

12. 8th century BC

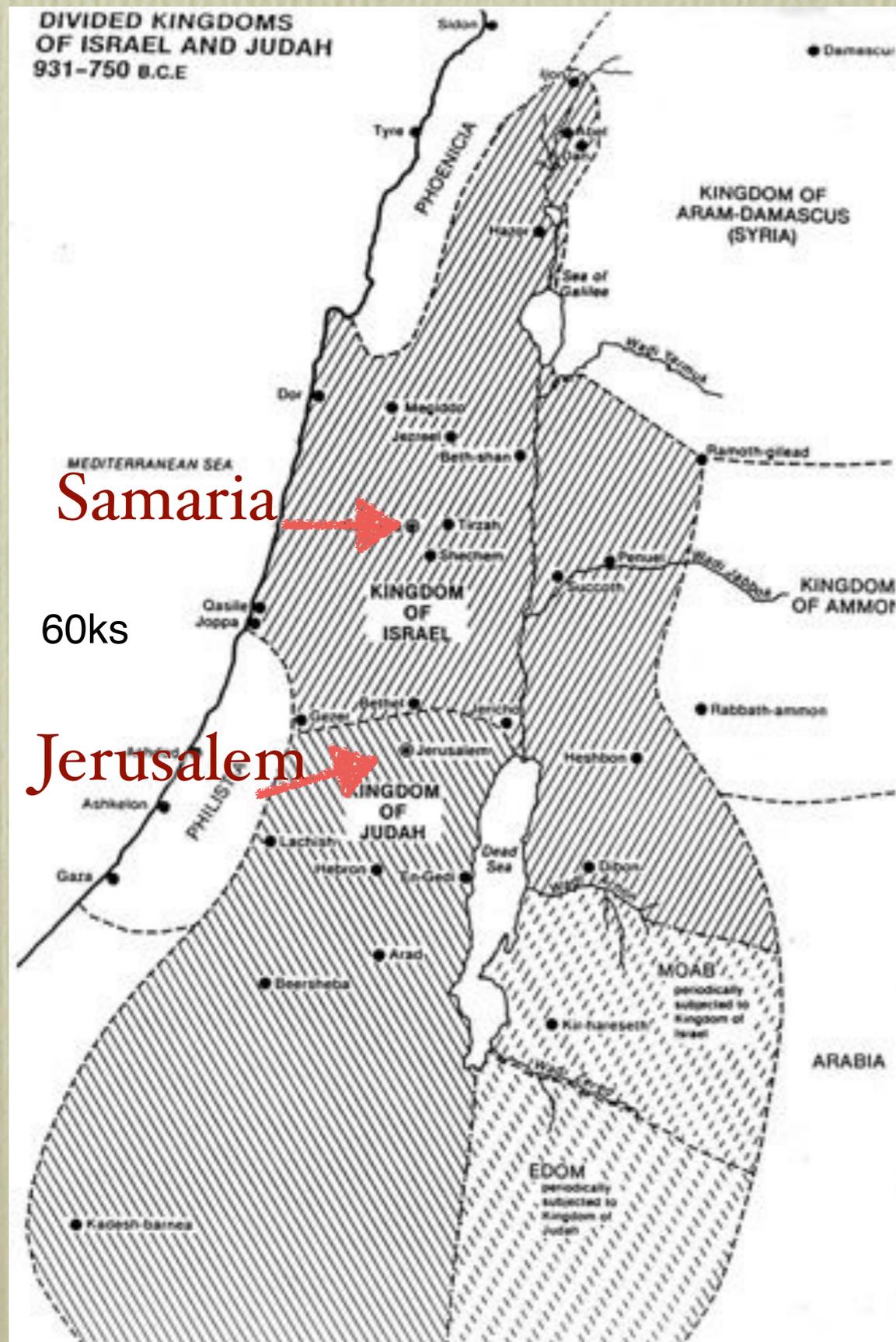


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Assyrian warship

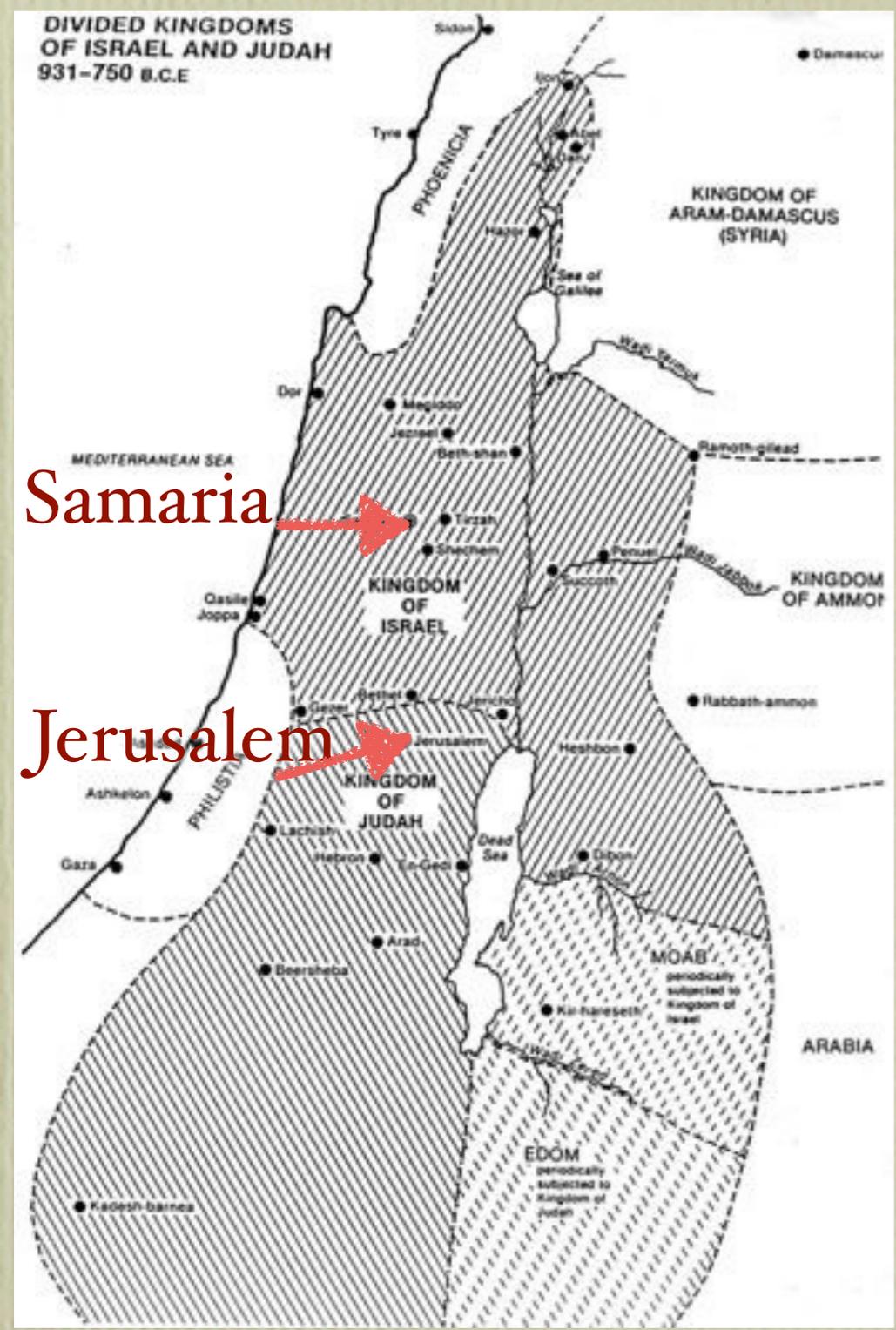
8th century BC





It is probable that the political, economic and social environment that is necessary to provide the environment for the emergence of substantial written material first emerged in the northern kingdom (Israel) in Samaria in the 8th century.

There we find the initial scribal work that would issue in the Book of Deuteronomy, and also the first of the prophets whose oracles are recorded in a scroll under their name (Amos and Hosea).



King Jeroboam II reigned in the northern kingdom (Israel) for forty years (788 to 748BC). King Azariah (also called Uzziah) reigned in Judah (785-734BC). Their long reigns were marked by mutual collaboration. Syria (Aram) had been weakened by Assyria, but, because of troubles on her borders, Assyria had not yet begun in earnest its westward expansion. It was during the reign of Jeroboam II that Israel reached its highest point of military and economic power since the days of the Omride dynasty. Under Azariah Judah reached its highest point of economic and military power ever.

The Northern Kingdom (Israel)

Thriving trade and commerce created a small, wealthy upper class in the capital, Samaria. In the main northern shrines the cult was lavish, but little regard was given to justice. Bribery, extortion, the corruption of the judiciary and exploitation of the poor undermined the moral foundations of the state.

The prophet Amos (c. 762-750BC)

This was the period of the ministry of the prophet Amos, the first of the prophets to have his words preserved in a scroll named after him. Amos exercised his ministry as a prophet prior to the military expansion of Assyria, which began with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III in 745.

