

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTERS NINETEEN AND TWENTY

THE BURDEN OF EGYPT

AS WE STUDY THESE CHAPTERS, however little we understand all the details referred to, we cannot fail to recognize the hand of God dealing with this one-time proud, haughty kingdom in retaliatory judgments because of its independent spirit and proud attitude toward the people of the Lord, who, in centuries gone by, had been subjected to cruel bondage and often since had suffered through Egyptian violence. Even though, at the time Isaiah prophesied, Egypt was outwardly in alliance with Judah, she proved utterly undependable when it came to helping Ahaz and, later, Hezekiah to stand against the onrush of the Assyrian armies.

The philosophy of history might be summed up in the words of Galatians 6:7 by substituting “*nation*” for “**man**” and “*it*” for “**he**”: Whatsoever a nation soweth, that shall it also reap. All down through the centuries the blessing of God has rested upon nations that followed after righteousness, even in measure, and His judgments have fallen when corruption and violence took the place of subjection to His hand. There is not enough agreement among historians and archaeologists to enable us to speak positively as to just when the predictions contained in the first part of this chapter were fulfilled, but we may be absolutely certain that whether as yet we have monumental confirmation of them they all came to pass as divinely foretold.

We do know that about the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, Egypt was for some years in a state of internal strife, Pharaoh himself having proven unable to control the populace or even the Egyptian armies. As a result, his dynasty was overthrown and a number of independent states were set up, until eventually a king arose who was able to unite them again into one empire.

It should be remembered that Egyptian records go back to the very dawn of history. In the beginning the religion of Egypt was a pure monotheism. That which the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 says of the heathen generally was manifested in that country to a marked degree. When they knew God they turned away from Him and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, setting up images, first of all made like to corruptible men, whom they recognized as gods of the various forces of nature. Later they deified birds like the sacred Ibis, and beasts like the sacred Bull and the Cat of Bubastes, and then degenerated even to the worship of reptiles such as the sacred Crocodile and the Asp, and last of all, even deified certain forms of insect life, of which the sacred Scarab is the one with which we are most familiar.

No man's life nor the life of a nation is any better than that of the gods that are worshiped, and so Egypt became debased politically, morally, and spiritually, until at last that once-proud empire was destroyed and became a base kingdom, not to be reckoned among the major dominions.

In the opening verses of chapter nineteen, God is pictured as riding upon the divine chariot, coming down from heaven to deal with this guilty nation.

“The burden of Egypt. Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence, and the heart of Egypt shall melt in the midst of it. And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbour; city against city, and kingdom against kingdom. And the spirit of Egypt shall fail in the midst thereof; and I will destroy the counsel thereof; and they shall seek to the idols, and to the charmers, and to them that have familiar spirits, and to the wizards” (verses 1-3).

God's patience with Egypt had at last come to an end.

He Himself would deal with their false gods, demonstrating their inability to deliver, and manifesting His own omnipotence. Terrified by the sufferings to which they were exposed, the worshipers of these idols would seek in vain for help from their false deities. The heart of the people would fail and in their desperation they would turn to those who professed to deal with departed spirits, the necromancers and other charlatans, who already abounded in great numbers in that land of superstition.

No longer respecting the king who ruled over them, city after city would revolt and independent rival states be set up. This new system, however, would not result in peace and security because of the jealousies of the various names, or counties, as we might call them.

“And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand of a cruel lord; and a fierce king shall rule over them, saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts. And the waters shall fail from the sea, and the river shall be wasted and dried up. And they shall turn the rivers far away; and the brooks of defense shall be emptied and dried up: the reeds and flags shall wither. The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and every thing sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more. The fishers also shall mourn, and all they that cast angle into the brooks shall lament, and they that spread nets upon the waters shall languish. Moreover they that work in fine flax, and they that weave networks, shall be confounded. And they shall be broken in the purposes thereof, all that make sluices and ponds for fish” (verses 4-10).

After some years of almost constant civil war and internal strife, history records the rise of a cruel and tyrannical leader known as Psammetichus who founded a new dynasty and succeeded in bringing about at least an outward semblance of unity. He is generally considered to be the “cruel lord” referred to in verse 4. On the other hand, a question may be raised as to whether all that we have here was to follow in immediate sequence.

