

Speak the truth in love (Eph 4.15)

Theme Rebellion and Ruin

I remember when I was in primary school I did a project on the Crimean War, 1853- 1856.

I don't remember much about it other than the work of Florence Nightingale, *The Lady of the Lamp*, who is credited with shaping modern nursing and the poem *The charge of the light brigade* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

As a boy I never really appreciated poetry, but what 8-9 year old boy wouldn't be drawn to a poem about cannons that volleyed and thundered, flashing sabres and charging horsemen.

This came to mind with recent events in Crimea where Ukraine has lost the territory to neighbouring Russia. Claims to this land go back a long way. It is strange the way history tends to repeat itself and again Russia and Western nations are clashing over this area.

An article in *The Economist* states, *On March 28th 1854—160 years ago this month—Britain, the superpower of the day, declared war on Russia. The resulting conflict was mainly fought in Crimea as British forces and their allies laid siege to the main Russian naval base in the Black Sea at Sebastopol.*

The reason for that conflict was a concern about Russian expansionism, the very thing that raises concerns in our own day.

When you look at history, whether it be modern, recent or ancient history you see the rise and fall of nations.

You see aggression, war, oppression of the conquered, victors taking the spoils and using resources. Then you often see the dominant power weakened from within, declining in power and being invaded by the new rising power where again you see aggression, war, oppression of the conquered and the victors taking the spoils.

The people of Israel lived in the times of the rise and fall of nations.

Their destiny became linked to the ebb and flow of the great nations which surrounded them.

Just as the Crimean Peninsula has been held by different nations with the rise and fall of various powers, so to the land of Israel came under the rule of whichever superpower held sway.

Understanding this can help us make more sense of the OT.

We are still in our Big Picture Bible series where we are standing back and trying to see a panoramic sweep of the whole bible.

Today I am not trying to preach, but to teach and give you a basic understanding of the big political players in OT times.

I know some of you will be really interested in this, but I can imagine some of you may be thinking this is boring, really boring, it's like being back in school.

Stay awake just for a few more minutes.

What I am going to do is to give you a two minute overview, which will help you get a handle on this.

After that, those who find it boring, have my permission to tune out and take your mind to a happy place – as long as you don't snore!

But for those who find it interesting, I will give greater detail which will help you make better sense of the OT.

Before you start timing the two minutes I want to tell you why this is important.

Over half the OT is set against the background of what these big nations were doing.

The history of the kings and the writing of the prophets are all set in this story.

Some of the events that took place,

the siege of Jerusalem,

the sacking of the temple,

the exile in Babylon,

the return of the Jews and the New Temple,
These were all huge nation changing events that sent ripples through time, having an effect on the lives of people even in the time of Jesus.

The prophecies, the songs and the teaching from the time when the Jews were taken from their homeland to be slaves has had a significant influence on the Black American people whose ancestors were taken from their homeland as slaves in another land.

Those who want to start timing may do so now.

There are three great kingdoms in OT times which made a significant impact on the lives of the people of Israel.

Assyria – Scattered

Babylon – Gathered

Persia – Returned

(Walk through the bible)

Stop the clock!

If you can take those six words on board then you have the key to a huge sweep of the history of Israel.

To have a deeper understanding of this we need to take a moment to consider the geography of Israel in the context of the middle-east.

Israel is part of an area known as the Fertile Crescent.

Its fertile nature meant it was valuable land.

To the west lies the Mediterranean Sea.

To the east is hill country.

Further to the east is desert.

In ancient times the plains of Israel were a natural corridor between North Africa and the nations of the North.

Invading or retreating armies often passed through Israel.

If you wanted to move an army it was difficult to transport people by sea and many of the nations were not sea going people.

It was difficult to march an army through the desert or through the hills.

The land of Israel became a strategic link for those in power.

If Egypt wanted to exercise power in the north they passed through Israel. More often it was a northern power that wanted to take land in Egypt and so they would pass through Israel. When a nation did this they did not politely stop at the border, ask permission to enter and then tell the army to behave its self as they moved through the nation.

Rather the dominant power would expect Israel to become a vassal state, owing allegiance to the power, doing what the power required of them, paying taxes to the power and supplying provisions for the army.

If Israel didn't do this the army would conquer them on the way to their next conquest.

Israel's times of peace and independence often came as one power was declining and so had to withdraw their army to fight at home; and before the next power had gained sufficient dominance to be able to reach them.

During this time the King of Israel needed to decide whose side he was on. Pick the wrong side and you would die.

We are going to take a slightly closer look at these three nations.

Assyria was the first big power player in the story of the kings.

Assyria began to rise as a dominant power around the time that Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, but did not stretch out its power to Israel until the time of the Kings and the divided Kingdom after the rule of Solomon.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

You may have heard about this city in connection with the prophet Jonah. Jonah was the man who tried to run from God, was swallowed by a great fish and then spewed up on dry land. The reason he ran was because God told him to go to the city of Nineveh and call them to repentance.

