

**God's judgment upon Egypt in Isaiah 19:1-15: its probable reasons and some
implications for contemporary Africa**

by

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any degree or institution for a degree.

P.G. WATT

(01-12-2011)

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people who have inspired, motivated and supported me in the process:

- Dr Kevin Smith – for his consistent and enthusiastic willingness to help with such patience and insight.
- My wife Sandy – for freedom, encouragement and proof-reading.
- Joaquim Mahlalela – a co-labourer and mentor who has introduced me into the psychology, stories and spiritual realities of Africa which has added such passion for this field of study.
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- The leaders and members of West City Fellowship – for providing me with the opportunity, and affording me the time and space to pursue this study whilst I was in pastoral leadership.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine whether Isaiah 19:1-15 has any relevance and implications for contemporary Africa. Isaiah 19:1-15 is used as the anchor text to explore the possible reasons why God responds to Egypt with acts of judgment. This examination requires a thorough analysis of the chosen text, taking into consideration authorship, audience, historical and theological context, as well as an understanding of the mechanics of the prophetic ministry. Of the four reasons which are presented, it is argued that the most likely primary reason and target of the threatened judgment by God are the idols of Egypt.

An investigation into the nature of worldview, and most especially the African worldview and experience of the spiritual realm, leads into an evaluation of African Traditional Religions. A cross-section of authors and researchers are sifted in order to appraise whether certain aspects of traditional African religious practices can be deemed as idolatrous, and a turning aside from the primacy of Christ. If indeed this is true, then the truths revealed in Isaiah 19:1-15 can be contextualised for the current African reality.

The conclusion of the study acknowledges that the final answer can at best be probable, but at worst only possible. However, even if only possible and plausible, then the warnings contained in Isaiah 19:1-15 need to be taken seriously for any nation that perpetuates idolatrous practices. Given the desire to be relevant to my lived African context, then the study has given sufficient grounds to believe that the truths and patterns unlocked from the anchor text need to be noted for a contemporary African audience.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A. ORIENTATION

a) Motivation for this study

The motivation for this study of Isaiah 19:1-15 has arisen out of a deep desire to understand the given text. This yearning includes an aspiration to better understand the prophets, the prophetic ministry, and the application of ancient Biblical prophecy to a contemporary context. However, the greatest incentive is to examine whether this text in Isaiah has any relevance or bearing on the reality which is witnessed in the African setting in which I live, namely Durban, KZN, and the broader areas to which I have been exposed in southern Africa, including Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia. The reality of this African context is the common and popular practice of African Traditional Religions, witchcraft and cultural customs which include ancestral veneration. The pivotal question is whether these practices carry any spiritual consequences, most notably a form of judgment as outlined in Isaiah 19:1-15.

b) Background

Research into the possible reasons for the judgment which Isaiah is announcing in Isaiah 15:1-19 has concluded four main possible reasons. The first one is Judah's trust in Egypt (e.g. Oswalt 2001); the second is Egyptian enslavement of Israel, based on

Acts 7:6-7; the third possible reason is the hubris of Egypt (e.g. Hamborg 1981); and the fourth possible reason is that judgment was aimed at the idols of Egypt (e.g. Smith 1973; Patrick 1995; Huddleston 2000). The in-depth study of chapter 3 will aim to determine which of these four possible reasons, if any, is the most probable one given Biblical and historical evidences, and taking into consideration scholarship on this subject (e.g. Barton 1995; Watts 1995; Bullock 1986; Sweeney 1996; Marlow 2007).

The other area of research which is of relevance to this study is on traditional religious practices. This is a subject which has been commented on by a number of authors, both African (e.g. Bediako 1995;2000; Magesa 1997; Mbiti 1991; 1996; 2008; Nwankpa 2006; Ndjerrareou 2006) and non-African (Barnhouse 1974; Steyne 1990; 1997; Moreau 1990; Parrinder 1969; Riddel and Riddel 2007; Unger 1994; Wink 1986; 1988). Not only is there divergence between African and Western commentators, but also amongst African scholars themselves. African authors and commentators (e.g. Mbiti 1996; Idowu 2000) would argue that African Traditional Religions have provided the fertile seedbed for the Christian gospel which has caused the gospel to spread so rapidly in Africa. Other African commentators would propose some assimilation of African Traditional Religions into Christian practices (e.g. Mogoba 1985). On the other hand, there are also African scholars and authors who claim that the Christian message and African Traditional Religions are irreconcilable, leading to syncretism and compromise of the Christian truth (e.g. Turaki 1999; Kato 1975; Olowola 1993; Munza 2005).

A further question to the above, given the size and extreme diversity of Africa, is whether it is valid to speak of a generic or common African culture, and hence African Traditional Religions. What is true of one tribe, region or nation may not be true of another. On the other hand, as one surveys some of the literature pertaining to African philosophy and beliefs, it seems that there certainly is a measure of uniformity which can be identified and referred to. In this regard, Uzukwu (1981:344) states: "A comparative study of African religions reveals a certain measure of unity in the way Africans experience God".

The works of authors such as Magesa (1997), Mbiti (1969, 1975, 1986), Parrinder (1969), Bediako (1995, 2000), Olowola (1996), Ferdinando (1997), Nurnberger (2007) and Turaki (2008), reveal that there are certain common traits and characteristics in Africa. These authors point to an overlap of culture and religious practices, including social connectivity, ancestral veneration, dynamism, the spirits, views on death and the afterlife, rituals, festivals, traditional healers, magic and the role of religious leaders.

