

## **NOTES ON THE FUTURE OF DAMASCUS ACCORDING TO BIBLE PROPHECY**

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Over the past several years, I have been repeatedly asked whether the Bible speaks to the future of Syria. Pastors and other Christian leaders have asked. So have a number of U.S. leaders and those from other countries.

In 2012, for example, a prominent Member of Congress asked to meet with me in Washington, D.C. I thought the topic was going to be the possible coming war between Israel and Iran. Instead, the Representative asked, “What are your thoughts on Isaiah 17 and the possible destruction of Damascus?” A few months ago, a Member of the Canadian Parliament asked me the same question.

As the implosion of Syria accelerates, the question of what Bible prophecy says about the future of Syria is being asked more frequently. During the horrific civil war that is underway there, more than 110,000 Syrians have been killed thus far, including, reportedly, through the use of chemical weapons in Damascus. More than two million Syrians have fled their country. Another five million more Syrians have been “internally displaced” – they have fled their homes and villages because of the brutal violence, but have not yet actually left their country. The country is steadily falling apart and there is a real question how in the world Syria would ever be put back together.

The larger question is whether the situation will actually go from bad to worse. Does the Bible predict the catastrophic destruction of Damascus? If so, why, and how will it happen? What are the implications of such a thing happening? How should Christians live in light of such coming events, if they are legitimate?

These are questions I have been studying for some time. In March of 2013, my most recent novel, *Damascus Countdown*, was published. It considers this very subject, the coming judgment of the Syrian capital, and how this scenario could possibly unfold in the not-too-distant future in relation to other Bible prophecies and current geopolitical trends in the Middle East.

Given how often I’m being asked to discuss this, I have decided to post my personal study notes on this subject. I hope they are helpful.

- 1. There are two major passages in the Bible that deal with the future of Damascus.**
  - a. The first is found in Isaiah 17, notably verses one through three, which foretells the destruction of Damascus in the last days, prior to the Day of the Lord.

- b. The second is found in Jeremiah 49:23-27, which also foretells the destruction of Damascus prior to the Day of the Lord.
2. **First, some background: Damascus is the capital of the Republic of Syria with some 1.6 million residents, and a greater metropolitan area of about five million people.**
3. **Damascus is described by historians as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on the planet.** Other ancient cities include Jericho (in the West Bank), Sidon (in Lebanon), and Byblos (also in Lebanon). Damascus is also considered the oldest capital city.
  - a. The Encyclopedia Britannica, for example, notes: “Many scholars believe that, among the ancient cities of the world, Damascus is perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited. Over the centuries, Damascus has been conqueror and conquered, wealthy and destitute, and capital of empire and small states.” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/150420/Damascus>
  - b. The World Heritage Convention, a project of the United Nations, notes: “Founded in the 3rd millennium B.C., Damascus was an important cultural and commercial centre, by virtue of its geographical position at the crossroads of the orient and the occident, between Africa and Asia. The old city of Damascus is considered to be among the [oldest continually inhabited cities](#) in the world. Excavations at Tell Ramad on the outskirts of the city have demonstrated that Damascus was inhabited as early as 8,000 to 10,000 BC. However, it is not documented as an important city until the arrival of the [Arameans](#). In the Medieval period, it was the centre of a flourishing craft industry, with different areas of the city specializing in particular trades or crafts..... Damascus is considered to be the oldest city as well as the oldest capital of the world. It is the cradle of historical civilizations, constituting a beacon of science and art over time, and a historical encyclopaedia which tells a great part of the history of humanity. In the same way, it represents a historical reference for comparing the systems of architecture and town planning over several thousand years.” <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/20>
4. **The city of Damascus is mentioned 56 times in the New American Standard Bible.**
  - a. Damascus is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 14:15. Here’s the passage in context: “When Abram heard that his relative [Lot] had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. He brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people.”

- b. Abraham’s most trusted servant, Eliezer, is from Damascus. We first learn about him in Genesis 15:2.
  - c. King David conquered Damascus and the Aramaeans and built garrisons for his troops in Damascus in 2 Samuel 8.
  - d. In 2 Kings 5, we read that Naaman, a captain in the army of Aram, comes to Elisha the prophet of Israel to be healed of leprosy, but is initially enraged when he’s told to wash himself in the Jordan River, saying, “Are not...the rivers of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?”
  - e. In the New Testament, of course, we learn in Acts 9 that Saul the Pharisee is heading from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest and persecute followers of Jesus Christ. It is on the road to Damascus that Saul receives his famous vision of Jesus Christ. Saul is then led to Damascus and fasts for three days in Damascus in the home of Judas on Straight Street. A disciple of Jesus Christ named Ananias then receives a vision from Christ telling him to go heal Saul of blindness, which he obeys and then baptizes Saul. Then Saul begins preaching the gospel to the Jewish people in Damascus and has to escape from Damascus because of threats against his life.
  - f. The last time Damascus is mentioned in the New Testament is in Galatians 1:17 as the Apostle Paul describes his testimony and notes that he later returned to Damascus to serve the Lord.
5. **What does the prophecy concerning the future of Damascus as described by the Hebrew prophet Isaiah tell us? An important key to interpreting Isaiah chapter 17 is in understanding that the context of the passage is End Times matters – in chapters 11 through 24, Isaiah is writing about the coming of the Messiah, the Lord’s future judgment of the Gentile nations who are historic enemies of Israel, and the reign of the Messiah on earth during the Millennial Kingdom.**
- a. In Isaiah 11 and 12, the Hebrew prophet describes the coming of the Messiah, the judgment of the nations that He will bring, the Messiah’s reign during the Millennial Kingdom – all of which are End Times matters.
    - i. The prophet speaks of the coming judgment of the nations – “[W]ith righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.” (11:4)
    - ii. The prophet discusses how the Lord will “assemble the banished ones of Israel and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four

