



Malvern Mashal 6

The Voice of the Prophet: A Study of Isaiah 19

If there is one prophet above all others whom one could say has a 'world' vision, you would have to go for Isaiah. As we follow the rise and fall of his soaring visions, and heed the passionate challenges that pierce our habitual complacency, we know at once that we are in the presence of vision and genius of a kind that surpasses even Shakespeare's plays or Bach's music.

My gaze was drawn this week to the proclamation against Egypt in chapter 19 – one of the less well-known chapters in the series of visions that describe the universal impact of the kingdom of God (13:1-27:13). If the early chapters provide reassurance that despite the sinfulness of the nation, there would still be a faithful remnant for the Lord, in these middle chapters we see that God has a global vision, and that there will be representatives of his Messianic kingdom in every part of the world. That most certainly includes the nation that the Israelites were more instinctively wary of: the land of their former captivity. Egypt, which is the focus of this chapter, stands not only for the literal nation but also for that 'worldliness' that we are called to avoid, and for the Gentile nations that the Lord longs to redeem. Much must first be levelled, however, before He can raise either people or nations up. Isaiah brilliantly expounds the reasons why the Lord is entering into judgment with the peoples on Earth. This judgment is neither random nor cruel but rather purifying. God disciplines nations but yet protects and arranges history to fulfil His purposes in favour of His beloved ones. The chapter concludes with the promise that God is going to do something truly amazing to bless the people who have made life so difficult for Israel. (19:18-25)



Maintain right Priorities

Before we turn our attention to these remarkable blessings, however, we must face the implications of the Lord's rebuke to Egypt. There is much here that it is in line with what He is saying to us today. It is so important when pressures increase and times are tight that we hold to our priorities and do not to compromise them in favour of expediency. Israel was constantly tempted to do this by forming an alliance with Egypt, if only because it appeared to be the one world power that was capable of curbing the cruel and relentless advance of the Assyrian military machine.

- Whenever the politically ambitious leaders of Israel tried to enlist closer cooperation with Egypt, Isaiah opposed them, foreseeing nothing but disaster in aligning themselves with a nation whose outlook was so far from that of the Lord their God.
- Read chapters 30:1-5 and 31:1-3, and ponder how guilty we in Britain and the USA are in this respect. How can we expect to find permanent answers from government, science, financial institutions, education or medicine if we are not prepared to seek the Lord and His strength? There comes a time when God decides that He has had enough and allows events to unfold that overthrow the status quo. What evidence is there that this is happening again in our own day?
- Let the Lord speak to you about any false alliances you may be in danger of making too.

Smiting and Healing: The Lord's dealings with Egypt

*This message came to me concerning Egypt:
Look! The Lord is advancing against Egypt,
riding on a swift cloud.
The idols of Egypt tremble.
The hearts of the Egyptians melt with fear.*

The first thing that develops as we grow in understanding the prophetic voice is a profound awareness that whatever comes on the land does not emerge primarily as a result of political economic or social considerations but because of the Lord's own actions.

- The picture of the Lord riding on the heavens and advancing towards Egypt is a marvelous reminder first of His sovereignty and then of His intention to take direct action. (cf Psalm 18:9-14)
- I always feel a spine-tingling thrill when reading the Narnia books when it becomes clear that Aslan is on the move. That means blessing for all true Narnians – but quite the reverse for those who have chosen the wrong side. What will be the *first* effect of the Lord's coming? Not so much joy and delight but rather a profound weakening of people's confidence *in* and self-satisfaction *with* the things that have sustained them thus far in their lives.
- The word *idols* literally means 'no gods'. In order to humble Egypt, God had to demonstrate that Egypt's gods were utterly powerless. Jesus has much to say about people's hearts melting with fear, but this kind of fear can be a prelude to repentance.¹

Demoralisation that leads to Despotism

*I will make Egyptian fight against Egyptian—
brother against brother,
neighbour against neighbour,
city against city,
province against province.
The Egyptians will lose heart,
and I will confuse their plans.
They will plead with their idols for wisdom
and call on spirits, mediums, and those who consult the spirits of the dead.
I will hand Egypt over
to a hard, cruel master.
A fierce king will rule them,"
says the Lord, the Lord of Heaven's Armies.*

Back in 1980 the Lord drew my attention to the book of Amos and showed me that there would be a series of gradated judgements on both Church and nation as the result of our unwillingness to put Him first. As these things unfold, there cannot but be side effects similar to what befell Egypt, as social divisions increased ten fold and national morale worsened. The history of civil wars reminds us of the extreme grief and sadness that occurs when brother fights against brother.