Similarly Mbiti (1969:266) refers to a “traditional solidarity” and to “the values of our African Zamani”. He goes on to say, “Religion in Africa has produced its own society with a distinctly religious set of morals, ethics, culture, governments, traditions, social relationships and ways of looking at the world”. Therefore, without losing sight of the fact that there are variances and nuances within the wide diversity of African rituals and practices, it is this underlying African religious fabric that is pervasive to the traditional African worldview which will be referred to. The contents and interpretation of Isaiah 19:1-15 will then be applied into this African religious context.

B. THE PROBLEM

a) The main problem

The main problem which I endeavour to explore in the chapters that follow is whether some or many of the African cultural or religious practices can be regarded as idolatrous in nature. If they can be regarded as idolatrous, and therefore potentially informed by the demonic realm (I Cor 10:20), then whether there are any potential consequences of judgment which might follow as a result.

In this process of investigation, I will use Isaiah 19:1-15 as the anchor text to establish the informing theology. In other words, what does OT prophecy reveal about the judgments of God in response to idolatry? What are some of the potential human activities that cause God to respond in judgment? How is OT prophecy applicable to our contemporary context? Does this informing theology, coupled with potential idolatrous

African religious practices add up to possible judgments taking place in contemporary Africa?

b) Delimitations

The first delimitation of this study is canonical. Isaiah 19:1-15 has been chosen as a means of exploring the subject of God's judgment on Egypt. Although there are 669 references to Egypt in the scriptures, Isaiah 19:1-15 will be used as the anchor text. There are related key texts that have a bearing on Isaiah 19:1-15, such as Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29-32.

The second part of the delimitation pertaining to Egypt is both historical and geographical. Human occupation of Egypt has a very extensive timeline, some believe to as far back as 6000 BC. However, the more formal dating of Ancient Egypt is based on the historical framework developed by a Ptolemaic priest, Manetho, from the third century BC. He divided the history of Egypt into dynastic periods – Old, Middle and New, with three intermediate periods, and up to the time of the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BC.

For the purpose of this study and an analysis of Isaiah 19:1-15, the time focus will be on the Middle Kingdom (1570 BC onwards), up to the time of the Roman occupation in 30 BC, and subsequent incorporation into the Roman Empire. However, in order to better grasp an understanding of Ancient Egypt, reference at times will be made to earlier periods in Egypt's history, most notably from the time of the Old Kingdom (2755-2255 BC), when the government and religion started to develop and took root in Egypt.

The second geographical delimitation is in the application section of the study, looking at implications of Isaiah 19:1-15 for contemporary Africa, and so the next delimitation will be Africa. This may not seem like much of a delimitation, given that Africa is such a large and diverse continent, made up of multiplied nations, tribes, languages, customs and religious beliefs. However, as alluded to above, and in Chapter 4(b), there certainly seems to be a common African worldview which permeates many, if not most African cultures. It is an underlying experience and view of the world which can be depicted and expressed in many different ways.

C. THE PLAN

According to Smith (2008:196) there is an alternate design for evangelical theology which makes reference to an anchor text. Smith (197) says that the “detailed exegetical analysis of this text lies at the heart of the study.” Therefore, in order to place this central or anchor text in its theological context, there needs to be a summary of the informing theology which helps the researcher to lay the foundations for understanding the text, based on previous related passages. The theological understanding that has been elicited from this study is called the developing theology (199). This is then followed by a discussion on how this new theological understanding (developing theology) which is centred on the anchor text has contemporary application to real life situations. This is the design which this thesis will follow.

a) Research design

The study being undertaken is based on a literary research design for biblical studies, with a primary focus on Isaiah 19:1-15. The process will require three major steps. The first step will be to present and understand the context of Isaiah 19 (both historical and theological), followed by an investigation into the probable reasons for this judgment, and then the third step, which will investigate whether the above findings have any bearing on Africa today.

The study of the anchor text (Isaiah 19:1-15), will aim to uncover the meaning of this portion of scripture in its original context and for its originally intended audience. This will require an understanding of the historical-religious context into which Isaiah was prophesying, which will help uncover the probable reasons for God’s judgment of Egypt. It will also require an examination of key related texts (e.g. Ex 12:12; Is 30-31; Jer 46; Ezek 29-32; Mal 3:5), a review of the informing theology, as well as a presentation of the developing theology.

b) Overview of chapters

The research tools that will be used for this thesis will be a combination of approaches selected from conceptual argumentation and biblical studies (Smith 2008). The main

steps in the research, each with a number of sub-components or approaches, will be as follows:

1. Chapter 2 will explore the context of Isaiah 19:1-15, looking at authorship, date, historical setting and audience. The question of intended audience will require more in-depth investigation, as it is vital for determining the probable reason for the judgment of Egypt. It will include the theological framework, which will look at the theology of the prophetic books, with an emphasis on Isaiah, and with special attention on the judgment oracles, and the mission of God.
2. Chapter 3 will comprise two parts. The first part will be a literary review, taking into consideration the views of various scholars on this text, as well as analyzing interpretive issues that the text raises. The second part will be a thorough investigation into the probable reasons for the judgment pronounced in Isaiah 19:1-15.
3. Chapter 4 will begin with an exploration of worldview. This will be followed by a critical assessment of the nature of African Traditional Religions, looking at continuity with Christianity, and then also areas of discontinuity or conflict with the Christian message. The final consideration will be the role of the demonic and God's response to human interaction with demonic powers.
4. Chapter 5 will use a synthetic approach to pull together the results from chapters 2 and 3, together with the discussions from chapter 4. These findings will then be applied to contemporary Africa, and review whether the hypothesis holds validity.

