



The Middle East & Prophecy #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 inevitably laced with strong moral teachings and repeated warnings that if you make the same mistakes 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 for 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 no recognizable transition, you suddenly realize he is speaking to the last generation of man before the kingdom of God comes on the earth. 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:

Isaiah 9

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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.

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 certainly will not assume that it is about Jesus. Now, the reason why this prophecy is considered messianic—that is, a prophecy of the Messiah and his kingdom—is the *context*. Here is the way it reads, in context:

Isaiah 9

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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.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end [...]

Get that? Of the increase of his government *and of peace* there'll be no end.

Isaiah 9

KJ2000

⁷ [...] upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth even 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. And 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 the events going on in Palestine, if they were happening on the southern end of Africa, would not make anywhere near the headlines or occupy the news in the way that it does in the Middle East.

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, all told. 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*. One of them, I think, may have even been 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, continue to read in Isaiah immediately following the messianic prophecy which we just read (The prophecy that 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

KJ2000

⁸ The Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it has fallen upon Israel.

⁹ And all the people shall know, even Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, that say in the pride and arrogance of heart,

¹⁰ The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with hewn stones: the sycamores are cut down, but we will replace 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 who brought a *lot* of destruction into the land. They came in there wave upon wave upon wave in the old days. And they said, "Well, never mind. We'll build it back better than before. We'll overcome this." Then, in verse 11, the prophet says:

Isaiah 9

KJ2000

¹¹ Therefore the LORD shall set up the adversaries of Rezin against him, and join his enemies together;

¹² The Syrians before, 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.

So what the prophet is saying is, “Yeah, 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 wreak 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. 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 when there has been a terrible war in the northern tribes. He says:

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

²¹ And they shall pass through it, hardpressed and hungry: and it shall come to pass, that when they shall be hungry, they shall be enraged, and curse their king and their God, and look upward.

²² And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish; and they shall be driven into 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. Then he says this:

Isaiah 9

AKJV

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 probably perk up your ears a little bit at the mention of “Galilee”, because so much of Jesus’s ministry was done there. In an earlier program [*The Middle East & Prophecy #3*], 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 12 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:

Isaiah 9

AKJV

² The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, on them has the light shined.

Now, if you are a New Testament reader that may sound familiar to you. This passage also is 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, verse 12:

Matthew 4

KJ2000

¹² Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee;

¹³ And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the seacoast, in the

region of Zebulun and Naphtali:

¹⁴ That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying,

¹⁵ The land of Zebulun, and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles;

¹⁶ The people who sat in darkness saw great light; and to them who sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up.

¹⁷ 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.

And so the ten northern tribes of Israel had been in a time of war, of struggle—things had not gone well for them, really, from the beginning of their nation. And now they are still struggling—in darkness. But there's hope coming. As this prophecy goes along, the tone of it begins to change. He says in verse three:

Isaiah 9

AKJV

³ You have multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before you according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For you have broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

⁵ 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 were being fought, but then comes...the Messiah.

Isaiah 9

KJ2000

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.

Isaiah 9

KJ2000

⁷ 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 was long since 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, "Well, this happened in ancient times and this will happen in the future." None of that exists.

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. Yeah, 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—that they were not even going to be a people. And this happened. When the Assyrians swept through and took the entire 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? Well, there's a *time warp* in the story. Listen to what Isaiah goes on to tell King Ahaz.

Isaiah 7

AKJV

- ¹⁰ Moreover the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying,
¹¹ Ask you a sign of the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above.
¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the LORD.
¹³ And he [*Isaiah*] said, Hear you now, O house of David; [...]

He was addressing the king of the house of David; he calls him the "house of David".

Isaiah 7

AKJV

- ¹³ [...] Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also?
¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and 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 is what the prophecy was all about...in history. Verse 14:

Isaiah 7

AKJV

- ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
¹⁵ Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.
¹⁶ For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that you abhor 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 the 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 stuff, but the history continues in chapter 8 of Isaiah.

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

¹ Moreover the LORD said unto me, Take a large scroll, and write on it with a man's pen concerning Mahershalalhashbaz.

He gives the name of his son to be born. He's going to write this down. It's one of those jawbreakers; I think it's nine syllables or so: Mahershalalhashbaz is the boy's name. And it means "spoil soon, prey quick". (We'll just call him "Maher", since that's probably what his friends called him when he grew up.) Isaiah was required to name his sons prophetically; both of them had names that were meaningful to prophecies. So Isaiah says:

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

² And I took unto me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.

³ And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bore a son. Then said the LORD to me, Call his name Mahershalalhashbaz.

All right, 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:

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

⁴ 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 gets old enough to say "Daddy! Mama!", 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:

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

⁵ The LORD spoke also unto me again, saying,

⁶ Because this people refused the waters of Shiloah that flow softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son;

What does that mean? Well it means simply, that the waters of Shiloh are those of Jerusalem. The leadership out of Jerusalem, which 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, because they reject God and rely on an alliance with Syria:

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

⁷ Now therefore, behold, the Lord brings up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, [...]

They didn't want gentle waters? They were going to get *big* waters.

Isaiah 8

KJ2000

⁷ [...] even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks:

⁸ And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and pass over, he shall reach up 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—“God with us”. And, of course, to all Christians, that’s Jesus in the flesh: “God with us”. And the prophet speaks to them and says:

Isaiah 8

AKJV

⁹ Associate yourselves, O you people, and you shall be broken in pieces; and give ear, all you of far countries: gird yourselves, and you shall be broken in pieces; gird yourselves, and you shall be broken in pieces.

“Here”, he says in verse 13, “is my advice”:

Isaiah 8

AKJV

¹³ Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

¹⁴ And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ 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 cites it outright in Romans 9, verse 33:

Romans 9

KJ2000

³³ As it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense: and whosoever believes on him shall not be ashamed.

And Paul is talking about Jesus Christ.

I can't help but wonder what Isaiah thought of all this after he had written it down. You picture him back in his house, sitting down with this prophecy that he had written out on this great long scroll and reading back through it again and 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—the 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 Isaiah might have thought—when he saw the Assyrian armies actually come down, 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 in of a 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, and 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:

Isaiah 11

AKJV

¹ And 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 descendant of David. Jesus *was* a descendant of David.

Isaiah 11

AKJV

² And the spirit of the LORD shall rest on 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!

Isaiah 11

AKJV

³ And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears:

⁴ But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and 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.

My, this sounds very much like what we read toward 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

AKJV

⁵ And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.

⁶ 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 fatted calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

⁷ And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.

⁹ 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*. It's a prophecy is about the *end time*, but it's a prophecy you would never really get unless you had some frame of reference for it. And I've 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:

Isaiah 41

AKJV

- ²¹ Produce your cause, said the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, said the King of Jacob.
- ²² 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. He says:

Isaiah 8

AKJV

- ¹⁸ Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, which dwells in mount Zion.

Isaiah and his sons were 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.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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ID: MEP6