

Israel and the Middle East

"And the Lord shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the Lord, and he shall be entreated of them, and shall heal them. In that day there shall 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. 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.'"—Isaiah 19:22-25

Introduction

A number of years ago this subject was discussed in a magazine article in an effort to furnish an answer to the question: When and how will this prophecy of Isaiah be fulfilled? At that time it was observed that the passage on which our question is based is only part of a section of the book of Isaiah devoted to predictions about the final end of all nations. Commencing with the thirteenth chapter that mentions, in order, the "burden" or "doom" of Babylon (in which is included Assyria, these two kingdoms being viewed as successive stages of one and the same power), followed by the "dooms" predicted for Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and finally the doom of Egypt which is portrayed in the nineteenth chapter to which our question relates.

It has been suggested that aside from such partial fulfillments as may or may not have occurred, historically to date, its complete fulfillment is still future. When, in the future? We cannot say precisely. It will be in that day—the day long promised in prophecy. It will be early in that day. How will the prophecy be fulfilled? We are not sure.

The first two paragraphs were written nearly two years before the May 14, 1948 termination of the British mandate and the birth of the Jewish State of Israel. Since then that nation, both its people and its land, has been making worldwide headlines. And it seems the frequency of their place in the news increases as time goes on.

What is God's Plan for Israel?

And why should both Jew and Gentile alike be interested? God's plan for Israel is an important feature of his plan for all mankind. Israel is the nation that God chose: they are his chosen people, not chosen for favoritism but for service. It is through them that God shall channel his blessing to all mankind.

God First Selected Abraham

We must refer to the first book of the Bible in order to get the record of this transaction straight. There, in the twelfth chapter of Genesis, verses one through three, we read of a promise made by God to Abraham (whose name at that time was Abram):

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee [and in thy seed - 22:18] shall all families of the earth be blessed."

Unquestionably, God has fulfilled a part of this promise. He has certainly made the name of Abraham great. Not only can many people around the world tell us more about Abraham than about their own grandparents, but moreover he has been a central character to three of the great world religions: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim.

The selection of Abram did not go to his head as so wonderful a promise might easily have done. But lest it should adversely affect his children, Israel was expressly informed that they had not been chosen because they were a great nation. They had been chosen for precisely the opposite reason. Hear the words of Moses on this point: "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were

the fewest of all people" (Deut. 7:7).

Very early in the Bible story we find that God supplemented his original promise to Abraham. God said, further, that Abraham and his seed would become a channel of blessing to all men. The seed was also to inherit land. No sooner had Abraham obeyed God's commandment and traveled to a land to which God had guided him than he was given another promise by God: "Unto thy seed will I give this land" (Gen. 12:7). This promise, too, is expanded upon in time:

"Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed [for how long? for 100 years? NO!] for ever" (Gen. 13:14, 15).

"Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee" (Gen. 13:17). "And to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). Some might inquire how the fulfillment of the promise has fared. First, we note that it was not realized by Abraham personally. However, it was confirmed to his son Isaac (Gen. 26:23,24). It was confirmed again to Isaac's son Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen. 28:10-15; 32:12; 35:9-15). After them the promise passed to Israel's twelve sons and to the nation of which they were the tribal heads.

After their experience in Egypt and their deliverance by the hand of Moses from that land, the children of Israel were led into Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. There in the land of promise they dwelt for centuries and experienced the special favor of God. With them God dealt as with no other nation (Psa. 147:19,20). According to his promises (cf. Lev. 26), he blessed them in basket and store as long as they tried to walk in his counsels. He also chastised them when they deviated from the paths of truth and righteousness, so that their national conscience might be kept tender. While they walked in his statutes he sent them rain in its season and blessed their crops. Their enemies fled from them.

On the other hand, when as a nation they departed from the ways of God, exactly the reverse conditions were permitted to come upon them. Rain was withheld. Crops failed. They were defeated in battle. Those not slain were taken captive. And then, since this treatment proved unavailing, the "seven times" of punishment predicted in Leviticus (26) took effect.

Gentile Times

On the theoretical level some may choose to question whether the expression "seven times" has any chronological significance. On the historical level, however, facts have shown that this was indeed the case. Israel became subject to gentile rule for a long period of time. The length of that period was to be the same as that covered by two of the prophecies contained in the Book of Daniel. One of these was that of the great image seen in a dream by the Babylonian monarch, Nebuchadnezzar (chap. 2); the other was Daniel's own vision of four wild beasts (chap. 7). The meaning of these two prophecies is not left to surmise. Each is interpreted in the Scriptures themselves. They represent four gentile world empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, which in one form or another have held control of the earth from that day until now.