Chapter 2

Context

A. THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF ISAIAH 19:1-15

a) Authorship

Although there is contention about the number of authors that there are for the entire book of Isaiah, the author of Isaiah 19 is indisputably regarded as being Isaiah son of Amoz (Isaiah ben Amoz), who lived and ministered around Jerusalem from 740-701 BC. However, if there was a second military campaign by Sennacherib in approximately 688 BC, then it is possible that Isaiah may have ministered until as late as 688 BC (Robinson and Harrison 1988:886). Further, according to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah's ministry was "during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (886). Due to the fact that the date of Isaiah's death is unknown, it is also possible that Isaiah's ministry may have extended into the rule of Manasseh, but with less of a public role, and therefore Manasseh is not mentioned in 1:1 (886).

"Isaiah" means "Yahweh is salvation" (Robinson and Harrison 1988:886), and is therefore similar in meaning to Joshua, Elisha and Jesus. He was married, and his wife was referred to as being a prophetess (8:3), and they had two sons. Each of the sons had names that were strongly symbolic of the message and prophetic concerns of Isaiah the prophet. The first son's name was Shear-jashub (7:3) meaning "a remnant shall return", and referring to the prophetic unctio that a faithful minority of God's

people would survive the collapse of national life. The second son was Maher-shalal-hash-baz (8:30) which meant “hasten booty, speedy spoil”, and which depicted the historical and prophetic sense of Assyria’s mad desire for conquest (Robinson and Harrison 1988:886)..

It is mainly due to the span of time that the entire book of Isaiah covers (i.e. extending towards the end of the Babylonian exile up to 200 years later), as well as the diverse subject matters, and alternate styles, that there are theories about how many authors contributed to the book. There are also various views of how many sections Isaiah can be divided into, ranging mainly from one (Bullock 1986:129) to six (Robinson and Harrison 1988:888).

The view that the book of Isaiah was the work of a single author (Isaiah ben Amoz) was held until late in the 18th century. This was largely informed by the fact that Isaiah is the most quoted book in the NT (16 times), with an equal spread of quotes coming from chapters 1-39 as from 40-66. These NT references do not distinguish between different authors, but rather speak of Isaiah as if there was only a single reference from the Hebrew OT (Robinson and Harrison 1988:894). In 1866, Franz Delitzsch’s commentary, although being aware of the work of liberal scholars, still maintained that the entire book was the work of Isaiah ben Amoz, even if 40-66 was the work of a disciple or scribe. Delitzsch viewed “the entire prophetic collection as the progressive development of his incomparable charism” (896).

The belief that there was a second author of the book of Isaiah emerged in the late 1700’s, where the idea of Deutero-Isaiah was put forward, potentially being an unknown exilic prophet. Further to this, in 1892, Duhm and Marti proposed a Trito-Isaiah, distinguishing between 40-55 and 56-66 (the work of the third Isaiah) (Seitz et al. 1992:502; von Rad 1965:43). There are still other critics who uphold that the book of Isaiah was written by a number of authors over a number of centuries, and is a compilation of their writings (Smith 1992, chap 1, n.p.).

Apart from how many authors there are for the book of Isaiah, there is variance as to how many sections the book can be divided into. Seitz et al. (1992) advocate 3 sections

- 1-39, 40-55, 56-66. Robinson and Harrison (1988:888) believe that there are six divisions to this prophetic book, dividing it into chapters 1-12, 13-23, 24-27, 28-35, 36-39, and 40-66. According to Bullock (1986:6), “more general agreement among Isaiah scholars may be found on seven main divisions of the book:1–12, 13–23, 24–27, 28–33, 34–35, 36–39, 40–66”. However, for the purpose of this particular study, none of these theories about divisions or various authorships have too much bearing, due to the fact that Isaiah 19 is embedded well within the chapters considered to be written by Isaiah ben Amoz, and not any of the alternates.

The only applicability that authorship may have on this study, is that if there was only one Isaiah, or if the work beyond chapter 40 was that of the original Isaiah, then it could have some significance when we consider the nature of prophecy (to be discussed in Section C of this chapter). In brief, the reason for this potential significance is that it would point to the predictive element in prophecy (Robinson and Harrison 1988:896), or the potential accuracy of futuristic prophecy. It would also point to whether Isaiah had the ability to project himself into the future and to speak of future events as if they had already happened, and addressing the people of a future time and circumstance.

b) Relevant Historical Setting

Isaiah has been referred to as being a “practical statesman” (Robinson and Harrison 1988:888) because of the role that he played in advising king Hezekiah during the invasion of Assyria in 701 BC, amongst other historical developments. That is to say that he was not only acutely aware of God’s divine council, but also of the historical developments of his day: “No prophet of his time more fully comprehended the gravity of the Assyrian threat and its implications for the immediate present and remote future” (Bullock 1986:42). In 1918, Alexander Gordon wrote an article on Isaiah entitled *The Prophets as Internationalists*, highlighting Isaiah’s interest in the international dynamics of his time and region. However, not only was Isaiah aware of historical and international developments, but to his awareness was added divine insight due to his comprehension that it was God who was directing the affairs of human history – “It rested with Isaiah to interpret the wider movement of events by the light of his own faith in Yahweh” (Gordon 1918:213).