corners of the earth” back to Israel, including from Syria, Lebanon and Kurdistan (Assyria), Egypt, Iran (Elam), Iraq (Shinar) and “from the islands of the sea.” (11:11-12).

- iii. The prophet describes the dramatically changed order of nature during the Millennial Kingdom – “And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat...the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra...” (11:6, 8)
  - iv. The prophet describes the peace and unity that will exist in the Millennial Kingdom between Assyria, Egypt and Israel (11:16), in a passage that echoes Isaiah 19.
  - v. There will be much rejoicing in the End of Days when the Lord judges the wicked and comforts His people and brings salvation (chapter 12).
- b. In Isaiah 13 to Isaiah 24, the Lord speaks directly to the future of Gentile nations near or surrounding Israel. These prophecies are also End Times matters – that is, they are events that will take place just before the Tribulation, or during the Tribulation, and come to complete fulfillment on or about the Day of the Lord (the literal, physical Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ).
- c. We know these are End Times prophecies – and not near-term prophecies that would take place during Isaiah’s lifetime or even in the generations that would immediately follow – because of the numerous eschatological references that Isaiah makes.
- i. In Isaiah 13, we read about the coming judgment/destruction of Babylon. But the context makes it clear that the prophecies will happen deep in the End Times, just prior to the Second Coming of Christ. In Isaiah 13:6, for example, we read, “Wail, for the Day of the Lord is near!” In Isaiah 13:9, we read, “Behold, the Day of the Lord is coming.” Both of these references indicate that the prophecies concerning the destruction of Babylon will occur in the last days leading up to the “Day of the Lord,” an eschatological biblical term that refers to the actual, literal, physical return of Christ to earth at the end of the Tribulation.
  - ii. In Isaiah 19, the Lord speaks of an End Times judgment of Egypt, followed by a great salvation of the Egyptian people, and describes a highway between Egypt, Assyria and Israel that will bring Jews and Arabs to Jerusalem to worship the Lord in the Millennial Kingdom.

- iii. In Isaiah 24:3-6 we read about the horrors of the Tribulation, “The earth will be completely laid waste and completely despoiled, for the Lord has spoken His word. The earth mourns and withers, the world fades and withers, the exalted of the people of the earth fade away. The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left.”
  - iv. In Isaiah 24:23, we read of the Second Coming of Christ, “Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders.”
  - v. This entire section – Isaiah 13 to 24 – is, therefore, about End Times events. The fact that the prophecy concerning Damascus occurs in Isaiah 17, indicates that it, too, is an End Times prophecy.
- d. It is worth noting that Dr. Dwight Pentecost, the renowned professor of eschatology at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote in his 1958 book, *Things To Come: A Study In Biblical Eschatology*, the following: “There is a divine program for the Gentile nations that is to come to fulfillment in the tribulation period....God has a program with the Gentile nations, leading to their salvation and blessing in the millennium....[including] the judgments upon nations adjacent to Israel. These predictions are set forth in various portions of the Old Testament, e.g.: Babylon and Chaldea (Isa. 13:1-22; 14:18-27; Jer. 50:1-51:64), Moab (Isa. 15:1-9; 16:1-14; Jer. 48:1-47), Damascus (Isa. 17:1-14; Jer. 49:23-27), Egypt (Isa. 19:1-25; Jer. 46:2-28), Philistia and Tyre (Isa. 23:1-18; Jer. 47:1-7), Edom (Jer. 49:7-22), Ammon (Jer. 49:1-6), Elam (Jer. 49:34-39).” (p. 314)

6. Now, let’s examine Isaiah 17 more closely.

a. Isaiah 17:1

- i. The NASB translation says: “The oracle concerning Damascus, ‘Behold, Damascus is about to be removed from being a city and will become a fallen ruin.’”
- ii. The NKJV translation of Isaiah 17:1 says: “The Burden of Damascus. ‘Behold, Damascus will cease from being a city, and it will be a ruinous heap.’”

