
Middle East and Prophecy

Part 6 by: Ronald L. Dart

If you pick up the Bible and start reading in any of the prophets, nearly anywhere, you will almost certainly be reading about the Middle East. Even the prophecies that deal with other nations deal with them from a Middle East perspective. That's all very reasonable, since the entirety of the Bible was written, guess where? In the Middle East.

Now it is all too easy as you open up an Old Testament prophet to assume that the prophecies are all about the times in which the prophet lived, that the prophecies were all fulfilled in ancient history and they are no longer relevant in the modern world, but it would be a mistake to think that.

For one thing, these are prophecies and not merely revelations of the future.

What's the difference?

Well, prophecy is laced with strong moral teaching and repeated warnings that if you make the same mistakes that the people of old made, you're going to suffer the same end. And so, there's a great deal of value in the study of prophecy from that alone.

But there's another reason as well. You may settle in to read one of the prophets, comfortable in the knowledge that he is speaking to his own generation, and then with no warning at all, and with no recognizable transition, you suddenly realize he is speaking to the last generation of man before the kingdom of God comes on the earth.

Messianic Prophecies

To a Jewish reader, these passages probably call to mind, the messianic age, which they hope for out in the future, but the problem is, we have not arrived at the Messianic age yet and these prophets are talking about it.

Now let me give you an example that may be familiar to you. If you've ever listened to Handel's Messiah you've heard the chorus sing these words: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be on his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, mighty God, the everlasting father, the Prince of peace." That comes from Isaiah 9 and verse 6.

And every Christian interpreter sees this as Messianic and I suppose some Jewish commentators as well, although they will certainly not assume that it is about Jesus.

Now the reason why this prophecy is considered Messianic, that it is a prophecy of the Messiah and his kingdom, is the context.

Here is the way it reads, in context. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." Get that?

"Of the increase of his government and peace there'll be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, to establish it, with judgment and with justice from henceforth forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." Now, this has never happened! Because we have seen an end of peace again and again since these words were penned by Isaiah. This is a prophecy of the Messiah and the establishment of His permanent kingdom which will last from henceforth even forever and of which there shall be no end.

So, it is a prophecy of the last days. But here's the kicker, it's also written out of a clear historical Middle East context, and because of that, it calls up the possibility that the ancient Middle East prophecies may also have an end time application.

I suppose that's why the whole world keeps watching what is going on in the Middle East. I suppose that is why the whole world is concerned about what is happening there, because if they were happening on the southern end of Africa it would not make anywhere near the headlines or occupy the news in the way that it does in the Middle East.

Israelite History

Now if I continue reading after this section, that I just read to you, I find myself firmly rooted in Israelite history.

Isaiah prophesied for close to 70 years. He began as a very young man. In fact, nearly all the prophets of the Bible seem to have started prophesying while they were quite young, and one of them, I think, was a preteen, when he actually started prophesying.

Now after the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two houses, the house of Israel in the North and house of Judah in the South.

Isaiah lived in the South during the overlapping period of time of these kingdoms leading up to the final fall of the northern tribes.

The capital of Judah was in Jerusalem. The capital of the house of Israel was the city of Samaria in the tribe of Ephraim.

Now with all that in mind, let's continue to read in Isaiah immediately following this Messianic prophecy which we just read. The prophecy talked about, "A child is given, the government shall be upon his shoulder, His name shall be called Wonderful, and of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end."

Isaiah 9:8 "The LORD sent a word against Jacob, And it has fallen on Israel. And all the people shall know, even Ephraim and the inhabitant of Samaria, that say in the pride and stoutness of heart, The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with cut stones: the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars."

Now you would be fully justified in wondering what on earth does this have to do with the Messiah? Bear with me while I explain a little bit.

Ephraim in the house of Israel had suffered invading armies that brought a lot of destruction into the land. They came in their wave upon wave upon wave in the old days. They said, "Never mind, we'll build it back better than before. We shall overcome this."

