

THE HIGHWAY FROM EGYPT TO ASSYRIA: THE MEANING OF THE PROPHECY OF  
THE RESTORATION OF EGYPT, ISRAEL AND ASSYRIA IN ISAIAH 19:23-25

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This paper will discuss the interpretation of a passage in chapter 19 of Isaiah which appears on its face to predict future restoration and blessing of both Egypt and Assyria along with Israel:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."<sup>1</sup>

The questions raised, and hotly contested, by the commentators regarding this passage are the time period to which its apparent prediction applies and to what degree it should be understood literally. This paper will argue that Isaiah 19:23-25 should first be understood literally as a prediction of eschatological events, a position which, curiously, none of the commentators seems to fully espouse.

## **Background**

### Date of Writing

This paper will assume, without arguing, that the entirety of Isaiah was written by a single author who delivered his prophecies in the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah. On this assumption, the most likely date of writing of Isaiah 19 is sometime between the death of King Ahaz in 716/715 B.C. and Ashdod's rebellion against Assyria in 713/712. As Niccacci points out, the internal chronological references in the first part of Isaiah, in 1:1, 6:1, 7:1, 14:28 and 20:1-2, are, in fact, arranged in chronological order and appear to set off separate sections written on different dates.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 14:28 is the beginning of a message that came to Isaiah in the year Ahaz died, while 20:1-2 states that God spoke again to Isaiah in the year

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 19:23-25 (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> Alviero Niccacci, "Isaiah XVIII-XX from an Egyptological Perspective," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 no. 2 (Apr. 1998): 214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1585503> (accessed Oct. 11, 2011).

Sargon II sent his Tartan to fight against Ashdod. This would place Isaiah 19 during the period between these events.

While there is no controversy that Ashdod fell to Sargon's *Tartanu* in 712<sup>3</sup>, there is some scholarly disagreement about the year of Ahaz' death. Niccacci, and some others writers he cites, place Ahaz' death in 728/727<sup>4</sup>, and therefore argues that Isaiah 19 was written sometime between 728 and 712. He further narrows this dating of Isaiah 19 to after 720 but before 712 (and probably very close to 712) based on the argument that the description of events in Egypt in the first part of the chapter would only make sense to contemporary hearers after Sargon II responded to the Cushite Pi'ankhy's attempts to consolidate a weak and fractured Egypt with a campaign of his own to the Gaza area in 720<sup>5</sup> or possibly 716<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the bulk of scholars who have considered the chronology of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah believe a co-regency began in 728/727, and that Ahaz died and Hezekiah became king in his own right in 716/715<sup>7</sup> or 715/714<sup>8</sup>. The best explanation of this regnal chronology appears to be that given by Stigers,

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<sup>3</sup> Frank T. Yurco, "The Shabaka-Shebitku Coregency and the Supposed Second Campaign of Sennacherib Against Judah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 no. 1 (Spring 1991):37-38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3267148> (accessed November 26, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Niccacci, 214-215.

<sup>5</sup> Niccacci, 223-224, 226.

<sup>6</sup> Yurco, 38.

<sup>7</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 674; William W. Hallo, "From Qarqar to Carchemish: Assyria and Israel in the Light of New Discoveries," *Biblical Archaeologist* 23 no. 2 (1960): 55, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbps.edu/ehost/detail?vid=7&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000680035> (accessed October 30, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Nadav Na'aman, "Historical and Chronological Notes on the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Eighth Century B.C.," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 no. 1 (Jan. 1986): 83-85, 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1518302> (accessed November 25, 2011); Leslie McFall, "Did

who posited that Hezekiah became a coregent in 729 or 728, at the age of about 11, and, when his father Ahaz' obedient pro-Assyrian policy lead to the destruction of Samaria and the end of the Northern Kingdom in 722, this disturbed the Judean nobility enough that they essentially forced him into a type of "emeritus" status in about 720, with his young son actually ruling the kingdom. When Ahaz then died in 716 or 715, Hezekiah was left as sole king<sup>9</sup>. Thus, on the assumption that Isaiah 19 was written by Isaiah, a date between 716 and 712 appears fairly secure.

### Historical Context

The major players in the period immediately preceding the death of Ahaz were Assyria, Egypt, Cush (Ethiopia) the Philistine cities on the Mediterranean coast, and Judah. Israel (or Ephraim) and Damascus also played roles in the story until their deportation by the Assyrians in 722.