The Old Testament provides us with a remarkable scale for computing the lengths of these two periods. It is known as the year/day scale. That is, each day in prophecy stands as a symbol for a year. A year, sometimes called a "time" and counted as containing three hundred and sixty year "days," stands as a symbol of three hundred and sixty years. This scale is subject to minor modifications, depending on whether lunar, calendar, or solar years are intended. Such minor modifications are, of course, important and must not be overlooked when students are seeking precise computations. However, a detailed consideration of them would go far beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say now that using the year/day scale the "Gentile Times" are seen as extending over a period of two thousand five hundred twenty years.

That the year/day scale is a key provided by God himself becomes clear when we find that it is used in all of the scriptural time prophecies, not only that of Nebuchadnezzar's image and Daniel's four beasts.

Speaking in broad themes we may say that as far as Israel was concerned the characteristics of this period were

these three:

- 1) Jewish loss of dominion and independence and their subjugation to and suffering under gentile conquerors;
- 2) Dispersion of the Jews;
- 3) Desolation of their land.

The period of "Gentile Times" would affect three factors of Israel's national life:

- 1) The land;
- 2) The throne;
- 3) The temple.

Insofar as **the land** was concerned the period extended from the desolation of the land by Babylon to the restoration of the Jews to Palestine.

Insofar as **their throne** was concerned it would extend from the fall of Zedekiah (their last king) to the restoration of the throne under Shiloh.

Insofar as **the temple** was concerned, it would extend from the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem to the reestablishment of the worship of God on Mount Zion.

Stated very precisely, we may then say that immediately prior to the beginning of "Gentile Times" the Jewish monarchy was recognized by God and that immediately after the close of that long period God's kingdom is scheduled to be established on earth.

Israel's Double

Another striking set of prophecies concerning Israel should also be discussed. This is what the Scriptures three times refer to as Israel's "double." Israel enjoyed the favor of God from the time she became a nation at Jacob's death. That favor was continual until, for reasons all too apparent, it was necessarily withdrawn. She was to suffer disfavor for a period of time equaling whatever the length of the period of favor had been. Only when this "disfavor" had been completed could she be returned to a position of favor with God. Let us hear the testimony of three prophets on this matter.

1) **Jeremiah** says that the days would come when God would bring about such a wonderful deliverance for Israel that his former miraculous deliverance from Egypt at the hand of Moses would fade into insignificance (16:14, 15). In verse eighteen he adds a further statement: "First I will recompense their iniquity and their sin double."

2) **Zechariah** predicts the coming of Messiah (9:9-12). Then, speaking for Jehovah, he addresses Israel in these remarkable words: "Turn ye to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope: even to day do I declare that I will render double unto thee." Here the word "double" is translated from the Hebrew word *mishneh* as in the prophecy by Jeremiah. Its meaning is: a "second portion" or a "repetition."

3) A third prophet, **Isaiah**, testifies concerning the same matter this way:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her appointed time is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1, 2, see margin).

The Hebrew word for "double" here is *kephel* which signifies "double" in the sense of a thing having been folded in the middle.

We note, in connection with these three prophecies, that the prophets varied their points of view, "sometimes speaking of future and speaking from that standpoint."

No better illustration of this principle of different prophetic points of view can be given than the three prophecies related to Israel's "double" already noticed.

Jeremiah told that days would come when God would scatter them among all nations and that when they had received their double he would gather them again by a display of power far greater than that used when they were delivered from Egyptian bondage. Zechariah speaks as though he were living in the time of Messiah's offering of himself to Israel as their king. He tells us that in that very day their double began to count. Isaiah takes his position still further down the stream of time, as though he were living at the very end of that period. He announces the message of comfort to Israel: that her double is completed.

That these prophets lived hundreds of years apart and wrote things contrary to Israel's expectations only serves to increase the force of their words.

One more Scripture bears on this phase of our topic. "Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favor her, yea, the set time, is come" (Psa. 102:13). Evidently the same spirit which operated in Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Isaiah also inspired the Psalmist. Yes, the time to favor Zion, "yea, the set time, is come."