As a prophet Isaiah was spiritually insightful into the unfolding events of history, but his voice was also pertinent to the specific days in which he was living – “It was well known that the voices of the great Old Testament prophets are heard, above all, in times of political crises” (Hogehaven 1990:351). There were a number of crises in Isaiah’s day, with the imminent threat from Assyria being the overarching theme throughout. Bullock (1986:42) has said well that “history was intimate with the prophets, an intimacy that partially stemmed from their deep relationship to the Lord of history”. However, the prophets such as Isaiah were not just knowledgeable by-standers, they were key role players – “the prophets were stabilizers of national destiny, or so they sought to be. They were present and speaking when kings clammed up and shut their eyes to the signs of the times” (Hogehaven 1990:350). Further to this, Hogehaven (351) says that “the prophetic oracles have a direct and immediate bearing upon the political events of their time”. Therefore it is clear that Isaiah was a man of history, as well a man of God, who was able to weave these two realms together in his prophetic ministry, and make the plans and knowledge of God relevant to the realities of the times in which he was living. Seitz et al (1992:476) put it like this: “The view of Isaiah that emerges from this portrayal is, not surprisingly, one of a shrewd political observer. Isaiah’s interest in world events, particularly in the Nation Oracles section (chaps. 13–23), make him the theological equivalent of modern global-political analysts”.

Isaiah’s prophetic ministry included the years from the death of Uzziah in 740 BC, and into the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Under the reign of Uzziah, Judah had enjoyed a prolonged season of national prosperity, building programs, militarization and commercialization. The emphasis however was on material prosperity, and this was coupled with the neglect of spiritual well-being, with a decline in morals, and a stark separation between religion and everyday life. It was during the subsequent reign of Jotham (740-732 BC) that Assyria began to emerge as the next superpower of the region, and began to look towards invading and conquering lands to their west, which would enlarge their empire. This dominant historical theme of the looming threat of an attack by a resurgent Assyrian empire in the lifetime and ministry of Isaiah, and the interplay of national loyalties, in order to protect themselves against being conquered by Assyria, were the international dynamics and national dramas which formed the

backdrop and informed the theme for much of Isaiah's prophetic ministry (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887).

Simplistically, there were three major historical events that stand out in the life and ministry of Isaiah, although they all gravitate around this centrality of an increasingly ambitious Assyrian Empire (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887). The first historical crisis was the Syro-Ephraimitic War of 734 BC, when Judah came under attack by a united Israel and Damascus. This was due to the fact that the rulers of Israel and Damascus had decided to form an alliance against an encroaching Assyria, and had asked Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them. However, he refused, and so the confederacy of Israel and Damascus attempted to dethrone Ahaz (II Kings 16:5; Isaiah 7:6). In response to this attack, Ahaz foolishly turned to Assyria for protection, which had many negative consequences. The Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser obliged, leading to large numbers of Jews being taken into captivity, and Damascus being captured. However, it also meant that Judah became beholden to Assyria, needing to pay tributes and leading to a decline in Judah. In addition it led to state-sponsored idolatry as Ahaz built an altar based on what he had observed in Damascus, on the requested visit by Tiglath-pileser (887).

King Ahaz was replaced by his son Hezekiah, and inherited a diminishing Judah due to the unwise choices and activities of his father (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887). At the same time, Israel refused to pay tribute to the new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser IV, which resulted in Samaria being besieged and captured, and the Israelites being carried into captivity. The cities of Samaria became inhabited by Babylonian expats. The net result of this international dynamic was that Judah was now exposed to Assyro-Babylonian neighbours, which made her vulnerable to Assyrian political and military offences. At first, it was only costly tributes that protected Judah from imminent possible attack. This was the second major historical crisis facing Isaiah in his time of ministry.

The third historical event, the illness of Hezekiah, could have been more of a major event at this time if it had lead to death, as Hezekiah was childless, which would have presented intrigue and potential disaster to the lineage on the throne of David. Nevertheless, through the prayers of the king and the prophetic obedience of Isaiah (Is

38), Hezekiah was healed and granted a further 15 years of life (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887).

When Hezekiah had succeeded Ahaz as king of Judah (729-687 BC), he began on a process of reform, as Judah's strength was waning. During the same period, upon the assassination of Sargon in 705 BC, Sennacherib became the new king of Assyria, which led to rebellion from the vassal nations, including Judah, who refused to pay their tribute. At the same time, and very noteworthy for the purpose of this study, there was a political grouping that emerged in Jerusalem who looked to Egypt for protection (Robinson and Harrison 1988:890). The scriptural references for this errant tendency towards Egypt are Isaiah 30:1-5 and 31:1-3. This challenge by vassal nations provoked a surge of invasions by Sennacherib in 701 BC, bringing Judah into the direct path of an angered Assyrian king. Hezekiah even started to use temple treasures to pay homage to king Sennacherib (see II Kings 18:13-16). However, Sennacherib continued in his conquests, and ended up at Lachish, from where he sent one of his commanders to confront Jerusalem. During this process of confrontation between Assyria and Judah, Egypt's army began to advance against Sennacherib, which meant that he could only send a further letter of demand to Hezekiah for the surrender of Jerusalem, and was unable to lead the troops himself against Jerusalem. At this point, the prophet Isaiah played a fundamental role, by encouraging Hezekiah not to surrender Jerusalem to the besieging forces (Is 37:21-35). Hezekiah listened to the voice of the prophet, and in a miraculous turn of events, the besieging army was overwhelmed with a plague of some sorts, and fled from the outskirts of Jerusalem, releasing Jerusalem from the threat of Assyrian take-over ("Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead" [Isaiah 37:36 NASB¹]; see also II Kings 18:33-19:36).

