

The Captain of My People

"This man shall be the peace when the Assyrian shall come into our land, and when he shall tread in our Palaces"—Micah 5:5

HEZEKIAH was one of the 3 greatest kings of Israel: David, Hezekiah and Josiah. His outstanding characteristic was trust in God (2 Kings 18: 5-6)—

"He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him of all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him.

"For he clave to the Lord and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses."

His one recorded failure—his heart being lifted up with pride when he showed all his glories and treasures to the Babylonian ambassadors—was the result, not of lack of trust, but of fleshly presumption upon that trust. How easy it is to fail—either at one extreme or the other! How deceptive is the flesh and the heart of man!

Because Paul had great privileges and prominence in God's purpose, he had to have a "thorn in the flesh" to humble and handicap him. Hezekiah had great power and great blessing, and great favor with God for his zeal and faithfulness: and the flesh being what it is, even this great man was carried away, and had to be humbled and rebuked.

There is a tremendous lesson here—we are never safe. We must be always prayerfully on our guard against the deception of the flesh.

The chronology of this period is difficult to harmonize, both within the Scriptures itself, and with the Assyrian records. Much is made by orthodox commentators of the accuracy of the Assyrian records—the so-called "eponyms" or lists of years and events tied in with eclipses, etc.—and the archeological inscriptions. The modern tendency is to rewrite the Bible record to fit these human records.

But as soon as we look into these wonderful "eponyms," we find scholars vary greatly in interpreting and aligning them, and they are clearly far from dependable. And as for the inscriptions found, the Assyrians, even more than most, were notoriously liars and boasters in promoting their own glory.

The scriptural record in 2 Kings 18 to 20 is clearly not all in chronological order, nor meant to be. Chapters 18 and 19 are generally chronological, except that some items are mentioned in them that refer backward or forward—like the general summary in 18:2-8, and the death of Sennacherib in 19:37, which was actually 20 years later. Also it is not clear where time gaps occur. There appears to be a 12-year gap between verses 16 and 17 of chapter 18.

Chronology is not too important, except to the extent that it helps us to see the relationship of events to each other, and the period in a man's life and development when he does certain

things (as in what period of Hezekiah's life his heart was lifted up). We can get a better and fairer picture of a man's actions and record if we can determine the order in which they occur.

Hezekiah's sickness and presumption are recorded at the end, in both Kings and Isaiah, but clearly they did not occur at the end, by the dates and facts given. We know he lived 15 years after his sickness.

The history of Hezekiah is given great prominence in the scripture record. It fills 11 chapters: 2 Kings 18 to 20; 2 Chronicles 29 to 32; and Isaiah 36 to 39. This seems to be the most likely order of events:

1. The great reformation and passover and cleansing of the land from idols, and the re-establishment of the true worship of God—in Hezekiah's first year.
2. The siege and fall of Samaria and carrying away captive of the northern 10-tribe kingdom of Israel—in Hezekiah's 4th to 6th years.
3. The first invasion of Judah by Assyria, in his 14th year. He strips the gold and treasures from the Temple and buys off the Assyrians. The Assyrians claim that at this time they took 200,000 captives from Judah. The Assyrian account of the ransom Hezekiah paid corresponds generally with the scriptural account, though somewhat exaggerated (after the normal human custom).
4. Hezekiah's sickness and recovery, in the same year (his 14th). Fifteen years are added to his life.
5. The embassy from Babylon, and Hezekiah's pride and presumption in connection with it—very soon after his sickness.
6. Another Assyrian invasion 12 years later, in Hezekiah's 26th year. On this occasion Hezekiah resists, pays no tribute, and puts his faith in God. The Assyrian host is destroyed, and Jerusalem is delivered in answer to Hezekiah's faith and prayers. Judah is given a 105-year new lease on life (to 608 BC), when Pharaoh Necho of Egypt deposes Jehoahaz and sets up a puppet, and Judah's independence ends.

Hezekiah's supreme act of faith—defying the vast army of Assyria that was right in his land—seems clearly to have occurred near the end of his life—long after his sickness and recovery and the presumption that arose out of it. We cannot be positive, but this seems to fit best both with the Bible picture and the Assyrian records.