- iii. The NIV translation of Isaiah 17:1 says: “A prophecy against Damascus: ‘See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins.’”
- iv. According to all major translations, the meaning of the text is clear:
  - 1. The passage concerns the city of Damascus.
  - 2. The passage is a prophecy, concerning the future of Damascus.
  - 3. Damascus will be utterly destroyed.
  - 4. Damascus will no longer be a livable, inhabitable city.
  - 5. Damascus will lie in ruins.

b. Isaiah 17:2

- i. The NASB translation says: “The cities of Aroer are forsaken; they will be for flocks to lie down in, and there will be no one to frighten *them*.”
- ii. The NKJV translation says: “The cities of Aroer are forsaken; they will be for flocks which lie down, and no one will make them afraid.”
- iii. The NIV translation says: “The cities of Aroer will be deserted and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid.”
- iv. The RSV translation says: “Her cities will be deserted forever; they will be for flocks, which will lie down, and none will make them afraid.”
- v. While 17:1 is crystal clear, understanding 17:2 is more challenging.
  - 1. Generally speaking, the text indicates that as Damascus will face judgment and be destroyed, so a certain geographical area – presumably close to or related to Damascus – will also face judgment and become “deserted” and desolate. In the aftermath of the judgment, there will be animals (“flocks”) but no human beings (“no one to make them afraid.”)
  - 2. The difficulty is in determining what or where “the cities of Aroer” are.
  - 3. The word “Aroer” is mentioned 16 times in the Bible, referring to a number of ancient cities in the Near East, none of which, however, are near Damascus.

4. Old Testament scholar J. Alec Motyer, author of *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (1993), notes that “There is no known Aroer in Aram.” He suggests “the alternatives are either to assume an Aramean area not elsewhere mentioned” in the Bible (thus currently unknown to us), or “a reference to Aroer in Gad.” That said, he concurs that the general meaning of the verse is plain, that there will be desolation in the wake of the judgment of Damascus. “The scene ‘of flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid’ is not one of pastoral bliss but of a landscape emptied of humankind.” (p. 156)
5. According to the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*: “The reading ‘the cities of Aroer are forsaken’ (Isa. xvii. 2) is probably incorrect, as it presents many geographical difficulties, occurring as it does in connection with ‘the burden of Damascus.’ While it is possible that there may have been a [city called] Aroer near Damascus, it is more likely that the passage should be rendered ‘the cities *thereof* shall be forsaken.’ This emendation, proposed by Lagarde, has been quite generally accepted by modern scholars.” See <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1804-aroeer>
6. According to Strong’s Concordance, Aroer (H6177) means “ruins.”
  - a. It comes from the root word “Aroer” (H6176) which means translated “naked, stripped or destitute.”
  - b. It is sometimes translated as “a tree or bush, probably juniper or cypress.”
7. Strong’s Concordance (H6177) notes three cities in the Bible that have the proper name, “Aroer,” including: “1) a city on the north bank of the river Arnon, the southern point of the territory of Sihon the king of the Amorites and later of Reuben; modern 'Arair'; 2) a city in Ammon near the Jabbok belonging to Gad; 3) a town in southern Judah.” <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H6177&t=NASB>.
8. Other Bible dictionaries and references (including Gesenius’ Lexicon) also note that there were at least three cities named “Aroer” in ancient times: one was in the territory of Judah (see I Samuel 30:28); and one was in what today is central Jordan, in the territory of Gad (see Joshua 13:25); and one was in what today is southern Jordan, in the Valley of Arnon

along the Arnon River in what was the territory of Reuben (see Deut 2:36). For example, see <http://www.bible-history.com/eastons/A/Aroer/>; <http://www.bible-history.com/smiths/A/Aroer/>;

- vi. The critical question is whether any of these are the specific cities of which the Lord was speaking about through Isaiah, or whether it is best translated as the “cities of ruins,” or whether there were other “cities of Aroer” close to Damascus that future archaeology will uncover.
- vii. I am not certain, but I lean against the idea that Isaiah is referring cities significantly distant from Damascus since 17:1 clearly states the prophecy is about the future of Damascus, not the future of Judah, Gad or Reuben.
- viii. Again, what is certain from verse 2 is that the area will be “forsaken” in the future. The Hebrew word “*asav*” (Strong’s H5800) which in English Bibles is translated “forsaken” clearly means “left, abandoned, forsaken, neglected.”
- ix. Here, the RSV translation is intriguing: “Her cities will be deserted forever; they will be for flocks, which will lie down, and none will make them afraid.”
- x. Based on the key words used in the text, and the context of the passage, a question arises whether verse 2 should be interpreted (not translated, per se, but interpreted) as follows: “*The cities of the ruins – the naked, stripped, and destitute people in the area around Damascus – will be forsaken. People won’t live in these regions again. Only animals will live there and no one will come to get, hunt or frighten those animals because the region in, near and around Damascus will be uninhabitable for human beings.*”

c. Isaiah 17:3

- i. The NASB translation says: “The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and sovereignty from Damascus and the remnant of Aram; they will be like the glory of the sons of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts.”
- ii. The NKJV translation says: “The fortress also will cease from Ephraim, the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria; they will be as the glory of the children of Israel, says the Lord of hosts.”



