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A Case Study of Extreme Weather Shock and Warfare: The Fall of the Kingdom of Israel c.720 BCE

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The idea that warfare increases when societies are subject to stress from climate extremes is plausible and yet has not been definitively established. Were it to be so, then the possibility of outbreaks of warfare, particularly between nations capable of bringing about unprecedented levels of destruction, would be one of the greatest risks for those living in an age of extreme climate events. As a contribution to the contention that there is a connection between extreme climate events and outbreaks of warfare, this paper offers a case study of the fall of the Kingdom of Israel c. 720 BCE with the conquest of the city of Samaria by Assyria. Because of the religious significance of the event, the defeat of the ancient Kingdom of Israel has been a subject of considerable study, despite the paucity of the sources. Until now, there has been no exploration of the role of climate extremes in the events of the period, other than to reject the idea that climate had any impact on the issue, as one scholar has written: 'no specific impulses from a (sudden) change in climate would have influenced the course of events leading to the end of the kingdom.'

This paper will draw on recent ice-core data to connect the fact that there was a very significant volcanic eruption in 723 BCE with the political and military events of the years immediately following. It will argue that a severe drop in temperature had a powerful impact on societies with relatively frail resilience to such shocks and that the stress created by the volcanic climate event had a profound effect on the decision makers of the era, with disastrous consequences in the case of the Kingdom of Israel.