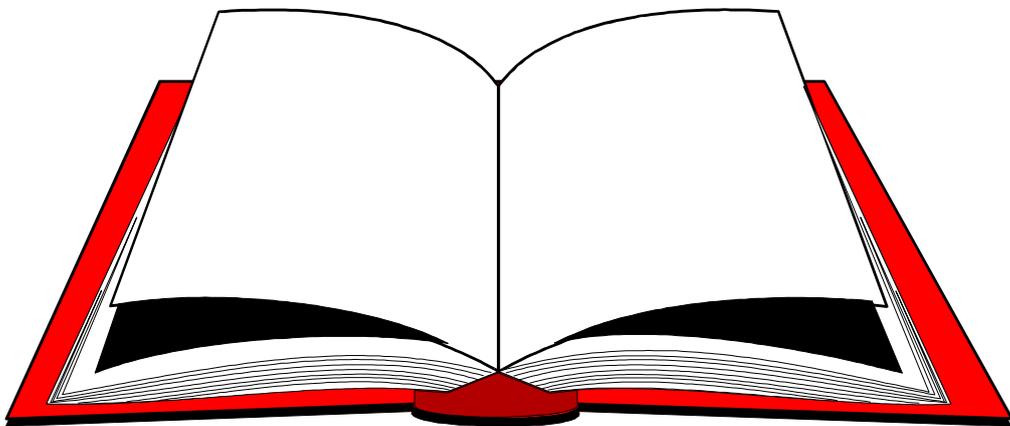


GOD'S STORY

A BIBLE OVERVIEW

By: Julian Spriggs, M.A.



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SECTION 1: THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Chapter VI. The Divided Kingdom: III

Assyria and the Exile of Israel

(Eighth century B.C. 800 - 700 B.C.)

Jeroboam II and Uzziah - a time of unjust prosperity (2 Kg 14-15, 2 Chr 26)

The marriage alliance between Israel and Judah certainly brought its problems, but it did stop the war between the two nations and establish a period of peace, which enabled both nations to become more prosperous.

The godly Uzziah (or Azariah) ruled in Judah, and gained significant victories against the Philistines, which unfortunately caused him to grow proud. He even offered incense on the altar in the temple, which only the priests were allowed to do. As judgement, God struck him down with leprosy, making him ritually unclean, so he had to remain isolated from society. In the Old Testament law the job of priest was kept totally distinct from that of a king. The priests came from the tribe of Levi, and the king from Judah. Only Jesus came fulfilling the office of prophet, priest and king.

In the north, another king called Jeroboam ruled (Jeroboam II). He also was able to gain many victories over surrounding nations and to extend his borders. His nation also grew more prosperous, but this prosperity was built on injustice, of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. During this time of unjust prosperity, two prophets were called by God to address the sins of the nation, and to warn of impending judgement.

Amos

Amos was a farmer from the southern kingdom, who was called to bring the word of the Lord to the northern kingdom of Israel. He began his prophecy in a dramatic way, by standing at the shrine at Bethel and predicting judgement in turn against all the surrounding nations, including Judah. We can imagine the delight of the people listening to him, until he turned on Israel and condemned their own nation as well. Amos spoke out against the social injustice in Israel, how the rich were oppressing the poor, particularly by taking their land, just as Ahab had stolen Naboth's vineyard. Amos warned of impending judgement which came a few years later when the Assyrians took Israel into exile.

Amos 5:24 "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

Hosea

Hosea was from the northern kingdom and was called by God to act out his prophecy in an extremely personally demanding way. He was told to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him and become a prostitute, bearing children who were not his. God then called Hosea to buy her out of slavery and take her once again as his wife. This was a dramatic representation of the relationship of Yahweh with his people, Israel. God had entered into a marriage covenant with Israel on Mt. Sinai. However, his people had been unfaithful to him by worshipping idols, committing spiritual adultery (and physical adultery!). Through the message of Hosea, God was showing his loving kindness in giving Israel another chance to repent and to return to him.