Assyria was the great power of the day. Although Assyria had been building, losing, and rebuilding empires for centuries<sup>10</sup>, and had regarded both Israel and Judah as tributaries prior to the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III in 745 B.C.<sup>11</sup>, the accession of this king marked an important

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Thiele Overlook Hezekiah's Coregency?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (Oct.-Dec. 1989): 397, 400-403, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=11&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000820218> (accessed Nov. 26, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Harold G. Stigers, "An Interphased Chronology of Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah and Hoshea," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9 no. 2 (Spr. 1966): 87-89, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=13&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000694760> (accessed Nov. 26, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Chadwick, *First Civilizations: Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2005), 63, 70, 74-79.

<sup>11</sup> Hallo, 39-41, 47.

change in policy toward distant tributaries that directly affected both Israel and Judah and led, in part, to the deportation of Israel. Prior to 745, Assyria had directly administered only conquered lands close to it. It had maintained the loyalty of more distant tributary kingdoms such as Israel, Judah, and Damascus by conducting punitive raids on any sign of disloyalty, imposing additional tribute, possibly replacing the king with a more pliable member of the local ruling house, then leaving. It had no interest in actually administering distant provinces<sup>12</sup>.

However, from and after the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III this policy appears to have changed to one that imposed first administrative control, then deportation, on disloyal kingdoms anywhere within the Assyrian sphere of influence. That is, a distant kingdom that recognized Assyrian hegemony and showed no signs of disloyalty would be allowed to continue under its present leadership as a satellite state long as it paid the required annual tribute. However, at the first sign of disloyalty—often, but not always, a refusal to pay tribute—after re-subjugating the that kingdom Assyria would replace its king, place spies or an Assyrian military governor in its royal court, and increase the required tribute. Any further signs of disloyalty would precipitate the resettlement of its citizens in distant parts of the Assyrian empire, where they were now regarded as Assyrian citizens and (to the degree possible) forcibly assimilated to Assyrian culture<sup>13</sup>. This is what happened to the people of Gilead and Galilee in 732 and to the remainder of the people of the Northern Kingdom in 722<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Chadwick, 75-79; Daniel R. Miller, “Objectives and Consequences of the Neo-Assyrian Imperial Exercise,” *Religion & Theology* 16 (2009):126-128, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=28&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=47715521> (accessed October 30, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Chadwick, 79-80; Miller, 126-128; Hallo, 47.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Kgs. 15:29, 17:6; Hallo, 48-52.

Assyria's main opponents during the period of likely authorship of Isaiah 19 were Egypt, Babylon and Elam<sup>15</sup>. Elam had virtually no direct role in Palestine, and, while Babylon figured in the incident involving Hezekiah and the ambassadors of its rebel king, Merodach-Baladan, a few years later<sup>16</sup>, Egypt had the most direct influence on Palestine. However, by this time, Egypt was a *former* major power. As of 728, Egypt consisted of five separate kingdoms. Upper Egypt was ruled by the Cushite king Pi'ankhy, the founder of Egypt's 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (also known in some sources as Piye). Lower and Middle Egypt were divided into four kingdoms, ruled by descendants of three past dynasties<sup>17</sup>. Probably in about 728, Pi'ankhy conducted a campaign in Lower Egypt which restored the balance of power between the four kings and affirmed their status as Pi'ankhy's vassals, but did not depose them<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, one of them, Tefnakht, continued to scheme against him<sup>19</sup>. This was the divided state of Egypt in about 720, when Gaza rebelled against Assyria with the support of Egypt, and was subsequently defeated<sup>20</sup>. Egypt paid tribute and avoided invasion after this defeat. Judah may have allied herself with Assyria in this situation, and received land in the area of Gaza as a reward<sup>21</sup>.

After defeating Egypt and taking Gaza, Sargon II sought to establish peaceful trade with Egypt along an existing coastal highway that he improved through Philistia and that avoided the

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<sup>15</sup> Chadwick, 82-84.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Kgs. 20:12-18.

<sup>17</sup> Chadwick, 210; Niccacci, 218-220.

<sup>18</sup> Chadwick, 211; Nicacci, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Chadwick, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Hallo, 53-54; Niccacci, 215, 220-223.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Chr. 4:41-43; Niccacci, 220-221.

need to ship Egyptian goods through Tyre<sup>22</sup>. It was likely largely the loss in sea trade to Ashdod and their allies Tyre and Sidon that led to the revolt of Ashdod in 714/713<sup>23</sup>. As noted above the defeat and exile of Ashdod at the end of this revolt in 712 marks the end of the period in which Isaiah 19 was likely written. Judah remained aloof from this revolt. Although the king of one of the divided pieces of Egypt had initially encouraged Ashdod's revolt, that king was deposed by Pi'ankhy's successor Shabaka who unified Egypt under the Cushite Twenty-Fifth Dynasty before the Assyrian army arrived<sup>24</sup>. Shabaka failed to support the revolt and extradited its leader to the Assyrians after he fled to Egypt<sup>25</sup>. Relative peace between Assyria and Egypt continued until around 702/701, when Hezekiah refused to pay tribute<sup>26</sup>.