- iii. The NIV translation says: “The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites, declares the Lord Almighty.”
- iv. The text clearly indicates for the third verse in a row that Damascus will be destroyed and here the Lord specifically says that “sovereignty” will “disappear” – or be removed – “from Damascus.”
- v. This verse also refers to trouble coming for Ephraim in the future. Note that Ephraim is often used as a substitute term in the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel. (In Hosea 5:3, for example, we read: “I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me; For now, O Ephraim, you have played the harlot, Israel has defiled itself.”) In Isaiah 17:3, the Lord is signaling that Damascus and the Syrians will face judgment and suffer great loss and lose their “glory” just like the children of Israel will face judgment and suffer great loss and lose their glory in the last days. The key to this interpretation is the following verses.

d. Isaiah 17 – other important verses

i. Isaiah 17:3-4

- 1. Here we learn that the divine judgment of Damascus will be linked to a coming divine judgment of Israel.
- 2. The text indicates that the removal of the “sovereignty from Damascus” due to divine judgment will correspond to the removal of the “glory of the sons of Israel.”
- 3. The text indicates that there will no longer be “fortified” cities in Israel “in that day,” that is, during that era or season of time.

ii. Isaiah 17:9-14 describes the judgment of Israel.

- 1. The text indicates that “the land will be a desolation” (vs. 9).
- 2. The judgment will come because, “you have forgotten the God of your salvation.” (vs. 10)
- 3. God will be impose judgment that will cause “a day of sickliness and incurable pain.” (vs. 11)

4. There will be great turmoil in the Middle East, “the uproar of many peoples,” and “the roaring of the seas,” and “the rumbling of nations.” (vs. 12)
  5. God will “rebuke” the nations “and they will flee far away.” (vs. 13).
  6. The judgment will produce “terror” in the hearts of the people (vs. 14).
- iii. The good news is that in verses 7 and 8 we see that in the midst of such judgment – and perhaps as a result of such destruction and judgment -- there will be a remnant of the people of Israel will finally turn to faith in the God of Israel and turn away from idolatry and false religions. “In that day man will have regard for his Maker and his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel. He will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands, nor will he look to that which his fingers have made.”
  - iv. This is all consistent with the suffering and the redemption that comes during the Tribulation and the salvation of Israel just prior to Armageddon and the Day of the Lord.
- e. Similar to the RSV translation, *The Message* translation actually does a useful job of summing up verses 1 through 3: “A Message concerning Damascus: ‘Watch this: Damascus undone as a city, a pile of dust and rubble! Her towns emptied of people. The sheep and goats will move in and take over the towns as if they owned them—which they will! Not a sign of a fort is left in Ephraim, not a trace of government left in Damascus. What’s left of Aram? The same as what’s left of Israel—not much.”
  - f. Various interpretations.
    - i. Some respected Bible scholars have argued that Isaiah 17:1-3 has already been fulfilled, and have specifically suggested it was fulfilled when Damascus was conquered in 732 B.C. (see 2 Kings 16:9).
      1. Example: Dr. John Walvoord, the late Chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary and a respected 20<sup>th</sup> century expert on eschatology, wrote in his 1990 book, *Every Prophecy of the Bible*, “The destruction of Damascus was fulfilled in history and prophecy.” (see p. 101 in the paperback edition)
      2. Example: Dr. Mark Hitchcock, a Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, pastor, and author of numerous works on Bible prophecy, wrote in his 2012 book, *Middle East Burning: Is the Spreading Unrest a Sign of the End Times?*,

“I believe it makes more sense to hold that Isaiah 17 was fulfilled in the eighth century B.C. when both Damascus, the capital of Syria, and Samaria, the capital of Israel, were hammered by the Assyrians. In that conquest, both Damascus and Samaria were destroyed, just as Isaiah 17 predicts. According to history, Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.) pushed vigorously to the west, and in 734 the Assyrians advanced and laid siege to Damascus, which fell two years later in 732 B.C. Rezin, the Syrian monarch, was executed, his kingdom was overthrown, and the city suffered the fate that a few years later befell Samaria.” (p. 156)

3. Example: Dr. Geoffrey W. Grogan, principal of the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow, Scotland, wrote in 1986 edition of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 6, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, “The oracle...certainly appears to belong to the period 735-732 B.C....Damascus, in fact, fell to the Assyrians in 732 B.C., and Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell a decade later.” (see pages 117 and 118 in the hardcover edition)
  4. Example: J. Alec Motyer was principal of Trinity College in Bristol, England, wrote in his 1993 work, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, that “17:1-3...must be dated prior to the fall of Damascus in 732 B.C.” (p. 155)
- ii. Other respected Bible scholars agree that Isaiah 17:1-3 has yet to be fulfilled and is a last days or “End Times” prophecy.
1. Example: Dr. Dwight Pentecost (as noted above), the renowned professor of eschatology at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote in his 1958 book, *Things To Come: A Study In Biblical Eschatology*, that the Isaiah 17 and Jeremiah 49 passages concerned Damascus are eschatological and relate to judgments that will come in the End Times. (p. 314)
  2. Example: Dr. Thomas Ice, co-author of some 30 books on Bible prophecy, including *The Return: Understanding Christ's Second Coming and the End Times*, and executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center, wrote in a paper entitled, “Isaiah 17 and the Destruction of Damascus.” In it, he explained that the prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. He noted that Damascus has ever been utterly destroyed as described by Isaiah. He argued that this will occur at the end of the Tribulation, not before. See [http://pre-](http://pre-trib.org/)

[trib.org/articles/view/isaiah-17-and-the-destruction-of-damascus](http://trib.org/articles/view/isaiah-17-and-the-destruction-of-damascus).