Now, verse 11, the prophet, says "Therefore the LORD shall set up the adversaries of Rezin against him, and join his enemies together; The Syrians on one side, and the Philistines behind; and they shall devour Israel with an open mouth. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still."

Now what the prophet is saying, "Yes, you've suffered a lot of wars ravaging through your land, but it is not over. There will be another war that's going to roll in and reek destruction upon all the towns of Israel." Now here's the point. All of this happened in history. It all happened before Isaiah died. So, this part of the prophecy seems to have been about something that was in the immediate future, when Isaiah wrote it.

No Transitions and Seamless

And yet, Isaiah persists in his prophecies connecting them to the Messianic age and as you read through them, there's no transitions and it is absolutely seamless. You can't tell where he's talking about one or the other, except as you read the content.

Maybe if we look at the section of Isaiah that comes before, it might shed some light on all of this. Beginning in chapter 8 verse 21, he's speaking of a time where there had been a terrible war in the northern tribes.

Isaiah 8:21 "And they shall pass through it, hard pressed and hungry: and it shall come to pass, that when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves, and curse their king and their God, and look up. And they shall look to the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness."

Historically, this seems to be a reference to the earlier wars suffered by the ten northern tribes as invader after invader came rolling through their country.

And then he says this, in Isaiah 9 and verse 1, "Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations."

Now if you're a Christian, you would probably perk up your ears a little with the mention of Galilee, because so much of Jesus's ministry was done there.

In an earlier article we talked about how all this land was divided by lot to the children of Israel, tribe by tribe, and the chances are pretty good that your Bible will have a map in the back showing roughly the settlement of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Naphtali and Zebulun were two of the children of Israel, and their tribes settled in the far North. They were roughly on the northern border of Israel.

Asher, Naphtali, and Eastern Manasseh were the frontier tribes and they took the first blows of all of the invading Northern armies.

And so, the prophet in poetic form is telling us about the struggles that these poor people had up there. But what follows in this prophecy is odd, to say the very least, having said what he said of all their struggles in Naphtali and Zebulun, he says, continuing in verse 2, "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them has the light shined."

Matthew Cites Isaiah

Now if you are a New Testament reader that may sound familiar to you. This passage was also in Handel's Messiah, but it is cited in the gospel according to Matthew. Matthew pulls this straight out of Isaiah, and here is what Matthew says about this particular prophecy.

It is in Matthew 4 and verse 12, "Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zebulun and Naphthali: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet," and then he proceeds to quote precisely what we would out of the book of Isaiah, saying, "The land of Zebulun, and the land of Nephthali, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations; The people which sat in darkness saw a great light; and to them that sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up. From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So, Matthew saw this ancient prophecy as Messianic, prophetic, reaching all the way down to his own day, and he probably thought it would usher in the kingdom of God.

Ten Northern Tribes of Israel

And so, the ten northern tribes of Israel had been in a time of war and struggle, and things had not gone well for them from the beginning of their nation. And now they're still struggling in darkness, but there's hope coming. As this prophecy goes along the tone of it begins to change.

In Isaiah 9 verse 3 it says, "You have multiplied the nation, and have increased the joy: the joy before you according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For you have broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire."

Wars are being fought but then comes the Messiah.

Messiah Has Come

Isaiah 9:6, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

This is the Messiah who has come, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David."

This is interesting all by itself. The throne of David, because David had long since been dead and buried but his throne continued on down through these kingdoms and it was in Jerusalem, and yet this prophecy is talking about Samaria. But in all of it, it is looking forward to a time in the future when the Messianic kingdom is established. It grows out of a prophecy, out of a definite historical context, and it wasn't fulfilled completely in that time.

But all this grows out of that very old prophecy. The history of the time when some of these events prophesied were taking place before their very eyes, but there's more.

This prophecy is part of a much larger prophecy, which begins in chapter 7 and ends with chapter 12. In case you want to sit down and read the whole prophecy from front to back. Now mind you, this whole prophecy is seamless. If you read it, you'll never find a break where it says that this happened in ancient times and this will happen in the future. None of that exists.