#### Context of the Passage in Isaiah

Isaiah 19 is a portion of the "oracles against the nations" (Isa. 13-23), and, as a whole, deals primarily with Egypt. Verse one makes the theological point that the Lord is greater than the idols of Egypt, which tremble before him, as will also the hearts of the Egyptians when he comes in judgment. Verses two through ten then speak of woe so extreme that at least one commentator<sup>27</sup> insists these verses must be read figuratively, as poetic hyperbole intended to

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<sup>22</sup> Niccacci, 215, 222-223.

<sup>23</sup> Niccacci, 224-225; Yurco, 38-39.

<sup>24</sup> Yurco, 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> Niccacci, 225; Hallo, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Niccacci, 225-226; Hallo, 57-59.

<sup>27</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1986) 366, 369-370.

emphasize the vulnerability of Egypt to the Lord’s judgment and teaching of verses 12 through 15—which is the folly of trusting Egypt.

The first woe forecast is a civil war stirred up by God—one in which there is warfare of “city against city” and “kingdom against kingdom<sup>28</sup>.” This description is general enough that it could simply be a description of the condition of Egypt, splintered into five kingdoms, at the time Isaiah wrote, as some have suggested<sup>29</sup>. In this civil war, the Egyptians will seek their gods and the spirits of the dead, but God will make their plans come to nothing. The second woe is tyranny, God handing Egypt over to a “cruel master” and a “fierce king<sup>30</sup>.” Some have suggested that the tyrant described is Pi’ankey or Shabaka<sup>31</sup>, others Esarhaddon, Assurbanipal or even later conquerors<sup>32</sup>, and, indeed, Egypt has frequently been ruled by foreign tyrants in the millennia since Isaiah<sup>33</sup>.

But the woe that must either be figurative and hyperbolic, or a description of eschatological events, is the woe described in verses five through ten. These verses predict a major economic collapse in Egypt<sup>34</sup>—something that has also been a frequent occurrence in

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<sup>28</sup> Isa. 19:2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Niccacci, 217-219; Oswalt, 367-368.

<sup>30</sup> Isa. 19:4.

<sup>31</sup> Niccacci, 218; R.B.Y. Scott, “Exegesis of the Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39,” in Vol. 5 of *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick *et al.* (New York: Abingdon Press 1956), 279.

<sup>32</sup> Oswalt, 366; Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries : Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press 1999), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Chadwick, 212, 214-215, 220-226, 229-230; Leo Duprée Sandgren. *Vines Intertwined: A History of Jews and Christians from the Babylonian Exile to the Advent of Islam* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 49, 56, 59, 67-71, 134-142, 220, 372, 652, 662.

<sup>34</sup> Motyer, 139; Scott, 278-280.



subsequent years. But the cause of that economic collapse is unprecedented and cataclysmic—the Nile will completely dry up, all of the fish will die, and all of the vegetation of Egypt will dry up, be blown away and disappear<sup>35</sup>. There is no evidence of such a complete and destructive drought affecting the Nile around the time of Isaiah or, indeed, at any time since.

The heart of the first fifteen verses is found in verses 11 through 15, in which God calls the famous wisdom of Egypt folly and her wise men fools because they do not understand what he has planned against Egypt. The Lord further declares that he has himself placed a spirit of dizziness on them, so that they will not be able to lead their people out of what is going to happen to them. The picture is that of Egypt's wise men as staggering drunkards wallowing in their vomit<sup>36</sup>. As both Oswalt and Motyer point out, the warning of verses 1-15 to Isaiah's audience in Judah is that Egypt should not be trusted or feared<sup>37</sup>.

Starting with verse 16, the chapter ends with a series of four oracles that are prefaced with the words “in that day.” Several commentators note that this phrase is often employed as a marker of an eschatological prophecy<sup>38</sup>, though Niccacci denies it is so utilized in Isaiah 19<sup>39</sup>. The first of the three oracles that is to occur “in that day”, read literally, predicts that the Egyptians will tremble in terror before Judah, before the very name of Judah, and before the

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<sup>35</sup> Oswalt, 369; Scott, 279-280.

<sup>36</sup> Motyer, 140; Oswalt, 372.

<sup>37</sup> Oswalt, 366, 370, 372; Motyer, 137-138.

