

ISAIAH 17 AND THE DESTRUCTION OF DAMASCUS

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

The oracle concerning Damascus. "Behold, Damascus is about to be removed from being a city, and it will become a fallen ruin."

—Isaiah 17:1

The last three years has seen a clear heightening of tensions between Syria and Israel. Over a year ago, Israel clandestinely bombed a Syrian nuclear facility that was being operated in conjunction with North Korea. Needless to say, such a venture did not make Syria very happy with the Jewish state. Syria has spent over three billion dollars the last few years strengthening most aspects of her military, anticipating an eventual conflict with Israel.

The last few months have seen an unprecedented dialogue back and forth between Syrian and Israeli officials about a possible conflict between the two nations. "Tensions between Israel and Lebanon have mounted in recent months, with Beirut accusing Israel of running espionage rings across the country. Earlier this month Tel Aviv blamed Hizbullah for planting 300 kilograms of explosives near the Blue Line border."ⁱ Jonathan Spyer, senior research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs Center, recently said, "Any future strike at Hizbullah that does not take into account its status as a client of Syria is unlikely to land a decisive blow," citing a recent report in the British magazine Jane's Defence Weekly which claimed that Syria had supplied the Shiite group with missiles capable of hitting central Israel.ⁱⁱ In a response to Syrian saber rattling, Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman "harshly warned Syria against drawing the Jewish state into another war, saying the Syrian army would be defeated and its regime would collapse in a future conflict."ⁱⁱⁱ

Some followers of Bible prophecy believe that such recent events could lead to a fulfillment of Isaiah 17 in our day, which speaks of the complete destruction of Damascus. Could these building events lead to the specific fulfillment of Isaiah? I do not think so!

THE CLAIM

Those who advocate the position that Isaiah 17 could be fulfilled any day if Israel is properly provoked, have not taken into account the contextual factors in this prophecy that militate against such a view. Many search the news headlines with the idea that this prophecy could be fulfilled in our own day. I also think that it is important to understand what is going on today, especially as it relates to Israel, but I think we are only seeing a preparation for the events of the tribulation, which will begin to unfold when the tribulation begins, after the rapture. Thus, if there is another war or conflict with Israel, which I think is likely, then these will not be conflicts that are found in Bible prophecy.

Bill Salus thinks that Isaiah 17 and a number of other prophecies could occur before the rapture and before the tribulation begins. He says, "Presently, almost every known Middle Eastern terrorist organization has representation in Damascus. Soon, they will have none. How fitting that the city most adversarial to the nation of Israel will cease to exist."^{iv} This is true, but it will be at the end of the tribulation when all of the other nations that have stored up judgment will receive it for the way they have treated Israel.

ISAIAH 17

Isaiah 17 speaks of God's judgment upon Damascus and Samaria. Why are they linked together? In Isaiah 7 (verses 1, 8–9) Damascus and Samaria plotted together to overthrow Judah, therefore, they are linked together in judgment. The passage can be outlined as follows:

- The destruction of Damascus (17:1-3).
- The destruction of Samaria (17:4–11).
- The destruction of the nations at Armageddon (17:12–14).

Verse 1 says, "The oracle concerning Damascus." An oracle in the Old Testament speaks of "a burden to make a pronouncement of judgment."^v "Damascus is about to be removed from being a city, and it will become a fallen ruin." The term "to be removed" is a Hebrew passive participle in the hophal stem, which means it is a causative passive.^{vi} Thus, God would cause Damascus to cease from being a city at some point in the future. The important thing to note about "it will become a fallen ruin," is the qal stem consecutive of the Hebrew verb "to be." The noun construct makes it clear that it means "fallen ruin." The force of the verb has a future sense, which supports the notion of a yet future fulfillment. Harry Bultema says,

The judgment that will strike Damascus is that it will be no longer a city but a *ruinous heap*. This prediction has yet to be completely fulfilled, for in Jeremiah's day it was a flourishing city, and even today is said to be the oldest city in the world (cf. Genes 15:2 where Damascus is already mentioned). According to II Kings 16:9 Tiglath-pileser captured it and killed its king Rezin; but he did not make it a *heap*. This chapter also, however, points to the terrible end time of the Great Tribulation when all the cities of the Gentiles will fall including Damascus (Rev. 16:19).^{vii}

Most commentators contend that Isaiah 17:1–3 was fulfilled in 732 B.C. at the conquest of Tiglath-pileser.^{viii} However, Tiglath-pileser did not totally destroy the city, but merely captured it, as has happened numerous times throughout its history. I think John Nelson Darby is correct when he concluded the following:

I do not see how it is possible, in all this part of Isaiah, from chapter 13 and even before, not to see that the Spirit of God is taking up the great plan of God, and speaking of future coming events, but taking hold of present ones as an occasion, and that connected with the government of God then, which will be fully displayed at the end.

