

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF JOEL

(Richard D. Patterson)

Because Joel's prophecies are undated, matters of background must be gleaned from internal details. This commentary proceeds from the perspective of a pre-exilic setting for the book. Beginning in the eighth century BC, Israel and Judah experienced a period of unparalleled prosperity. Indeed, in the early half of that century the twin kingdoms acquired nearly the same territorial dimensions as in the days of the united monarchy (2Ki 14:23-15:7).

With the death of Jeroboam in the north in 752 BC and Uzziah in the south in 740 BC, however, dramatic change in the fortunes of God's people took place, for they became involved in the affairs of the expanding Neo-Assyrian Empire. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC) fought two campaigns in the western Fertile Crescent (744-743; 734-732 BC), the second of which culminated in the capture of Aramean Damascus and the submission of both Israel and Judah to Assyria (2 Ki 15:27-31; 16:7-9). This set the pattern for Assyro-Israelite relations in the rest of the eighth century.

Neither Hoshea in the north nor Ahaz in the south was to prove equal to the challenge. Hoshea's ill-advised attempt at freeing Israel from Assyrian control failed and resulted in the the fall of Samaria and the kingdom itself in 722 BC. In the southern kingdom matters went from bad to worse. Not only did Judah's vassalage to Assyria continue throughout the days of Shalmaneser V (727-722 BC) and Sargon II (721-706 BC), but Ahaz himself proved to be a wicked king who led his people into shameful apostasy (2Ki 16:10-18; 2Ch 28:19-25).

With the accession of Hezekiah to the throne in the latter portion of the eighth century BC, however, Judah experienced a period of spiritual revival. His commendation as a man of unequaled trust in God and faithfulness to the Lord and the law (2Ki 18:5-6) reflects his reform efforts. The author of Chronicles gives extensive attention to his cleansing and rededication of the temple, together with the reconstituting of proper worship services (2Ch 29-31). Nevertheless, he was faced with the continuing menace of Assyria, culminating in invasion by the forces of King Sennacherib.

The next century witnessed still further changes in the political situation. Although in the earlier part of the seventh century BC Assyrian forces ranged far abroad, from Persia on the east to Arabia and Egypt in the south, the reigns of Esarhaddon (681-668 BC) and Ashurbanipal (668-626 BC) were largely peaceful. This period is often designated the *Pax Assyriaca*, an era when the two kings were often able to turn their attention to building projects, religious pursuits, and the cultivation of artistic and literary matters.

In the closing days of Ashurbanipal, however, the Assyrian Empire began to weaken, so much so that fourteen years after his death in 626 BC Assyria itself fell prey to the rising power of the Chaldeans and the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In such an era God raised up the great writing prophets, men of deep spiritual concern. Their message, unlike that of their predecessors, was not limited to national affairs but also took in the entire international scene from their own time to the culmination of God's teleological program.