What is it to be? Is there any way of determining? Without taking a dogmatic position we may say quite accurately, within the realms of approximation, what is our position on the stream of time. We will not attempt to treat this issue at length here, but will deal, in general, with this one thought: The "Gentile Times" and "Israel's double" are not measured from one particular year to another but from one era to another.

This is so because the rise or fall of entire nations must, by their very nature, take place over some period of time. The fall of Israel and Judah covered a period of one hundred sixty years, culminating in the overthrow of Zedekiah. We should not be surprised to find that their restoration will also occur over a period of years, decades, or even longer. What should we look for? A thunderbolt from the skies? No. We should look for a noticeable change in the trend of events. We should be watching and analyzing the signs of the times; noting how they fit into the prophetic forecasts.

Messiah

Let's go back to considering Abraham to notice another point or two that we intentionally omitted in our earlier comments. Notice first that the promise was not confirmed to all of Abraham's children. Ishmael was not included. Isaac only received the confirmation of the promise. And again, not all of Isaac's children received the confirmation. Esau was passed by in favor of Jacob. And in the case of Jacob and his children we notice that carefulness of his deathbed blessing. All of Jacob's children received some blessing. But Jacob saw and predicted that the throne as distinguished from the land would be limited to the tribe of Judah. Moreover, even within Judah the long anticipated throne was promised to but one individual by the dying Jacob. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Gen. 49:10).

It must have been this same great one of whom Ezekiel spoke when he addressed Zedekiah:

"Thou, profane wicked prince of Israel . . . Thus saith the Lord GOD; Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: . . . I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him" (Ezek. 21:25-27).

With even this simple, seemingly cursory examination we are finding that the promise to Abraham contained much more than first appears—and, doubtless, much more than even Abraham himself realized. It becomes apparent that the promise comprised two parts: First, there was the natural seed of Abraham, the nation of Israel. To them he promised an inheritance in the land. That promise will still be kept. And not only so, but through them God's blessing of everlasting life and all earthly favors will be channeled to the gentiles in due time.

Secondly, there was another part of the promise. This too shall be fulfilled. It was to be the inheritance of one worthy of honor: Israel's great Messiah.

Moses had seen this in prophecy. "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet . . . like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken" (Deut. 18:15-19). David too speaks of Messiah. He is called David's "Lord," or superior, and is spoken of as destined to be a greater king than even David (Psa. 110:1). In verse four he explains that he had seen God (in a vision) addressing his great Messiah as a priest—a priest who occupied a much greater station than had the high priest Aaron. This Messiah was to be a priest who would not function for just a few brief years only to die and be replaced by some successor. Messiah was to serve as a priest for an entire age: a priest after the order of Melchizedek. You may recall who Melchizedek was, being both a king and a priest before whom even mighty Abraham did homage by paying him tithes and receiving a blessing.

This great prophet, priest, and king is not a man, like Moses, Melchizedek, or David. He is to be a highly exalted spirit being, the very Son of God. And it is he in whom the great Jehovah delights to honor. Of him the second Psalm says, "Jehovah saith unto me, Thou art my Son; . . . Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession."

Israel Restored

Earlier we suggested that careful attention be paid to the signs of the times. By noting what transpires around us we may more easily learn where we fit on the stream of time.

With regard to Israel, specifically, the unanimous testimony of the Old Testament prophets tell us to look at three main avenues:

- 1.) Restoration of the land,
- 2.) Restoration to the land,
- 3.) Restoration to God.

The land is to be recovered from the desolation in which it had lain during the period of gentile rule. Isaiah had a wonderful way of expressing it: "The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose . . . in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert." We ask, then, "Is this sign in evidence today?" A man would have to be blind indeed not to see the evidence of this prophecy being fulfilled. Restoration of the land may not yet be complete, but the economic growth of the country in recent years (agriculturally, industrially, socially) has been nothing short of miraculous. And this has been true in spite of hardships, difficulties, war, and economic distress which have troubled the nation of Israel over the past forty years.

What of the second sign? Are there indications that the people of Israel are being restored to the land? Oh, yes indeed! Looking as far back as 1878, over one hundred years ago, the Berlin congress signaled the beginning of a change of status for Israel. That conference was the most remarked upon stage in the downfall of the Ottoman power—a stage in the dismembering of the Turkish Empire. By the end of World War I this power was to be completely destroyed.