3. Example: Dr. Walter Kaiser, Jr., president emeritus and Colman Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and author of more than forty books, including, *Preaching and Teaching the Last Things: Old Testament Eschatology for the Life of the Church*, believes Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the future of Damascus are eschatological and will come to pass during the End Times (personal correspondence with the author).
  4. Example: Dr. Mitch Glaser, author of *Isaiah 53 Explained*, editor of *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology*, and president of Chosen People Ministries, also believes Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies concerning the future of Damascus are eschatological and will come to pass during the End Times (personal correspondence with the author).
- iii. Note: Dr. Tim LaHaye and Dr. Ed Hindson in their 2006 book, *The Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary: Understanding The Meaning of Every Prophetic Passage* do not refer to Isaiah 17.
- g. I have great respect for these various Bible scholars, including those who argue that Isaiah has already been fulfilled. That said, the historical record is quite clear: Damascus has never in history been utterly destroyed and uninhabitable. To the contrary, it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. What's more, the book of Isaiah indicates that he received the prophecies concerning the judgment of the Gentile nations (including the judgment of Damascus in chapter 17) at a time that was decades after Damascus was conquered by Tiglath-pileser.
    - i. In Isaiah 14:28, the text says: "In the year that King Ahaz died this oracle came."
    - ii. This tells us that the prophecies found in the rest of Isaiah chapter 14, and certainly chapters 15 through 19, were given to Isaiah in the year that King Ahaz died.
    - iii. King Ahaz died around 715 BC. (See J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, who notes on p. 147 that "Ahaz, the arch-collaborator with Assyria, died in 715.")

- iv. This was well after the fall of Damascus under Tiglath-pileser in 732 BC (indeed, King Ahaz was obviously alive when Tiglath-pilser conquered Damascus and was, in fact, present in Damascus. See 2 Kings 16.)
- v. This makes it clear that Isaiah's prophecies about Damascus given to him by the Lord well after 732 BC. Thus, they do not relate to the conquering of Damascus by Tiglath-pileser as some commentators have suggested.
- vi. That said, it is important to note that in other passages in the beginning of his book – in chapters 7 and 8 – Isaiah does specifically prophesy about the fall of Damascus that occurred in 732 BC under Tiglath-pilser.
  - 1. First, it's important to understand the time frame in which Isaiah lived and ministered. "Isaiah of Jerusalem ministered from the year King Uzziah died (740/39), through the reigns of Jotham (740/39-732/31), Ahaz (731/31-716/15), and Hezekiah (716/15-687/86)." [Motyer, p. 18]
  - 2. Second, it's important to note that during the days of King Ahaz, the Lord told Isaiah to prophesy about coming judgment. Isaiah was to tell the people that Damascus and Ephraim (the northern Israelite kingdom) would be conquered by Assyria, and that this would be accomplished in Isaiah's lifetime. A few examples:
    - a. "Now it came about in the days of Ahaz...." (7:1)
    - b. "So I approached the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. Then the Lord said to me, 'Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz ["swift is the booty, speedy is the prey"]; for before the boys knows how to cry out, 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria." (8:3-4)
    - c. "And I will wait for the Lord who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob...." (8:17)
    - d. "The Lord sends a message against Jacob, and it falls on Israel, and all the people know it; that is, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, asserting in pride and in arrogance of heart...." (9:8-9)

3. These prophecies did, in fact, come to pass in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, BC, during the lifetime of Isaiah and his family. See 2 Kings 16.
  - a. “Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king [of Judah]...and he did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God...but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son walk through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out from before the sons of Israel.” (2 Kings 16:2-3)
  - b. “Then Rezin king of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah, king of Israel, came to Jerusalem to wage war; and they besieged Ahaz, but could not overcome him.” (16:5)
  - c. “So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son; come up and deliver me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the king of Israel, who are rising up against me.’” (16:7)
  - d. “So the king of Assyria listened to him; and the king of Assyria went up against Damascus and captured it, and carried the people of it away into exile in Kir, and put Rezin to death.” (16:9)
  - e. “Now, King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria....” (16:10)

#### h. Conclusion

- i. While the conquering of Damascus (and Ephraim/northern Israel) as described by Isaiah in chapters 7 and 8 were fulfilled in 732 BC during the reign of King Ahaz, the judgment of Damascus as related in Isaiah 17 had not even yet been given to Isaiah in 732 BC. Rather, it was given to Isaiah in the year of Ahaz’s death in 715 BC.
- ii. Thus, Isaiah’s prophecy about the judgment and utter destruction of Damascus in chapter 17 is eschatological, and yet to be fulfilled.
- iii. The near-term fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies about the destruction of Damascus in the 8<sup>th</sup> century gave the Hebrew

prophet credibility, and make it all the more certain that his End Times prophesies will come to pass in God's sovereign timing.