The above summary introduces the historical milieu in which Isaiah's ministry was active and to which he was responding. It highlights the extent to which Assyria was an

¹ All further Bible quotes will be from the New American Standard Bible (Thompson 1993) unless indicated otherwise.

agitator and aggressor, and the key role player in international affairs, and of which Isaiah was intensely aware and involved.

c) Intended audience

The question of who was the intended audience of Isaiah 19:1-15 is an important one, as it could go some way towards helping understand the probable reasons for judgment (to be discussed more fully in chapter 3 section C). Once we establish who the prophet-intended hearers of the oracle against Egypt were, it will give more insight into the mind of the prophet, and therefore the potential purpose for which the oracle was given. Although the majority of writers believe that the primary intended audience was Judah herself (e.g. Hamborg 1981; Seitz et al 1992; Sweeney 1996; Hagedorn 2007), there are a few writers who believe to the contrary (Bullock 1986; Marlow 2007; Peels 2007), as well as some prophetic scriptures that clearly indicate that the Gentile nations are the intended audience (Jer 27; 51:59-64), at least in some instances. Final clarity one way or the other is difficult to obtain, and so the author-intended audience will need to be based on the balance of probability from the evidence below.

Sweeney (1996:26) is one of the scholars of Isaiah who purports Israel as the intended hearers: "The form ultimately addresses Israel even though it is ostensibly addressed to another nation". Based on potential historical-political scenarios, Sweeney goes on to say, "The oracle is clearly intended to undermine confidence in Egypt, which is presented as internally divided, undecided and weak" (271). One of the possible historical-political scenarios was when Israel chose to revolt against Assyria (724-721 BC), and so king Hoshea sent envoys to Egypt seeking assistance, which would have been required in this event. Therefore, Isaiah's oracle was meant "to convince Hezekiah to stay out of the revolt since Egypt was an unstable and unreliable ally that would fear even tiny Judah" (271). The second scenario could have been the Philistine revolt against Assyria (713-711 BC), which had garnered Egyptian support, although ineffective. Again, Isaiah's oracle could have been to discourage Hezekiah against a similar such revolt. Therefore, in either of these cases, the target audience would have been Judah, and not Egypt.

One further point by Sweeney (1996) in argument for Judah being the prophet's targeted audience, is based on the fact that during the late 7th century BC, there was a waning of Assyrian power and influence, with a resultant re-emergence of Egypt as a major regional power. This would have been seen as a threat to Josiah's national re-building programme. However, the condemnation of Egypt in Isaiah 19-20 would have given Josiah confidence. On the other hand, given that this was more than a century after the time of Isaiah, this was not something that Isaiah would necessarily have foreseen in the future, and so it does not prove conclusively that Judah was the audience in contrast to Egypt. Therefore, there is no convincing argument in favour of Sweeney's view, and it remains a possibility that Egypt could have been the target audience.

It is believed that Isaiah had close ties with the royal house and with matters of state in the capital city of Jerusalem (6:1-8, 23; 36:1-39:8), which was similar to the kind of access that Nathan had to king David (II Samuel 7; 12:1-15). Based on this fact, Seitz, et al (1992:478) have said, "Isaiah was a prophet whose message had primary relevance for Judah and Jerusalem (1:1; 2:1)".

Similarly, Hamborg (1981:148) believes that we can draw conclusions about the target audience of Isaiah 19:1-15 based on other Isaianic references to Egypt, namely 30:1-7; 31:1-3. All of these references issue a warning to Judah not to seek help from Egypt. Hamborg (148) therefore says:

Thus it seems that Isaiah announced judgment on Egypt, not because of any sin that Egypt committed, but because Judah was relying on Egyptian help instead of relying on Yahweh. Judah was not going to avoid Yahweh's rod by going down to Egypt for help, for if necessary Egypt too would be overthrown.

Therefore, the more common view has been that Israel was the ultimately intended audience in the oracles against foreign nations. However, there is no conclusive evidence for this argument. Indeed there are some hints that the hearts of the prophets were towards the foreign nations, and there were instances where the prophecy was

actually carried to the foreign nation (Jer 27; 51:59-64). Therefore the door remains ajar for an opposing view, in which case the oracles could have had a purpose beyond the mere interests of Israel.

One such alternate view on the purpose of oracles against nations was put forward as being imprecatory. That is, within the context of the Near East, the practice of speaking negative or imprecatory oracles against the enemy in the situation of war was common. According to Peels (2007:85), this would be done to “paralyze the enemy”. He says further, “Following G. Von Rad the oracles against the nations are related to the tradition of the holy war and the notion of the Yom YHWH, the day on which God Himself will destroy the enemies” (85). This is another possible purpose of oracles against nations, although not a common view. In this case, the intended audience would have been Egypt.

Bullock (1986:44) asked the following question: “Were the oracles ever delivered to the Gentile nations with which they were concerned?”. His initial answer is the same as the above authors, “Generally scholars answer that question negatively. It has been suggested that the oracles functioned more as comfort to Israel than judgment against the foreign nation” (44). However, Bullock, in reference to Amos, says that Israel was not always comforted by the oracles against the nations, and therefore comfort of Israel was not always the prime purpose.

Bullock (1986) goes on further to single out two of Jeremiah’s national oracles that can be seen as exceptions to the generally accepted scholarly view. The first example is Jeremiah 27, when there were foreign envoys from neighbouring countries gathered in Jerusalem to meet with Zedekiah. In this case, Jeremiah was instructed by God to make yoke-bars and thongs, which were a warning to these kings, in which case the oracles were meant to be heard by the kings of these nations. The second example is Jeremiah 51:59-64, where Jeremiah instructs the quarter-master, Seraiah, who was accompanying king Zedekiah to Babylon, to read the oracle against Babylon once he enters Babylon, and then to tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates. Although it is unlikely that the king of Babylon would have heard the oracle, according to Bullock (44), “delivery of the oracle on Babylonian soil seems to carry some significance”. This

therefore points to the possibility that there were at least some times that the oracles against nations were intended for the hearing of the Gentile nation, or the ruler of the nations.