The period during which Amos was prophesying was one of relative peace and considerable prosperity. The problem that confronted and shocked him was that the prosperity favoured a small upper class, who were living in luxury while the vast bulk of the population was being exploited (see Amos 3:15; 5:11; 6:4-6) . This cuts at the very heart of the covenant with YHWH that gives Israel its identity. The administration of justice was corrupted by bribery and extortion, and paid no regard to the rights of the poor.

‘Thus says the Lord: I will not revoke my punishment on Israel, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way’(Amos 2:6-7).

The wealth flowing from commerce and trade enabled the main northern shrines to have lavish cult and elaborate rites (see Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-23), but Amos judged this style of religion to be a travesty. It lacked justice, integrity, honesty, and fidelity to the covenant with YHWH, which made it abhorrent to God. God would have to put an end to their prosperity. There would have to come what Amos calls 'the Day of YHWH' (see Amos 5:18-20).

'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream'(Amos 5:21-24).

Amos insists that a genuine response to God must include working for justice for all. He challenges any smug assurance that we might entertain that all will be well for us, since God is loving and has chosen us as his own. Religious practice is no substitute for true obedience, and true obedience requires justice. These statements we will find inspiring only to the extent that we accept their challenge and find and follow ways of living justly in our world today (see 3:2). We, like Amos's contemporaries, must 'seek good and not evil'(5:14).

‘After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord —
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things’ (Amos 9:11-12).

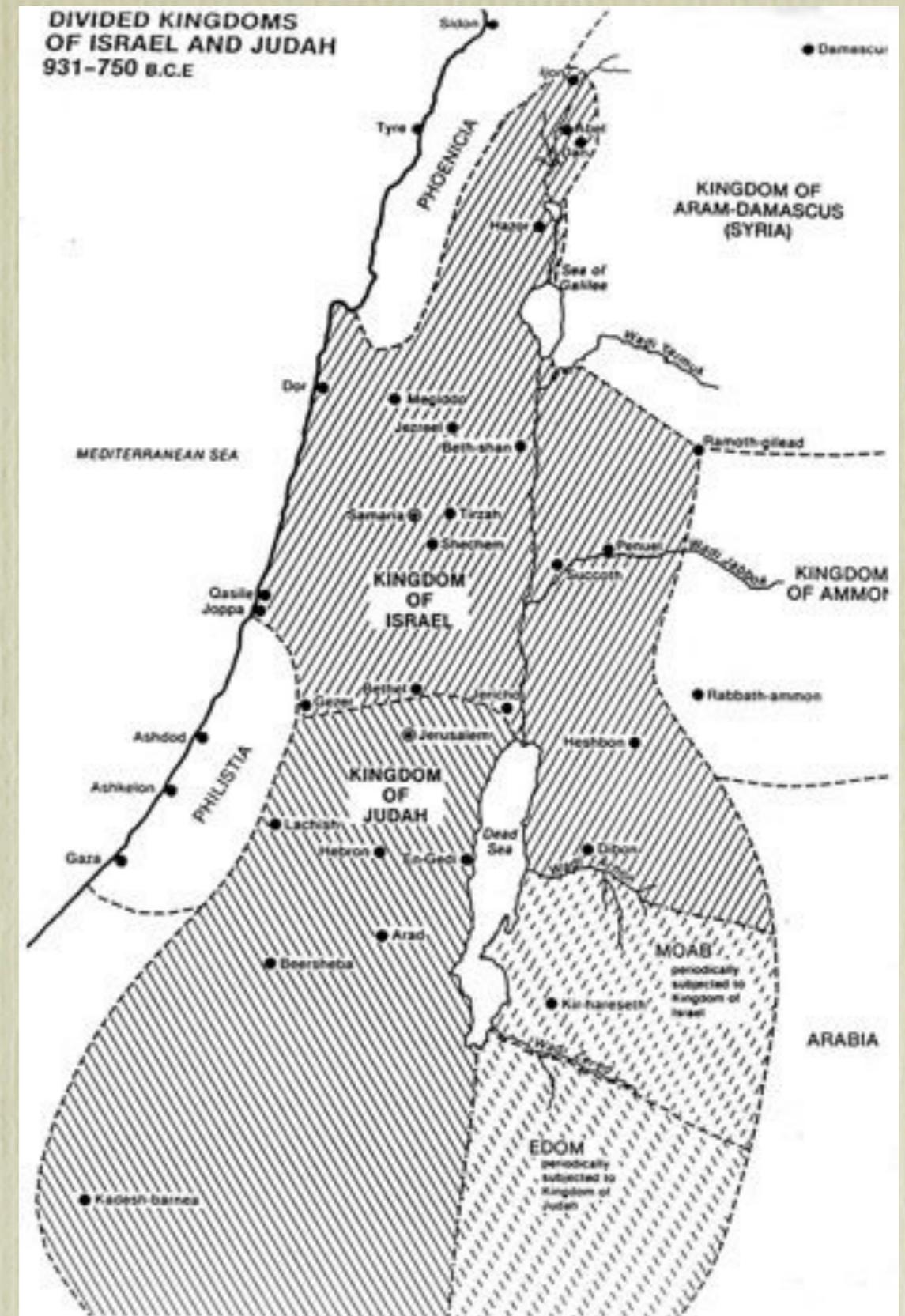
Acts 15:16-17 (James at the Jerusalem Assembly)