By the standards of their day Nineveh had a large population, over 120,000 people.

To us this doesn't seem so big. There are a number of cities in NZ today that far exceed that population. However, in this ancient agricultural society there was no other city like it.

London, one of the great cities of the western world in the 16th century had only 75,000 people.

Even in the 17th century there were only a handful of cities in Europe with a population of over 20,000.

Paris would have been one of the very few with around 120,000.

So for in the ancient world Nineveh was huge.

This was a city that put a traveller in awe. It had magnificent palaces and grand municipal buildings, great gardens and dramatic works of art. A visitor to the busy city would take 3 days to get from one side of the city to the others.

This was a cruel Empire – in our day their leaders would be brought before the UN war crimes commission for trial.

Their treatment of captives was barbaric. They would subject them to a torturous death, leaving one hand attached so they could shake it before the person died. It was a reign of terror in which they boasted of dreadful tortures and even had their artists depict the scene to adorn their buildings.

To convict them of war crimes you would not need any witnesses because the Assyrians were proud of this and made detailed records of the atrocities.

King Assurbanipal was cruel to captives.

He boasted that he threw living men and women into ovens, cut off hands and heads, had enemy generals impaled on stakes, personally poked out the eyes of soldiers with his dagger, ordered captives skinned alive.

Captive men were pulled back to Nineveh attached to chariots by metal rings that were thrust through their lips.

The Assyrians worshipped the God Assur and their religion made no room for compassion.

Their religious practises revelled in cruelty, and delighted in myths of violence and gore, ... ***and is dominated by awful demons who constantly attempt to do mankind harm.***

Part of the duties of the king was to bring prisoners of war to the temple of Assur for execution to honour the god who took joy in the torture, mutilation and murder of captives.

They believed they were surrounded by thousands of demons who populated dark places especially graveyards, ruined cities and crossroads.

These demons were particularly active around childbirth as they looked for babies to eat.

One of their strategies for weakening their enemies was to move populations between countries. (Assyria scattered the nations)

Scholars estimate that the Assyrians moved around 4.5 million people over three centuries, a staggering number for those early times.

Moving people from their homeland to a foreign land meant they didn't know the local people, language, culture or religion. It watered down a sense of nationality and meant these people had to learn to survive in a new land.

It quenched rebellion by removing them from normal contacts with people they knew and forced them to focus on their immediate needs.

So we read in 2 Kings, *The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites.* (2 Ki 17:24).

Those who are familiar with their bibles will remember in the NT the people of Judah looked down upon the Samaritans and Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

The reason for the enmity between Judah and Samaria goes back to this time. The people of this area were no longer full blooded Israelites. Rather they were a people of mixed blood, coming from other nations, not holding to the practises of the

Jewish faith, and no longer strongly related to the surviving tribes of Israel.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel ceased to exist when the last king of the north, Hoshea was taken captive.

Previously Hoshea had served Assyria, paying tribute to them, but as we read in 2 kings 17, it was discovered that he was a traitor.

Shalmaneser King of Assyria laid siege to Samaria for three years, defeated Hoshea and took him captive.

Following this attention turned to Judah.

The land of Judah was less fertile than that of the Northern Kingdom and it had a smaller population.

Because of this it wasn't badly affected by the rule of the Assyrians until King Sennacherib attacked and looted the leading cities of Judah. He boasted, *I drove 200,150 people out of the cities.*

King Hezekiah, a godly king, paid a ransom to the Assyrians, but still they laid siege to Jerusalem.

However, Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah prayed to God for deliverance.

Their prayer was heard, circumstances changed, Sennacherib withdrew his army and returned to Nineveh where he was assassinated.

The new Kingdom of Babylon then rose to power capturing Nineveh in 612AD.

The ruins of ancient Babylon are about 95km from modern Baghdad.

Babylon is mentioned as early as Genesis 10 and has a long history of habitation. For centuries there had been various city states and kingdoms.

The Babylonian Empire that is found in the story of Kings begins with the fall of Nineveh in 612AD and ends with the fall of Babylon in 539AD when it was captured by Cyrus of Persia. While Babylon looms large in the bible story and was a vast empire with great power, it only lasted 73 years. Some members of our church are in their 70's. In a personal sense that may be a lifetime, but in terms of the rise and fall of empires it is a blip in history.

While Assyria scattered people, Babylon gathered people.

The Babylonians took the best and the brightest of the elite of the nations' back to Babylon.

Because of this we are probably more familiar with the Babylonian Empire than we are with either the Assyrians or the Persians.

We remember that only the Southern Kingdom of Israel, the land of Judah existed at this time.

The capital of the Southern Kingdom was Jerusalem.

The people of Judah were still able to worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

The history of Judah until this time seemed to be more local skirmishes with its neighbours.

The boy King Josiah, found the book of the law, turned to God and returned to worship in the temple that previous kings had ignored. This caused a rise of nationalistic fervour.