Giving further evidence in line with this view, Peels (2007:87) states that, "In earlier research it was thought that the listeners in question were the heathen nations themselves and that the oracles against the nations contained an implicit call to conversion". He goes on to say the following:

These passages of Scripture certainly are not the product of a narrow-minded and nationalistic way of thinking. Rather, they offer a universal view of the nations. Although everything in the Old Testament is centred around Israel, YHWH Zebaoth is concerned with much more: the nations over which he rules (88).

Hamborg (1981:147) asked whether Isaiah's prophecy against Egypt was "merely an expression of nationalism?" Peels (2007:90) says in this regard, "The view that the oracles against the nations contain an outburst of xenophobia and narrow-minded nationalism is shared by only a few nowadays". This alternate view dovetails with what many authors have said about the understanding and burden of the prophets. For example, Seitz et al. (1992:478) have said that the prophets shared a belief that the God of Israel was the God over the nations and the cosmos, citing Amos 1-2; Hosea 11-13; Micah 7; Zephaniah 2:5-15. They also speak of Isaiah's "appraisal of history in broad scope" (478). This points towards the nature of God as being concerned with and involved in the affairs of all the nations, and not just Israel. In fact, Barton (2003:35) has said of Isaiah 19:16-24, that it is "one of the most 'universalistic' oracles in the Old Testament, and perhaps also the latest".

Seitz et al (1992:476) have further said of the prophet Isaiah, that he was "a shrewd political observer", and that "Isaiah's interest in world events, particularly in the Nation Oracles section (13-23), make him the theological equivalent of modern global-political analysts" (476). They have also said that "Isaiah's distinctive Judah and Jerusalem

perspective functions within the broader conception of God's sovereignty over Israel and the nations" (478).

These kinds of understandings of a God who is over the full spectrum of nations, and not just Israel, as well as a prophet like Isaiah, who was internationalist by nature, fly in the face of a conception put forward by Hagedorn (2007). Hagedorn has said that biblical prophecy (like Greek prophecy) implied "the announcement of doom for the other serves as an implicit announcement of salvation for the group that hears these oracles" (448). Application of this principle would mean that the oracle against Egypt would be solely for the purpose of the salvation of Judah, who were the supposed hearers. He goes on to say that the "imagined community utilizes the imagined adversary to proclaim salvation for one's own group" (448). According to this view held by Hagedorn, foreigners were merely seen then as a means of defining self and one's own identity, and "the salvation of the own group is the determining feature" (432).

Marlow (2007:230) looks at Isaiah 19 in relation to the Prophecy of Neferti (an oracle of "national distress" against Egypt), and points to the fact of Isaiah's seemingly intimate and broad knowledge of Egyptian geography and culture, especially pertaining to the Nile, as well as awareness of Egyptian literary history (242). Marlow says that Isaiah 19 is a "literary composition of some artistry, deliberately constructed to present YHWH's judgment on Egypt in the starkest and most dramatic of terms" (242). If this was the case, then one needs to question why Isaiah would have gone to such lengths to construct and deliver an oracle with such insight into the psyche and philosophy of Egypt, if the Egyptian people were not intended to hear it. This fact, combined with the above assertion of Isaiah's international interest and insight, paint an altogether contrary picture of oracles against the nations that were purely for the purpose of Judah.

Gitay (1983), in writing about Isaiah 1-39, says, "The element of good fortune against the threat of destruction should be read as Isaiah's attempt to persuade his audience to change their behaviour and, consequently, to be rewarded." He says that the "rhetorical goal" of the prophets was to reach their audience. But, who was the intended audience? Is it reasonable to believe that all this prophetic activity was simply a presentation of mirrors for Israel and Judah to consider themselves, with no genuine concern for the

nations to whom it was pointed? This is possible, and some scholarly literature would agree with this view as presented above.

However, there still remains the possibility that the oracles against the nations may have, at least at times, been intended for the nation that was being spoken about in judgment. It is unlikely that the oracles would have been delivered every time to the foreign nations. The main reason for this being due to the great distances, as maintained by Peels (2007:84) regarding Jeremiah, "It is improbable that Jeremiah made voyages abroad to prophecy in foreign countries. More plausibly, the oracles were declared in Jerusalem, in the presence of the people of Israel".

Nevertheless, even if these oracles were never delivered in the foreign land which was being addressed, it is still plausible to believe that God's desire was for any nation to repent of its wickedness, and to turn to the God over all the nations. In Jeremiah 18:7-10, we read:

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

Based on this premise, God desires for people to repent, so that He can relent from the pending judgment that He has warned them against.

According on predominant scholarly opinion, the main hearers of the oracles against the nations seem to have been Judah. However, this does not preclude the foreign nation as a target, even if not in the immediate present. God's heart was to have the foreign nation hear and repent, so that he could relent of the pending judgment. Bullock (1986:44) says the following in this regard:

We do not have much information from Isaiah on the manner in which their information was transferred to the nations concerned, if at all (but Jeremiah does provide some data). However, direct addresses are frequent, and in 18:2 Isaiah may be speaking directly to the Ethiopian envoys who visited Jerusalem. One fact is certain, however, Isaiah was not uninvolved in these oracles, and he did not view the nations with cold calculation. Weeping and terror seized him as he contemplated the judgments he pronounced (15:5; 16:9; 21:3–4; 22:4).

