

The Syro-Ephraimite War and its Implications¹

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1. Introduction

The latter half of the eighth century B.C.E. in the Near East was a period of Assyrian resurgence and expansion to the west under the powerful king, Tiglath-Pileser III. In response to this threat, Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah, king of Israel, formed an anti-Assyrian coalition and attempted to persuade Ahaz of Judah to participate. After the Ahaz' rejection of this offer, Rezin and Pekah advanced against Judah and besieged Jerusalem, but had to withdraw because of the advancing Assyrian army, which took advantage of the opportunity to crash the coalition. This, so-called Syro-Ephraimite War, cannot be fully understood without consideration of its background, some of its problems, and its consequences.

2. Background of the Syro-Ephraimite War

2.1. Assyrian expansion to the west

In 738 B.C.E., Tiglath-Pileser III received the tributes of Rezin of Damascus, Menahem of Samaria and other western rulers (ANET:283). In 734 B.C.E., the king campaigned against Philistia. His troops reached "the city of the River of Egypt," and erected a stela marking the southern boundary of the Assyrian empire (Wiseman 1951:23). As ANET (282,284) indicates, it was perhaps at this time that Idibilu, an Arabic tribe, was installed as a Warden of Marches on the border of Egypt. The king of Gaza, Hanno, fled to Egypt before the Assyrians besieged the city, but later was allowed to return to his office (ANET:283). Gaza became an Assyrian port to serve Assyria's commercial interest (Otzen 1979:255). The years 733-732 B.C.E. mark the successful campaign against Damascus.

1) I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Steven Olson for reviewing this article and suggesting necessary corrections for improvement.

With the expansion of its empire, Assyria dealt with its subjects in a particular way. The subjects can be divided into three types: satellite or puppet state, vassal state, and province². A satellite or puppet state was the result of voluntary submission to Assyria by local rulers. The social, religious, and political life of such a state suffered little interference as long as the state was submissive. When such state became disloyal to Assyria, it was conquered by force, and turned into a vassal state, which was to pay regular tribute and accept a significant Assyrian role in the state's life. If a vassal state rebelled and was defeated, its territory was incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system. Israel experienced these stages in a short period: voluntary submission in 738 B.C.E., reduction to a vassal in 732 B.C.E., and incorporation into an Assyrian province (722-720 B.C.E.) after the fall of Samaria by Sargon II (Miller & Hayes 1986:320-321).

2.2. Syrian expansion

Rezin, whose hometown was Hadara rather than Damascus (ANET 283), was probably an usurper (Miller & Hayes 1986:323). This ambitious Syrian king was extensively involved in Israelite and Judean affairs. II Kings 15:37 indicates Rezin and Pekah threatening Judah during the reign of Jotham (?-742 B.C.E.). Since Pekah's reign over Israel was 735-732 B.C.E., this verse could be anachronistic. However, the suggestion that Pekah was already ruling as a puppet ruler of Rezin at that time over some portion of Israel, the northern Transjordan or Galilee (Miller & Hayes 1986:324) is a reasonable interpretation. The reason is that II Kings 15:37 did not mention Pekah during the reign of Jotham as a king of Israel but "Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah", while II Kings 16:5 in the reign of Ahaz (742-727 B.C.E.) states, "Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel." This explains why II Kings 15:27 assigns twenty years of reign for Pekah who ruled between Pekahiah (736-735) and Hoshea (732-723) (Miller & Hayes 1986:323).

As Ben Hadad II and Ahab fought against Shalmaneser III in 853 B.C.E., Rezin attempted to form an anti-Assyrian coalition of Syro-Palestinian states (cf. Galil 1992:60). Mentioning Rezin in terms of recovering Elath (II Kings 16:6) indicates that Edomites associated with Rezin. Other Transjordanians probably supported this takeover because of the geographical location of Aram in far north and Elath in the south. A Philistine-Aram coalition is suggested by Isaiah 9:11-12 and II Chronicles 28:16-18, which reported the raid of the Philistines against Judah while Ahaz sought assistance from Assyria (cf. Ehrlich 1991:58). Samsi, queen of Arabia seems to have joined the coalition (ANET:284). A text from Nimrud

2) The terminology is somewhat versatile among scholars: Otzen (1979:253) states the types as vassal state, puppet state, and province. In this paper, we follow Miller & Hayes (1986).

(ND 4301,4301) states the alliance of Tyre with Rezin (Wiseman 1956:121).

