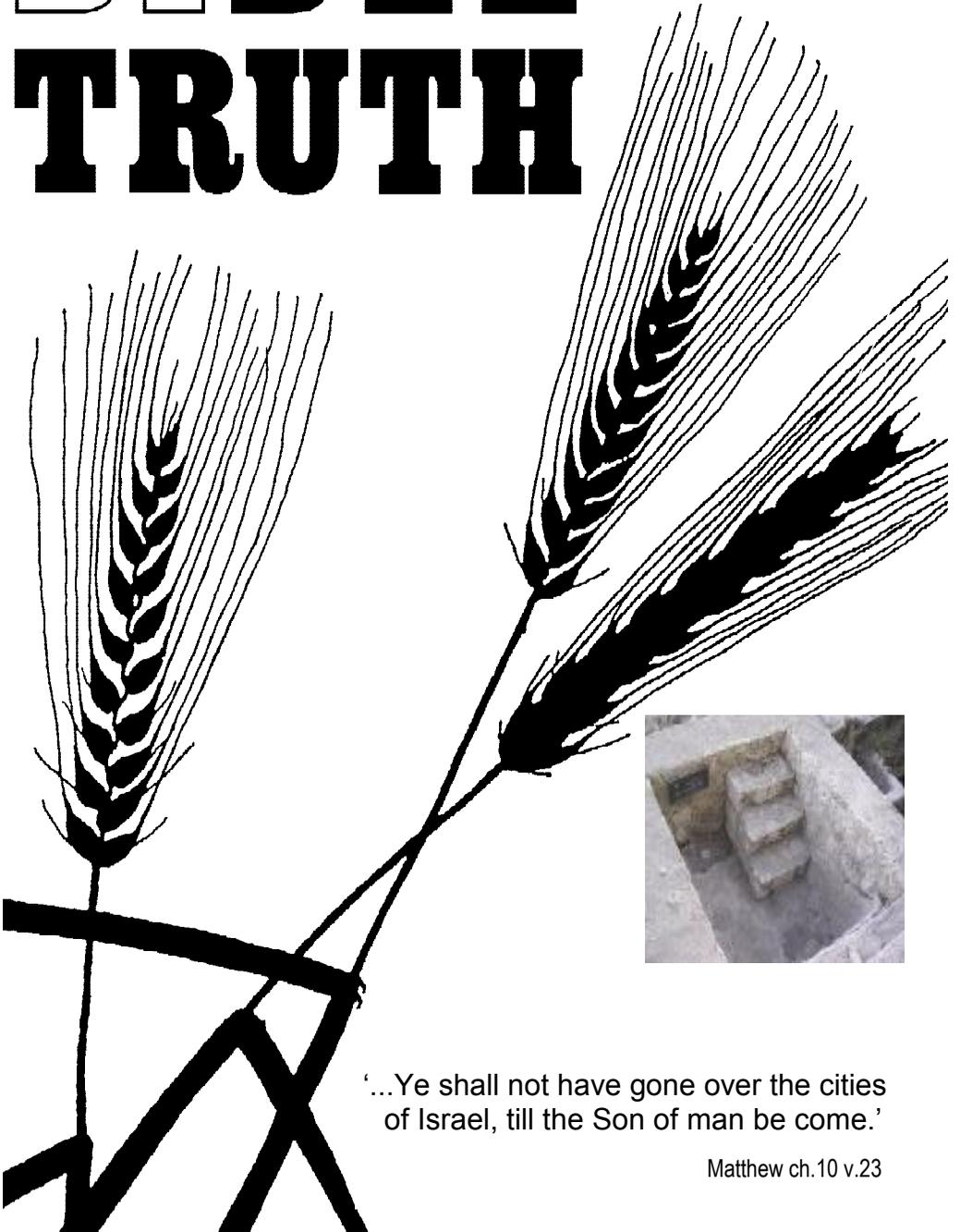


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'...Ye shall not have gone over the cities
of Israel, till the Son of man be come.'

Matthew ch.10 v.23

The Desolate City

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'Alas howe sitteth the citie so desolate, that sometime was full of people?'

Lamentations ch.1 v.1 (*Bishop's Bible* 1568)

In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah mourns the fate of the kingdom of Judah, destroyed by the Babylonian army in 587 BC. A Jewish translation of the same verse says,

'How lonely lies the city that once thronged with people!'

The Complete Jewish Bible

The Septuagint has the following words as an introduction.

'And it came to pass after Israel had been carried captive, and Jerusalem was become desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem.'

There is no question that Scripture describes Jerusalem as an empty, lonely, desolate place after the Babylonian conquest. Several accounts in the Bible tell us in stark terms of the exile of a great majority of God's people from Canaan.

We read this vivid description in the book of 2 Kings, telling us how King Nebuchadnezzar's commander,

'... burnt the house of the LORD, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire. And all the army of the Chaldees, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about. Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen'.

2 Kings ch.25 vv.9-12

Two things are very apparent here: every structure in the city of any size or importance was burned to ashes, and the great majority of the population was taken into exile, the remainder being those who were unable to make the journey.

Despite this firsthand account of Jerusalem's large scale destruction and deportation, some modern theologians talk as if nothing much happened, and that life went on afterward as usual. In *Myth of the Empty Land*, p.42, Hans M. Barstad wrote,

‘... with the great majority of the population still intact, life in Judah after 586 in all probability before long went on very much the same way that it had done before the catastrophe’.

In response to this, in his book *Israel In Exile*, p.83, n.129, a more well-respected scholar, Dr Rainer Albertz remarked,

‘In my opinion, however, Barstad underestimates the profound rupture caused by the exile’.

The prophet Zephaniah foresaw the desolation of Jerusalem in these words.

