

# Jot & Tittle

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## Assyrian Kings in the Bible

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The ancient empire of Assyria figures prominently in history. Since the events in the Bible fit within a historical framework it makes sense that some of the Assyrian kings would be identified in the Scriptures. In fact, the Old Testament refers to six different Assyrian kings, linking them to specific biblical events. Assyrian records from that era support the accuracy of the Bible.

Assyria was located along the Tigris River in what is modern day Iraq. It rose to prominence as a world power during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC). Following Ashurnasirpal was a series of kings—Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC), Shamshi-Adad V (823-811 BC), Adad-nirari III (810-783 BC), Shalmaneser IV (782-773 BC), Ashurdan III (773-755 BC), Ashurnirari V (754-745 BC), Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC), Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC), Sargon II (721-705 BC), Sennacherib (704-681 BC), Esarhaddon (680-669 BC), and Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC).<sup>1</sup> These last six major kings of Assyria are mentioned by name in the Bible.

### ***Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC)***

As early as the reign of Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) the Assyrians exerted active influence in Israel. The famous Black

Obelisk, discovered at Nimrud and now preserved in the British Museum, lists Jehu (841-814 BC), king of Israel (2 Kings 10:36), as one of the conquered kings who paid tribute to Shalmaneser. Following Shalmaneser's reign, however, the Assyrians faced inner struggles and Israel experienced a period of relief from Assyrian oppression. "During this hiatus in Assyrian control of the west (ca. 805-743), Israel and Judah were left to follow their own interests without superpower interference, but this was the last respite from eastern domination they were to enjoy."<sup>2</sup>

Assyrian influence in Israel again became evident during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, also known by the name of Pul. Tiglath-Pileser consolidated control over Assyria and spread his control over outlying regions, including Israel. He invaded Israel, forcing King Menahem (752-742 BC) to pay tribute in order to avoid defeat (2 Kings 15:19-20). "It is interesting to note that this same event is mentioned in the annals of the great Assyrian king: 'As for Menahem, terror overwhelmed him, like a bird, alone he fled and submitted to me. To his place I brought him back and . . . silver, colored woolen garments, linen garments . . . I received as his tribute.'<sup>3</sup>

Later, Tiglath-Pileser again invaded Israel during the reign of King Pekah (752-732 BC). He conquered a number of Israel's cities and deported many of Israel's inhabitants (2 Kings 15:29-30; 1 Chronicles 5:26). Apparently Tiglath-Pileser was also responsible for dethroning King Pekah and replacing him with Hoshea (732-723 BC) as a puppet king. "He boasts in his records: 'Pekah their king they deposed and Hosea I set (as king) over them.'<sup>4</sup> At this time, "Galilee was made into an Assyrian province."<sup>5</sup>

Tiglath-Pileser's motivation for this second attack on Israel seems to have been based on a conspiracy between Israel's King Pekah and the Arameans against Assyria. Judah's King Ahaz (735-715 BC) remained loyal to Tiglath-Pileser and requested his help in resisting Israel and the Arameans (2 Kings 16:7-9). Ahaz went to meet with Tiglath-Pileser in Damascus, the capital of the Arameans. There Ahaz saw an altar that he had replicated for use in Jerusalem, while making other changes at the Temple in Jerusalem to placate Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kings 16:10-18).

### ***Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC)***

Tiglath-Pileser's son, Shalmaneser V, succeeded him on the throne of Assyria. Hoshea, the puppet king of Israel, resisted Shalmaneser's authority, so Shalmaneser attacked and defeated Israel in a protracted conflict (2 Kings 17:3-6; 18:9-11). He deported the Israelites, scattering them throughout the Assyrian empire. However, near the time of his conquest of Israel, Shalmaneser died. His successor, Sargon II, took much of the credit for this conquest.

### ***Sargon II (721-705 BC)***

Isaiah 20:1 is the only Old Testament reference to Sargon II. Sargon was a brother to Shalmaneser V, and his existence was unconfirmed until archaeologists discovered his palace in Khorsabad in the 1800's. From these ruins it became apparent that Sargon had a wide influence in the ancient world, and in his records he claims to have captured Israel and dispersed its inhabitants throughout his empire.

### ***Sennacherib (704-681 BC)***

Sennacherib, the son of Sargon II, moved the capital of Assyria from Khorsabad to Nineveh. He also carried on military activities in Judah during the reign of King Hezekiah (715-686 BC). Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib to keep the Assyrians from destroying Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:13-16; Isaiah 36:1). Later, Sennacherib returned to Jerusalem but was unable to conquer it due to God's miraculous intervention (2 Kings 18:17—19:37; Isaiah 36:2—37:38). In the Sennacherib Cylinder, a record of Sennacherib's conquests, he refers to his victory in Judah where he "penned up Hezekiah in Jerusalem 'like a bird in a cage,' to use Sennacherib's own words."<sup>6</sup> This Assyrian propaganda failed to mention God's defeat of Sennacherib's army at Jerusalem, but confirms the biblical account of Sennacherib's inability to conquer Jerusalem.

### ***Esarhaddon (680-669 BC)***

Esarhaddon was the first Assyrian king to conquer Egypt, and his campaigns included marching through Palestine. But the Bible says little about his activities, except that Esarhaddon succeeded his father as king of Assyria (2 Kings 19:37; Isaiah 37:38) and that he carried on the Assyrian policy of deporting captive people (Ezra 4:2).

### ***Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC)***

Ezra 4:10 refers to Ashurbanipal, also called Osnappar, as one of the Assyrian kings responsible for settling deported captives in Samaria. This mixing of Gentiles in Jewish territory resulted in the Samaritans of the New Testament, a mixed people group that was often despised by pure Jews. Ashurbanipal is also known for gathering an extensive library of cuneiform tablets which, having been discovered by archaeologists, revealed a great deal of information about the ancient world. As Ashurbanipal's reign came to an end the Babylonians were making significant military progress. Soon Babylon defeated Assyria and took center stage in biblical history.

The Assyrian records serve to confirm the biblical account of events in the ancient world. The Bible is a trustworthy historical account, and it is equally trustworthy in directing minds and hearts to a relationship with the true and living God.

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<sup>1</sup> Gwaltney, William C., Jr. "Assyrians" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, editors. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994, pp. 87-100.

<sup>2</sup> Gwaltney, pp. 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> Yamauchi, Edwin M. *The Stones and the Scriptures*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Gwaltney, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Gwaltney, pp. 95-96.