<sup>38</sup> Oswalt, 374; Motyer, 140; Scott, 280; Iain Wilson, “In that Day,” *Interpretation* 21 no. 1 (Jan. 1967): 69, 79, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=9&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=rh&AN=ATLA0000711535> (accessed December 12, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Niccacci, 220-224.

uplifted hand of the Lord raised against them, because of what the Lord is planning<sup>40</sup>. Their wise men, against whom God spoke in verses 10 through 15, do not understand what God is doing, but in that day the people of Egypt will understand and be terrified. The second oracle proclaims that “in that day” five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan<sup>41</sup>—meaning, according to the commentaries, speak Hebrew in worship of this God they now dread<sup>42</sup>— and swear allegiance to the Lord, and one of these cities will be “the city of the sun” (a phrase plagued by textual variants and of very problematic meaning)<sup>43</sup>. The third oracle then predicts that “in that day” there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt and a monument (pillar or stele) to Him at its border, and that the Egyptians will worship Him with sacrifices and vows there<sup>44</sup>. It also predicts that God will send plagues on the Egyptians and that they will be overcome by oppressors, but they will then call on the Lord and he will heal them and send them a savior from their oppressors<sup>45</sup>. The fourth and last “in that day” oracle is the primary subject of this paper.

### **Literal and Competing Interpretations**

Although he retreats from this interpretation in favor of an archetypal interpretation applying the prophecy to modern nations (as described later), in his “Exposition” of Isaiah 1-39 in the *Interpreter’s Bible* G.G.D. Kilpatrick gives a good explanation of what a literal interpretation of Is. 19:18-25 looks like:

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<sup>40</sup> Isa. 19:16-17.

<sup>41</sup> Isa. 19:18.

<sup>42</sup> Oswalt, 376; Motyer, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Oswalt, 377-378.

<sup>44</sup> Isa. 19:19-20a, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Isa. 19:20b-22; Oswalt, 379-380.

In their desperate plight the Egyptians begin to recognize the hand of God in their calamity; the very name of this implacable judge sent terror through the land. If “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10), Egypt’s salvation became a possibility when she shrank under the scourge of God. The process of deliverance is indicated as follows: (a) five cities are mentioned as adopting the language of Canaan, *i.e.*, they turned to the Hebrew religion. This is borne out by (b) the erection of an altar to the Lord in the heart of the land and a pillar at its border, tokens of God’s claim and the nation’s acknowledgement (vs. 19). (c) Further, a highway to Assyria is opened, *i.e.*, a way to the heart of the enemy (vs. 23). Over it pass not the armed forces of the contending foes, but the peaceful ambassadors of trade. The oracle closes with a picture, almost unique in ancient prophecy, of a great reconciliation: Assyria, Egypt, Israel—the triple alliance of faith<sup>46</sup>.

Similarly, Motyer acknowledges that the titles God applies to Egypt and Assyria in verse 25—“my people” and “my handiwork”—had formerly applied to Israel alone. He also correctly notes that the ground of the unity described is “they accept each other because they have been accepted by the Lord (Rom. 14:1-3).<sup>47</sup>” Although Motyer seems to accept the first three “in that day” oracles (vv. 16-22) as making, at least in part, a literal future prediction, when he comes to verses 23-25, with the addition of Assyria, he switches to an archetypal interpretation<sup>48</sup>. Wilson, likewise, before retreating to a position that applies the passage only to modern pairs of enemies, explains that, read literally, the predicts that a day is coming when Assyria and Egypt will be “friends... brought together at the deepest level on which human beings can meet—the level of worship,” sharing God’s blessing after Israel speaks to them “a word of love<sup>49</sup>.”

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<sup>46</sup> G.G.D. Kilpatrick, “Exposition of the Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39,” in Buttrick *et al.*, 281.

<sup>47</sup> Motyer, 142.

<sup>48</sup> Motyer, 141-142.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 70.

Thus, a literal interpretation would obviously predict the future full restoration of Israel, Egypt and Assyria, all worshiping God together in peace, and a literal highway between them. The alternative approaches to this passage are discussed below.

Position that Isaiah 19 Generally was *Vaticinium ex Eventu*

Two authors take the position that Isaiah 19, as a whole, was *vaticinium ex eventu*. Scott takes the position that verses 1 through 15 described events of Isaiah's time, but that verses 18 through 25 were inserted in Isaiah much later, to justify the operation of Jewish temples by exiles in Elephantiné in Upper Egypt or Leontopolis, near Heliopolis (the "city of the sun"), at the apex of the Nile delta<sup>50</sup>. However, this places the authorship of the passage well outside the time period assumed in this paper. The temple of Yahu at Elephantiné most likely operated from about 650 until sometime after 410 B.C.<sup>51</sup>, whereas the temple at Leontopolis appears to have come into use during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor, 180-145 B.C.<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, if the passage in question was inserted to justify the temple at Leontopolis after the fact, the noted presence of verse 18 in 1QIs<sup>a</sup>, containing, indeed, the reading "city of the sun" (*eres*)<sup>53</sup>, becomes very difficult to explain.