Some have thought that the prophecy looked on to the day when Egypt would be so weakened that she would be powerless to resist the onslaught of the Arabs and, later, the Ottoman Turks, and that the cruel lord referred not to anyone individual but to the succession of Ottoman rulers who subjected Egypt to the very hardest servitude and taxed the people so as to reduce them to the most desperate poverty.

The verses that follow tell of the destruction of all of the great commercial enterprises in which Egypt once excelled, and the centuries since bear witness to the literal fulfillment of these prophecies. In some way the great fishing industry of Egypt was brought to an end and the Nile that once abounded with fish ceased to be productive. Egypt, at one time the center of the papyrus industry which in olden times took the place of the paper to which we are now accustomed, ceased to produce this material because the papyrus plant no longer grew in quantities on the banks of the Nile.

It is a well known fact that Egyptian linens were exported into all civilized lands and this industry was a source of enormous income to the merchants of that land, but singularly enough and in exact accord with this prophecy, the production of flax came almost to an end, and that which had been an Egyptian monopoly was taken up by other nations and Egypt never since has been a linen-producing country to any serious extent. So literally have these prophetic words been fulfilled.

“Surely the princes of Zoan are fools, the counsel of the wise counsellors of Pharaoh is become brutish: how say ye unto Pharaoh, I am the son of the wise, the son of ancient kings? Where are they? where are thy wise men? and let them tell thee now, and let them know what the Lord of hosts hath purposed upon Egypt. The princes of Zoan are become fools, the princes of Noph are deceived; they have also seduced Egypt, even they that are the stay of the tribes thereof. The Lord hath mingled a perverse spirit in the midst thereof: and they have caused Egypt to err in every work thereof, as a drunken man staggereth in his vomit. Neither shall there be any work for Egypt, which the head or tail, branch or rush, may do” (verses 11-15).

The prophecy definitely depicts a time of great business depression and political perplexity when Pharaoh's counselors proved themselves unable to handle the situation aright. Their advice offered no real solution of the problems that the nation was facing. The princes of Zoan (the Egyptian Tanis), and of Noph (known to us as Memphis), sought in vain for a way out of the conditions that confronted them.

The reason for their failure comes out clearly in the closing verses of this section. They refused to turn to the only One who could have helped them, that is the God of Israel, whom they had despised. Therefore, they were like drunken men, unable to control themselves or their country, a spirit of perversity having taken hold upon them.

In all that we have seen thus far, we are again reminded of that which comes out so plainly in other parts of Scripture, that Egypt is a type of this present evil world - that godless system which once held the people of God in bondage when they were made to serve with rigor under the lashing of the lusts of the flesh.

This world has grown no better throughout all the centuries during which the gospel has been preached and the Lord has been taking out a people for His name. Rather has it become hardened in its attitude toward God and His Word; **“Evil men and seducers,”** we are told, **“shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived”** (II Timothy 3:13). Nor will this state of things be changed until the now-rejected Christ returns from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who know not God. Then will His kingdom of righteousness supersede all the kingdoms that man has set up and **“the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.”**

Starting with verse 16, we have five distinct sections each beginning with the words **“In that day,”** all therefore looking forward to the Day of the Lord, the day of the Lord’s triumph.

In that day shall Egypt be like unto women: and it shall be afraid and fear because of the shaking of the hand of the Lord of hosts, which he shaketh over it. And the land of Judah shall be a terror unto Egypt, every one that maketh mention thereof shall be afraid in himself, because of the counsel of the Lord of hosts, which he hath determined against it” (verses 16, 17).

There is a very definite sense in which these words are even now in course of fulfillment. We have seen Israel returning in unbelief to her own land and one of her chief adversaries has been the nation of Egypt, which appears to dread the growing power of the nation once enslaved by the Pharaohs.

But according to these verses the acknowledged weakness of Egypt and the recognition of God’s manifested power in permitting the resettlement of His people in their own land, will prove to be the precursor of blessing, and Egyptian enmity will come to an end in the day that Israel shall turn to God in repentance and receive the Messiah they once rejected. But if we take the prophecy as having to do with the times shortly following Isaiah’s day, we see only the fear of Egypt, as of old, lest the Israelites should multiply and become stronger than they. However, Judah was carried away by Babylon and for the time being the Lord’s testimony ceased to exist in the land of Palestine.

“In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of Canaan, and swear to the Lord of hosts; one shall be called, The city of destruction” (verse 18).