Therefore, who was the audience of Isaiah 19:1-15? The immediate hearers were likely to have been the inhabitants of Jerusalem. However, Egypt could well have been the ultimately desired target audience, so that they could enter into the benefits of repentance. I will discuss this further in the mission of God (3 C (a) below).

B. THE LITERARY SETTING OF ISAIAH 19:1-15

An investigation into the structure and organization of the book of Isaiah is indeed a complex and divided journey. There are so many theories about how the book should be read and divided into its logical, literary and theological units. I will do my best to present a broad spread of these arguments, and then to show where Isaiah 19 fits into the superstructure. Although this section's main focus is not on authorship, which was handled in section A of this chapter, structure of the book and authorship do overlap as a matter of interrelated subjects, as will be shown below.

It was Duhm (Seitz et al. 1992:502) who first identified three authors for the book of Isaiah, and which informed scholarship for some time in the 20th century. Chapters 1-39 were regarded as being linked to Isaiah ben Amoz, the eighth-century prophet who lived and ministered in Jerusalem. Deutero-Isaiah was considered to be the author of chapters 40-55, and was believed to be an anonymous prophet in Babylonian exile. The

third Isaiah, or Trito-Isaiah, was believed to be a post-exilic prophet, 150 years after Isaiah ben Amoz. However, in spite of the fact that Isaiah could have been compiled over a period of 4 centuries, due to the range of historical subject matter, Sweeney (1996:41) maintains that “literary, exegetical, and thematic links between the various parts of the book demonstrate that... it now constitutes a single literary entity”.

Smith (1992, chap 1, n.p.) argues for a single author (i.e. Isaiah ben Amoz) for all 66 chapters, based on the following reasons:

1. The heading of the book and at least thirteen other places within the book claim Isaiah as the speaker/writer.
2. Jewish and Christian tradition is uniform in attributing this book to Isaiah.
3. The Septuagint, translated about 250 b.c., shows no distinction between the two halves of the book.
4. Ben Sirach, writing at about 280 b.c., knew of one Isaiah.
5. The two complete Isaiah manuscripts among the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate no break at the end of chapter 39. These manuscripts date to about a century and a half before Christ.
6. Josephus attributes the Cyrus prophecy of 44:28 and 45:1—the most controversial prophecy in the book—to Isaiah the son of Amoz.
7. Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth read from Isaiah 61 and attributed it to Isaiah (Luke 4:16ff.).
8. In the New Testament several passages from “Deutero-Isaiah” are quoted and attributed simply to Isaiah.
9. The literary style of the second half of Isaiah is so similar to the first that even critics admit that “Deutero-Isaiah” must have been a disciple of Isaiah who tried to imitate his master.
10. A certain circle of ideas appears throughout the book binding it together as the work of one author. The concepts of a highway, Zion, the Holy One of Israel, and pangs of a woman in travail are but a few of the many which might be listed.
11. Many of the passages found in “Deutero-Isaiah” are totally unsuitable to the period of the exile of Judah where they are

placed by the critics, but totally appropriate to the days of Isaiah son of Amoz.

If the argument for single scholarship is indeed true, then one needs to ask how a single author's content could deal with historical matters scanning 150 years in extent. According to Barton (1995:105), there are two theories of how this came about. Firstly, that there was a school of disciples who supplemented and edited the works of Isaiah ben Amoz, over an extended period of time. This has found agreement with scholars such as Eaton, Jones, Mowinckel, and Vermeylen (105). The other theory is that there were groups of scribes who did more than just copy the original works and words, but reworked the contents as time passed, which is supported by Perlitt, Fishbane, and Fohrer (105).

In contrast, George Gray (quoted in Bullock 1986:129) has argued for multiple authors, even just within chapters 1-39. Similarly, William Brownlee (129) believes that the book of Isaiah is a composite of oracles by various authors. In contrast to these views, Bullock (1986:129) says that we need to "make allowance for Isaiah's prophetic and literary genius", which could mean that one inspired prophet may well have had the divinely imparted capacity to provide such insightful prophecy.

There evidently are a range of opinions about the number of sections that the book can be broken into. Some scholars argue for 10 major units (e.g. Smith 1992), others for 6 divisions (e.g. Robinson and Harrison 1988), 7 sections (e.g. Bullock 1986), and still others for 14 sub-units (e.g. Gileadi quoted in Bullock 1986:129). On the other hand, Gileadi has argued for a "bifid structure" for the book of Isaiah (129). According to Gileadi's theory, the book can be divided into 2 main parts (although also 14 sub-sections). Gileadi upholds that part I comprises chapters 1-33, whilst part II comprises 34-66. This would divide the book into two equal parts, with each part consisting of 7 sub-sections with parallel subject matter.

There are a number of interesting and credible arguments that correspond to Gileadi's approach. Firstly, Bullock (1986:130) has said of Gileadi's theory – "we should insist that any serious study of the composition of the prophetic books must approach the

literature with assumptions that are built upon an analysis of ancient Near Eastern literature and literary method rather than modern literature, and Gileadi has made a genuine effort in that direction”.