quotes the above passage from Amos in support of welcoming non-Jews into the
Christian community

The prophet Hosea (c. 750-724BC)

Hosea's ministry, too, was carried out in the northern kingdom. He began prophesying in the last years of the reign of Jeroboam II and continued during the period of expansion of Assyria, which was propelled by King Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) and continued under his successor, Shalmaneser V (727-722). In 748 Jeroboam was succeeded by his son, Zechariah. The following year Zechariah was assassinated by Shallum, who was then assassinated by Menahem. Menahem decided on a policy of submission to Assyria (see 2Kings 15:19). This involved the paying of a hefty tribute, which was resented by the landowners. When Menahem died in 737 his son, Pekahiah continued his father's policies, but the opposition rallied to Pekah who murdered the young king and cancelled the tribute. Pekah looked for support to Egypt.

In 734 Tiglath-pileser III conquered Philistia and annexed the area of Israel that bordered the Mediterranean. The following year he took Gilead on the east of the Jordan, as well as Galilee, including the Valley of Jezreel. Pekah was assassinated in 730 by Hoshea who reverted to paying tribute to Assyria. However, in 724 Hoshea decided to turn to Egypt and stop paying the tribute.



Shalmaneser V invaded Ephraim. Hoshea was taken prisoner, and the Assyrian forces besieged the capital, Samaria. Samaria valiantly resisted for three years, but was finally forced to surrender by Shalmaneser's successor, Sargon II in 721. This marked the end of the northern kingdom.

Hosea's ministry in the north continued through to the beginning of the siege of Samaria.



It is likely that it was in Israel, and during the period of Hosea's ministry, that we find the beginnings of a spiritual movement that moved to Judah when Israel collapsed, and bore fruit in the writing we know as the Book of Deuteronomy. Hosea seems to have had close connections with this movement (see Hosea 4:3; 8:1, 6; 11:5; 13:2; 14:4).

Hosea's picture of God was, as we should expect, shaped by his own experiences. He married a woman, Gomer, who is called a 'whore'(1:2). She may have been involved in the sexual rituals that were part of the Canaanite cult, encounters that were understood to influence the harvest. The relationship with Gomer appears to have broken down when she committed adultery. However, in spite of her infidelity, Hosea sought her out and paid to have her back as his wife. It was these experiences that led Hosea to picture YHWH as a husband, and Israel as YHWH's unfaithful bride. He speaks of YHWH's hurt and anger, but also of his fidelity and unconditional and passionate love for his people.

The suffering Hosea witnessed, and in a special way the sufferings he experienced in his own personal life, gave him an insight into the suffering of God at what was happening to his people. He felt the pain of YHWH's heart at the destruction of Israel (see 6:1-6; 11:1-9). It is here, perhaps, that we find Hosea's most inspiring contribution to our knowledge of God.

Hosea has a lot to teach those of us who say we believe in God, but for whom God is an abstract figure, scarcely acknowledged in our day to day lives except, perhaps, when life gets hard. To live like this is to fail to **'know God'** (see 4:1). For Hosea, YHWH is passionately involved in our lives, determined that we should live, and hurt when we do not respond to his love. Not to know God's love and purpose for us is to court destruction (see 4:6).

Like Amos, he speaks out against religious practice that ignores obedience to God's will (see 2:13; 4:12-13). He is especially critical of priests who live off the cult, but fail in their duty to teach (4:6-11). What God wants from us is that we know him and that we be faithful to the covenant of love he has with us (6:6).