‘I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; ... for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off. And it shall come to pass at that time, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil. Therefore their goods shall become a booty, and their houses a desolation: ...’

Zephaniah ch.1 vv 4 & 11-13

The Book of Chronicles makes the desolation of Judah a Divine requirement. Since God's people had not kept the Biblical Sabbath rest, an enforced rest from labour occurred for the full seventy years of Babylonian rule.

‘To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.’

2 Chronicles ch.36 v.21

The words, ‘desolate’ and ‘desolation’, used dozens of times, are the most common Biblical words describing the fall of Jerusalem, and are repeated by several prophets.

The prophet Jeremiah, called ‘the weeping prophet’, fervently begged the people to repent to avoid desolation and destruction. He proclaimed God's Words,

‘Howbeit I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear to

turn from their wickedness, to burn no incense unto other gods. Wherefore my fury and mine anger was poured forth, and was kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; and they are wasted and desolate, as at this day. Therefore now thus saith the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel; Wherefore commit ye this great evil against your souls, to cut off from you man and woman, child and suckling, out of Judah, to leave you none to remain; In that ye provoke me unto wrath with the works of your hands, burning incense unto other gods in the land of Egypt, whither ye be gone to dwell, that ye might cut yourselves off, and that ye might be a curse and a reproach among all the nations of the earth? ... Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will set my face against you for evil, and to cut off all Judah'.

Jeremiah ch.44 vv 4-8 & 11

In these verses, God makes clear that Judah would be cut off with virtually none to remain in the land of Canaan.

The prophet Ezekiel warned Judah,

'Thou shalt be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, with the cup of astonishment and desolation, with the cup of thy sister Samaria'.

Ezekiel ch.23 v.33

Ezekiel delivered God's decree,

'So will I stretch out my hand upon them, and make the land desolate, yea, more desolate than the wilderness ... say unto the people of the land, Thus saith the Lord GOD of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and of the land of Israel; They shall eat their bread with carefulness, and drink their water with astonishment, that her land may be desolate from all that is therein, because of the violence of all them that dwell therein. And the cities that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall be desolate; and ye shall know that I am the LORD'.

Ezekiel chs 6 v.14 & 12 vv 19-20

Again, utter waste and desolation would be the lot of Judah and Jerusalem.

God said through the prophet Zechariah,

'But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate'.

Zechariah ch.7 v.14

None of the exiles returned during the seventy-year exile.

The prophet Micah also gave a similar warning.

‘Notwithstanding the land shall be desolate because of them that dwell therein, for the fruit of their doings.’

Micah ch.7 v.13

The Biblical prophets are all in agreement!

Do leading Biblical historians also agree that Judah was a ‘desolation’ and a ‘wilderness’ after the fall of Jerusalem? In the book *Scripture and Other Artifacts* p.276, Dr Michael Coogan says,

‘... the survival of some — a woefully small number in comparison to the pre-exilic kingdom — is apparent’.

Dr Coogan also says that,

‘... the size of postexilic Yehud [i.e. Judah] reveals a rather tiny province’.

Ibid. p. 279

This indicates that a majority of the House of Judah — the tribes of Judah and Benjamin — migrated to other lands.

Dr Devorah Dimant in *Tobit In Galilee* p.350, n.12, of the University of Haifa, tells us that an

‘... archaeological survey of Lower Galilee showed a sharp decline of population during the seventh and eighth centuries B.C.E ... the Assyrians did not resettle the Galilee but left it in a state of partial abandonment and devastations’.

Large numbers of Judah were taken into captivity by the Assyrian invasion of 701 BC, leaving the Galilee region of Judah largely devastated even before the final Babylonian destruction of 587 BC.

This important Assyrian exile of the House of Judah is largely ignored by theologians.

‘Now in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them.’

2 Kings ch.18 v.13

Only the City of Jerusalem itself was spared, and ancient Mideast scholar, Dr G.W. Ahlstrom, commented in the book *Royal Administration In Ancient Palestine* p.77 that, ‘... at this time Judah was ... a city-state’. The Assyrians left Judah a greatly reduced and desolate one-city nation. Few people realise there were in fact two major exiles of Judah by the world-powers of the era — Assyria and Babylon. The result was a devastating drop in population, as scholars are beginning to understand more fully. Dr Jon L. Berquist informs us that,

‘... scholarly work has shown ... The population of Jerusalem and its environs in the Persian period was much smaller than earlier estimates (and these estimates have continued to decline from tens of thousands to perhaps a few thousand)’.

Approaching Yehud, p.3

Modern archaeological excavations prove that, at most, only a few thousand people lived in all of Canaan following the Babylonian conquest and during the subsequent Persian era. Many of these were the aged, the sick, and the handicapped that could not make the long journey into exile. Jerusalem itself was indeed a desolate city.

With this background, it is easier to understand the underlying theme of the Book of Lamentations. Judah had suffered tremendous destruction and devastation for well over a century at the hands of two brutal conquerors who both carried out a policy of mass deportations of conquered peoples. *The Bible Knowledge* commentary says,

‘Jerusalem had experienced a catastrophic metamorphosis ... her population had been decimated. The once bustling city was now deserted’.

Yet most of her missing population was exiled and dispersed, not dead. As the *Kell & Delitzsch Bible Commentary on Lamentations* states,

‘Jerusalem is personified as a woman, and, with regard to its numerous population, is viewed as the mother of a great multitude of children ... The meaning of the Hebrew ... designates the multiplicity, multitude of the population ...’.

Abraham's descendants were indeed to become a great multitude of people too great to count (Genesis chs16 v.10 & 32 v.12). The modern Bible believer is entitled to ask,

‘Where in the world are this great multitude to be found?’

The answer to that question involves the wonderful fulfillment of Bible prophecy.