Note Damascus was taken by the King of Assyria in the reign of Ahaz; but all this is evidently in the latter days. Moab, however, suffers first from the heathen.^{ix}

The destruction of Damascus is still a future event.

WHEN IN THE FUTURE?

The final section of the chapter gives us a perspective as to when in the future Damascus will be removed from being a city. Verses twelve through fourteen say, "Alas, the uproar of many peoples who roar like the roaring of the seas, and the rumbling of nations who rush on like the rumbling of mighty waters! The nations rumble on like the rumbling of many waters, but He will rebuke them and they will flee

far away, and be chased like chaff in the mountains before the wind, or like whirling dust before a gale. At evening time, behold, there is terror! Before morning they are no more. Such will be the portion of those who plunder us, and the lot of those who pillage us." This passage is similar to other passages that speak of the judgment of the nations at Armageddon (compare Joel 3:1–17; Matt. 24:29–31; Rev. 16:14; 19:11–21). Therefore, it could not happen in our day or before the rapture. Instead, it appears to be an event that will occur at the end of the seven-year tribulation as the Lord not only judges and destroy Damascus, but all of Israel's historic enemies that surround her.

If one examines the broader context of Isaiah 17 and take account of the section where it is located, it becomes clear that it is a section in which the Lord prophesies judgment upon all the Gentile nations that have opposed Israel. This will all happen at the end of the tribulation in conjunction with the second coming of Christ to the earth. Note that Isaiah 17 is in the middle of a section of Israel that deals with God's judgment on the nations as follows:

- A. Condemnation of the nations (13-23)
 - 1. Babylon (13:1-14:23)
 - 2. Assyria (14:24-27)
 - 3. Philistia (14:28-32)
 - 4. Moab (15-16)
 - 5. Damascus and Samaria (17)
 - 6. Ethiopia (18)
 - 7. Egypt (19-20)
 - 8. Babylon (21:1-10)
 - 9. Edom (21:11-12)
 - 10. Arabia (21:13-17)
 - 11. Jerusalem (22)
 - 12. Tyre (23)
- B. Condemnation of the world (24-35)
 - 1. Tribulation and kingdom: Little Apocalypse (24-27)
 - 2. Six woes (28-33)
 - 3. Tribulation and Kingdom (34-35)^x

The condemnation of the nations section (13–23) is then followed by a condemnation of the world section (24–35). These judgments will clearly take place at the end of the tribulation when all the nations are gathered together against Israel at Armageddon. In the list of nations in Isaiah to be judged, as noted above, Babylon is first on the list. Babylon will be wiped out, never to be inhabited again, toward the end of the tribulation (Rev. 17–18). It should also be noted, that Jeremiah has a section on the judgment of the nations, similar to the one in Isaiah, in chapters 46 through 51.

- I. Prophecies concerning the Gentile nations (46-51)
 - A. Egypt (46)
 - B. Philistia (47)
 - C. Moab (48)
 - D. Ammon (49:1-6)
 - E. Edom (49:7-22)
 - F. Damascus (49:23-27)
 - G. Arabia (49:28-33)

- H. Elam (49:34-39)
 I. Babylon (50-51)^{xi}

Note the section on Damascus and many similar nations that are found in Isaiah. Damascus will be destroyed at the end of the tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Dalila Mahdawi, "Israel urged to widen any future Lebanon conflict to Syria," *The Lebanon Daily Star* (Jan. 30, 2010), www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=111263.

ⁱⁱ Mahdawi, "Israel urged to widen."

ⁱⁱⁱ Ian Deitch, "Israel warns Syria it would lose future war," *The Associated Press* (Feb. 4, 2010), www.news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100204/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_israel_syria.

^{iv} Bill Salus, *Israelstine: The Ancient Blueprints of the Future Middle East* (Crane, MO: Highway, 2008), p. 57.

^v Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic version (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000).

^{vi} Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew Lexicon*.

^{vii} Harry Bultema, *Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1981), p. 184.

^{viii} For example, Peter A. Steveson, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2003), p. 142. See also, John D. W. Watts, vol. 24, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Edition, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 293.

^{ix} John Nelson Darby, *Notes and Comments on Scripture*, 7 volumes (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, reprint 1971), vol. IV, pp. 35-36.

^x Andy Woods, *Old Testament Book Arguments: Isaiah* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 18-21.

^{xi} Andy Woods, *Old Testament Book Arguments: Jeremiah* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 21-22.