Israel Prepares To Attack Judah

In Isaiah chapter 7 there is another Middle East war on the horizon. Syria and Ephraim have created an alliance to attack Judah and Jerusalem. Yes, the ten northern tribes of the house of Israel were in the process of making an alliance with Syria to attack Judah and Jerusalem, and when word of this alliance reached Jerusalem, it swept through the city like wildfire.

King Ahaz and all of his cabinet officers were scared to death. God told Isaiah to take his son and to meet Ahaz with the message. Oddly, Isaiah's son was named in Hebrew "a remnant shall return." Basically, the message he took was "relax, it will never happen," and more than that, within 65 years he told him, Ephraim would be broken and that they would not even be a people,

and this happened. When the Assyrians swept through and took the northern kingdom captive, it all happened. It's all history, it's over, it's done. So why do we have this thing connected up to the Messianic age?

Time Warp

Well, there's a time warp in the story. Listen to what Isaiah goes on to tell King Ahaz.

Isaiah 7:10 "Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; ask it in the depth, or in the height above." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, I do not want to tempt the LORD." And Isaiah responded, "Hear now, O house of David." Isaiah is addressing the king of the house of David, and he calls him the house of David.

Immanuel

"Is it a small thing for you to weary men, are you going to tire out God also? Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel."

Now if you have gone to church very much, if you have read the Bible very much, that is going to be very meaningful to you. The virgin conceiving, bearing a son, and calling his name Immanuel, which means 'God with us.' This is universally understood among Christians to be a reference to the virgin birth of Christ. This very curious prophecy has historical fulfillment, although there is never a son named Immanuel in Isaiah's day. And yet the way the prophecy is constructed it is all about Isaiah's day.

Here's what the prophecy is all about in history. Isaiah 7 and Verse 14, "The Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel, Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that you hate shall be forsaken of both her kings."

Now this is clear in history, a child is to be born and before that child is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, both of the kings of this northern alliance, which had been named in the prophecy will be dead.

We are not talking about something thousands of years into Isaiah's future. We're talking about something happening on the ground then, at that time, and yet we have already seen within the context, it is about the Messianic age as well.

The remainder of that chapter explains about the butter and honey, but the history continues in chapter 8 of Isaiah.

Mahershalalhashbaz

"Moreover, the LORD said to me, I want you to take a great scroll, and write on it with a man's pen concerning Mahershalalhashbaz." This is the name of his son that is to be born. He's going to write this down and it is a jawbreaker of a name.

His name means 'spoil soon, pray quick.' We will just call him Maher since that's what his friends probably called him when he grew up.

Isaiah was required to name his sons prophetically, both of them had names that were meaningful to prophecies.

Isaiah says, "I took unto me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah. And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived and bare a son. Then the LORD said to call his name Mahershalalhashbaz."

Here's our boy. Now the funny thing about it, remember it talked about a virgin conceiving, bearing a son, calling his name Immanuel. Well, this is not a virgin, this is Isaiah's wife, who had already had a son. She gives birth to a boy, and they do not call him Immanuel. They call him Mahershalalhashbaz.

Why are we doing this? Well, the answer is in verse four, "For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father, and my mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria."

We're not looking out very far. This is just a matter of months before this child is old enough to say, "Daddy and Mama" and these two nations will be destroyed. So, this is the child, but he's not named Immanuel. He's named Maher.

What's going on. Well, Isaiah says in chapter 8 and verse 5, "The LORD spoke to me again, saying, "Forasmuch as this people refused the waters of Shiloah that go softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son." What does that mean? Well it means simply; the waters of Shiloh are those of Jerusalem. The leadership out of Jerusalem was supposed to be gentle and kind. They refused that, they refused God's leadership, and they had turned and wanted to rely on Syria and on Ephraim. Ephraim and his people rejected God and relied on an alliance with Syria.

Isaiah 8:7 "Now therefore, behold, the Lord will bring upon them the waters of the river, strong and mighty." They didn't want gentle waters. They were going to get big waters.

"The king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels and go over all his banks and flood completely all of Israel and all of Judah. He shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel."