It was surely no mere coincidence, either, that when British General Allenby captured Jerusalem from the Turks (without firing a shot) he did so on the date December 9, 1917—exactly 1335 lunar years from the starting point of the Mohammedan calendar. Daniel (twelfth chapter) has something to say about a symbolic period of 1335 days. While Allenby's capture of Jerusalem may not have been a complete and final fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, it is certainly remarkable—to say the least—that this event took place exactly 1335 lunar years from the birthday of that particular gentile power which, for so long, had desolated the Holy Land and trodden down Jerusalem.

Jacob's Trouble

What of the third sign? We have seen evidence of the restoration of the land. We have looked also at the regathering of the people to the land. But, is there evidence that the hearts of the people of Israel, as a nation, are returning to the God of their fathers?

It must be admitted that those signs which exist are not as pronounced as in the other two signs. The economic progress of the country (as regards both the land and the people) is still largely secular. With due respect to the devout souls living in Israel it must be said that there is little of the faith of Abraham in evidence in modern day

Israel.

We are not to be surprised by this state of affairs, though, because there are prophecies which tell us to expect just this situation. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah all caution us to expect exactly this condition. Briefly summarizing a great many Old Testament ideas, we understand the prophets to teach that there is to be, first, a regathering of a representative remnant of Israel. These are to return to the land, not in the faith of Abraham but largely in unbelief. This is what we see today and for the past forty plus years. Then there is to follow a brief period of prosperity. And following this we have the prophecy of a period of great anguish. To quote Jeremiah's words, "it is the time of Jacob's trouble" (30:7).

What is to cause this trouble which these four prophets foretell? They all speak of a gathering of nations against Israel. The most graphic of these four is found in Ezekiel (38:1-13). The Prophet names the chief actors in this yet future struggle in Palestine. However, we may not yet be too sure of their symbolic identifications.

One thing is quite sure, however, Israel's enemies will not have the final victory! Why not? How can we be so sure? Because it is the time which God himself has set for the deliverance of Israel. Israel's great Messiah will intervene. Of this there is no question. After telling us of this time of Jacob's trouble, Jeremiah goes on to say that "he shall be saved out of it." According to Zechariah (14:2,3), God will fight against Israel's enemies the way he fought in the ancient days of battle. And Isaiah, too, speaks in a similar vein (28:21).

What a wonderful day that will be in the history of Israel! It will be an hour of triumph such as never has been known! And it will be a greater triumph than even that which was theirs when God brought them out from the land of Egypt and the host of Pharaoh were lost in the Red Sea. It will be greater than their triumph over the city of Jericho when God caused those walls to fall in connection with their entry into the Promised land.

There is a greater issue here: greater, more solemn, more blessed than mere triumph and victory over one's enemies. The great victory is that of God's final conquest over Israel itself.

Formerly, God gave them victory over their enemies. But it was not long before pride arose in their hearts and they rebelled against the Rock of their salvation. This will never again occur. He, their great Messiah, comes also to subdue their hearts. Hence, as great as will be their triumph in victory, it will be achieved through their own self-abasement and tears. How can this be? How can hearts made hard by habitual unbelief and endless gainsaying be broken? Zechariah tells us: "I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and supplications" (Zech. 12:10). Elsewhere, Jeremiah speaks in this vein:

"I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD,

"But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD, for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:31- 34).

Egypt's National Preservation Assured

This will not be true only of Israel. No! It will also be true of Egypt and Assyria (present day Iraq). Dr. Arthur W. Kac has noted in an article:

"Many of the nations in the ancient world have disappeared forever in accordance with Bible prophecy, but in the case of Egypt we have a definite assurance in God's Word that her national life shall not be extinguished. On the contrary, God has a future for Egypt. The passage in Jeremiah painting a gloomy picture of the destruction of Egypt at the hand of the people of the north concludes with this significant statement: 'And afterward it [i.e., Egypt] shall be inhabited, as in the days of old, saith Jehovah' (Jeremiah 46:26).