Alternatively, although Niccacci views all of Isaiah 19 being written in the late eighth century, he understands it to be a mixture of *vaticinium ex eventu* and, essentially, wishful thinking. He believes the chapter has as its "horizon" the Gaza area<sup>54</sup>, and that it describes a

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<sup>50</sup> Scott, 281-282

<sup>51</sup> Sandgren, 51-52.

<sup>52</sup> Sandgren, 165.

<sup>53</sup> Oswalt, 378.

<sup>54</sup> Niccacci, 221.

series of events during Isaiah's lifetime that began with Tiglath-Pileser III's annexation of Gaza and establishment of a trading center there in 734 and ended with Assyria's improvement of a previously-existing coastal military road as a link between the peoples of the region and an artery for trade with Egypt after the defeat in about 720 of Egyptian-Ethiopian forces supporting a rebellion there<sup>55</sup>. He posits that the social disorder pictured in verses 1-3 accompanied the period immediately preceding Pi'ankhy's campaign to restore the balance of power in Middle and Lower Egypt and that the "hard master" of verse 3 is likely Pi'ankhy<sup>56</sup>.

Niccacci writes that the oracle of Egypt fearing Judah, the first "in that day" oracle, describes, figuratively, the state of affairs immediately after Assyria, with which Judah was allied, defeated the Egyptian-supported rebellion of Gaza<sup>57</sup>. He proposes that the five Hebrew-speaking cities "in Egypt" may actually have been Judean settlements encouraged by Sargon in Egyptian territory in the Sinai to protect trade along his commercial highway<sup>58</sup>. Further, he speculates that the altar in the midst of Egypt and the people in Egypt who call to the Lord in the midst of punishment and are sent a savior are Judeans living in the Nile delta<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, when Niccacci reaches verses 23 through 25, his interpretation is fairly straightforward: the highway between Egypt and Assyria described in these verses is Sargon's highway, and "Judah was a kind of third party, a link between the two superpowers and a blessing to them<sup>60</sup>." Niccacci

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<sup>55</sup> Niccacci, 215, 222-223.

<sup>56</sup> Niccacci, 217-219.

<sup>57</sup> Niccacci, 220-221.

<sup>58</sup> Niccacci, 221-222, citing 1 Chr. 4:34-43.

<sup>59</sup> Niccacci, 222.

<sup>60</sup> Niccacci, 222-223.

reads worship entirely out of verse 23 by taking an alternate reading of the Hebrew, following the LXX, “the Egyptians will serve the Assyrians<sup>61</sup>.” Under this interpretation, verse 25 states, essentially, the prophet’s wish that Sargon and his highway would succeed in creating a lasting political peace. There is no prediction of the restoration or salvation of Egypt, Assyria, or any other gentiles, in this chapter.

The main weakness of Niccacci’s approach is in the details it glosses over. First, Niccacci does not discuss verses 5 through 10 at all. As has already been noted, there is no evidence of any such devastating drought as is predicted in these verses occurring during Isaiah’s lifetime, nor is there any evidence of a severe economic collapse in Egypt during the years this prophecy was likely written. Second, Niccacci’s argues that, because the horizon of the text is the Gaza area, the border between Egypt and Judah, and because Isaiah uses in verse 22 the same “punishment-salvation-conversion” pattern he used of Israel in verse 20 (according to this author’s reading of that verse), the “Egyptians” who came to worship God must actually have been Judeans in Egypt. However, this argument seems to gloss all too lightly over the fact that the prophet repeatedly calls the country “Egypt” and the people affected “Egyptians.”

However, if it is conceded that the Egyptians will come to worship the true God as a result of the events set forth in this chapter, as many commentators agree is the thrust of verses 18 through 22<sup>62</sup>, there is no reason to suspect that the Assyrians will not also do so, and all common translations of verse 23 state that the Assyrians and Egyptians will “worship” together. But neither the drought of verses 5 through 10 nor the conversion of Egypt described in verses

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<sup>61</sup> Niccacci, 223.

<sup>62</sup> Motyer, 140-141; Oswalt, 376-378; Scott, 281; Kilpatrick, 281; Sandgren, 53.

18 through 22 occurred during Isaiah's lifetime. Therefore, they must predict future events, future events of which verses 23 through 25 are a part.