And here, out of the blue, comes the name Immanuel back into play, which means "God with us." And of course, to all Christians, that's Jesus in the flesh, 'God with us.'

The prophet speaks to them and says "Make your associations and you are going to be broken into pieces, give ear, all you afar, countries, you had to get ready for war. But you're going to be broken in pieces."

Let God Be Your Fear

Here, he says in verse 13, is my advice, "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear and let him be your dread. And he shall be a sanctuary for you; but he will be a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken."

What? "The Lord Himself, let Him be your fear, and your dread. He will be a sanctuary for you, but the Lord himself will be a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense to the houses of Israel." How did the New Testament writers see that?

Paul cited it out in Romans 9 and in verse 33 "As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offence: and whoever believes on him shall not be ashamed." Paul was talking about Jesus Christ.

What Did Isaiah Think?

I can't help but wonder what Isaiah thought of all this after he had written it down? You could picture him back in his house sitting down with the prophecy that he had written out on this big long scroll and reading back through it again, thinking, "What does this mean?"

I think that we can be excused for thinking that he might have assumed that the wars that he was seeing in the North, that this was a coming Assyrian invasion, as it came rolling down upon Jerusalem, that probably what this was going to be was a forerunner of the Messianic kingdom. I have an idea that is what Isaiah might have thought, when he saw the Assyrian army actually come down and surround Jerusalem, and basically wipe out all their agricultural roundabout, that he anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the kingdom of God and the coming of the Golden age, following on the heels of this because that's what the prophecy seems to sound like. Yet we know that that's not what happened. One is led to wonder, then, will the Golden age of the Messiah in the future, what we would call the return of Christ, the establishment of the kingdom of God, follow on the heels of an invasion from the North that Isaiah spoke about in his own day.

Well, the prophecy continues all the way through Isaiah 12. It is in Chapter 11 where you get quite a jolt when you understand what Isaiah wrote was to follow on the heels of his other Messianic prophecies.

Chapter 11, verse 1, "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." This of course is a reference to David. The Messiah was to be a descendent of David and Jesus was a descendent of David.

Verse 2, "And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD." This is the Messiah! "He shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: Now he will judge the poor with righteousness, he shall reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked."

This sounds very much like what I read about at the end of the book of Revelation, the return of Christ, the putting down of this world's kingdoms, the establishment of an age of peace.

Isaiah 11:5, "Righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."

Now, mind you, this prophecy started in Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 1 and goes all the way through chapter 12 seamlessly. This prophecy is about the end time.

It is a prophecy you would never really understand unless you had some frame of reference for it.

Now I have said this before, if you are going to understand prophecy, you must understand history. Later in his book Isaiah will make it plain to us in a remarkable little passage. It is in Isaiah 41 and verse 21, "Produce your cause, says the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob. Let them bring them forth and show us what shall happen: let them show the former things, what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things for to come."

If you're going to understand what's going to happen at the time of the end in the Middle East, you've got to understand what happened before.

I have reason to think that Isaiah may have understood that this was not merely something for his lifetime because he makes this statement in Isaiah 8:18, "Behold, I and the children whom the LORD hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells in mount Zion."

Isaiah and his sons are what biblical interpreters call types. That means they are models, images, prototypes of things to come in the future. And in this case of things that were to come at least twice. I think Isaiah may have understood that.

So, if you want to understand the future in the Middle East, you have to understand the past.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that prophecy is there to prepare and warn us?
2. Do some people get too caught up in trying to use prophecies to set dates?
3. Have you ever studied how many references in the New Testament come from the Old Testament?
4. What lessons can we learn about how not to act when we study the schism between Judah and Israel?
5. Do you agree with Mr. Dart that the Immanuel prophecy has historical context not just future context?
6. Do you agree that in order to understand prophecy you have to understand history?
7. What do you think Isaiah thought after writing down the prophecies?
8. Was there anything new in Mr. Dart's teaching that you learned?
9. Was there anything that you didn't agree with?
10. What are your thoughts in regards to Mr. Dart's series about "Middle East and Prophecy"?