

The bow of Elam

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THERE IS a prophecy “against” (“concerning”, RV) Elam in Jeremiah 49:34-39. Although there are several references to Elam in Scripture, not much detailed information is provided about this ancient nation.

Jeremiah uses a very graphic word picture to describe the demise of Elam: “I will break the bow of Elam”. Clearly the meaning is that Elam’s power would be broken, but why refer to the bow as opposed to any other weapon?

In referring to the bow, Jeremiah reflects a comment made by Isaiah, who declared that “Elam bare the quiver” (22:6). Both prophets, then, drew attention to archery when referring to Elam.

The Elamites, like all ancient peoples, used a range of weapons, but the bow was particularly associated with Elam. The historian Strabo speaks of the Elamites as skilled archers, while Herodotus draws attention to the “uncommon size” of the bows used in this part of the world (Book 7:61).

The Louvre in Paris contains a wonderfully preserved frieze made of coloured glazed bricks taken from Susa, which depicts archers, reflecting the importance placed upon archery.

Even more pertinent to the words of the prophets is one of the bas reliefs of Ashurbanipal, representing a battle between Assyria and Elam. When the king of Elam is defeated he is depicted as breaking his bow.

Jeremiah, conscious of the centrality of the bow to the martial culture of Elam, used the same image adopted by Ashurbanipal when describing Elam’s demise, although in his case he acknowledged that it was God Who would break the nation rather than the Assyrians.

Detail from the archers' frieze in Darius' palace at Susa, now in the Louvre Museum, Paris.



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