#### Position that Israel, Egypt and Assyria are Types Fulfilled by the Church

In his discussion of intellectual interchange between Christians and Jews in the second and third centuries AD, Sandgren notes that Justin Martyr referenced Is. 19:23-25 in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. According to Sandgren, Justin insisted that the passage is a "parable" and that Israel, Egypt and Assyria in this passage are all typical of the Church, into which God admits believing gentiles, as part of a larger argument that Jesus has replaced the Torah and that gentiles who accept Jesus are the new Israel<sup>63</sup>. Justin, in fact, wrote the following about Isa. 19:23-25:

And by Isaiah He speaks thus concerning another Israel: 'In that day shall there be a third Israel among the Assyrians and the Egyptians, blessed in the land which the Lord of Sabaoth has blessed, saying, blessed shall my people in Egypt and in Assyria be, and Israel my inheritance.' Since then God blesses this people, and calls them Israel, and declares them to be His inheritance, how is it that you repent not of the deception you practise on yourselves, as if you alone were the Israel, and of execrating the people whom God has blessed? For when He speaks to Jerusalem and its environs, He thus added: 'And I will beget men upon you, even my people Israel; and they shall inherit you, and you shall be a possession for them; and you shall be no longer bereaved of them.' ... Again in Isaiah, if you have ears to hear it, God, speaking of Christ in parable, calls Him Jacob and Israel. He speaks thus: 'Jacob is my servant, I will uphold Him; Israel is my elect, I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any one hear His voice in the street: a bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not quench; but He shall bring forth judgment to truth: He shall shine, and shall not be broken till He have set judgment on the earth. And in His name shall the Gentiles trust.' As therefore from the one man Jacob, who was surnamed Israel, all your nation has been called Jacob and Israel; so we from Christ, who begot us unto God, like Jacob, and Israel, and Judah, and Joseph, and David, are called and are the true sons of God, and keep the commandments of Christ<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Sandgren, 420.

<sup>64</sup> Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 123, tr. Marcus Dods and John Reith, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01288.htm> (accessed Dec. 11, 2011).

This interpretation agrees with one traditional approach to the interpretation of the entire corpus of Old Testament prophecy—namely, that it is all figurative and its primary application is to Christ and the Church. This general line of interpretation also has modern proponents. While Scott taught that Isa. 19:16-25 was written primarily as an after-the-fact justification for a Jewish temple in Egypt, as previously noted, he also allowed it a secondary application to the Church, stating that with God’s blessing in verse 25 “the promises and titles of Israel will now belong to the larger community of the broader covenant.” He then states “it is thus that Christianity appropriates the language of the Old Testament<sup>65</sup>.”

In a somewhat similar way, according to Wilson “this oracle [i.e, Is. 19:23-25] has to do with the ultimate condition of human society, and... ‘Egypt’ and ‘Assyria’ may be treated as synonyms for any social groups which are normally hostile to one another.” “Israel” is to be the instrument of their reconciliation<sup>66</sup>. Although Wilson finds the Church’s mediating role in Isa. 19:23-25 not to be clearly stated<sup>67</sup>, he nevertheless identifies “Israel” with the Church, on the basis of what he finds to be a declaration of the mediating role of the Church in 2 Cor. 5:18-20 and the fulfillment in Christ (Gal. 3:29) of the promise of blessing on all people through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3)<sup>68</sup>.

However, the main weakness of the interpretational approach that identifies Israel (and possibly also Egypt and Assyria) with the Church in Isaiah 19 is that absolutely nothing in the

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<sup>65</sup> Scott, 283.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson, 81.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, 70, 72-73, 76.



text suggests that it is to be read as a “parable” or a type or figure applicable, at least primarily, to any nations or groups of people other than Israel, Egypt and Assyria.

#### Position that Egypt and Assyria are Archetypes of All Gentile Nations in the End Times

Most modern commentators seem to take the position that, in Is. 19:23-25, the names Egypt and Assyria are not to be understood literally, but as archetypes for all gentile nations that will come to Christ in the end times. This is true even of Oswalt and Motyer, who take most of what is written in verses 1-22 literally. Thus, in commenting on verse 23, Motyer writes that “the Assyrian crisis was typical of world history,” which will end with the peoples, of which the Egyptians and Assyrians are typical, accepting each other because Christ has accepted them. He then begins his commentary on verses 24-25 by saying that these verses “emphasize[] again, ‘one world, one people, one Lord.’”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Oswalt’s summary of verses 23-25 is that Israel will no longer be a pawn between warring powers, “but she will take her place beside them to fulfill the ancient promise ‘...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” However, God’s blessing will not be limited to Israel but “will be impartially given out to all nations”<sup>70</sup>.

The reason the possibility of a literal fulfillment of this passage is generally overlooked may be suggested by a paper presented at a conference by Robert B. Chisholm several years ago<sup>71</sup>. Chisholm posits that Is. 19:23-25, may originally have been intended as a contingent, short-term predictive prophecy, but, when the contingency failed, Assyria—but, curiously, not Egypt—became an archetype of the nations:

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<sup>69</sup> Motyer, 142.