Hosea 1:2 "When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD'".

The rise of Assyria (See Map 7)

In his prophecy, Amos declared that the lion was roaring. God was raising up a new enemy who would be his tool of judgement against his people for their idolatry. These were the Assyrians, who used the lion as one of their symbols.

The Assyrians were a formidable enemy, who delighted in fighting and being cruel to people. In the British Museum in London there are several rooms full of wall panels from the Assyrian palaces, almost all of which depict battle scenes. After capturing a city, they would torture and kill many people and leave a pile of skulls outside the city to remind the people what would happen if they failed to pay their taxes or dare to rebel against Assyrian rule.

Also in the British Museum, there is another room full of panels showing King Sennacherib on a lion hunt. The kings appeared to enjoy demonstrating their great power and strength by the large number of lions they killed.

Jonah

Assyria is the setting for the book of Jonah. Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and preach God's judgement against it. The reason Jonah ran away was not that he was frightened, but that he did not want to preach to Israel's worst enemy Assyria. The danger was that they might repent, and God might forgive them! This of course is exactly what happened when Jonah did eventually reach Nineveh after his little adventure in the belly of the fish (or whale). Jonah was very displeased that they had repented, and God had to teach Jonah an important lesson. From this book, we see God's heart for the nations, even back in the Old Testament.

Jonah 4:11 "And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals".

Nahum

The prophecy of Nahum was also addressed to the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. It seems that the repentance in Nineveh at the time of Jonah was short-lived, and the Assyrians soon returned to their old ways. About 150 years later, Nahum vividly predicted its destruction, as God's vengeance on the barbaric way they had treated other nations, especially Israel. This finally happened in 612 B.C., when Nineveh fell to the Babylonians, after the Assyrian empire had collapsed from within.

Nah 3:19 "There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is mortal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For who has ever escaped your endless cruelty?"

Ahaz and the coalition against Assyria "The Syro-Ephraimite War" (2 Kg 16, 2 Chr 28)

Because of the threat of Assyria, King Rezin of Syria and King Pekah of Israel joined in a coalition against their common enemy. They asked Ahaz king of Judah whether he wanted to join them in this coalition. When Ahaz refused, they plotted to put another king in his place, who would support them. Instead of joining the coalition, Ahaz asked Assyria to help him against the coalition of Israel and Syria. Naturally, Assyria was all too pleased to agree to this, and as a result Judah lost her independence by becoming a vassal state of Assyria. This involved paying taxes and to Assyria and worshipping Assyrian gods (not a great problem to Ahaz). The Assyrians sent their armies south, first conquering Syria in 732 B.C., then Israel in 722 B.C.

The first part of the Book of Isaiah is set during this time (ch 7-12), where he vainly urges Ahaz not to put his trust in Assyria, but to trust in the Lord for his salvation from his enemies. He gave Ahaz a sign, saying that a young woman will bear a son called Immanuel (God with us), which foreshadowed a much greater fulfilment 700 years later (Is 7:14).

The fall of Samaria (2 Kg 17)

KEY DATE: 722 B.C.

Following the reign of Jeroboam II, the northern kingdom of Israel collapsed. They had five kings in about 20 years, most of who killed the previous one. Finally the Assyrians came and captured the nation, then besieged and took the city of Samaria. This was the end of the northern kingdom, because of the idolatry practised by the people, and particularly because of "the sin of Jeroboam".

After they captured a nation like Israel, the Assyrian practice was to kill many of the inhabitants, after torturing them first. Many of the remainder were taken into exile, and scattered to various different places around the empire, where they would intermarry with the local inhabitants. This caused the captured peoples to lose all their national, cultural and religious identity, which explains why the ten tribes of Israel are now lost.