Let us then trace the course of Hezekiah's reign on the basis of the record in 2 Kings 18-20, putting the events recorded elsewhere (Chronicles and Isaiah) into their most likely proper order.

It should be noted that although Isaiah is not mentioned until near the end of Hezekiah's reign, he was actually very prominent and active, not only all through Hezekiah's reign but also in the three reigns before him. His own book records his dealings with Hezekiah's father, the wicked Ahaz, to whom he made the great prophecy of the virgin bearing the child Emmanuel. Isaiah was clearly a major factor in Hezekiah's faith and zeal and reforms.

Also Micah was prophesying at this time (as well as Hosea in the northern kingdom of Israel). Jeremiah records (26:18) that, in contrast to the reception and treatment he received, Hezekiah and the men of Judah hearkened to Micah when he warned them that because of the land's wickedness, Zion should be plowed as a field.

Beginning, then, with 2 Kings 18—

Verse 1: Hezekiah began to reign in the 3rd year of Hoshea, the last king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Verse 2: He was 25 years old, and reigned 29 years.

Verse 3: He did right before God, like David.

Verse 4: He removed the "high places"—a system of local worship and sacrifice, long tolerated (apparently because there was often for long periods no central worship, due to the wickedness and idolatry of the reigning king). These high places were sometimes used to worship God, but they were usually centers of idolatry and fleshly corruption. He broke down the images. He broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made, because it had become an object of superstition and idolatry.

This verse (4) records briefly what is given in great detail in 2 Chronicles 29 to 31. Let us then turn there to pick up the record.

2 Chr. 29:3: In the first month of his first year, he opened he Temple.

Verses 4-11: He exhorted the priests and Levites to the work.

Verse 9: He reminds them that their fathers had fallen by the sword because they had neglected the worship and service of God, and their wives and children had been taken captive. In the previous chapter (2 Chr. 28:5,6,17) we learn that a great multitude had been taken captive to Damascus, that 120,000 had been slain, and that Edom also had taken captives.

Verse 10: He speaks of the "fierce wrath" of God against them. This was apparent both from the warning words of the prophets and also from the miserable circumstances they were in. They were oppressed and spoiled by their neighbors, and under tribute to Assyria.

Verses 12-15: The priests and Levites sanctify themselves.

Verses 16-19: They cleansed the Temple, the court, and the vessels, in 16 days.

Verses 20-24: They made a great sin offering for the nation: 7 bullocks, 7 rams, 7 lambs, 7 goats. We note that in verse 24 it is twice emphasized that it was for ALL Israel (not just Judah). The sin offering—the recognition and admission and atoning for sin—must come FIRST...

Verses 25-26: THEN he set the singers and players in order. The rejoicing follows the purification.

Verses 27-30: Having thus laid the foundation, they re-established the regular system of offering and sacrifice—

"And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshiped."

Verses 31-35: Then all the congregation brought their offerings. We note in verse 34 that there were not enough priests ready—the Levites who had been more zealous in self-preparation, had to help them. The priests, the ones who should have been foremost in zeal and activity, had been negligent and uninterested.

2 Chr. 30: 1-9: Hezekiah sent letters to all Judah and Israel to come to hold the Passover at Jerusalem. It was arranged to hold it in the 2nd month because there was not time to prepare to do it at the appointed time in the first month.

Verse 10: The general reaction in the northern kingdom was rejection and ridicule of the invitation. Many had been already carried away. They had just three more years to go to the complete destruction of their kingdom. This was their last opportunity. But they "laughed it to scorn."

Let us not self-satisfiedly condemn them, or marvel amusedly at their obvious folly. We could very well unconsciously be doing the same thing ourselves.

Verse 11: Some did humble themselves and come. General scorn and rejection cannot be made an excuse for not proclaiming, for there may always be the few who will hear, and they make the effort worthwhile. Furthermore, the proclaiming is a duty and responsibility, even though none give heed.

Verse 12: In Judah, God "gave them one heart" to obey. All is of God. God in His mercy is uniting them in zeal and holiness, giving them a new start.

Verse 15: The zeal of the nation puts the dilatory priests and Levites to shame, and they belatedly sanctify themselves.