<sup>70</sup> Oswalt, 380.

<sup>71</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic” [paper presented at the 55th National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, GA, November 19-21, 2003], *Evangelical Theological Society Papers 2004*, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mbts/docDetail.action?docID=80065801> (accessed November 24, 2011).

In Isaiah's prophecy, Assyria is an archetype of the powerful nations of the earth who will someday recognize the Lord's sovereignty (cf. Isa. 2:2-4). It seems just as likely, however, that these prophecies originally anticipated a more immediate fulfillment. But being inherently contingent, they were not realized in the eighth century. Circumstances unfolded in such a way that God decided to postpone their fulfillment. However, this does not mean they are obsolete, for they reflect the unchanging purposes of God to bless his covenant people and establish a kingdom of peace on earth. Assyria becomes an archetype and we can expect an essential fulfillment of the prophecies<sup>72</sup>.

Wilson also bases his interpretation in part on the observation that Assyria has "vanished" (along with the Egypt and Israel Isaiah knew)<sup>73</sup>. This leaves the question: does Assyria become only an "archetype" of powerful nations in modern interpretation because literal fulfillment of the prophecies as regards Assyria is believed to now be impossible?

Does the Disappearance of Assyria Render Literal Future Fulfillment Impossible?

Isaiah 19:23-25 appears to predict the future restoration of three nationalities—Israel, Egypt and Assyria. There can be no doubt that the Jews still exist as a distinct religious and ethnic group, and that there is a Jewish state now located where ancient Israel was. A nation called Egypt also unquestionably still exists, and its Coptic minority—the descendants of the Egyptians of Isaiah's day—also undoubtedly still exist, and have been predominantly Christian since the fourth century of the present era and persistently persecuted for most of that time<sup>74</sup>. But are there still Assyrians?

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<sup>72</sup> Chisholm, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Wilson, 67, 71.

<sup>74</sup> Sandgren, 464, 665-666; H.I. Bell, "Evidences of Christianity in Egypt During the Roman Period," *Harvard Theological Review* 37 no. 3 (July 1944): 199, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1508210> (accessed October 11, 2011); Paul Rowe, "Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak's Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45 no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 111-126, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=16&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=jss&AN=35923579> (accessed Dec. 3, 2011); "Ecumenical outcry follows Coptic Christian killings," *Christianity Today* Feb. 9, 2010, 16 <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=22&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301->

The Babylonian conquest of Assyria in 609 B.C. destroyed all of its major cities, and left Assyria de-urbanized and its high civilization destroyed<sup>75</sup>. Based, likely, upon this fact alone, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century A.D. attributed to the Roman Emperor Constantine the observation that “the Assyrian race is gone<sup>76</sup>.” This appears to have been the assessment of the Western church since that time as well—there are no more Assyrians. This may have led to a tacit assumption that literal fulfillment of Is. 19:23-25 is impossible.

However, Eusebius was wrong. Although the Assyrians were largely reduced to an impoverished, rural existence after the Babylonian conquest, they neither disappeared nor lost their cultural identity. As Hallo<sup>77</sup> and Sandgren<sup>78</sup> both note, Assyria re-emerged in the first century B.C. as the Kingdom of Adiabene, which was sometimes independent and sometimes a vassal of the Parthian (Arsacid) Empire that ruled Iran. According to legend, in what Hallo describes as “a supreme irony of history,” in the mid first century A.D. King Izates of Adiabene converted to Judaism, and certainly the royal family of Adiabene was Jewish by the time the Roman emperor Trajan conquered the area and created the Roman province of Assyria in 115 A.D.<sup>79</sup> The area was subsequently retaken by the Parthians, and a smaller kingdom came into

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425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=48002190 (accessed Dec. 3, 2011).

<sup>75</sup> Hallo, 61.

<sup>76</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea *Oration of Constantine 22*, tr. Ernest C. Richardson, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2503.htm> (accessed November 16, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Hallo, 61.

<sup>78</sup> Sandgren, 216-217, 254-256.

<sup>79</sup> Hallo, 61; Sandgren, 254-255.

existence, centered at Edessa in what is now southeastern Turkey. When Christian missionaries reached the Assyrians, they found them very receptive. There were Christians in both Edessa and Nisbis by the mid-second century<sup>80</sup>. King Abgar VII of Edessa (177-212) was at least friendly to Christianity, if not (as tradition has it) himself a Christian<sup>81</sup>. By the late third century, Edessa was predominantly Christian and sending missionaries. In 363, a seminary was founded at Edessa, which was later (471) supplanted by a seminary farther east in Nisibis, both of which cities were in Assyrian areas<sup>82</sup>. After the advent of Islam, the Assyrians maintained their cultural identity in large part by clinging to their traditional Christianity<sup>83</sup>. The ethnic Assyrians of modern Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran remain predominantly Christian to this day, despite persecution, and what to do with the Assyrian minority has been a contentious issue for modern governments, particularly in Great Britain, Iraq and Turkey<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> Sandgren, 366-367.