A mixture of peoples were then brought from around the empire to repopulate the captured area, which in Israel was the origin of the Samaritans. These were despised by the Jews because they were half-breed, and had a different system of religion. In Jewish thinking there was no such thing as a "Good" Samaritan. Even 700 years later, Zealous Jews would still never travel through Samaria to get from Jerusalem to Galilee, instead they would cross the Jordan and travel up the east side. In light of this, it was quite a shocking thing for Jesus to pass through Samaria, and then to stop and talk with the woman at the well (particularly because she had had five husbands!) (Jn 4).

Many of the inhabitants of the northern kingdom who were faithful to God had previously moved south to Judah, which explains why some people in New Testament times were able to trace their ancestry to one of the ten northern tribes. An example is the old lady, Anna from the tribe of Asher, who recognised the infant Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:36).

Hezekiah and the last minute salvation of Jerusalem **KEY DATE: 701 B.C.**

(2 Kg 18-19, 2 Chr 29-32, Is 36-37)

The result of Ahaz asking Assyria to come to help Judah against the coalition of Israel and Syria was that Judah became a vassal state of Assyria, paying taxes to Assyria, and worshipping their gods. When the godly Hezekiah came to the throne, he took advantage of a change of king in Assyria to introduce some radical reforms to return the nation to worship of Yahweh. Hezekiah is one of the two best kings of Judah, and was described as being like David, the ideal king. He repaired the temple, celebrated the Passover, broke down idols, and most importantly, he destroyed the high places.

However, the Assyrians saw this as rebelling against their rule, so they sent their armies in to recapture the rebellious nation. Led by Sennacherib, they captured all the cities of Judah (46 of them), with only Jerusalem left. No one successfully stood against the Assyrians, so it seemed that the last moment of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah had come. The Assyrian army began to besiege Jerusalem and challenged Hezekiah to give in. However also inside the city was the prophet Isaiah, who exhorted Hezekiah to trust God, and not to trust in Egypt to come and help him. Amazingly Hezekiah did trust God, and that night the angel of the Lord killed all the Assyrian army, leaving the city free. God had saved the city at its eleventh hour and 59th minute. The main theme of Isaiah is demonstrated through this episode. Hezekiah was tempted to call the Egyptian armies to come and help him, trusting that they could help him defeat the Assyrian army. Isaiah called Hezekiah to **trust God for his salvation**, which was what eventually happened.

Isaiah

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem and had access to the royal court. He was called to be a prophet through a vision of the glory of God in the temple (Is 6). His name means "Yahweh is salvation", and appropriately, the main theme running right through his long prophecy is trusting God for salvation. Both Ahaz and Hezekiah were challenged to trust in God to save them from their enemies. Sadly, Ahaz failed that challenge, but Hezekiah did trust God, and saw a wonderful deliverance from the Assyrians. The second part of Isaiah's prophecy looks forward in history, to a setting during the exile in Babylon. Again the same theme continues, of trusting God

for salvation. He predicted a human saviour, Cyrus, who would allow God's people to return home, and a later saviour, the suffering servant, who will bring a far more wonderful salvation in the future by dealing with the real problem of sin, finally bringing life in a glorious new heaven and a new earth.

Is 12:2 "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation".

Micah

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, but who lived in the countryside of Judah. He also predicted the invasion by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. Like Amos, he was outspoken against the injustice in the land, particularly the rich taking land from the poor. His note of hope is found in his prediction of the Shepherd King, who will come from Bethlehem, and who will lead his flock to safety.

Micah 6:8 "He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God".

Chapter VII. Paul's Third Missionary Journey

Acts 18 - 20, A.D. 54 - 58.



In his Third Missionary Journey, Paul did not travel to any new places, but mostly concentrated on strengthening the churches he had previously established.

Galatia (Acts 18:22)

Once again Paul travelled through Galatia, encouraging the churches, and seeing how well they were doing.

Ephesus (Acts 19)

This time Paul travelled directly to Ephesus, which was the major city in the Roman province of Asia, with an important port. It was well known as a centre for the worship of Artemis, the goddess of fertility. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In this temple was a sacred stone which had fallen from heaven. Many people travelled great distances to visit the Artemis temple, and a large trade in statues of Artemis grew up. Spiritually, Ephesus was a very dark city, being a major centre of magic arts and a wide variety of occult practices.

