

The Assyrians

As the battles rage around Mosul, it is relevant to recall that what we now call Kurdistan was actually the core of the old Assyrian Empire, the one that carried off the Ten Lost Tribes. Indeed there is quite a lot of literature to suggest that the Kurds are descended from Israelites. Benjamin of Tudela (died 1173, in Castile), who visited them, thought that had not the Byzantines forcibly converted one half and the Muslims the other half, then they would still be Jewish. He detected, he said, several customs they all adhered to that could only have come from us. Now there's a thought. Anyone volunteering to rescue Kobani?

Assyria looms large in the Bible. After it conquered the Arameans of Damascus who had ravaged the Northern Kingdom for years, it then turned its attention to the Kingdom of Israel. First they bullied King Jehu into submission and finally conquered it in 722. According to the Bible, they exiled all the population and replaced them with other victims from their empire who settled around Samaria, the Northern capital, and became known as Samaritans. They were plagued by wild animals and thought it was because they did not know the local gods. So the Assyrians commanded Judea in the south to send priests to teach and convert them. They became known as "Geyrei Arayot", "Converts (out of fear) of lions." In other words not genuine converts out of conviction. The struggle between Samaritans and Jews went on for quite a while. Needless to say, Samaritans dispute this story. But the story does indicate what a religiously tolerant sort of people the Assyrians were. They wanted your money, bodies, gold, and obedience, but really didn't mind too much which god you worshipped.

They then turned their attention to the southern Kingdom of Judea and besieged King Hezekiah, "like a bird in a cage" according to Sennacherib's stele. The Bible tells us that the Assyrians withdrew, but Hezekiah was forced to pay tribute nevertheless. Sennacherib, the one Byron describes as coming down "like the wolf on the fold", retreated home and set about building a new capital called Nineveh (the ruins are to be found outside Mosul today, if you can avoid ISIS).

The Assyrians finally fell foul of the Babylonians, and they in turn capitulated to the Persians, whose king Cyrus let some Jews return. But they ran into trouble with the Samaritans, who said that this was their land now and the Israelites could jolly well go back to Persia and complain to the UN (or something like that). We keep on running into such problems, don't we? But we persevered! We hung in there. Until, of course, the Romans decided otherwise.

But there's an important lesson we learn from the Assyrians that we repeat every Yom Kipur when we read the book of Jonah. He was told to go to Nineveh to get them to repent their evil ways. He didn't want to go because he knew that if they did repent they would be used as a tool to destroy his country, Israel. So he fled to Tarshish a well known port that was in the hands of the Kittim, the enemies of the Assyrians, the Sea Peoples from Crete and islands

around. Well, we know the story of the fish and that when Jonah eventually got to Nineveh and started preaching, the King listened. Hence the well known phrase, "There's no prophet in his own country." They repented. Then proceeded to destroy the Northern Kingdom. (Don't ask too many questions about chronology.) The lesson is clear. God does not support Israel if they misbehave. He will use some other power to destroy her. So He must have thought reasonably highly of the Assyrians. At that stage, at any rate, they were not just brutal, greedy conquerors, but in fact had a higher standard of morality than the Northern Kingdom.

Why am I telling you this? Because at this moment there's an excellent exhibition called "Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Anyone who would like to tour the exhibit with me and Dr. Michael Seymour, assistant curator in the museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, should just turn up at 10:00 AM at the Met on Thursday, December 4.

The exhibition is fascinating in many ways. First of all it includes the earliest archaeological artifact that refers to the "House of David". It is an engraved stone, a fragment from an arch found at Tel Dan celebrating Hazael of Damascus's destruction of the House of David. As you might expect the Palestinian archaeologists anxious to deny there were ever any Jews there claim it's not the House of David, but the "House of Dod" (perhaps Dod's your uncle). Given that there is no other evidence, record, or hint of such a house, it's nonsense to suggest that it's not what it obviously is. But hey, politics gets into archaeology too. And the Israeli archeologists made so sure we would not miss the reference that they chalked the words white against the black background for all to see. Politics cuts both ways.

Then there's the ivory balustrade found in northern Israel on display. The Bible mentions Solomon's use of ivory, but this was found in Samaria. Ahab's son Ahaziah fell through one of the balustrades of the palace and died soon after. Ahab's dynasty was done away with by Jehu, and here he is at the Met, in stone on the Black Obelisk from Nimrud, the Assyrian capital before Nineveh, bowing down low to Shalmaneser, and it looks as though those following him are wearing four tassels that might even be tzitzit!

The exhibition links Assyria to Spain through the Sea Peoples. They were what we now call the Phoenicians or the Philistines. Some suggest the Canaanites are their descendants too. The competition between them and Assyria was fierce. But it was often one of mutually beneficial trade. In the different artifacts you can clearly see the connection between the Phoenician alphabet and the early Hebrew script. That was before the Jews of Babylon adopted the square letters we still use today. But it was that earlier one that Moses would have used.

It is very moving, and it goes to show that the Bible is not just a collection of fairy stories. The events it mentions come alive. They remind us of the immense achievements of our ancestors and their failures too. It is both a source of pride and a warning, that like Ozymandias, great kings end up in the dust and are remembered only by their epitaphs. But ideas live on.