3. The Syro-Ephraimite War

3.1. The Date

While the end of the Syro-Ephraimite War is clearly dated by the siege and the fall of Damascus in 733-732 B.C.E., the beginning is obscure. It cannot be earlier than 735 B.C.E., the accession of Pekah to the throne of Samaria, since II Kings 16:5 refers to Pekah as a king of Israel in besieging Jerusalem, nor can it be later than the Assyrian attack of Damascus in 733-732 B.C.E. (II Kings 16:8-9). The campaign of Tiglath-Pileser III against Philistia in 734 B.C.E. occurred between these events. The question is whether the Syro-Ephraimite War took place before or after the Philistine campaign.

The period in question must accommodate the following events: (1) the formation of the anti-Assyrian coalition between Rezin and Pekah and their contacts with Judah, (2) the advance of the coalition forces and siege of Jerusalem (the war in our concern), and (3) the advance of the Assyrian forces (Donner 1977:429). The period between Pekah's enthronement in 735 B.C.E. and the Assyrian campaign against Philistia in 734 B.C.E. appears to be too short to accommodate the three stages (Begrich 1929:215-216). Thus, the Syro-Ephraimite War could not occur before the Philistine campaign of 734 B.C.E.

It is almost impossible for the coalition military action to coincide with the Assyrian campaign in Philistia. Such military operation next to the Assyrian presence would attract and challenge the Assyrians, resulting in political and military catastrophe. It was after the departure of the Assyrians from the Philistine coast that the advance of the coalition force could take place (Donner 1977:430). Hence, the Syro-Ephraimite War occurred between 734 and 733 B.C.E. This will leave enough time for stage (1), before and during the Philistine campaign of Assyria.

Our proposed date for the Syro-Ephraimite War also provides sufficient time for events described in Isaiah: Ahaz' fear of the alliance between Aram and Ephraim (Isaiah 7:2)³ and the coalition's decision to depose Ahaz militarily: "Let us go up against Judah and make her afraid... and let us enthrone son of Tabeel" (Isaiah 7:6). It was probably at this time that the Aramean units advanced to Israel to form the coalition force against Judah (Donner 1977:429). Yahweh, then, assured that the plot of the two kings would not happen (Isaiah 7:7) by giving Ahaz the sign of a new born child: "Before the boy knows to re-

3) Considering the fact that old Judeo-Israelite alliance was by its very nature anti-Aramean, as Oded (1972:159) indicates, it is understandable that the coalition of Rezin and Pekah caused "the hearts of Ahaz and his people to be shaken."

ject the evil and to choose the good, the land of the two kings you fear will be desolate" (7:16). Finally, Yahweh was said to use Assyria as his instrument to fulfill the defeat of Damascus and Samaria (8:5-7;10:6).

3.2. The Purpose

We have dealt with Assyrian and Syrian expansion as the background of the Syro-Ephraimite War. The purpose of the War, in general, was probably to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian coalition by replacing Ahaz with a figure who would support the coalition. II Chronicles 28:7 is particularly interesting in our discussion: "Zicr, a warrior of Ephraim, killed Maaseiah son of the king (Ahaz), Azrikam officer of the palace and Elkanah second to the king." Because it is unlikely that all three were at a battle field at the same time, they must have undergone unusual death, assassination. This verse seems to suggest an unsuccessful assassination plot to exterminate the Davidic dynasty (Miller & Hayes 1986:329). Failure to assassinate Ahaz perhaps caused the coalition to achieve its aim through military operation.

The replacement candidate for Ahaz was "the son of Tabeel" (Isaiah 7:6). One suggestion for Tabeel is Tubail, king of Tyre, the major Phoenician city (Vanel 1974:23). Another suggestion is that Tabeel was connected with the family of Tobiards who caused difficulty for the returnees from Babylon during the post-exilic period (Oded 1972:163). In either case, the son of Tabeel, if ascended to the throne of Judah, would have joined, supported and contributed to the anti-Assyrian coalition.

Ahaz's refusal to follow the Israelite anti-Assyrian policy may have been perceived by Pekah as rebellious conduct (Isaiah 8:11-15). This is supported by the fact that Judah, from an Israelite perspective, always had functioned as a vassal (Miller & Hayes 1986:329). For instance, I Kings 22:3-4 relates the war to retake Ramoth Gilead, and although this was a purely Aram-Israel matter, Jehoshaphat agreed to Ahab's request to fight together against Aram. Jehoshaphat also gave an affirmative reply to the appeal of Jehoram, king of Israel: "The king of Moab rebelled against me; will you go with me to fight against Moab?" (II Kings 3:7). Hence, removal of Ahaz from his throne could have been punishment to a renegade vassal (Miller & Hayes 1986:329).