- iv. The text does not tell us specifically whether the prophecy will be fulfilled before or after the Rapture, nor does it tell us whether it will be fulfilled before or during the Tribulation.
- v. Those who argue that the prophecy will not come to fulfillment until the end of the Tribulation could be correct. However, that is an interpretation and the text does not explicitly and precisely say.
- vi. Because the text doesn't give us precise timing, we should be cautious in our interpretation. The destruction of Damascus could occur during the Tribulation, or near the end of the Tribulation, close to the Second Coming of Christ (the "Day of the Lord.") But it is also possible that the destruction of Damascus occurs in the "last days" leading up to the Tribulation. It could happen in our lifetime, even soon. That's not to say it will, but it could. Indeed, should the destruction of Damascus happen in the not-too-distant future, it would be an ominous sign that the destruction of much of Israel (which the Bible says will happen during the Tribulation, the "times of Jacob's trouble") is rapidly approaching, too.

**7. Let's now look specifically at the prophecy concerning the future destruction of Damascus as described by the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah: As with the Isaiah passage, an important key to interpreting Jeremiah chapter 49 is in understanding that the context of the passage is the Lord's future judgment of the Gentile nations who are historic enemies of Israel.**

- a. From chapters 48 through 51, the prophet Jeremiah is specifically writing of End Times events.
- b. In Jeremiah 48, we read about the future judgment and restoration of Moab -- a region of the country we now call Jordan -- in the End Times.
  - i. 48:4 – "Moab is broken."
  - ii. 48:5 – "They [the people of Moab] will ascend with continual weeping..." [future tense]
  - iii. 48:8 – "A destroyer will come..." [future tense]
  - iv. 48:9 – "Her cities will become a desolation..." [future tense]
  - v. 48:12 – "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord..." [future tense]
  - vi. 48:35 – "I will make an end of Moab,' declares the Lord..." [future tense]

- vii. 48:42 – “Moab will be destroyed from people a people....” [future tense]
  - viii. Now, here is the key: “Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days,’ declares the Lord.”
  - ix. While we cannot be precise about the timing of the complete judgment and restoration of Moab, one thing is clear: this is a prophecy that will come to fulfillment in the End Times.
- c. In Jeremiah 49:1-6, we then read a prophecy about the future judgment and restoration of the people of Ammon (another region of the country we now call Jordan; indeed, the capital of modern Jordan is called Amman.)
- i. 49:2 – “‘Therefore, behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord, that I will cause a trumpet blast of war to be heard against...the sons of Ammon; and it will become a heap of ruins, and her towns will be set on fire....”
  - ii. 49:6 – “‘But afterward I will restore the fortunes of the sons of Ammon,’ declares the Lord.”
- d. In Jeremiah 49:7-22, we read a prophecy about the future judgment – and no restoration – of the people of Edom (another region of the country we now call Jordan).
- i. 49:12 – “‘You will not be acquitted.”
  - ii. 49:17-18 – “‘Edom will become an object of horror; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss at all its wounds. Like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah with its neighbors,’ says the Lord, ‘no one will live there, nor will a son of man reside in it.”
- e. In Jeremiah 49:23-27, we read the prophecy concerning the future judgment of Damascus. We will get back to that in a moment.
- f. In Jeremiah 49:28-33, we read a prophecy concerning the future judgment – but no restoration – of Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor (modern day Arabia).
- i. 49:32 – “‘I will bring disaster from every side,’ declares the Lord.”
  - ii. 49:33 – The region “will become a haunt of jackals, a desolation forever; no one will live there, nor will a son of man reside in it.”
- g. In Jeremiah 49:34-39, we read the prophecy concerning the future judgment and blessed restoration of Elam (modern day Iran).
- i. The judgment is described in verses 35 through 38.



- ii. Most importantly, we read in verse 38 that the Lord says that “it will come about in the last days that I will restore the fortunes of Elam.”
  - iii. This is critical because it gives us another indication that this is an End Times prophecy, consistent with the previous prophecies.
- h. Then, in Jeremiah 50 and 51, we read the prophecies concerning the future judgment – and no restoration – of Babylon (modern day Iraq).
  - i. 50:13 – “Because of the indignation of the Lord, she [Babylon] will not be inhabited, but she will be completely desolate; everyone who passes by Babylon will be horrified...”
  - ii. 50:24 – “I set a snare for you and you were also caught, O Babylon....because you have engaged in conflict with the Lord.”
  - iii. 50:35 – “A sword against the Chaldeans,’ declares the Lord, ‘and against the inhabitants of Babylon and against her officials and her wise men!”
  - iv. 50:39 – “Therefore the desert creatures will live there along with the jackals; the ostriches also will live in it, and it will never again be inhabited [by people], or dwelt in from generation to generation. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah with its neighbors,’ declares the Lord, ‘no man will live there, nor will any son of man reside in it.”
  - v. 51:7-8 – “Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord, intoxicating all the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine; therefore the nations are going mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken.”
  - vi. 51:24 – “I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea for all their evil that they have done in Zion before your eyes,’ declares the Lord.”