Verses 17-20: Some of the congregation had not had time or proper understanding to cleanse and prepare themselves as required, but Hezekiah prayed for them and God accepted them. We cannot presume on this: we must make every effort to know and to obey. Yet this does give us assurance that God is merciful and flexible toward sincerity, and not rigid and mechanical.

Verse 21: They kept the Passover with great gladness. The only possible source of any real gladness is the assurance of harmony and peace with God through faith and obedience. Nothing else has any real satisfaction. That is why the fear of God is the BEGINNING of wisdom—anything short of it is self-destructive stupidity.

Verse 23: In their joy and zeal they decided to double the time, and keep the feast another 7 days. This is the kind of enthusiasm that is a joy to contemplate.

2 Chr. 31:1: Stirred up to this high pitch of zeal, all the assembled congregation dispersed through all the land, both Judah and Israel, and destroyed all the images and groves and high places—

“Until they had utterly destroyed them all.”

Note the positive comes first. They were not in a fit condition, nor did they have the incentive and zeal, to go out and destroy the evil until they had first put themselves in harmony with the good.

But zeal for destruction does not always mean zeal for construction; nor does a burst of destructive enthusiasm mean a consistent holding fast thereafter. The flesh enjoys destroying something, especially under the gratifying pretence of "righteous anger." But it takes a lot more depth and patience and character to consistently and ploddingly build.

The rest of 2 Chr. 31 is the setting up of the permanent appointments and arrangements of the priesthood, worship and offerings. Finally (vs.20-21)—

"And thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah, and wrought that which was good and right and truth before the Lord his God.

"And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the Law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it WITH ALL HIS HEART—and prospered."

This was the beginning of his reign. Now back to 2 Kings 18—

Verse 5: He trusted in the Lord God: none like him before or after.

Verse 6: He clave to the Lord: he departed not from following Him.

Verse 7: And the Lord was with him, and he prospered whithersoever he went forth. And he rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not.

This prospering, and rebelling against Assyria would appear to apply to the latter part of his reign, though doubtless it was his course and purpose and desire from the beginning. The first time the Assyrian king came to punish his rebellion, he submitted and paid an enormous tribute. We are not told the reason—whether under pressure his faith failed, or whether the people or his leading men would not support him in his resistance.

It does seem clear throughout the historical record, and from the writings of Micah and Isaiah, that all the initiative for faith and resistance depended on Hezekiah himself (with the encouragement of Isaiah and Micah), and that there was little depth of faith in the generality of the people.

On the occasion of the first invasion, Shebna seems to have been the first officer under the king—"over the house"—as we see in Isa. 22, and he was not a good or faithful man, as Isa. 22 reveals. It is possible he remained over from the reign of Hezekiah's father, and that he was strongly entrenched.

On the later occasion, when Hezekiah successfully resisted, and held the people with him, and the Assyrian host was destroyed, we find that the faithful Eliakim has replaced Shebna as "over the household," as Isaiah had foretold (22:19-21).

Verses 9-12: The final carrying away of the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity, by Assyria, and the complete termination of their kingdom. They had, as a whole, scorned God's last merciful plea to them through Hezekiah. They had seen Hezekiah's reforms, and how God had blessed him, but they preferred destruction to wisdom and obedience.

In the natural course of things, Judah would have suffered the same fate at the same time, but it is clear that Hezekiah's efforts and reforms and mediation for the nation deferred the wrath of God, which had already very strongly begun to be manifested.

Verse 13: Eight years after the fall of Samaria, in Hezekiah's 14th year, Sennacherib the king of Assyria came against Judah. Hezekiah had inherited a kingdom already under tribute and vassalage to Assyria, for his father had submitted to them.

Hezekiah may have accepted the situation at first, until he could reform and rebuild the nation, so God would be with them. Or he may have rebelled from the beginning and this may have been Assyria's first opportunity to come against him in punishment.

It appears from Assyrian records that Sennacherib was not the supreme ruler at this time, but his father Sargon, according to the most likely chronology. But the term "king" was not so restrictively used as today, and it did not necessarily mean the one supreme ruler. Very similarly, in Dan. 5, Belshazzar is called the "king" of Babylon, though his father was still alive, and was the chief ruler of the kingdom.