Commentators generally refer this prophecy to the migration of many of the Jews to the land of Egypt following the destruction of the first temple. We know from history that the day came when many thousands of Israelites dwelt in the cities of Egypt and synagogues were erected there and the law of Moses read and taught. It may be that it is to this the verse refers, but there is also the possibility that it is looking on to a future day when the relations of the Egyptians and the Jews shall become very close indeed, as both together shall acknowledge the one true and living God. The City of Destruction mentioned here is generally considered to be Heliopolis, *“The City of the Sun.”* Its Hebrew name was Ir-ha-cheres, which by the change of one letter became Ir-ha-heres, *“The City of Destruction.”* John Bunyan was wisely guided when he selected this as the name for the original home of his Pilgrim, who declared that he was born in the City of Destruction, and had the name, Graceless.

“In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord. And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt: for they shall cry unto the Lord because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a Saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them. And the Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it. And the Lord shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the Lord, and he shall be intreated of them, and shall heal them” (verses 19-22).

Many have been the conjectures as to the real meaning of this passage. Most of us are familiar with the views of the Anglo-Israelites and others, even including the founder of the Russellite Movement, now known as “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” who maintain that the altar and pillar here spoken of refer to the Great Pyramid. This pyramid is supposed to have been erected by divine instruction and the length of its passages, etc., to indicate the exact period of the Times of the Gentiles, and many theories have been founded upon it as to the time when this age would end by the coming of the Lord Jesus. But all the dates once suggested have expired and still the word remains true that of that day and hour knoweth no man. The Great Pyramid is not an altar nor is it a pillar. It is simply a gigantic tomb.

It seems evident that in the last days when Egypt shall turn to the Lord, this altar and pillar in the form of a memorial of some kind where worship is offered to the Lord, will be set up in the border of Egypt, but it is useless to speculate where God has withheld further information. Surely, however, the Saviour yet to be sent to Egypt can be none other than our blessed Lord Jesus who, after Egypt has learned its lesson because of the judgments that have been poured upon it, will heal it and bring it into lasting blessing.

In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians” (verse 23).

This surely refers to millennial days when these two great Gentile powers, or perhaps more accurately, the people who shall dwell in their lands in that day, will have friendly commercial relations with one another and, with Israel, will be recognized as the people of the Lord. See also Isaiah 35:8-10. Then these one-time warring powers will be brought into fullness of blessing as we read in the next two verses.

“In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land: whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance” (verses 24, 25).

Thus we see Jew and Gentile enjoying together the blessings of the promised kingdom when the Lord Himself takes over the government of the universe.

The twentieth chapter still refers to God’s dealing with Egypt, but now a definite date is given.

“In the year that Tartan came unto Ashdod, (when Sargon the king of Assyria sent him,) and fought against Ashdod, and took it; at the same time spake the Lord by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, Go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from thy foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot. And the Lord said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia; so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians prisoners, and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with their buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. And they shall be afraid and ashamed of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory. And the inhabitant of this isle shall say in that day, Behold, such is our expectation, whither we flee for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria: and how shall we escape? (chapter 20).

Sargon, the king of Assyria, was unknown to history until his name was, in our times, found upon monuments, and thus Isaiah’s record confirmed. Scripture does not need to be vindicated by the often conflicting histories of ancient times nor by archaeological inscriptions, for we may be sure of this, the Bible is God’s inerrant Word and therefore always right, even though some of the ancient records might be in conflict with it; but again and again it has pleased God through the spade of the archaeologist to give full confirmation of the truth of His Word concerning doubts and questions that unbelievers have been only too glad to raise.

Sargon exercised tremendous power though but for a short time. Isaiah was commanded by God to become a sign to the Egyptians of the hardships that would be brought upon them by the Assyrian armies. He was commanded to lay aside his outer garments and put off his sandals and walk **“naked and barefoot”** before the people as an indication of the circumstances the Egyptians would have to face. Observe, it was not nudity but nakedness that was commanded.

To an Oriental, the laying aside of his long robe gave him the appearance of nakedness, and it was in this way that Isaiah became a sign. Others have pointed out that we are not here told that the prophet had to go about in this manner for the three years of Egyptian punishment, but that in all likelihood, three days on his part answered to the three years in which they were to suffer. As to the rest of this chapter, in their desperation the Egyptians would recognize their helplessness and cry out for a deliverer.

That Deliverer was yet to be revealed, as we have seen, in the coming Day of the Lord.

~ end of chapter 19, 20 ~

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