Paul stayed here for two years, working as a tent-maker, and then preaching during the heat of the day in a lecture hall. Paul had great success here, many people came to faith in Jesus, and publicly burnt their magical books, and spoke out the magical charms, thus breaking the secrecy. So many people were converted, that the sale of images of Artemis dropped greatly, so the statue makers and sellers became upset when they suffered economically. This led to a riot in the great amphitheatre, led by the statue makers, which was eventually silenced by the local authorities, who were frightened that the Romans would step in to quell the

rebellion.

Collection for Jerusalem saints (Rom 15, 1 Cor 16, 2 Cor 8-9)

Throughout his third missionary journey, Paul was collecting money from the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Greece for the Jewish church in Jerusalem. This was partly to help the believers in Jerusalem, who were very poor, and who had suffered a severe famine. However, Paul also wanted this to be an act of solidarity to ease the tensions between the Gentile churches that Paul had established and the Jewish church in Jerusalem, who often struggled to accept Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

Correspondence with Corinth

While Paul was in Ephesus, he wrote several times to the church in Corinth, in an attempt to bring unity, and to restore his relationship and authority in the church. In total, there were four letters, two of which are preserved in the Bible:

No.	Title	Comment
1	The "previous letter"	- not to associate with immoral men (1 Cor 5:9)
2	1 Corinthians	
3	The "Severe letter"	- calling them to repentance (2 Cor 7:8)
4	2 Corinthians	

The basic problem in the church in Corinth seems to be super-spirituality. Many of the people were strongly influenced by Greek attitudes to spirituality. To them, the ideal spiritual leader would be physically perfect, an eloquent speaker, he would never suffer, and generally would be uninvolved and unaffected by anything physical, certainly not having to work with their hands. In their thinking, Paul did not match up to this ideal, so they severely questioned his spirituality and authority. Different factions sprang up in the church, each with their favourite spiritual hero.

Some believed that they were already living in the age to come, particularly because they spoke so much in the tongues of angels, and therefore they denied the truth of a future physical resurrection. Some took this understanding to say that because they were so spiritual, they could live however they liked, and they were boasting of their freedom because they even had a man living incestuously with his step-mother. Others took the opposite view, that Christians should not have any sexual relationships at all, including within marriage.

1 Corinthians

In this letter, Paul addresses several different issues reported to him, and questions asked by the church. However, there is an underlying theme of rejection of Paul's authority, because of the super-spirituality in the church.

First he addresses reports of disunity. There were different factions, each favouring a different leader, some followed Peter, some Apollos because of his eloquence, some followed Peter, and probably the really "spiritual" followed Christ. Addressing the false values of Greek thinking, he shows how God uses the foolish things in the world to shame human wisdom, and that the ultimate foolishness was the cross.

Then he rebukes the church for tolerating the man living with his father's wife, telling them to discipline him. He calls them not to have lawsuits against each other, or visit prostitutes. Then he turns against the people teaching asceticism, by giving instructions about marriage and singleness, saying that each person should be

married if they are called to be married, and single if called to be single.

Another issue was food offered to idols. This was a problem for the believers in Corinth. Should a Christian go to the fellowship meals in pagan temples, and should they eat meat sold in the market-place which had been previously offered as a sacrifice to an idol? He broadened this issue into the subject of Christian freedom, saying that Christians are free, but should be willing to forgo those freedoms for the sake of other believers.

He also answers reports about their worship. In a difficult and controversial passage, he commends them for keeping the traditions in women wearing head-coverings, showing that men and women should maintain their distinct dress, as is culturally appropriate. But he rebukes them because the disunity was so severe that it also spread to their celebration of communion. The rich would get there early and eat all the food, leaving nothing for the poorer slaves who would arrive later and find nothing to eat. Also in their worship, they seemed to boast and show off their spirituality by the use of spiritual gifts, particularly their use of tongues. Paul shows that their overriding desire should be to demonstrate love, and to edify one another. He declares his preference for the gift of prophecy in public meetings because it is intelligible and therefore edifying to others.