## **8. Now, let’s examine Jeremiah 49 more closely.**

- a. First, it should be noted that Jeremiah prophesied between 626 BC to sometime after 586 BC.
- b. Thus, Jeremiah’s prophecies were given to him and written down well after the fall of Damascus in 732.
- c. As such, Jeremiah’s prophecy about Damascus in chapter 49 is eschatological and will come to pass in the End Times -- it is not related to the events of Tiglath-pilser.
- d. Jeremiah 49:23

- i. The NASB translation reads: “Concerning Damascus: ‘Hamath and Arpad are put to shame, for they have heard the bad news; they are disheartened. There is anxiety by the sea, it cannot be calmed.’”
- ii. The KJV translation reads: “Concerning Damascus. Hamath is confounded, and Arpad: for they have heard evil tidings: they are fainthearted; [there is] sorrow on the sea; it cannot be quiet.”
- iii. The verse is very straightforward:
  1. The focus of the prophecy is the future of Damascus.
  2. In the future, something so terrible happens in Damascus -- something that brings:
    - a. “shame”
    - b. “bad news”
    - c. “anxiety”
    - d. “evil tidings:
  3. The terrible event in Damascus causes the inhabitants of two cities to the north of Damascus – Hamath and Arphad -- to be deeply affected emotionally.
    - a. “disheartened”
    - b. “fainthearted”
    - c. “sorrow”
  4. Hamath in Hebrew means “fortress.” [Strong’s H2574]
  5. Arpad in Hebrew means, “I shall be spread out (or supported).” [Strong’s H774]
  6. The two northern Syrian towns are not particularly far from one another, and are repeatedly linked in the Scriptures.
    - a. 2 Kings 18:34
    - b. 2 Kings 19:13
    - c. Isaiah 10:9
    - d. Jeremiah 49:23
  7. The biblical town of Hamath is the modern-day city of Hama.
    - a. Hama is located about 130 miles north of Damascus, not far from the Mediterranean Sea.

- b. Today, Hama has about 300,000 residents.
- c. Hama is a town closely associated with the evils of the recent Syrian regimes.
- d. After rebels against the Syrian government fled into Hama in 1981, then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad ordered his military to attack the city with airstrikes and artillery, ostensibly to destroy the rebels and teach the residents of Hama (and the rest of Syria) a lesson not to ever harbor anti-regime rebels.
- e. Thousands of innocent civilians – men, women and children – died in the attacks. Some put the number of deaths at 20,000 people or more.
- f. Later, the city was rebuilt by the Assad government and is one of the five largest cities in Syria.
- g. Note: The city of Hama is not the same as the Syrian city of Homs.

8. The biblical town of Arpad is the modern-day city of Tell Rifaat (also written, “Tall Rif’at”).

- a. Arpad was an ancient Aramean city.
- b. Tell Rifaat is located in the far-north Syria.
- c. It is close to the border with Turkey, and not far from the Mediterranean Sea.
- d. Today, it has about 20,000 residents.

e. Jeremiah 49:24

- i. The NASB translation reads: “Damascus has become helpless; she has turned away to flee, and panic has gripped her; distress and pangs have taken hold of her like a woman in childbirth.
- ii. The text indicates that something catastrophic happens to Damascus.
- iii. The historically mighty city becomes “helpless.”
- iv. Her inhabitants are fleeing or trying to flee from the catastrophe.
- v. The people are in “distress” and great pain.
- vi. The reference to the birth “pangs” of “childbirth” echoes the eschatological nature of the prophecy. (i.e., Matthew 24:6-8 when the Lord Jesus says, “You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation,

and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.”)

f. Jeremiah 49:25-26

- i. The NASB translation reads: “How the city of praise has not been deserted, the town of My joy! Therefore, her young men will fall in her streets, and all the men of war will be silenced in that day,’ declares the Lord of hosts.”
- ii. The KJV translation reads: “How is the city of praise not left, the city of my joy! Therefore her young men shall fall in her streets, and all the men of war shall be cut off in that day, saith the LORD of hosts.”
- iii. Damascus is a historically important city, and praised and respected by friends, allies and enemies alike at various times throughout history.
  1. It has been capital for Israel’s enemies.
  2. It has also been a place where one of the greatest enemies of the Church [Saul] was dramatically converted to Christ, baptized, healed, and called to reach the nations with the Gospel as one of the Church’s most effective apostles [Paul.]
  3. Damascus has been a source of great evil.
  4. But Damascus has also been a place used by God to bring great joy to Himself and to others by the great salvations and miracles that have been wrought there. After all, the Apostle Paul – saved on the road to Damascus – when on to write nearly half of the New Testament, which has brought great joy to billions of people over the past 2,000 years.
- iv. The text indicates that whereas many of the inhabitants of Damascus will flee – or seek to flee – in the End Times (see 49:34), the city will not be deserted when the final catastrophic moment comes. Eventually, Damascus will be deserted and uninhabited. But at the moment of its apocalyptic destruction, there will be people living and working there.
- v. Given that there will be people living and working there, “young men will fall in her streets, and all the men of war will be silenced in that day.” The judgment of Damascus will bring death and destruction. Soldiers will fall and die. Damascus as a war machine – an engine of death and terror – “will be silenced” and cease to be a factor.

