

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTERS FIFTEEN AND SIXTEEN

THE BURDEN OF MOAB

IN THE SHORT FIFTEENTH CHAPTER the prophet predicts the eventual destruction of Moab. The country bearing this name lay to the north of the land of Edom and was bounded on the west by the Dead Sea and on the east by the Arabian Desert. The north boundary ordinarily was the River Arnon though, owing to frequent strife with the Ammonites, the border changed from time to time so that occasionally it extended some miles north of this river.

The Moabites were descended from the illegitimate son of Lot and his eldest daughter by incestuous relationship. Moab, therefore, might picture for us those who make a profession of being children of God while actually with no legitimate claim to that name. In other words, Moab may represent to us the easy-going religious profession with which many are contented who fail to recognize the importance of the new birth. Generally speaking, Moab was somewhat friendly toward Israel but when the nation was first passing through their borders on the way to their inheritance in the Promised Land, Balak was fearful of being destroyed by them and so hired Balaam, the son of Beor, to curse them, but as we know, God turned the curse into a blessing.

The book of Ruth tells us of the visit of Elimelech and his family to Moab in the time of famine and the unhappy results of that period of sojourn. When David was pursued by Saul he took his parents to the country of Moab and put them under the protection of its king, but as the years went on Moab, like Edom, became an enemy of Israel, for no matter how friendly religious professors may seem to be at times to the true children of God, the day always comes when they resent what seems to them to be the assumed superiority of those who really know the Lord. So from time to time we find Moab allied with the enemies of Israel and Judah.

Isaiah here depicts most graphically the day of their destruction.

“The burden of Moab. Because in the night Ar of Moab is laid waste, and brought to silence; because in the night Kir of Moab is laid waste, and brought to silence; he is gone up to Bajith, and to Dibon, the high places, to weep: Moab shall howl over Nebo, and over Medeba: on all their heads shall be baldness, and every beard cut off.

“In their streets they shall gird themselves with sackcloth: on the tops of their houses, and in their streets, every one shall howl, weeping abundantly. And Heshbon shall cry, and Elealeh: their voice shall be heard even unto Jahaz: therefore the armed soldiers of Moab shall cry out; his life shall be grievous unto him. My heart shall cry out for Moab; his fugitives shall flee unto Zoar, an heifer of three years old: for by the mounting up of Luhith with weeping shall they go it up: for in the way of Horonaim they shall raise up a cry of destruction. For the waters of Nimrim shall be desolate: for the hay is withered away, the grass faileth, there is no green thing. Therefore the abundance they have gotten, and that which they have laid up, shall they carry away to the brook of the willows. For the cry is gone round about the borders of Moab; the howling thereof unto Eglaim, and the howling thereof unto Beerelim. For the waters of Dimon shall be full of blood: for I will bring more upon Dimon, lions upon him that escapeth of Moab, and upon the remnant of the land” (chapter 16).

When or how all these predictions had their initial fulfillment in the past we may not be familiar enough with history to know, but the day came when Moab was utterly destroyed as a nation and for centuries their land has been inhabited by the Arabians of the desert. Their destruction evidently came about to a great extent through the armies of Assyria and, later, of Babylonia. Their doom may be looked upon as a solemn warning of the judgment that will fall at last upon those who have a name to live but are dead toward God and are content to go on with an empty profession instead of turning to God in repentance and finding new life in Christ.

The following chapter continues the subject, bringing before us first of all an earnest entreaty on the part of the Lord Himself for Moab to turn from its enmity against His people and meet their ambassadors in a spirit of friendliness.

“Send ye the lamb to the ruler of the land from Sela to the wilderness, unto the mount of the daughter of Zion. For it shall be, that, as a wandering bird cast out of the nest, so the daughters of Moab shall be at the fords of Arnon. Take counsel, execute Judgment; make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the outcasts; bewray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee, Moab; be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler: for the extortioner is at an end, the spoiler ceaseth, the oppressors are consumed out of the land” (16:1-4).

Moab was devoted largely to the raising of sheep and cattle, and during the reigns of David and Solomon and even later, paid tribute to Israel and Judah by sending annually a specified number of their flocks and herds. In Isaiah's day they had revolted and refused to continue to pay this tribute. The prophet, speaking by divine inspiration, pleads with them to send the lamb again to the ruler of the land, that is, the land of Israel, and to cease acting vindictively toward those who fled across the Jordan for refuge when in terror of invading armies.

By thus manifesting friendliness to the Lord's people Moab might, at least for the time being, avert her judgment. To what extent the prophet's words influenced this nation at that time, we do not have any way of knowing. The prophecy goes on to emphasize the authority given to the prince who sat upon David's throne, but looks on to the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed King, who was to sit upon this throne and rule the nations in righteousness.

“And in mercy shall the throne be established: and he shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging, and seeking judgment, and hastening righteousness” (verse 5).

It would seem, however, that there was no response to the plea made above. Instead, the Moabites met the pleadings of the prophet with coldness and arrogance, therefore judgment must take its course.

“We have heard of the pride of Moab; he is very proud: even of his haughtiness, and his pride, and his wrath: but his lies shall not be so. Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab, every one shall howl: for the foundations of Kir-hareseth shall ye mourn; surely they are stricken. For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmah: the lords of the heathen have broken down the principal plants thereof, they are come even unto Jazer, they wandered through the wilderness: her branches are stretched out, they are gone over the sea. Therefore I will bewail with the weeping of Jazer the vine of Sibmah: I will water thee with my tears, O Heshbon, and Elealeh: for the shouting for thy summer fruits and for thy harvest is fallen. And gladness is taken away, and joy out of the plentiful field; and in the vineyards there shall be no singing, neither shall there be shouting: the treading shall tread out no wine in their presses; I have made their vintage shouting to cease. Wherefore my bowels shall sound like an harp for Moab, and mine inward parts for Kir-harsh. And it shall come to pass, when it is seen that Moab is weary on the high place, that he shall come to his sanctuary to pray; but he shall not prevail” (verses 6-12).

Like many another people with whom God has pleaded earnestly through His prophets, beseeching them to turn from their evil ways and submit to His authority, the leaders of Moab met the prophet's entreaties with defiance and refused to give heed to the call to be subject to the God of Israel. Therefore there was no hope of recovery but they were to be exposed to the ravages of the armies of Assyria; first of all under Sennacherib and then under other leaders, till their national existence was brought to an end. The language used by the prophet is stirring indeed and indicates how deeply he, himself, yearned for the deliverance of Moab and longed to see them yield to the commands of the Lord. A preliminary judgment is predicted in the last two verses of the chapter.

“This is the word that the Lord hath spoken concerning Moab since that time. But now the Lord hath spoken, saying, Within three years, as the years of an hireling, and the glory of Moab shall be contemned, with all that great multitude; and the remnant shall be very small and feeble” (verses 13, 14).

Just when or how these words were fulfilled we may not know because of lack of familiarity with the ancient records - records which have, to a great extent, now been destroyed - but we may be certain that the prophecy was fulfilled as predicted and Moab's destruction began in Isaiah's day.

~ end of chapter 15, 16 ~

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