Finally he addresses those who deny that there will be a future resurrection. He says that if there was no resurrection, they have no hope, but instead the day will come when we will be raised physically into bodies suited for glory.

2 Corinthians

Following 1 Corinthians, the problems seem to have grown worse. The people rejecting Paul's authority had become even more influential, and had turned much of the church against him. In 2 Corinthians, Paul gave an extended defence of his actions, his ministry, and his calling to be an apostle against these people, who he sarcastically calls "super apostles".

First he defended his changes of plan, explaining why he had not yet come to them. Between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul had paid a brief visit to Corinth, not mentioned in Acts, which he calls the "painful visit" (2 Cor 2:1). It was to avoid another such painful visit that he had not yet visited again. Instead he had sent Titus as his representative, to see how the church was responding. After the arrival of Titus back from Corinth, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians expressing his delight that Titus had brought the good news that there had been a positive response of godly grief and repentance. Within this defence he made an extended digression about the glorious message of reconciliation that he brought, but which comes in weak earthen vessels, emphasising to the Greeks that it is the message which is important, and not the messenger.

Following practical instructions about the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, and principles of generous and voluntary giving, he concludes his letter with a lengthy defence of his personal calling to be an apostle. Instead of boasting in all his achievements, as the Greeks would do, he comes in the opposite spirit, and boasted in all his weaknesses, his suffering, his unanswered prayer, and how the grace of God is made perfect in weakness. The climax of his boast is when he was let down the wall in a basket. In Greek epics, the great military hero was the first one to climb up the wall and enter a city under siege.

2 Cor 12:9 "but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

Corinth / Greece (Acts 20)

Following Paul's departure from Ephesus, Luke briefly describes a visit to Macedonia, then Greece (probably Corinth), and a return visit to Macedonia and Troas.

Letter to Rome

During his three months in Greece (Acts 20), Paul wrote what is normally thought of as his greatest letter, and clearest statement of the Christian Gospel, the letter to the Romans. There seem to be two purposes for Paul's writing this:

The first was for practical personal reasons. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem with the gift from the Gentile churches, so he asks the Roman church to pray for him and for the reception of this gift, and for his own safety in Jerusalem. Following the third missionary journey, he saw that his work in the Eastern Mediterranean area had been completed. Up until this time, the church in Antioch had sent him out and supported him. He had established thriving churches in each major city, which he expected to preach the Gospel in their surrounding areas. Paul was now turning his attention to the West, particularly to Spain, as he did not want to preach the Gospel where it had already been preached. So, through the letter to Rome, he lays out his Gospel, to establish relationship with them, asking that they would receive him when he eventually came to Rome, and become the church that would send him out on his mission to Spain.

Rom 1:16-17 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'."

The second was to address a situation in the church itself. From a careful reading of the letter, it appears that there were several different fellowships in Rome, rather than a single church. Also, there was a problem in the relationships between the Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish believers tended to be more legalistic, still keeping the Jewish Sabbath and food laws, and judged the Gentile believers for not keeping them. In turn the Gentile believers despised the Jewish believers for not living in the freedom that Jesus gave (Rom 14-15). So through his letter, Paul showed their unity before God, in judgement, in salvation by grace, in sanctification and glorification. Therefore, they need to show love and tolerance for each other.

Rom 15:5-6 "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Return to Jerusalem (Acts 20)

On his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped briefly at the port of Miletus. From there he called the elders of the church in Ephesus to come and meet him. In a moving speech, he warns that false teachers will come, even from among them. In other words, some of the elders themselves will become false teachers, which is a prediction of the situation later addressed in 1 Timothy. From Miletus, he sailed to Jerusalem.