The Assyrian records that have been discovered in the past century or so give a remarkable confirmation to the general historicalness and reality of the Bible, though details are often hard to reconcile. Until recent discoveries, the Bible had been for 2000 years the only record of these events at all.

Verse 14: Hezekiah submits to Assyria and pays tribute. The Bible says 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. If the translations of the inscriptions are correct, Sennacherib claims it was 800 of silver and 30 of gold—remarkably similar, considering the normal lying and boasting of the Assyrians. (Translators don't always agree on rendering the inscriptions).

Verses 15-16: Hezekiah stripped all the treasures of the Temple to pay the tribute. He is not condemned for it, and we do not know the circumstances. It could hardly have been pleasing to God. Hezekiah's sickness occurred the same year, and it appears that God soon after far more than made up all the loss to him, for when the Babylonians visited him to congratulate him on his miraculous recovery, he showed them all his treasures (Isa. 39:1-2).

Verse 17: The king of Assyria sends a great host against Jerusalem.

From several considerations, there seems to be a break in time between verses 16 and 17, which, according to the most likely chronology, appears to be 12 years. For while

verse 16 speaks of Hezekiah's submission and tribute (on the earlier occasion), the section starting with verse 17 speaks all through of his resistance and refusal to submit, and his miraculous deliverance.

It seems clear that between verses 16 and 17 we must put his sickness and the embassy from Babylon and the temporary uplifting of his pride and presumption, and his soon-after repentance and humbling of himself, for in the very sentence when God tells him he will add 15 years to his life (2 Kings 20:6), He also tells him He will deliver Jerusalem from Assyria. This must be after the occasion of submission and before the occasion of resistance.

The record beginning at verse 17 of chapter 18 tells of the deliverance and carries the record in an unbroken line right through to the destruction of the Assyrian host and the death of Sennacherib back in Assyria.

So following verse 16 of chapter 18, we go to chapter 20, the record of his sickness.

This begins, "In those days"—referring back indefinitely to some time earlier, for chapter 19 goes right down to the death of Sennacherib, which was nearly 20 years after the death of Hezekiah himself.

Furthermore, we are told in this chapter (20) that 15 years were added to Hezekiah's life. He reigned 29 years, so we have to go back to his 14th year for his sickness—the same year the Assyrians first came and he paid tribute, as recorded in 18:13-16. So beginning chapter 20—

Verse 1: God said, "*Set thine house in order for thou shalt die, and not live.*"

Verse 3: And Hezekiah wept sore, and prayed not to die. Whether he was wise in this request is hard to say. Certainly as a general rule it is best to submit to the vastly superior wisdom and arrangements of God, rather than to seek our own way. Who are we to know what is best? And certainly the son that was born during the added 15 years was by his wickedness the direct cause of Judah's final destruction (2 Kings 23:26). And certainly Hezekiah's one great failure occurred later, and as a direct consequence of his extension of life.

If his concern was for himself, it would seem far wiser to submit to God's appointments. But if his concern was for his people, like Paul and Moses under similar considerations, then at least we can sympathize. The fact that God gave him assurance of deliverance from the oppression of Assyria right together with the extension of his life (v. 6) would point in this direction and indicate that this was probably why he did not want to die.

He doubtless realized the shallowness and precariousness of the people's reformation and worship. He would realize there was much to be done if the nation was to be preserved, and he would not want to leave his people as they then were—under bondage and tribute to Assyria.

Truly he did fail after this, but also he did humble and recover himself, so God's wrath was turned away, and he went on later to his greatest triumph of faith—his defiance of the Assyrian host. In its consequent miraculous destruction Judah was completely relieved of the Assyrian oppressor for many years, and may have been permanently so had not Manasseh's wickedness caused God to bring Assyria to carry him away captive.

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Hezekiah's life was extended 15 years. In Rabshakeh's appeal to the people to submit to Assyria (2 Kings 18:32), he said the king would carry them away to a land like their own land. This was the Assyrian policy: Israel had already been taken away, and so had a great number from Judah itself.

