

*“I will shake the House of Israel among the nations” Amos 9:9*

### 1. The Collapse of the Kingdom of Israel

It took just under 30 years for the Israel of Amos, the strongest nation of its day in the Middle East, to collapse completely and be wiped off the map. Amos pronounced its destruction about 750 BC, and in 722 BC his words were vindicated when Israel’s capital, Samaria, was overrun by the Assyrians and the population deported amidst appalling slaughter. Initially such a pronouncement of disaster seemed utterly absurd. Jeroboam who ruled Israel in 750 BC was one of Israel’s strongest kings. He appeared to be very secure on his throne, he ruled over territory far greater than his predecessors, the economy was booming, and there was nothing to indicate that it would cease to be that way. No Israelite in 750 BC would have dreamed that such a catastrophe could take place, certainly not within 30 years or so. But the word of Amos prevailed.

Thirty years may seem a long time from one perspective, but historically it is really very short: it is just one generation. In fact for five years after he prophesied Israel’s demise the prosperity of Jeroboam’s strong rule actually continued, but when Jeroboam died the nation rapidly began a 23 year process of disintegration, politically, socially and spiritually. Those years were very much in the nature of a “countdown” to the final catastrophe. All the signs of such a coming catastrophe were clearly and increasingly displayed as those 23 years progressed. Anyone looking carefully at them, and putting them alongside the warnings of Amos would have had very real cause to be alarmed. The tragedy was the appalling blindness in the nation to what was happening.

If we in some sense are under the same word of warning that Israel was under, those years of progressive collapse of Israel as a nation have some very important lessons to teach us. We are likely to follow a similar route. What were the marks of that collapse? What exactly happened in those years that caused the strongest nation of Palestine to degenerate into such ruin and to disappear off the map? In other words, what was the process by which God fulfilled his word of judgement? Part of those developments consisted of an escalation of problems which were already beginning to manifest themselves even before Jeroboam died, particularly the problems of social and moral disintegration which Amos clearly pointed out. Part of them consisted of striking new departures after Jeroboam’s death, particularly in the area of political disintegration and foreign affairs. It was the latter which eventually delivered the “coup de grace”.

### 2. Political Disintegration

The first sign of the withdrawal of God’s favour from the nation came in the form of political disintegration and loss of stability. On the death of Jeroboam the nation was straight away plunged into political chaos. Within 12 months Jeroboam’s son who succeeded him was assassinated, and his son’s killer and usurper was also assassinated. The latter’s murderer, Menahem, managed to hold on for 8 years, but only in a bloodthirsty atmosphere of brutal civil war. When Menahem’s son succeeded him, he also failed to last even a year, and was murdered. His murderer survived only four years before the Assyrians deposed him. Thus the mark of those years was a chaotic struggle among rivals to gain and hold power. This took precedence over everything else, dragging down the nation and making effective government impossible.

This sort of anarchy, however, was not a new experience for the northern kingdom of Israel. At Jeroboam’s death Israel had existed for some two centuries and during that time had had four “dynasties”, each having their beginning in the assassination of the king and family of the former dynasty. Violent death was the norm for the kings, of whatever dynasty, and natural death was a rarity. The current situation after Jeroboam was, therefore, something that the people of Israel had known in the past and could expect to blow over in due course, as it always had. This was dangerous complacency. Things do not always “blow over”! That was certainly not to be the case for Israel, and that was precisely what Amos came to say. What had been normal for so long was now to end.

What we see here in Israel is, of course, the political disintegration that can overtake a state when a strong dictatorial rule comes to a sudden end and only weak men follow. The state which has a broader base than dictatorship, and is more democratic in structure, is obviously less prone to such anarchy. And the longer such a democratic structure has been in place the more resilient it is to disintegration. But democracies are still open to bitter ambition, in-fighting, confusions and chaos in their political processes. They too can become the victim of “strong men” if only by stealth and the gradual undermining of free institutions. Where economic disaster occurs they are always vulnerable to chaos. Where attacks from stronger, dictatorial powers are faced they can also crumble. Political instability and weakness of leadership can, therefore, be disastrous to any form of state, when other factors also conspire against it. The critical factor is not in the history of a state or in the nature of its political institutions, but in its standing before God. God can destabilize any nation that incurs his displeasure.

### 3. Political Incompetence

The political anarchy in Israel was inevitably accompanied by political incompetence. Second rate rulers and second rate advisors with an eye to personal gain were in the ascendancy. This was the next mark of God’s disfavour toward Israel, for the quality of rulers is not merely an accident of history. A nation gets the leaders it deserves. The most obvious evidence of this incompetence was in the realm of “foreign affairs”, precisely that realm where the nation desperately needed wisdom and perception. Assyria was threatening Israel and there was a gross underestimation of the power and determination of the new Assyria. The Assyrians had always been a threat and were always likely under a strong king to attack the states of Palestine in order to collect tribute. It was during this period of anarchy in Israel that they appeared once again and took tribute from Israel. An appropriate response was seriously lacking. Pekah, Israel’s king (having murdered his predecessor) absurdly sought to produce an alliance against Assyria. He even attacked Judah to make her join the alliance, whereupon Judah called in the Assyrians, who promptly dethroned Pekah.

**Political Anarchy and Incompetence are marks of God's Disfavour**

His successor showed even less competence. Foolishly he withheld the new tribute imposed by Assyria on Israel and turned to a weak Egypt. This was suicidal. Assyria promptly attacked Israel's capital Samaria, and then took the population into exile.