There are two objections against our view of the aim of the Syro-Ephraimite War. First, Oded (1972:153) states that if the aim of the coalition was to form an anti-Assyrian league, it is not clear why they should attack Jerusalem and weaken themselves while exposing the northern flank against Assyria. However, there is evidence that the forces of Rezin and Pekah could advance against Judah virtually unmolested: the anti-Assyrian sentiment was prevalent among Judeans, who "rejoice over Rezin and the son of Remaliah" (Isaiah 8:6). Moreover, the northern flank was not exposed because both Syria and Israel had paid tribute in 738 B.C.E. to Assyria, which would not attack her satellite states without a sign of

rebellion. Second, Oded (1972:153) insists that the wars between states in Syria-Palestine were caused not by attempts to organize a coalition but by disputes over territories and struggles for power (cf. Tomes 1993:70). It is advisable, however, to remember that there is no governing law of human behavior; the action of the coalition should not be evaluated by an unfounded notion that every war in Syria-Palestine has to be related with territorial disputes. We suggest that the failed attempt to assassinate Ahaz might have led to the military action to achieve dethronement of Ahaz and to enthrone the son of Tabeel who would join the Anti-Assyrian coalition.

3.3. Ahaz and his “bribe”

“Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me’... and he sent a bribe to the king of Assyria” (II Kings 16:7-8). As mentioned earlier, since the attack of Jerusalem must have taken place between the Assyrian campaign of Philistia in 734 B.C.E., and the campaign against Damascus in 733-2 B.C.E., the bribe had to be sent between these events. It has been suggested that Ahaz’ payment was simply a response to the Assyrian presence in the area rather than vice versa (Miller & Hayes 1986:345); namely, the gift was not a bribe but a voluntary tribute. There are several reasons for this opinion.

First, there is no previous record that Ahaz had submitted to Assyria and had been considered a satellite state. Because the Assyrians were not international mercenaries, it is unlikely that they would have rescued a non-subject state. Secondly, during the crisis, Judah was surrounded by hostile states under an anti-Assyrian movement; therefore, sending an embassy carrying a “bribe” to the Assyrians would probably been intercepted by those states. Thirdly, while the campaign against Philistia in 734 B.C.E. remains unmentioned in the Bible, the Assyrian attack of Damascus in 733-732 B.C.E. is associated with Ahaz’ payment (II Kings 16:9). Fourthly, both ANET 282 and II Chronicles 28:20-21 mention no indication of special contribution by Ahaz; the “bribe” is treated as an ordinary tribute. Finally, Isaiah 7:1-8:15 states nothing about a special appeal made by Ahaz (Miller & Hayes 1986:342-345).

It seems that the word shouhad, bribe, was used to express criticism against Ahaz. To the Biblical writer, Ahaz was the sinful king who did not trust God and made Judah a subject of Assyria. That is why II Kings 16:7 used the expression “your servant and your son” which official annals would not have used (Miller & Hayes 1986:345). Hence, as Tadmor & Cogan (1979:506) indicates, the “bribe” of Ahaz was constructed by the Biblical writer who intended to make Ahaz a king “walking in the ways of the kings of Israel” (II Kings 16:3).

4. Consequences of the Syro-Ephraimite War

4.1. General Results

The advance of the Assyrian army caused the allied forces to withdraw from Jerusalem. Then, Tiglath-Pileser III proceeded to attack Damascus and captured it. Rezin was killed (II Kings 16:9). New Assyrian provinces were established at the former Syrian territory and regions once influenced by Aram: Syria, Karnaim, Megiddo, Hauran, and Gilead. Israel had controlled many of these regions, but they were taken as Aram expanded its territory. This will explain why II Kings 15:29 states the Assyrian incorporation of these areas without claiming that Assyria took them from Israel: "In the time of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and took Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali and he brought the people to Assyria" (Miller & Hayes 1986:332).

In Israel, it appears that the pro-Assyrian party gained the upper hand. Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea (II Kings 15:30), and Tiglath-Pileser III recognized Hoshea as a new king: "They (Israelites) overthrew their king Pekah and I placed Hoshea as king over them" (ANET:284). The territory of Israel is now rightly referred to as the small state of Ephraim: "When Ephraim saw his sickness... then Ephraim turned to Assyria... But he is not able to cure you... For I will be like a lion to Ephraim... I will tear them to pieces and go away..." (Hosea 5:13-14).

Assyria gained the control of Transjordanian kingdoms. ANET (282,284) mentions that Sanipu of Ammon, Salamanu of Moab, Kaushmalaku of Edom and Samsi queen of Arabia paid tributes to Tiglath-Pileser III. Judah also became a satellite state of Assyria (Miller & Hayes 1986:332).