In the short time since the "credit crunch" began to hit home I have noticed that people are becoming noticeably more susceptible to temptation and to adopt underhand measures in order to shore up their flagging resources.

¹ For the reference to riding on swift cloud, cf the Lord's return cf Ps. 18:9-10, Rev. 1:7; 14:14

- This passage concludes by showing that many will turn to the wrong sources for help.
- The end result is something we are beginning to see in our own country in terms of the loss of civil liberties. Ultimately the way is opened up for nothing less than a dictatorship to flourish. That is why it is so important to stand for the nation at this time in prayer, that the Lord may yet spare us the worst consequences of the harsher measures we read of in the following verses.

Economic Meltdown

The waters of the Nile will fail to rise and flood the fields.

The riverbed will be parched and dry.

*The canals of the Nile will dry up,
and the streams of Egypt will stink
with rotting reeds and rushes.*

*All the greenery along the riverbank
and all the crops along the river
will dry up and blow away.*

*The fishermen will lament for lack of work.
Those who cast hooks into the Nile will groan,
and those who use nets will lose heart.*

*There will be no flax for the harvesters,
no thread for the weavers.*

*They will be in despair,
and all the workers will be sick at heart.*



God had made Egypt dependent on the Nile for irrigating its land, just as He had made Israel dependent on receiving the regular spring and autumn rains. The drying up of the Nile would make an immediate economic impact on the nation. Agriculture would be devastated, not just because certain crops had failed but because of the underlying damage that was being done through soil erosion.

- We are beginning to see the dire effects of this curse in many parts of the world today, in the great droughts affecting many parts of Australia and the USA, as well as in countries we more commonly associate with drought conditions. Many warnings are being sounded that water, rather than oil, is the most likely cause of future conflict in the Middle East.¹
- Verse 8 describes something we also have been seeing only too poignantly in recent years, especially as it affects the east Coast of Scotland: the severe curtailing of the fishing industry.²
- Verses 9-10 shows a decline of the manufacturing industries such as we have long been witnessing in the UK. Many of us had long realised that having reduced the manufacturing base of our economy in favour of a serviced economy, we would be at enormous risk were that industry itself to be hard hit (especially the banking sector). Pray for all who are affected by this, not only on the effect of their take-home pay and all that goes with that, but also on their morale.

¹ <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/natres/waterindex.htm> For an overview of world water shortages see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/in_depth/world/2000/world_water_crisis/default.stm and follow the excellent links. For Texas see <http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/02/12/america/12drought.php>

² Type the words 'Fishing Industry & Collapse' into Google and the results are a predictable reminder that this is an issue that requires urgent prayer.

Isaiah denounces the Folly of the Politicians

*What fools the officials of Zoa are!
Their best counsel to the king of Egypt is stupid and wrong.
Will they still boast to Pharaoh of their wisdom?
Will they dare brag about all their wise ancestors?
Where are your wise counselors, Pharaoh?
Let them tell you what God plans,
what the LORD of Heaven's Armies is going to do to Egypt.
The officials of Zoan are fools,
and the officials of Memphis are deluded.
The leaders of the people
have led Egypt astray.
The Lord has sent a spirit of foolishness on them,
so all their suggestions are wrong.
They cause Egypt to stagger
like a drunk in his vomit.
There is nothing Egypt can do.
All are helpless—
the head and the tail,
the noble palm branch and the lowly reed.*



Many would argue that trying to spend one's way out of a major recession is ultimately as misguided as going on a shopping spree when you are already heavily overdrawn on your credit card.

- In these verses, Isaiah highlights a central plank of the prophetic ministry: the foolishness of placing too much confidence in one's own abilities. Whether you take it as being a literal evil spirit sent by God, or the inevitable consequence of human overconfidence, the results cannot fail to be disastrous.
- The leaders have no idea which way to turn. As they grope to follow their own counsels, they end up taking the nation still further from God's path. Why should people who are unable to solve their own problems be able to lead and help others?¹
- The pairs and opposites mentioned in verse 15 – 'the head and the tail', the 'noble palm branch and the lowly reed' – are a symbol of totality, embracing everything that lies between the two extremes.
- Not only are the leaders deluded and at their wit's end, but the Lord is seen here *adding* to their delusion by sending a spirit of foolishness upon them so that "all their decisions are wrong." This too is part of the Lord's holy work of judgement. This is not a concept that most modern Christians are keen to give much thought or time to, but it is again such a central plank of the prophetic ministry that it is important to take time out to understand the prophetic dynamics of the Word of God. This will bring us to a much deeper understanding of the sovereignty of the God of first causes, without which it is very hard to make sense of passages such as 1 Kings 22:21-23 and 2 Thess. 2:11.