Hosea described the nation's policy at this point as "half baked" (7:8), and likened Israel to "an easily deceived and senseless dove" (7:11). Foolish and useless policies were the order of the day. A grasp on reality was sadly lacking. There was a living in the past, not the present. Statesmanship had disappeared. Serious mistakes in dealing with other nations, especially strong nations, can be a sign of divine disapproval.

#### 4. Political Corruption

A third mark of divine disfavour can be found in the debilitating effect of widespread and increasing corruption in the nation, not least among its political and religious leaders. Hosea, a near contemporary of Amos, and whose main prophetic activity was at its height during these decades of collapse, sums up the situation with Israel's leaders in a few terse comments: "their rulers dearly love shameful ways" (4:18); "Judah's leaders are like those who move boundary stones" (5:10); "They delight the king with their wickedness, the princes with their lies. They are all adulterers, burning like an oven ... On the day of the festival of our king the princes become inflamed with wine ... (7:3-7). Thus the personal degradation of the rulers was very marked. They were dishonest, they were dissolute, they were drunkards, and they loved it. They were arrogant. Justice and integrity had died. There was no political integrity because there was no personal integrity. The two, of course, can never be disassociated: humanity cannot keep corruption confined to one compartment of its life – it spreads all over. It is a sign of decadence when politicians insist that public life and personal life can be held in separate compartments.

A despotic ruler is particularly prone to such corruption, but democracy is by no means immune. Modern European democracies over the last few years, in fact, have provided not a few leading political figures, including presidents of major nations, who have been involved both in financial corruption and personal dissoluteness. Their personal behaviour has spilled over, of course, into their political life. It is a deeply saddening sight when God gives over a nation to corrupt rulers.

It was not political corruption in high places alone that marked the years of rapid decline, however. The corruption was endemic in the whole nation. Greed and gain among the rich provided not only a degenerate example to the less affluent, but drove those who were poorer to evil ways in order to keep up or even to survive. In this way corruption led to violence. Hosea again paints the picture: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed" (4:1-2). The corruption and evil with which the nation had lived for fifty years, and by which it had lived a profligate lifestyle, were now to become part of the cancer which was to render it incapable of a strong response to the danger it was to face. The political leadership was absolutely incapable of addressing these deep moral and social issues: it was actually itself a part of the problem.

#### 5. The Hammer Blow

How long the nation might have gone on in such chaotic and degenerate disarray is difficult to say, but one single factor made sure that it was ultimately brought to an end. That was the rise of a huge, aggressive foreign power, Assyria. The emergence of an antagonistic Assyria was God's final mark of disfavour for Israel, and, coming at the point of Israel's own internal disintegration, delivered the final blow that brought about her destruction. The timing of this was of huge significance. Again it was on the death of Jeroboam that a very powerful ruler, Pul, seized the Assyrian throne. Within a mere two years Pul had reduced his enemies in the north and west, and five years later he was campaigning in Palestine. Another five years and he was taking tribute from Israel. Thus in less than 15 years the international scene had changed beyond recognition. It would only be another 16 years before Israel would in fact be dispossessed and wiped off the map by this resurgent superpower. All this would have been unthinkable when Amos first prophesied.

We have God's own comment on the rise of Assyria in Isaiah. He spoke of "the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath. I send him against a godless nation; I dispatch him against a people who anger me ..." (Is. 10:5-6). There was nothing accidental, therefore, about the rise of such a strong person as Pul. Strong and vigorous men like Pul were always needed (and still are) to realize the vast potential of a conglomerate superpower such as Assyria, but their arrival on the scene of history at a particular time is something that God keeps in his hands. The strong men of history do not, of course, see themselves as fulfilling God's will in their generation. Pul certainly did not. Pul's motive was to build an empire, to destroy other powers and to get rich on the spoil (Is 10:7)..

We must never presume that modern democracies are immune to attacks from without. Incompetence and corruption can make them very susceptible to defeat by a foreign power. In our modern world, therefore, the major power blocks of the world are to be watched carefully. They are still the most likely things to be the "rod of God's anger". Hitler was such to Russia and Russia was such to Hitler. Russia still has the potential to be pulled into superpower status by a strong man, while China is in a league entirely of its own (with a population 3 times that of Europe and 4 times that of the U.S.A.). Even the Islamic nations have an outside chance of being pulled into a cohesive force of massive proportions. Just as Napoleon, almost overnight, pulled the French nation together and became a scourge to Europe, so there is always the possibility of strong and ambitious leaders turning some massive superpower of the modern world into a very devastating scourge. Whether that will happen is a matter solely for God to determine, as he weighs up the nations.

**Some degree of instability, incompetence and corruption is always present in the political life of nations and, though these can be quite serious at times, they do not always add up to complete disaster. Only God knows, as he did with Israel, when the mix is such that complete disaster is on its way. Only he knows when the "cocktail" is likely to explode through "superpower" intervention, for it is he that prepares such a cocktail. For two centuries he had watched Israel survive (had helped Israel to survive!), but the prophets were sent to make it plain that this time there would be no survival. The day of reckoning had come. What is God saying today? We do not need our own speculations about the future, but it is a time to discern events both at home and abroad with great care. A "countdown" seems only too evident in our times.**

**The strong men of history are the "rod of God's anger" on the nations**