

Does the Bible Predict the Destruction of Syria?

Over the last few weeks, I have been asked many times if I believe that the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 17 refers to Syria today, since the text predicts the total destruction of Damascus, the ancient and modern capital of the nation.

In principle, I have no problem with the concept that ancient biblical prophecies can refer to contemporary events, since it's clear that there are many prophecies still to be fulfilled, including the future world war against Jerusalem. (See Zechariah 12 and 14.)

But it's obvious from the historical context that Isaiah was speaking of his own day, and so we can safely say that Isaiah 17 almost certainly has nothing to do with the current conflict in Syria. (What follows may be a little technical, but stay with me; it's important we rightly interpret God's Word.)

The text states, "An oracle concerning Damascus. Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins. ... The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus; and the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts" (Is. 17:1, 3).

We don't know the exact date this was written, but the best guess is somewhere between 735-732 B.C., since:

1) Ephraim (meaning the kingdom of Northern Israel, the 10 tribes of Israel) had aligned itself with Syria (called Aram in Hebrew) in 734 B.C. with the hope of being able to stand together against the king of Assyria, who was bent on a brutal conquest of the region. Together, they planned to attack the kingdom of Judah, which was to the immediate south, thereby

bringing Judah into their alliance against Assyria. This is recorded in Isaiah 7:2, where the house of David (meaning the kingdom of Judah) is told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim." God told Ahaz, the faithless king of Judah, that this alliance would be crushed (vv. 5-9).

2) In the years 734-732 B.C.—meaning, within a matter of months or years from when Isaiah delivered the prophetic message found in Isaiah 17—the Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser III absolutely devastated Syria and Israel (meaning Ephraim, northern Israel). And note carefully that both of them are mentioned together in Isaiah 17:1-3, so this prophecy concerns the two nations together.

According to the *IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Annals describe how he completely destroyed the sixteen districts and most of the cities of Aram [Syria] in 732, deported portions of the population and gave charge of most of the cities and territories of Syria to other, more loyal vassals (the list includes 591 towns destroyed). Damascus was badly damaged but survived the experience to become the capital of a newly constituted Assyrian province. Subsequently Damascus joined yet another anti-Assyrian coalition, led by the Syrian state of Hamath, in 720. This rebellion was crushed by Sargon II in 720, and thereafter Damascus is ruled by Assyrian governors until 609. The city only regained its independence temporarily until the Neo-Babylonian empire absorbed it in 604."

And in the year 722 B.C., Assyria completed its destruction of Israel (meaning, again, the northern kingdom, Ephraim), sending many of the Israelites into exile.

So, within a few short years of Isaiah prophesying the destruction of Syria and Israel, his words came to pass, with God using the king of Assyria to bring the devastating judgment.

This obviously has nothing to do with the situation today, more than 2,700 years later.

What about the fact that Isaiah declared that “Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins”? This is basically what happened under the Assyrians, and it is in keeping with prophetic language that often describes divine judgment in extremely vivid terms like this. (In other words, the powerful language of the prophets often describes a snapshot of the destruction and judgment, and so from a literal viewpoint it sounds like hyperbole.)

Is it possible that Isaiah was speaking of a still future, more complete destruction of Damascus?

It’s remotely possible, but the whole context of Isaiah 17 is against it, and rather than speculate on whether Isaiah was predicting the destruction of Damascus in the 21st century—again, a highly unlikely proposition—we would do better to focus on other issues, like praying for God’s kingdom to come in power to Syria and the region; praying for the name of Jesus to be exalted in that war-torn nation; praying for mercy on those deeply affected by the war (and working to help them however we can); praying for grace on the Christian population there (and for the nominal Christians to truly come to know the Lord); praying for the salvation of many Muslims; praying for God’s hand of restraint on America, Russia and the nations; and praying for the peace of Jerusalem.

That should keep us busy for some time to come.

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