¹ Concerning foolish "white elephant" projects Herodotus tells us that Pharaoh-Necho, attempting to cut a waterway from the Nile into the Red Sea, employed a vast number of men but succeeded only in impairing the flow of the river and losing 120,000 of his people in the process. That make even our Millennium Dome look a small scale fiasco!

- Whether or not you feel comfortable in saying that the Lord specifically sends certain judgements, He is certainly allowing us to be visited by them as a result of our lack of seeking Him. Sometimes the Bible makes it very clear that ‘Because someone did *this*, God did *that*.’ On other occasions, that would be far too simplistic an approach. This is why the task of the prophet is to discern and interpret what is going on.

- In his splendid book, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*¹ Alex Motyer writes,

Egypt stands for the Gentile world heading into irreversible decline. Its real problem is divine opposition, and yet no sins are specified such as would explain the Lord’s hostility. In a word, we have here the situation, first seen at Babel in Genesis 11, where humankind’s determination to run the world without God automatically comes under disapproval and counter-attack. But divine opposition is not the last word; alongside the world’s problem (verses 1-15) the prophet places the Lord’s solution (verses 16-25.) It is a point-by-point reply, couched in five ‘In that day’ oracles.²

Five futuristic Oracles

In that day the Egyptians will be as weak as women.

They will cower in fear beneath the upraised hand of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

Just to speak the name of Israel will terrorize them,

for the Lord of Heaven’s Armies has laid out His plans against them.

God often works when we are too weak to get in the way . When a sheep gets stuck along a ledge, the Shepherd does not pursue it, in case it panics and leaps to its depth. He waits until it is weak enough to no longer resist his advances. This too is planned in the courts of the Lord, where the *real* decisions that affect so much of life on Earth are made.

- What the Lord initiates for blessing, however, often makes its appearance in the guise of yet more trouble. When Egypt did (for the first and only time) attempt to honour its alliance and marched out to rescue Judah from Sennacherib, the Egyptians were soundly defeated and taken captive.
- As the British Task Force set sail for the South Atlantic, the Lord spoke to me clearly that there would be a limited war in the Falklands, and that this was His will – to bring down the Argentinean junta that had been guilty of shedding so much innocent blood.
- Who knows what openness may have come into the life of the nation as the result of this humiliating defeat? What the Lord did not say to me as the Falklands conflict loomed was the incredible fruit that would come through the national humiliation. Argentina has subsequently enjoyed the longest running revival in history!
- There is an echo of this in the way the Lord describes the captivity that the combined Egyptian and Ethiopian army would meet at the hands of the all-conquering Assyrians.

¹ *IVP 1993*. It is, by a margin, the best I have come across, combining serious scholarship and shrewd insight into the ways of the world, interpreted and filtered through a profound knowledge of the Most High.

² Isaiah uses the expression *bayyom hahu* ("in that day," v. 16) forty-two times.

- Dressed only in a loincloth Isaiah had walked around the streets as a prophetic picture of the humiliation and destitution that was going to come upon Judah. Here, however, the sign is seen as being directed against Egypt, and those who put their trust in her.
- Things looked utterly grim for Judah as the invading Assyrian army swept through the land and besieged Jerusalem. But that was when Isaiah and King Hezekiah prayed together, to such startlingly good effect that Sennacherib's army was supernaturally overthrown. As you can imagine, this hugely raised Jewish expectation that God would intervene actively on their behalf.
- Examples such as these serve as a direct incentive for us to pray big, and to attempt things we would otherwise feel we lacked authority and divine sanction to contemplate.

“Everyone will come to You because You answer prayer” (Psalm 65:2 CEV)

The time is coming when Hebrew will be spoken in five Egyptian cities, and their people will become followers of the Lord. One of these cities will be called City of the Sun. In the heart of Egypt an altar will be set up for the Lord; at its border a shrine will be built to honour him.