This took place when the Assyrians had been defeated by the Babylonians and before the Babylonians were sufficiently established to move their armies to other lands.

However, in time, the Babylonians did exert their power and Judah fell under their control.

The Babylonians took people into captivity at different times. Firstly in 605AD when Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity. Here we get the story of Daniel in the lions' den. Secondly in 597AD when Ezekiel and others were taken.

Lastly, at the fall of Jerusalem in 587AD when still more people were taken into exile.

We know more about the Babylonians because the books of Daniel and Ezekiel were written about the events in this time. We also have the psalmist writing, *by the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.*

The Babylonians weakened the nations they conquered by taking its finest young people into captivity.

Judah lost the educated young noblemen who might have leaders in government and business. They lost those with skills and talents that might have given a bright future to the nation. This not only weakened the conquered nations, it also strengthened Babylon by using such talented people in their own service.

We see this in the story of Daniel. Fit young men of good intellect were trained in the language and literature of the Babylonians and then put into service for the King.

With the brightest from every nation working for them Babylon flourished. It grew in culture and in arts

As we noted last week, it was to these people in exile, longing to return to Jerusalem, that God spoke through Jeremiah saying,

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Je 29:5-7

As a punishment for sin and rebellion God told the people of Judah they would be in exile for 70 years.

They should simply get on with the business of life, because they weren't going home until that time was up.

Such a command to work for the good of the city must have come as a shock to these captives.

In many respects the people left in Judah floundered.

They had no wealth, no leader, no temple in which to worship.

The walls of Jerusalem were pulled down making them

defenceless in the face of their enemies.

They faced famine, plagues and were under the sword of the enemies.

There was no hope, no organisation and no structures to help give strength to the nation.

It seems the captives in Babylon were better off than the people who were able to remain in Judah.

The Persian Empire came to prominence through the victories of Cyrus the Great.

Cyrus conquered the Babylonians, entering Babylon in 539.

His approach to conquered people was quite different from that of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Cyrus respected the culture and religions of the nations.

Persia returned the captives to their homeland.

Cyrus declared that the people of Judah were free to return to Jerusalem and he arranged for the artefacts that had been taken from the temple to be returned.

The book of 2 Chronicles which told the depressing story of the kings and people rebelling against God and going into exile. It ends on a high note of promise and hope saying, *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up." 2 Ch 36:22-23*

In the servant songs of Isaiah Cyrus is spoken of as a servant of the Lord and we read:

I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty.” Is 45:13

Cyrus doesn't just appear as the leader Persia, from the biblical perspective he is a tool in the hand of God, used for the purposes of God.

What difference does all this make?

If you look from a purely historical point of view you simply see the rise and fall of nations.

If you look from a biblical perspective you see the hand of God at work.

The deep sinfulness of the 10 tribes of Israel brings God's anger upon them.

They are conquered, scattered and they never return.

A remnant remained, but Israel was never the same again.

The sinfulness of Judah also brings God's anger.

However, when they are conquered they are taken as a gathered people into Babylon.

As a group they are able to retain their religious identity. It was in Babylon that Synagogues began as places to teach young people the faith.

There is a sense in which although they suffer defeat and are taken from the land, God covers them with his protection and they flourish in Babylon.

So when Cyrus conquers Babylon there are actually a people who have preserved the faith who are able to return and start rebuilding the nation, the walls of Jerusalem and the temple.

In this we see the hand of God, dealing with sin yet preserving a people, from whom in time would come the Messiah.

So as you read the Bible, particularly the story of the kings you will know that if you read of

Assyria – they were a cruel nation who would scatter the people of Israel.

Babylon – a slightly more benevolent empire who gathered the people of Judah.

Persia – Cyrus returned the people of Judah to their own land, sending with them resources to rebuild the walls and temple of the city.

This reminds us that God is at work through the nations.

I don't know how we interpret this in our own day or what it means that in the lands of ancient Assyria, Babylon and Persia, in modern day Syria, Iraq and Iran, that there is tension, unrest, war and threats of war.

We do know that in a way we are like the captives in Babylon, the bible calls us strangers and aliens in this world as we await the day when Jesus returns to take us into his presence, the new heaven and the new earth, where God will come and make his home among us.

While there is much we do not know, we do know is that God is working out His purpose and there will come a day when all powers, ancient and modern, will bow before him.

Perhaps we should hold on to the words of our faith from Jeremiah to pray for the peace of our city, knowing if it prospers then we prosper.

Let us as a church read these OT stories with fresh eyes

Let us see the hand of God moving through the rise and fall of nations

Let us be a people who look forward to the day when we are called home into the presence of God and when all nations will bow before him.

Rebellion and Ruin - resources

Ancient Civilisations, Timothy Roberts, 1997

The Great Empires of the Ancient World – Thomas Harrison Ed (2009, Thomas & Hudson Ltd)

Bible Atlas (Lion Hudson Publishing 2010)