When Hosea looked back over the history of Israel he saw a constant story of infidelity, but he saw also the constant call to authenticity. However faithful or unfaithful we might be, Hosea was convinced that God remains faithful. Punishment is necessary, but it is in view of repentance (2:7, 14). Man of the heart that he is, Hosea knows that real repentance must come from the heart (7:10, 14). Religious cult in no substitute for a genuine seeking of YHWH (see 2:11; 6:6; 8:11; 9:4; 10:1-2, 12; 12:6). God cannot impose love. If we are to receive God's love we must open our hearts to God's inspiration and be faithful to the traditions of obedience that have come down to us from those who listened to God in the past (see 10:12; 12:6).

God cannot allow us to avoid the consequences of our infidelity. Rather, God uses these consequences to bring us to a change of mind and heart and behaviour, so that we might enjoy the communion with God that he desires and without which we cannot live. Knowing YHWH's faithfulness, Hosea was convinced that Israel would, once again, enjoy the intimacy of divine communion (see 1:10-11; 2:14-23; 3:5; 14).

Hosea (11:1-4, 8-9) recalls God's liberation of his people from Egypt:

‘When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.’

Matthew 2:14-15 portrays Jesus as this Son who would reveal God's love and liberate humanity from all forms of ‘slavery’.

Hosea 6:6 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings'.

Matt. 9:13 'Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Matt. 12:7 'If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and
not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.'

Hosea 10:8 'The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,
shall be destroyed.

Thorn and thistle shall grow up
on their altars.

They shall say to the mountains, Cover us,
and to the hills, Fall on us'.

Luke 23:30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us';
and to the hills, 'Cover us.'

1 Corinthians 15:55

Paul cites Hosea in support of his belief that death gives way to resurrection

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”(Hosea 13:14).

Romans 9:25-26

Paul quotes Hosea to support inclusion of non-Jews in the Christian community

As God says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.” “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they shall be called children of the living God”(Hosea 1:10; 2:1; 2:23).

The Southern Kingdom (Judah)

During the reign of Uzziah Judah's army was modernised and the conquering of the Philistine plain established control over the trade route along the Mediterranean coast. There was commercial expansion into Arabia and the construction of the copper and iron mining town of Elath on the gulf of Aqabah. Developments were experienced also in agriculture. King Uzziah was forced to retire in 749 due to a scaly skin disease. His son Jotham was co-regent till his father's death in 734. Jotham died in 734 and was succeeded by his son, Ahaz.

Compared to the northern kingdom of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah was still an undeveloped rural kingdom. It is estimated that

‘The population of the Judahite highlands was about one-tenth that of the highlands of the northern kingdom of Israel’(F&S page 238)

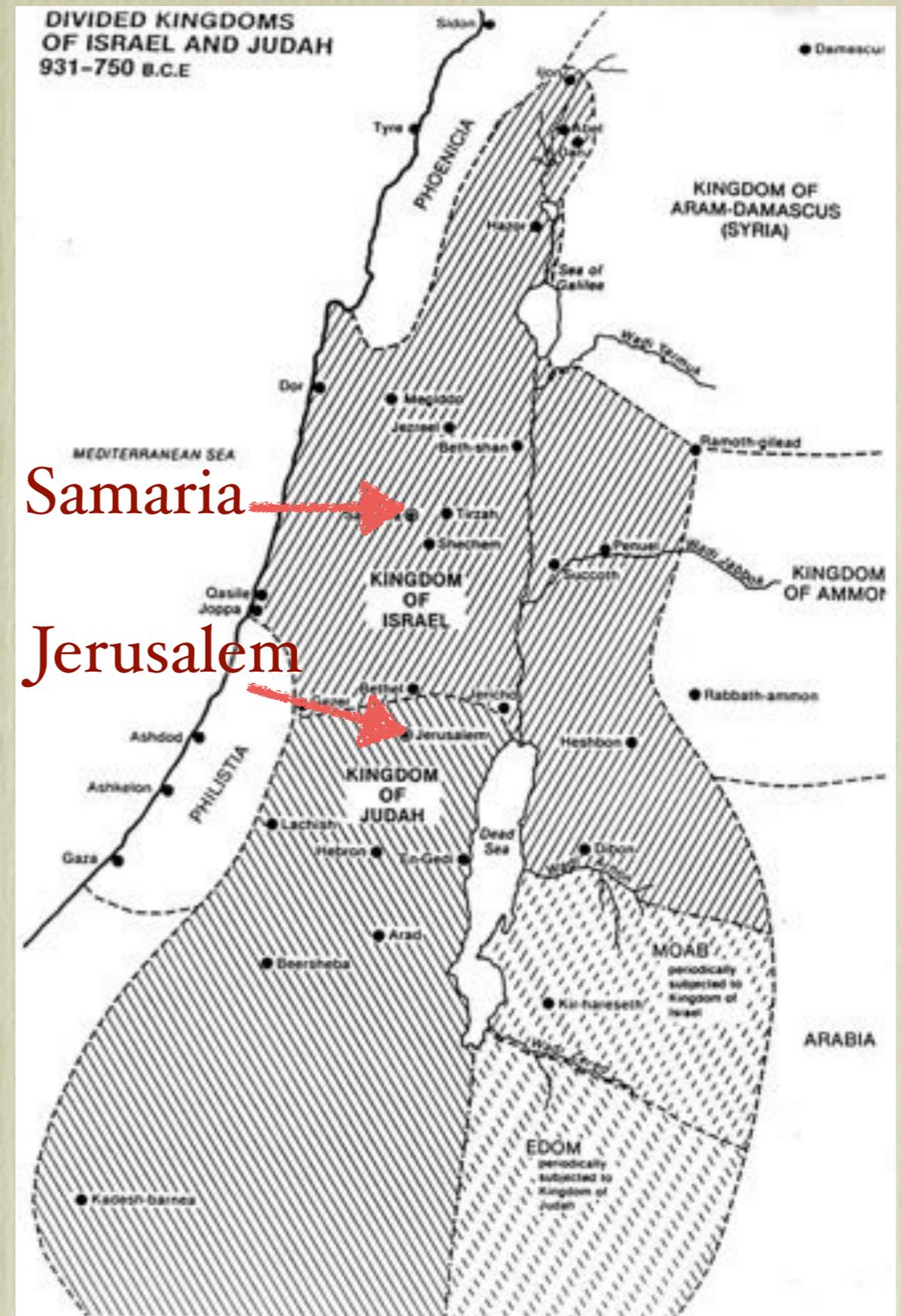
Syria and Israel united forces to defend themselves against Assyria's aggressive expansionist policies, and tried to get Judah to join them. When they experienced resistance from the advisers of the young king Ahaz, King Rezin of Damascus and King Pekah of Samaria tried to put their own ruler on the throne of Judah (see 2Chronicles 28:5-8).