Clearly the Assyrians planned the end of the nation of Judah, and Hezekiah could see this closing in on the land. But as a result of his faith and resistance, we find that Judah enjoyed 105 more years of independence and national life, from the year of Hezekiah's sickness (713 BC) to 608 BC, when Pharaoh Necho carried king Jehohaz captive and set up Jehoiakim as an Egyptian vassal.

105 is 7×15 ; the nation had 7-fold the extension of life that Hezekiah had.

Verse 8: Hezekiah asked for a sign. Why? Was this a lack of faith? And he was given a sign—a tremendous sign—one of the great mysteries of Scripture which people have pondered on ever since. In some way, God caused the shadow on the sundial to go exactly 10 degrees backward, and He gave Hezekiah choice beforehand whether it would be backward or forward.

Why such a tremendous sign for something that was going to happen in 3 days anyway? Couldn't Hezekiah just believe and wait?

Perhaps this reveals something to us about Hezekiah's faith that God knew and Hezekiah realized. Faith is not an automatic thing: God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

Hezekiah bore great responsibility for the nation. Their destiny and very existence depended on what this one man did. The Assyrians are notorious for their ruthless and wanton cruelty to their captives—especially to any who had resisted them. It was customary to cut off the hands, feet, ears and noses, and put out their eyes, or to impale them alive on sharp poles.

Clearly, for what he had to do in standing up to this power with only the armor of faith, Hezekiah needed the strength of a tremendous sign. It wasn't just getting well. It was the prodigious work that lay before him.

The very fact that he failed so soon after this when put to the test emphasizes the need. It wasn't that his faith failed. He failed in the opposite direction—presumption, self-sufficiency: his heart was lifted up. And the sign was the indirect cause of his failure, for the ambassadors had come because of his sickness and recovery, and to *"inquire of the wonder that was done in the land."*

How hard it is for the flesh to keep a true and stable balance! But it was all part of his training and development, out of which he at last successfully came.

Verse 12: Berodach (or Merodach) Baladan sends messengers and a present to Hezekiah.

Verse 13: And Hezekiah "hearkened unto them," and showed them everything he had. What does it mean, he "hearkened unto them"? Clearly there was something more to it

than a simple goodwill visit. Isaiah pointedly asked Hezekiah, *"What saith these men?"* (v. 14).

Merodach-Baladan had a continuous history—before and after this time—of revolt and sedition against Assyria, to which he was nominally subject. It would seem here that his purpose was intrigue, and Hezekiah seems to have been flattered and carried away.

Hezekiah's basic desire was freedom for his people from Assyria. Here was a strong ally with a scheme for revolt. It would be easy for him to convince himself that here was a provision from God.

But he did not seek divine counsel. If we are not careful to continually seek God's guidance—in study of His Word and in prayer—we can let our desires, very commendable as they may be, cause us to get involved in questionable associations and activities by relying on our own wisdom and power. Of this incident 2 Chr. 32:25 records—

"Therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem."

Note again how his action affected others beside himself. The specific reason given for God's displeasure was that—

"He rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him, for his heart was lifted up."

Apparently, like Moses, he for the time being forgot his complete dependence upon God, and was carried away by the natural pride and self-sufficiency of the flesh. Mercifully, Isaiah was sent immediately to rebuke him back to wisdom and humility and faithful dependence. Deliverance from the Assyrian yoke was not to come by human scheming or by the pride-arousing arm of the flesh.

Isaiah—in saying that all Judah's wealth, and Hezekiah's own descendants, should be taken captive to Babylon—does not specifically say it was because of Hezekiah's display of pride. But he does make it very clear that material things are very transitory and nothing to build pride on, and also that Babylon would be a very dangerous ally, and would replace Assyria as the oppressor.

Hezekiah immediately humbled himself, and recognized his error, and so did the inhabitants of Jerusalem (so, clearly, they were involved with him). And he was given assurance (v. 19) there should be—

"Peace and truth in his days."

We note "peace AND truth." There cannot be peace without truth. Hezekiah's whole course before God was a sincere endeavor to serve Him in TRUTH, and when he humbled himself he determined to follow truth, and not allow pride to deceive him again.

This concludes 2 Kings 20 (except the final summary of verses 20-21), and brings us back to 2 Kings 18:17.