4.2. Ahaz' New Altar

After Tiglath-Pileser III conquered Damascus, Ahaz visited Damascus to greet the Assyrian king. Ahaz saw an altar there, and sent the design back to Jerusalem. Following the plans, the priest Uriah had an altar built before the king returned. The new altar replaced the former bronze altar, which was set aside for the king's private inquiry (II Kings 16:10-18). There are two possibilities about the nature of this new altar: it was modeled after an Assyrian altar or a Syrian altar.

The first opinion suggests that the Assyrians had installed their altar in Damascus when they captured the city and that Ahaz voluntarily adopted the altar as a form of submission or even was compelled to do so (Soggin 1985:228). Since the Arameans (and their gods) had been defeated, copying an Aramean altar at that time would have been odd. Noth (1960:266) also indicates that the removal of the royal

entryway outside the temple was done “because of the king of Assyria” (II Kings 16:18); thereby, royal authority over the sanctuary was lost.

However, the altar Ahaz imitated was likely to be a Syrian altar. II Chronicles 28:22-23 indicates that Ahaz’ obsession with the Syrian cult probably had originated before the Syro-Ephraimite War, when Damascus was dominant. Though the Syrian gods must have become less appealing after the defeat of Damascus, the design of the Syrian altar still seems to have appealed to Ahaz. The passage “because of the king of Assyria” (II Kings 16:18) should be interpreted as the purpose of making tribute to Assyria rather than accommodating Assyrian religion (Miller & Hayes 1986:346). In addition, because Judah was a satellite state, which was free from religious obligations, Ahaz by no means needed to accept Assyrian religion, and Judah succeeded in retaining this nominal independence until the end of Assyrian empire (Cogan 1974:60-65).

There are some reasons that the new altar of Ahaz seems to have served a legitimate Yahwistic cult. First, the priest Uriah did not protest the introduction of the altar into the Temple. Since Uriah was fully Yahwist as Isaiah 8:2 described him to be a “faithful witness,” the Syrian cult practice would have met his strong protest (Snaith & Calkins 1954:275). Secondly, various sacrifices mentioned in II Kings 16:10-15 in association with the new altar were typical lists of sacrificial cult, and can hardly be a source for Syrian cult practices (Greenfield 1987:70). Thirdly, subsequent history of the new altar supports the use for Yahwistic cult. As Cogan (1974:75) indicates, Ahaz’ altar survived the religious reform of Hezekiah and Josiah; Ezekiel 9:2 reports the old bronze altar during the last days of Jerusalem by the Temple’s northern gate, where Ahaz had placed it to make space for his new altar.

5. Conclusion

The Assyrian expansion to the west and Syrian expansion lie behind the Syro-Ephraimite War. Starting from 738 B.C.E., the Assyrian empire gradually reduced western kingdoms through three stages: satellite, vassal, and province. The ambitious Syrian king Rezin, on the other hand, seems to have formed an anti-Assyrian coalition with Israel, Edom, Philistia, Arabia, and Tyre, with an attempt to also include Judah.

The date of the Syro-Ephraimite War probably falls between 734 B.C.E., when the Assyrians campaigned against Philistia and 733 B.C.E., when they besieged and captured Damascus. This will accommodate three stages of events (see chart) and the information from Isaiah. A failed attempt to assassinate Ahaz and Ahaz’ refusal to follow the Israelite policy probably caused the coalition to launch war against Judah in order to depose Ahaz and replace him with the son of Tabeel, who would join the anti-Assyrian

coalition.

Though II Kings 16:7-8 claims that Ahaz sent a bribe to Tiglath-Pileser III to ask for rescue from Rezin and Pekah, the gift was possibly a voluntary tribute instead of a bribe, which might have been constructed by the writer to portray Ahaz as unfaithful to God. The Syro-Ephraimite War ended with the advance of the Assyrian army, followed by the fall of Damascus. Rezin was killed, and Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea. After visiting Tiglath-Pileser III at Damascus, Ahaz set up a new altar following a Syrian altar, and his new altar seems to have served a Yahwistic cult until the end of Judah.

Chronology Chart

<u>Judah</u>	<u>Israel</u>	<u>Assyria</u>
Jotham(-742)	Menahem(745-36)	Tiglath-Pileser III(744-27) ◆738 tributes of Rezin & Pekah
Ahaz(742-27)	Pekahiah(736-35)	
	Pekah(735-32)	◆735

STAGE 1: formation of an anti-Assyrian coalition

| contacts with Judah

| ◆734 campaign against Philistia

↓

T

STAGE 2: advance of the coalition

R

| siege of Jerusalem

I

↓

B

STAGE 3: advance of the Assyrian forces

U

T

E

Hoshea(732-23) ◆733-2 conquest of Damascus ?

Hezekiah(727-698)

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