wonderful series of conquests which, in thirty years, gave them a well-governed empire which lasted for two hundred years, and stretched from the Indus to the Nile, and from the Dardanelles to the Persian Gulf. Advancing to the western limit of the Median Empire, Cyrus crossed the Halys and, capturing Sardis (546 B.C.), added to his dominions Lydia, which occupied western Asia Minor and had a fringe of Greek city-states on its west coast (see p. 108). You may have heard the phrase "as rich as Croesus." Croesus was the Lydian king whom Cyrus overthrew. The conqueror now retraced his steps and advanced on Babylon itself. Its feeble king had left all the government in the hands of his deputy, the prince Belshazzar. You must read for yourselves in the Book of Daniel, if you have not already studied that interesting part of the Old Testament, how Belshazzar gave a great feast at which the holy vessels from the temple of Jerusalem were used by the revellers, and how the Jewish cupbearer, Daniel, interpreted the mysterious writing which suddenly appeared on the wall and struck terror into Belshazzar's heart.

Daniel's prophecy came true, for in 539 B.C. Cyrus captured Babylon with little trouble and made it one of his capitals. With Babylon he acquired Syria and Palestine. After winning and successfully organising in ten years the greatest empire the world had yet seen, Cyrus was killed, fighting a savage tribe beyond the Caspian Sea (529 B.C.). We know little about his son and successor, Cambyses, except that he conquered Egypt in 525 B.C. His successor Darius (522-486 B.C.) not only extended Persian rule in Egypt further south and west, but pushed the north-western corner of the Persian empire further out till it included Macedonia, Thrace and many of the Greek islands of the Aegean, while the eastern frontier was advanced to the Indus.

The Persians were tolerant towards their subjects and gave the Jews of Babylon permission to return to Jerusalem, to take back with them the holy Temple vessels and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus may have first given permission, but there were so many difficulties that it required a special decree of Darius before the work was really begun.



Soldiers Of The Royal Persian Guard

There was no question of restoring the monarchy of Judah. Henceforth the High Priest was looked upon as the leader of the Jews. It was about this time that there was begun the arrangement of their sacred writings that we know in translation as the Old Testament. It gave the world not only by far the finest ideas of God yet known, but also of men's duty to Him and to their fellow men. And more than once it foretold the coming of a Messiah or Saviour.

Exercises

1. What can you discover from the pictures in this book and from other sources about the costume etc. of the Assyrians and of the Chaldeans?

2. What Hebrew prophets mention (a) the Assyrians (b) the Chaldeans and (c) the Persians?
3. Who ruled the countries of the Fertile Crescent, before the Great War (1914-1918 A.D.)? Who rules them to-day?
4. From the details given on pp. 96, 97 draw a plan of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.
5. Why does the Old Testament describe the city of Ur as "of the Chaldees," though it is mentioned in this book as a city of Sumer?



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