Egypt's Spiritual Regeneration

"Since God has decreed that Egypt shall not perish from the earth, the purpose of the many afflictions heaped upon her is not merely to punish her, but to rid her of her vain pride, to cause her to forsake the errors of her ways, to give up her false doctrines and philosophies, and come to a saving knowledge of Jehovah and place her trust in him. That this is the aim which God will accomplish through his judgements upon Egypt may be seen through the frequency with which the phrase `and they shall know that I am Jehovah' occurs in the Egypt passages in the Bible. `And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am Jehovah' (Ezek. 29:6); `and they shall know that I am Jehovah, when I have set a fire in Egypt, and all her helpers shall be destroyed' (Ezek. 30:8); `Thus will I execute judgements upon Egypt, and they shall know that I am Jehovah' (Ezek. 30:19); `When I shall make the land of Egypt desolate and waste, a land destitute of that whereof it was full, when I shall smite all them that dwell therein, then shall they know that I am Jehovah' (Ezek. 32:15); `Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, saith. Behold, I will punish Amon of No [name of the supreme god of the Egyptians], and Pharaoh and Egypt, with her gods, and her kings; even Pharaoh, and them that trust in him' (Jer. 46:25). The true purpose of the chastisement of Egypt is nowhere expressed better than the following passage in Isaiah: `and Jehovah will smite Egypt, smiting and healing, and they shall return unto Jehovah, and he will be entreated of them, and will heal them' (Isa. 19:22)." Egypt's conversion to the God of Israel is more fully described in the second half of the nineteenth chapter of Isaiah: "In that day shall there be an altar to Jehovah in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to Jehovah. And Jehovah shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know Jehovah in that day" (Isa. 19:19,21).

That the Egyptian people have never fully experienced the kind of spiritual transformation spoken of in Isaiah (19:19-22) is quite certain. This may be easily seen from an examination of the concluding passage of this chapter of Isaiah describing the striking changes which are to take place in Egypt's international relations as a result of her spiritual regeneration.

A New Day For the Near East

"In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, . . . and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians. In that day shall Israel be the third with ... Assyria, 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" (Isa. 19:23-25). To grasp the full significance of the closing passage of this great chapter one must also appreciate the history of the Middle East in the centuries preceding and concurrent with the writing of this prophecy. The Near East, or Middle East, was the known and civilized world of ancient history. On the southwest border of this world was Egypt, with Assyria at the Northeast border of the "world." Israel lay between these two great empires. For centuries the world was dominated by either Egypt or Assyria. Israel's position was that of a buffer state between these two great powers, similar to Poland's position between Germany and Russia. If Israel favored Egypt she incurred the wrath of Assyria, and vice versa. Israel often found herself the battlefield where these two opposing forces met. The rivalry between them never ceased: until both were struck down by the rising power of Persia. Now, after twenty five hundred years, Assyria, Egypt, and Israel have regained political existence and along with renewed political existence they have renewed their traditional rivalry.

It is this rivalry between Egypt and Iraq that paves the way for Russian penetration into the region. Hostility to Israel among Arab states is exploited by Russia and the Arab politicians in the same way it was done by the Nazis. The Nazis hated the Jews, but they also hated other nationalities. Anti-Semitism was used by the Nazis as a screen to conceal the real Nazi aim, which was world conquest.

The Arab states, with a population of over 173,000,000, whose territories contain vast uninhabited spaces, know well that tiny Israel, whose population of little more than 5,200,000 is squeezed into a small corner of the Middle East, does not threaten the Arabs. It is the Arabs who since 1948 have been raiding Israel's territory, pillaging the countryside, and killing peaceful citizens. The Arabs know that they can have peace with Israel any time they desire peace. We find that the anti-Israel schemes of Arab governments have been part of their own plans for mastery in the region.

The meaning of the closing portion of Isaiah nineteen is a demonstration of just how catastrophic the rivalry between Egypt and Iraq will be. It will not cease until both these nations, humbled by defeats and suffering, will

surrender themselves to Jehovah, the God of Israel. When that day comes there will be a highway between Egypt and Iraq; the two nations will mix and mingle freely and unite as friends instead of being divided as enemies. This newly found friendship and cooperation between Egypt and Iraq will be reinforced by a covenant, or pact with Israel, who at that time will be a blessing not only to the Middle East but to the whole world.

All Men Blessed

Yes! All mankind will then be blessed through Israel as God promised to Abraham. The Prophet Isaiah tells us this in chapter two and verse four. So also the Prophet Micah states in chapter four, verses one through three. Listen:

"In the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain [or kingdom] of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains [that is, overruling all other kingdoms], and it shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

"And many nations shall come, and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths.' . . .

"And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."