Ahaz was succeeded by his son, Hezekiah (727/715 - 699BC). It was during the reign of King Hezekiah that the Assyrian army put down a revolt by the Philistine city-state of Ashdod (713-711). Sennacherib succeeded Sargon II in 705. The death of Sargon led to revolts in every section of the Assyrian Empire. Hezekiah seems to have played a significant role in organising rebellion in Palestine. Isaiah was active in attempting to deter him from a policy which he saw as a failure to trust in YHWH. Hezekiah went ahead and Judah was devastated by the Assyrian army in 701.

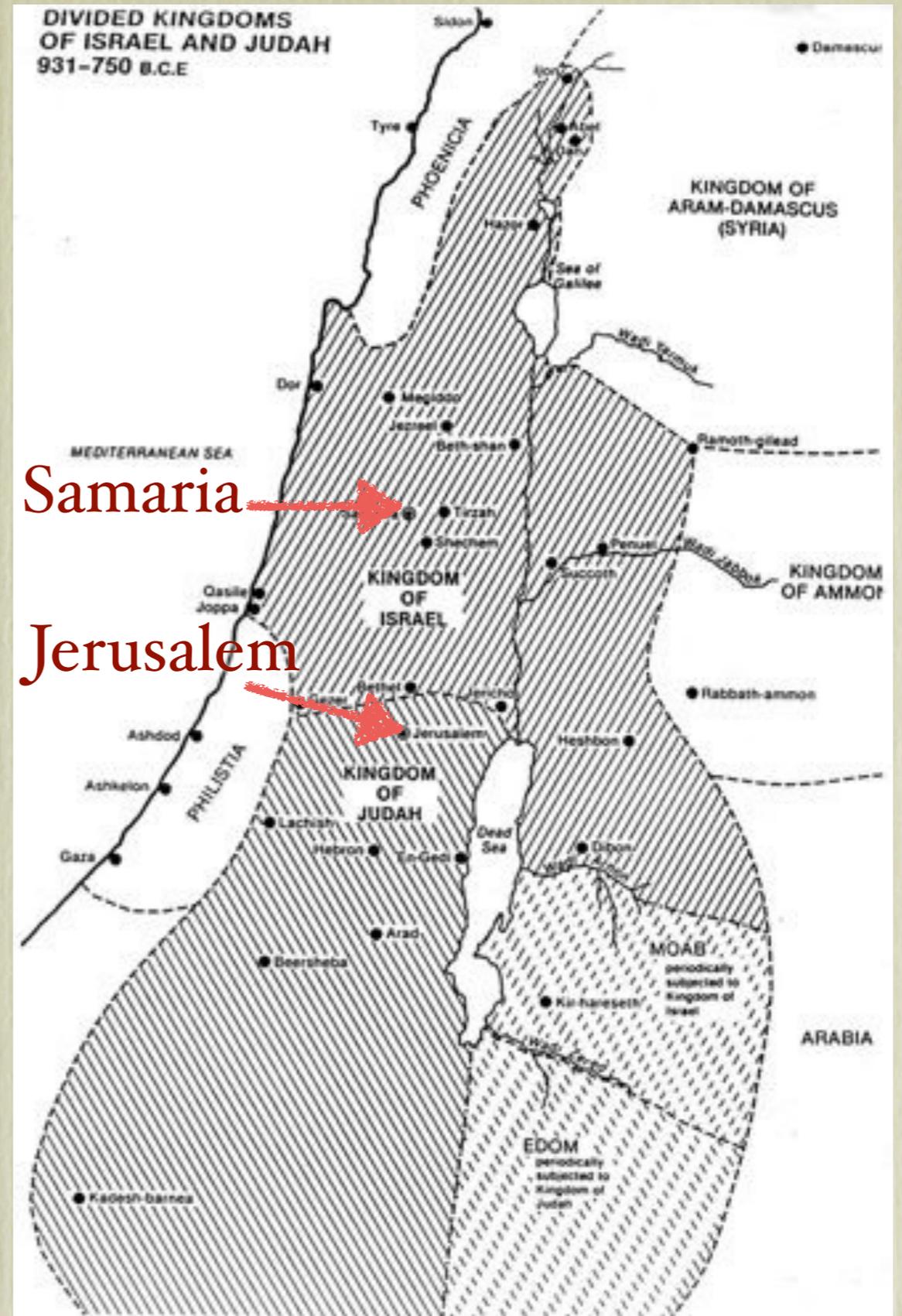
It was during Hezekiah's reign that refugees from the north poured into Jerusalem, which had to expand to the western hill.