The Assyrians have invaded the land again, and this time Hezekiah is not paying tribute but putting his faith in God, and defying them. It is clearly a different and later occasion from verses 13-16, where he bought them off.

The Bible does not give any date for this invasion, but from Assyrian records it appears to have been 12 years later, in Hezekiah's 26th year, in 701 BC, near the end of his reign. In the intervening 12 years, God had prospered Hezekiah greatly.

Rabshakeh's words (2 Kings 18:19-25 and 28-35) make two things clear that distinguish this invasion from the previous one—

1. Hezekiah was in defiance and not submitting and paying tribute.
2. The purpose this time was not tribute, but destruction of the nation (v. 25) and deportation of the people (v. 32).

Rabshakeh's speech is very clever, and he makes five strong points that would be a great test of his hearers' faith:

1. Verse 21: He points out that Egypt, their only possible natural ally, was both weak and undependable—a bruised reed which pierced the hand of him that leaned on it for support. Isaiah had publicly said much in warning against dependence upon Egypt, and doubtless the Assyrians were aware of this, for they show a remarkable familiarity with Judah's internal affairs. (Espionage and intelligence has always been the lifeblood of successful war). Isaiah had said—

"They shall be ashamed of Egypt their glory ... whither shall we flee for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria?" (20:5-6).

Similarly, over 100 years later, the Babylonians were aware of Jeremiah's prophecies and exhortations to his people to submit, and they used them in their psychological warfare against Judah.

2. Verse 22: Rabshakeh points out that Hezekiah had removed all the high places throughout the land. To many, perhaps most, of the people, this would be removing the visible aspects of their worship, and rejecting their God. Again we note Rabshakeh's knowledge of Judah's affairs, and his clever use of that knowledge.

3. Verse 23: He vividly exposes and emphasizes the military weakness of Hezekiah and focuses attention on his own vast military resources by the challenge that he will supply 2000 horses if Hezekiah can furnish riders.

Hezekiah's inability to meet this challenge would manifest to all the people how hopeless his condition naturally was. It would also, a little later, emphasize the miraculousness of the deliverance.

4. Verse 25: Rabshakeh says God had told him to come against Judah to punish it. (And he is actually familiar with and uses the divine Name, Yahweh. We notice later he is able to speak Hebrew).

This point would have a disturbing and discouraging effect on those most likely to support Hezekiah: those sincere ones who realized the nation's wickedness and the call for God's judgment. Here again, Rabshakeh manifests an apparent knowledge of Isaiah's prophecies, for Isaiah had said to Ahaz, Hezekiah's father (7:17)—

"Yahweh shall bring upon thee the king of Assyria."

There would, therefore, be much doubting and searching of heart: If this is truly God's doing, should we resist?

5. Verse 33: His final point: "Have any gods of any lands been able to deliver their people from Assyria?" If Assyria was stronger than the combined gods of all the other nations, how could little Judah and its God stop them?

But here was where the Assyrians, with their cleverness of argument, went too far and destroyed themselves. They directly challenged the God of Israel. Furthermore, the king of Assyria himself put this last point—their key point, their basic challenge—into writing, and messengers came again from the king of Assyria with it in a letter (2 Kings 19:9-14). And Hezekiah took this letter of blasphemy and spread it before the Lord in the Temple.

The consequence was the miraculous destruction of 185,000 of the enemy in one night. And we learn from 2 Chr. 32:21 that it was ALL the mighty men of valor, and the leaders, and the captains—his whole trained officer corps—and not just plain soldiers that could soon be replaced. This would break the back of the Assyrian power for many years.

This appears to have been about 3 years before Hezekiah's death. He had at last, by his faith, delivered his people from the enemy. This typical Messiah had gone to the gates of the grave (Isa. 38:10-14), and had come again the THIRD DAY (2 Kings 20:5) to the House of the Lord, and at last in renewed strength had "become the peace when the Assyrian came into the land" (Micah 5:5).

"And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honor at his death..."

"And Manasseh his son reigned in his stead."

And with Manasseh began all over again the wickedness and abominations, and consequent oppression of the cruel Assyrian power, and at last the complete destruction of the nation and desolation of the land.

—G. V. Growcott