

God used world politics to bring about his judgments upon Israel, Judah, and other nations exactly as the prophets had foretold. It's interesting to understand how political events intersected with the Biblical narrative.

Israel was at war with Syria for most of its history. Northern Gilead changed hands several times throughout this conflict. Near the end, however, Israel and Syria feared the Assyrians and made an alliance. They expected Judah to join, but King Ahaz refused. Israel and Syria then decided to attack Judah, depose Ahaz, and replace him with a king who would join their anti-Assyrian alliance. Isaiah prophesied that Syria and Israel would fall before they could carry out their plans. Damascus, the capital of Syria, fell to Assyria in 532, and Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell in 521, both after sieges.

Sennacherib continued the Assyrian conquest by invading Judah. It seems that Assyria invaded Judah twice during Hezekiah's reign, though there are differing interpretations. The first time, around 713, Assyria took fortified cities, but Hezekiah sent tribute, and the Assyrians ended their assault. The second time, in 701, Assyria again took fortified cities and initiated a siege by camping around Jerusalem. Isaiah reassured Hezekiah of Judah's salvation, and the king encouraged his people to trust God. The Assyrian messenger mocked Judah's confidence, citing Assyria's many recent victories. But God miraculously destroyed the Assyrian army.

Around this time, Hezekiah became ill but was healed by God. Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon, heard of Hezekiah's miraculous recovery. At the time, Babylon was revolting against Assyrian rule. Merodach-baladan likely saw Judah as a valuable ally in the war against Assyria. He sent messengers with gifts to Hezekiah, creating a friendship between Judah and Babylon. Isaiah, however, prophesied that Babylon would one day conquer Judah, and this was fulfilled about 150 years later.

After God saved Judah from Sennacherib's attack in 701, the Bible simply states that Sennacherib returned to Nineveh and was assassinated by some of his sons. Sennacherib had originally appointed his oldest living son, Arda-Mulissu, as his successor. In 684, Sennacherib changed his mind and appointed Esarhaddon as his successor. Arda-Mulissu was not happy, and he already had some support in Assyria and among some of its vassals. Sennacherib sent Esarhaddon away to protect him. In 681, Ardu-Mulissu and his brother, Nabu-shar-usur, conspired and killed their father in a temple at Nineveh. But Esarhaddon faced Arda-Mulissu in battle and defeated him to claim the throne.

Around 630, Assyria began to experience internal conflict. Nabopolassar, a Babylonian, took advantage of Assyria's weakness and secured independence for Babylon in 626. Assyria failed to regain control over Babylon. Meanwhile, Cyaxares had begun to rule Media. Nabopolassar and Cyaxares invaded Assyria. Cyaxares conquered Assur, an Assyria center of religion and culture, in 614. He then teamed up with Nabopolassar to conquer Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, in 612. The weakened Assyrian army, under new leadership, rallied at Harran. Harran was besieged by Medo-Babylonian forces and fell in 609. This is considered the end of the Assyrian Empire by historians.

Pharaoh marched his army north to help the Assyrians retake Harran. Josiah, friendly to Babylon, attempted to stop Pharaoh and was killed at Megiddo. Pharaoh continued north to Harran, and Judah set Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, on the throne. After Pharaoh and the Assyrians failed to retake Harran, Pharaoh returned to Egypt. On his way back through Judah, he deposed Jehoahaz and set his brother, Eliakim (Jehoiakim), on the throne as a loyal vassal to Egypt.

About four years later, Pharaoh once again took his army north to aid the Assyrians. The Babylonian army, led by Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar, and their allies decisively defeated the Egyptian-Assyrian forces at Carchemish in 605.

The same year that Nebuchadnezzar won at Carchemish, his father died. Nebuchadnezzar inherited a great empire and solidified his alliance with the Median Empire. Babylon ruled the West while Media ruled the East.

Nebuchadnezzar quickly engaged Egypt for control of the Levant and won. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and took captives, including Daniel. In 597, he besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiachin (Jeconiah/Coniah) surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar exiled Jews, including Jehoiachin and Ezekiel, and plundered the temple and royal treasuries. Around this time, Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles.

Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah (Zedekiah), king of Judah as a vassal. Jeremiah warned Zedekiah and Judah to submit to Babylon, but the prophet was marked as a traitor and imprisoned in Jerusalem. Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon in his ninth year, and Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. After about two years, in 586, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem, plundered and destroyed its temple, exiled many, and executed members of the resistance. They made Gedaliah governor over Judah and allowed Jeremiah to stay with him. The new government of Judah was headquartered at Mizpah. Jeremiah wrote Lamentations in the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall.

A band of rebels assassinated Gedaliah and killed many Jews and Babylonians at Mizpah. Fearing retaliation for the assassination, the rebels took captives from Mizpah and fled to Ammon. An official rescued the hostages. Jeremiah warned them not to go to Egypt, but they went anyway, taking Jeremiah. He prophesied Babylonian victory over Egypt and judgment upon the Judean refugees.

Daniel prophesied in the royal court of Babylon throughout the Babylonian period and in the early years of the Persian period. Meanwhile, Ezekiel prophesied among his fellow exiles in Babylon.

Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews would be in exile for 70 years can be calculated two ways. The temple was destroyed in 586 and rebuilt in 516. The beginning of Babylon's dominance over Judah and an initial exile occurred in 605, and the first wave of exiles returned in 536.

Throughout their existence, Israel and Judah turned to idolatrous nations for salvation, directly disobeying God's command and disbelieving his promises. This led to idolatry, tributes, subjections, deposed kings, military defeats, loss of territory, and exiles. Israel was destroyed completely. Those who remained in the land became the ethnically mixed Samaritans, rejected by the Jews. The rest were scattered throughout the world. Many Jews were also scattered by exiles, immigration, and other means. But a remnant was preserved in Babylon and returned to rebuild the nation. God sent them prophets, like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, to bring them back to faithfulness. After delays due to enemy threats, they rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, restoring worship, dignity, and their national identity.

Cyrus the Persian overthrew Media in 550, creating a strong, unified Persian Empire. Meanwhile, in Babylon, King Nabonidus had left his son, Belshazzar, in charge in his absence. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 while Belshazzar was hosting a drunken feast. Cyrus let the Jews return home to rebuild in 536, as Isaiah had said. God preserved a remnant of Israelites to fulfill his promise to Abraham and David concerning the Anointed Offspring who would bless all nations. Forty years after Jesus had fulfilled that promise, Judah faced its final destruction in 70 AD.