‘The city's population may have increased as much as fifteen times, from about one thousand to fifteen thousand inhabitants.’
(F&S page 243).

‘The population of Judah, which had long hovered at a few tens of thousands, now grew to around 120,000’(F&S page 245).



Hezekiah strengthened the fortifications and built an underground tunnel to bring water into the city from the Gihon spring located in the Kidron valley outside the city walls. The oracles of Amos and Hosea found their way to Judah, and we should imagine scribes working to preserve them. The members of the Deuteronomistic School would have supported Hezekiah's efforts to strengthen the Jerusalem Temple's influence, and to attempt to establish cult of YHWH alone..



The prophet Isaiah ben Amoz (c. 740 - 700BC)

While Hosea was carrying out his prophetic ministry in Israel, Isaiah was challenging Judah. At first the situation in Judah was not as dire as in Israel. Assyria saw no advantage in attempting to overrun either the mountainous terrain or the deserts of Judah. To confront Egypt it was enough to conquer and occupy the transverse valley of Jezreel, the Megiddo Pass and the Philistine country bordering the Mediterranean. This was to change in the final years of the eighth century, when Judah suffered the fate of its northern neighbour.

On the death of Jotham in 734 Israel and Syria attacked Judah in an effort to put their own puppet on the throne and force Judah into joining their anti-Assyrian alliance. The Syro-Ephraimite alliance as it is called put pressure on the young king, Ahaz, and his advisers. In Isaiah 7-9 we find the reaction of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah insisted that the key response of Judah to its situation is to put their trust in YHWH, their liberating God. Isaiah kept insisting that Judah's identity as a nation is defined by its covenant with God. Before all else, they must honour this covenant and place their trust in God. This is perhaps Isaiah's greatest contribution, then and now.

(see 7:9; 8:13; 9:13; 10:20; 12; 17:7-8; 25:1-10; 30:16; 31:1-3; 32:17; 33:22; 38:20).

Like Amos and Hosea, Isaiah speaks out against injustice, especially injustice that hides behind compliance with law (see 1:15-18; 3:13-15; 4:15; 5:1-23; 10:1-2; 29:17-21). As individuals and as people who are to some extent responsible for the institutions that govern our lives, we need to take Isaiah's criticisms to heart.

'Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!'(Isaiah 5:8).

'Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!'(Isaiah 10:1-2).

Like Amos and Hosea he also castigates religious practice that pays no attention to obedience to the will of God as expressed in the covenant (see 1:10-14; 5:24; 28:7ff; 29:13). It is this love-covenant with YHWH that is the reason for Israel's existence.