- vi. This is not a prediction; this is a Bible prophecy. As such, this prophecy is certain to be fulfilled, because it is not declared by the thoughts and guess of mortals; it is declared by the Lord of hosts.

g. Jeremiah 49:27

- i. The NASB translation reads: “I will set fire to the wall of Damascus, and it will devour the fortified towers of Ben-hadad.”
- ii. These are the words of God Himself.
- iii. Clearly, God is going to play a direct role in bringing judgment to Damascus.
- iv. Damascus will be destroyed by fire.
- v. The text does not indicate whether this will be a supernatural act (like the “fire from heaven” that is part of the judgment of Israel’s enemies in Ezekiel 38-39, the “War of Gog and Magog”), or whether this will be a result of military conflict.
- vi. The text says the “fortified towers of Ben-hadad” will also be devoured by fire.
- vii. “Hadad” was a false god of the Arameans, worshipped widely throughout Assyria.
  - 1. “Ben-hadad” in Hebrew means “son of the [false god] Hadad.” [Strong’s H1130]
  - 2. Ben-hadad was also a specific person described in the Bible, a terribly king of Syria (see I and II Kings)
  - 3. In II Kings 8, we see the story of Ben-hadad wanting to know from the Hebrew prophet Elisha whether he would recover from a great sickness. At this, Elisha, the man of God, began to weep. Yes, he said, Ben-hadad would recover from his illness. But he was weeping “because I know the evil that you will do to the sons of Israel: their strongholds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword, and their little ones you will dash to pieces, and their women with child you will rip up.”
  - 4. See more on Ben-hadad at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2871-ben-hadad>.
- viii. The reference to the “fortified towers of Ben-hadad” is not a literal reference to a specific judgment against the ancient king by that

name. Rather, it refers to the evil, idolatrous, cruel, savage, demonic legacy of that king. In other words, the God of the Bible has sovereignly decided to bring judgment in the End Times not simply on the city of Damascus and the people of Damascus but on the false gods and religion and ideologies built up, held by and advanced by the leaders and armies of Damascus.

**9. When viewed together, we can say the following about the prophecies concerning Damascus found in Isaiah 17 and Jeremiah 49:**

- a. The prophecies refer to a divine judgment by God against the city of Damascus.
  - i. Though neither text describes the specific sins, the context of the prophecies in the range of chapters in Isaiah and Jeremiah suggest that that the judgments are similar to that of other enemies of God and enemies of Israel.
  - ii. The judgments are, therefore, due to the evil that has been done to the people of the city by the leaders, and the evil done by the people of the city, as well as the evil done to the nations around her, including Israel.
- b. The prophecies refer to the the utter, catastrophic destruction of Damascus.
- c. Both are eschatological passages, referring to End Times events that have yet to occur.
  - i. Isaiah's prophecy was given to him in 715 BC, well after the conquering of Damascus in 732 by Tiglath-pileser.
  - ii. Likewise, Jeremiah's ministry occurred between 626 BC and 586 BC, long after Tiglath-pileser conquered Damascus in 732 BC.
- d. Damascus has certainly been attacked, conquered, and burned at various points in history, including Biblical history – but it is clear that the prophecies of Isaiah 17 and Jeremiah 49 have not yet been fulfilled. Damascus is, after all, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities on the planet.
- e. We cannot be certain when these judgments will happen and the prophecies will be fulfilled.

- f. They could come to pass before, during or after the War of Gog & Magog (Ezekiel 38-39); before, during, or after the Rapture; or before or during the Tribulation. The texts simply do not say, so we cannot be definitive.
  - g. It is possibly that the prophecies could come to pass in the not-too-distant future. But they certainly will come to pass at some point before the Second Coming of Christ (the “Day of the Lord.”)
- 10. In light of the current crisis in Syria – as well as in light of the coming judgment of Damascus – Christians need to consider the implications of such a prophecy and be faithful to the Lord’s commands throughout Scripture to:**
- a. Strengthen and encourage the Syrian Christians to be strong and courageous in standing for Christ, proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples, preaching the Word, shepherding the flock, loving their neighbors, loving their enemies, praying, and caring for the needy and suffering in the name of Jesus. (Matthew 4:23-25, Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 1:16)
  - b. Care for hungry, thirsty, sick, suffering refugees fleeing from Damascus and Syria. (Matthew 25:31-46)
  - c. Educate and mobilize more Christians around the world to pray for the people of Damascus and Syria and to love them in the name of Jesus while there is still time. (Matthew 5:43-48)
  - d. Remember that one day we will stand face to face before our Lord Jesus Christ and give an account for what we did, or didn’t do, in light of these biblical prophecies. (Matthew 25:31-46)
- 11. The good news is that the Bible clearly indicates that there is hope for the people who live in the nation state we now call “Syria.”**
- a. Consider Isaiah chapter 19, and particularly Isaiah 19:23-25 -- “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.’”
  - b. This passage indicates that not only will the city of Damascus face divine judgment, but so will the nation of Egypt – yet after divine judgment will come a divine blessing to the people of Egypt, the people of Assyria, and the people of Israel.

- c. The prophet Isaiah specifically indicates that the Lord God will show great mercy and kindness to the Syrian people and turn their hearts to worship the Lord Jesus Christ in the End Times.
- d. We should, therefore, have great hope that many will be saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and thus we should be faithful in ministering to the people of Damascus and all of Syria.

-- END --