<sup>81</sup> Sandgren, 367.

<sup>82</sup> Sandgren, 468, 505-506, 593; Yonca Anzerlioğlu, "The Revolts of Nestorian Christians Against the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey," *Muslim World* 100 (Jan. 2010): 45, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=20&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=47657122> (accessed December 3, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Anzerlioğlu, 45-48.

<sup>84</sup> Anzerlioğlu, 49-59; Vahram Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," *Iran & The Caucasus* 10 no. 1 (2006):113-147, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=24&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=21783184> (accessed Oct 11, 2011); Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 40-44; Keith Roshangar and Susan Wunderlink, "Fleeing Nineveh," *Christianity Today* 51 no. 1 (Jan. 2007):22-23, <http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy01.mbts.edu/ehost/detail?vid=26&hid=7&sid=ea8e74b7-1301-425f-bd18-a173f9f7f644%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=23567774> (accessed Dec. 3, 2011).

This, by itself, does not prove that Is. 19:23-25 should be interpreted as anticipating a literal future fulfillment, but it does demonstrate that a literal fulfillment remains *possible*. All of the people groups identified in the prophecy still exist in the region and are identifiable.

### **Conclusion**

The best interpretation of Isaiah 19:23-25 starts with a literal understanding of these verses: in the future, with God's open blessing, Egypt and Assyria will be joined with Israel in peace. This literal understanding of the passage does not exclude the obvious effect this will have on the other nations of the world. Of course, in that day Egypt and Assyria will serve as living examples (rather than mere literary types) of God's rule of the nations and of his acceptance of people from every nation in Christ. Thus, both of the typical interpretations of this passage contain a kernel of truth. But the best interpretation starts with the literal understanding.

### **Ministry Application**

The most significant application of the argument in this paper lies in the defense of the Scriptures and of the power of God. Modern interpretation has shunned a literal reading of this passage in part because it appears that the prophecy has failed beyond any hope of literal fulfillment. Since the prophecy can no longer be literally fulfilled, as we view history, at least in the West, the true interpretation must lie elsewhere.

However, God is not as limited as we think. He scattered Israel among the nations, and allowed them to face centuries of persecution, but has never permitted them to be exterminated. Rather, he has been preparing them to accept his Son, Jesus, as a nation, when the time is right<sup>85</sup>. This much is generally accepted among Evangelical Christians.

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<sup>85</sup> Rom. 11:25-29.

What is less well understood is that God has also been continuing to work with other groups of people to whom he has directed specific prophecies. The apparent failure of those prophecies in the short term does not mean they will never or can never happen. The early conversion to Christianity and preservation of the Copts and the Assyrians—though as small minorities in Islamic countries—demonstrates this. In Isa. 19:23-25, God said there would be a time when Israel, Egypt and Assyria will live and worship the true God together in peace, and, true to his Word, God has preserved a remnant of all three nations through the centuries to make this possible. This demonstrates the power and faithfulness of God.

This passage can also be used in a manner similar to Wilson’s application—though without rejecting the literal meaning. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and he has committed to believers, to us, the word of reconciliation<sup>86</sup>. God has chosen to not only forgive two great national oppressors of his chosen people, Egypt the decadent enslaver of his people and bloodthirsty Assyria, but also to preserve them through the centuries and ultimately reconcile them with Israel and bring them into a place of equality with Israel as a recipient of his blessing. If God is doing this for Egypt and Assyria, what can our modern national and group enmities be worth? In the Church, our group hostilities and international conflicts should not be a consideration. We should have the same concern for our Christian brothers in Iran and North Korea as we do for those in our own city. We should have the same concern for the spread of the Gospel in “enemy” countries as we do at home.

This leads to the final ministry application of the material in this paper—raising awareness of groups of persecuted Christians in the Islamic bloc. Many of these groups, like the Coptic Church and the traditional Christian Assyrians, have been present in the Middle East

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<sup>86</sup> 2 Cor. 5:18-20.

since long before Mohammed. Others were planted by Western missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. All are being persecuted, to one degree or another, and are standing faithful in the face of it. Some of these groups of Christians in Islamic lands are growing in numbers at present. The church in this country needs to be aware of them, and pray for them.

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