Isaiah joins Amos and Hosea in underlining the folly of worshipping 'gods' of our own making (see 2:8).

Isaiah speaks of God's love for his people (see 5:1-2; 30:18). His conviction that YHWH is faithful encouraged him to trust that all would be restored.

(see 1:18-19, 26; 2:1-4; 4:2-6; 5:4; 10:24-27; 11:1-13; 28:5-6; 30:18-26; 35).



Matthew 1:23

Matthew applies to Jesus Isaiah's words to King Ahaz

'The young woman is with child and will bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel'(Isaiah 7:14).

‘The Lord said: these people draw near with their mouths
and honour me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me is a human commandment
learned by rote’(Isaiah 29:13).

quoted by Jesus to those complain that the disciples failed to wash their hands

Matthew. 15:8-9

Isaiah (8:21-23, 9:2) records the devastation of Israel, but knows that God will not abandon them:

‘He [a nameless refugee] wanders across it [a nameless land], oppressed and hungry and in his starving condition he becomes desperate and curses his king and his God as he turns his face upward. Downward to the earth he looks and there is anguish, darkness, swirling oppression, confused gloom. For there is no glimmer of light for an oppressed land. At the time a beginning of humiliation of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali led afterwards to a worsening of oppression in the Way of the Sea, in Trans-Jordan and in the Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shone.’

Matthew 4:15-16 quotes this text as he has Jesus going to Galilee to bring the light of God’s revelation.

‘The stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising,
and the moon will not shed its light’(Isaiah 13:10).

quoted by Jesus in the eschatological discourse

Matthew 24:29

‘The Lord said: these people draw near with their mouths
and honour me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me is a human commandment
learned by rote’(Isaiah 29:13).

quoted by Jesus to those complain that the disciples failed to wash their hands

Matthew. 15:8-9

‘The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert’(Isaiah 35:5-6).

Jesus’ reply to the question posed by John’s disciples
‘The blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them’(Matthew 11:5).

Romans 9:33 (see also 1Peter 2:6)

Reflecting on why it was that non-Jews were welcoming faith in Jesus, while most Jews were not, Paul cites Isaiah to make the point that the Jews were stumbling because of lack of faith

“See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame”(Isaiah 8:14).

Romans 15:12

Paul sees the communion of Jews and non-Jews in the Christian community as fulfilling the hope expressed by Isaiah:

‘Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope”(Isaiah 11:10).

The prophet Micah (c. 740-725BC)

Though scholars are not all of the same mind in regards to the Micah scroll, there are very few verses that we can confidently state could not have come from the prophet himself.

In many of the prophetic scrolls we are helped to link the words of a prophet with the events of his day by the fact that those responsible for the scroll included something of the context of the prophet's words, whether it be details from his life, or details of the historical circumstances he was addressing. In the case of the Micah scroll, however, the only help we have is the opening sentence which states:

‘The word of YHWH came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah.’(Micah 1:1).

Like Isaiah his contemporary, Micah lived through the prosperous years towards the end of Uzziah's reign, and then the years when Judah was forced to defend itself against Israel and Syria who were determined to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance.

Micah experienced a call from YHWH to prophesy; that is to say, to communicate to others the insights he received in prayer. His words reveal his concern for public policy and the exercise of justice that is faithful to the covenant Judah has with YHWH.

Like Isaiah, Micah has a lot to say about divine punishment (see 1:2-16; 3:12; 5:10-15; 6:13-16). His picture, however, is not as dark as that of Isaiah, who lived through the fall of Samaria and the devastation of Judah by Sennacherib.

Like the other prophets of the eighth century, Micah speaks out against injustice (see 2:1-2; 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:10-12; 7:3).

He is particularly concerned with those whom the people look to as prophets, but who 'lead my people astray'(3:5). They proclaim 'peace', but not the obedience to God's will which alone can produce it. Micah is critical of those who assume that because they are God's chosen people they are guaranteed divine protection and blessing (see 3:11). Religious cult is no substitute for justice (6:6-8).

As a true prophet, his focus is primarily on God and he speaks beautifully of God's faithful love (see 6:3-5; 7:18-20). This gives him hope that ultimately all will be restored (see 2:12; 4:1-8; 7:9). We must trust YHWH (7:7).

‘The son treats the father with contempt,
the daughter rises up against her mother,
the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
your enemies are members of your own household’(Micah 7:6).

quoted by Jesus in insisting on the need for decision
if they want the kind of peace he is offering.

Matthew 10:35-36

‘But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel’(Micah 5:2).

quoted to Herod by the scribes

Matthew 2:6