

Activity 9. Time of Affliction in Mesopotamia

Source:

http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/joshua_the_stylite_02_trans.htm, accessed June 16, 2010.

Background: Historians believe this account of war and famine in the 6th century was written by a Christian monk named Joshua. In these edited passages, Joshua describes an alliance between the Eastern Roman and Persian empires in an effort to block the westward expansion of the Huns. In an account reminiscent of the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the ten plagues of Egypt, both from the Biblical Old Testament, Joseph attributes famine in the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley to divine vengeance against people who were sinful. We think this history was originally written in 507 AD. It was translated and published in English in 1882.

Instructions: As you read these passages consider and prepare to answer questions 1 – 5.

Questions

1. What was warfare like in this period and how did it differ from today?
2. Why were the Romans willing to support military ventures by the Persians?
3. How did religion make possible the preservation of history?
4. How did religion influence the way observers recorded historical events?
5. In your opinion, why did the people of this region and time period blame natural events on divine actions?

A. There was a treaty between the Romans and the Persians, that, if they had need of one another when carrying on war with any nation, they should help one another, by giving three hundred able-bodied men, with their arms and horses . . . The king of the Persians, because of the wars that he had with the Kushanaye or Huns, very often received money from the Romans . . . "that they may not pass over into your territory." What made these words of his find credence was the devastation and depopulation which the Huns wrought in the Roman territory in the year 707 [395-6 AD]. By the help of the money which he received from the Romans, Peroz subdued the Huns, and took many places from their land and added them to his own kingdom; but at last he was taken prisoner by them. When Zeno, the emperor of the Romans, heard this, he sent money of his own and freed him, and reconciled him with them. Peroz made a treaty with the Huns that he would not again cross the boundary of their territory to make war with them; but he went back from and broke his covenant . . . and went to war, and . . . he was delivered into the hands of his enemies, and all his army was destroyed and dispersed, and he himself was taken alive. He promised in his pride that he would give for the safety of his life thirty mules laden with silver coin; and he sent to his country over which he ruled, but he could hardly collect twenty loads, for by his former wars he had completely emptied the treasury of the king who preceded him. Instead therefore of the other ten loads, he placed with them as a pledge and hostage his son Kawad, until he should send them, and he made an agreement with them for the second time that he would not again go to war.

B. On the 17th of Iyar [495-6 AD] in this year, when blessings were sent down abundantly from heaven upon all men, and the crops by the blessing [of God] were abundant, and, rain was falling, and the fruits of the earth were growing in their season, the greater part of the citizens of Edessa cut off all hope of safety for their lives by sinning openly. Being plunged in all sorts of luxurious pleasures, they did not even send up thanks for the gifts of God . . . Because of this wickedness a marvelous sign was

wrought by God to reprove them . . . There came a vast quantity of locusts into our country from the south. They did not, however, destroy or harm anything in this year, but merely laid their eggs in our country in no small quantity . . . In the month of Ilul [September] there was a violent earthquake, and a great sound was heard from heaven over the land, so that the earth trembled from its foundations at the sound; and all the villages and towns heard that sound and felt the earthquake . . . By all these earthquakes and calamities, however, not a man of us was restrained from his evil ways, so that our country and our city remained without excuse . . . In the month of Adar [March] of this year the locusts came upon us out of the ground . . . When they were only able to crawl, they devoured and consumed all the Arab territory . . . After they were able to fly, the stretch of their radii was from the border of Assyria to the Western Sea [the Mediterranean], and . . . had not the providence of God restrained them, they would have devoured human beings and cattle . . . Before the year came to an end, misery from hunger had reduced the people to beggary, so that they sold their property for half its worth, horses and oxen and sheep and pigs . . . Everything that was not edible was cheap, such as clothes and household utensils and furniture, for these things were sold for a half or a third of their value, and did not suffice for the maintenance of their owners, because of the great dearth of bread.