These will remind the Egyptians that the Lord All-Powerful is with them. And when they are in trouble and ask for help, he will send someone to rescue them from their enemies.

The Lord will show the Egyptians who he is, and they will know and worship the Lord. They will bring him sacrifices and offerings, and they will keep their promises to him.

After the Lord has punished Egypt, the people will turn to Him. Then He will answer their prayers, and the Egyptians will be healed.

At that time a good road will run from Egypt to Assyria. The Egyptians and the Assyrians will travel back and forth from Egypt to Assyria, and they will worship together. Israel will join with these two countries. They will be a blessing to everyone on earth. Then the Lord All-Powerful will bless them by saying, "The Egyptians are my people. I created the Assyrians and chose the Israelites." (CEV)

This oracle is of exceptional interest because of the amazing promises to bless Egypt and Assyria. The late eighth century BC was a time of great tension between the world superpowers (Egypt and Assyria) just as there are great tensions today between nation states in the Middle East and between clashing ideologies. But as Alex Motyer puts it, ‘what worldly ambition sunders, religion based on revelation unites.’ What a contrast these verses present of the last days as opposed to the wholesale destruction that we see in passages such as Isaiah chapter 24.

- This passage is a powerful reminder of how quickly God's kingdom is spreading as He draws more and more into relationship with Himself. The key words are *The Lord will reveal Himself to them*, and He will *listen to their prayers*.
- These verses speak of a unity with nations that prophets like Jonah could never have got his head around. Knowledge of the Most High will extend even to the city of Egypt's most important deity – the sun-god Re. It is rather like speaking of Christianity making its appearance in Mecca.
- We find the same thought reflected at the climax of chapter 27, where we see people from both nations being drawn to Jerusalem to worship.

'In that day the Lord will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one. On that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.'

The judgment of God on the Egyptians is followed by their repentance and conversion, by manifestations of God's grace to them, and by their incorporation in the people of God, along with their bitter enemy, Assyria. (NIV Study Bible)

- The menace of Sennacherib had driven a goodly number of Jews to go and live in Egypt, but the whole feeling of this prophecy is of sending Jesus Christ. He is surely the Saviour who is spoken of in verse 20. Through Him God will send the glad tidings of to the Egyptians, and by Him He will deliver them out of the hands of their enemies, that they may “*serve Him without fear*” (Luke 1:74)

Though Egypt was formerly a house of bondage to the people of God, and Assyria an unjust invader of them, all this shall now be forgiven and forgotten, and they shall be as welcome to God as Israel. They are all alike His people whom He takes under His protection. (Matthew Henry)

Athanasius, the great Bishop of Alexandria loved this chapter and saw in it a prophecy of the gospel of Christ triumphing in his native land of Egypt. He wrote:

“The thing is happening before our very eyes, here in Egypt; and thereby another prophecy is fulfilled, for at no other time have the Egyptians ceased from their false worship save when the Lord of all, riding as on a cloud, came down here in the body and brought the error of idols to nothing and won over everybody to Himself and through Himself to the Father.” (NIV Study Bible)

- Fast forwarding this to our own day, it is important to look beyond Cairo University, which is such a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism, and to remember instead the many who are standing for Christ, almost invariably at considerable cost.

The most extraordinary testimony I have come across concerns Father Simon, a Coptic priest and his wife, who courageously consented to go to work for the Lord in the slums of Cairo. In the midst of the most appalling conditions, they have made the most profound impact on the 30,000 people who collect the city's rubbish, leading countless people to Christ.

Some years ago Father Simon uncovered an ancient cave church and renovated it to accommodate 4,500 people. When that proved far too small for the weekly services, he built Garbage Cathedral, which houses many times that number. It is the largest church in the Middle East. Many healing miracles have been reported. Once again, the Lord has chosen to visit the least the least and the last – “and the last shall be first!”¹

¹ <http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-964-A-trip-to-the-dump.htm>;
http://www.cavechurch.com/Tin_Church/healing.asp;

What an incentive these promises and examples are to pray at this time when powerful forces are speaking openly of destroying Israel, and are advancing anti Christian legislation across the world.

May the Lord raise up people who inspire genuine hope and lead many in every nation to the hope that can be found in in Christ alone. May He renew His deeds of power in our own day and say of Egypt, '*My people;*' of Assyria '*My handiwork,*' and of Israel '*My inheritance.*'