The second such support of symmetry within Isaiah (“bifid structure”) is based on the content of the book. Sweeney (1986) also believes that Isaiah can be divided into the same two equal parts. For the most part, this is based on his interpretation and understanding of the bridging chapters, which are 32-33, 34-35, and 36-39. He believes that this is an indication that the book of Isaiah falls into two main parts – namely, 1-33 and 34-66. Similarly, Steck (quoted in Sweeney 1996:43) maintains that chapters 32-33 are a summary of 1-33, and is therefore a transitional chapter. Furthermore, Dicou (quoted in Sweeney 1996:42) upholds that chapter 34 plays a dual role as the first chapter of part II. This chapter looks backwards to the judgments of 1-33, and points forward to the opportunity for nations to recognise YHWH. Steck then says that chapter 35 is another bridging chapter, indicating the end of judgment and an anticipation of a future return to Zion. These interpretations would fit well within the framework of understanding that the main break in the whole book is between 33 and 34 – 33 being the end of part I and 34 being the start of part II.

Within these two main parts, Sweeney (1996) proposes that there are textual blocks within each. The prophetic declaration of the Day of YHWH is made to Zion (2-4), and to the nations (13-23). Building on this premise, Sweeney claims, “Chapters 13-27 constitute a prophetic announcement concerning the preparation of the nations on the Day of YHWH for YHWH’s worldwide rule” (46). Chapters 13-23 in this block then correlate to chapters 24-27, which make the prophetic announcement of YHWH’s new world order including the gathering of the nations at Zion, and are therefore the climax of the oracles against the nations (13-23). The prophetic explanation of the meaning or significance of YHWH’s actions is given to Jacob/Israel in chapters 5-12, and to Jerusalem in 28-33. Therefore, chapters 2-33 are “constituent textual blocks” which reveal the significance of the Day of YHWH and YHWH’s worldwide dominion. There is therefore internal cohesion and logic to this textual block.

The second half of Isaiah (34-66), according to Sweeney, focuses on the fulfilment of YHWH's plan for worldwide dominion at Zion, which involves the downfall of Edom, Assyria and Babylon. Within part II, the major structural division is between 34-54, and 55-66. In chapters 34-54, YHWH's worldwide rule is a contemporary event in history in full view of the reader. It has an "instructional character" (1996:47) and speaks of the "imminent manifestation of YHWH's universal sovereignty at Zion" (47).

Chapters 34-39 are an introductory textual block for 40-55, which reveals that YHWH maintains his covenant by restoring Zion. This introductory block (34-39) is made up of two parts – 34-35, which is the prologue for part II, revealing the power of YHWH to return the exiles to Zion, including the decline of the wicked and redemption of the wicked. Chapters 36-39 comprise the second sub-unit within this introductory block, which are the royal narratives, depicting the deliverance of Jerusalem under Hezekiah.

Chapters 40-54 are argumentative in nature, comprising the renewal of the prophetic commission (40:1-11), and then 40:12 - 54:17 highlights the nature of YHWH. YHWH is the master of creation (40:12-31), He is the master of human events (41:1-42:13), the redeemer of Israel (42:14-44:23), He will use the pagan king Cyrus for the restoration of Zion (44:24-48:22), and that YHWH is restoring Zion (49:1 - 54:17). According to Sweeney (1996), all of these evidences were meant to lead the reader to conclude that the restoration of Zion was taking place in the present.

The final textual block within part II is chapters 55-66, which speak of YHWH's worldwide dominion, after a purging of the wicked in Zion and the world. Sweeney (1996:47) believes that chapter 55 sets the scene for this entire textual block as an encouragement to maintain the covenant requirements of YHWH, followed by the subsequent chapters which explain the make-up of the people who do so.

The third reason that makes the division of Isaiah into two equal parts ("bifid structure"), is a pragmatic one, rather than reference to internal logic or internal structure, as per above. Based on the finding of the Isaiah scroll in Qumran Cave 1, there is clear evidence of a scribal break between chapters 33 and 34 (Robinson and Harrison

1988:901). This may indicate an obvious literary break between the two main sections, although this is not conclusive.

Regardless of which of the above theories or models that one accepts about the number of authors, or the internal structure and logic of the book, Barton (1995:107) expresses it well when he says that we must read Isaiah as a unified literary work. He says:

Such a reading may well take seriously the presence of dissonant elements in Isaiah, and fully accept that these mean the book could have originated as a single entity, composed by one prophet. But the disparate materials from which the book is composed have none the less been drawn together in such a way that the resulting book is much more than a collection of fragments – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In light of the above discussions, there is no reason for us to believe that Isaiah 19:1-15 was written by anyone other than Isaiah ben Amoz, as it is entrenched well within the portion of Isaiah that is not subject to controversy over authorship. Similarly, Isaiah 19 is embedded squarely within the section known as the oracles against the nations, and is part of the collection of oracles in which Isaiah addresses those nations who are neighbours to Israel, or whose activities impact on Israel. Apart from the views of Gray and Brownlee, none of the preceding approaches cast any controversy onto our chosen text. It is almost certain that Isaiah 19 was the work of Isaiah ben Amoz, and that it is by divine foreknowledge and inspired insight that Isaiah came to his understanding about God's future plans for Egypt.

C. THE THEOLOGICAL SETTING OF ISAIAH 19:1-15

a) The Mission of God

In order for us to understand and appreciate the fullest meaning of Isaiah 19:1-15, we need to embed this portion of scripture not just within the book of Isaiah, prophetic

literature, or the oracles against the nations, but also within the story of God that runs from Genesis to Revelation. According to Wright (2006:455):

God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is God's mission in relation to the nations, arguably more than any other single theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative.

Although we are often lead to believe that God's sole concern and focus, especially in the OT, was the nation of Israel alone, it becomes clear that God's heart has always been for all the nations, and that this desire has been worked out through the course of history.

In the same vein, Eichrodt (1985:332) says that the prophets were:

Driven further by the incomparable greatness of the God made known to them, which caused them to understand the judgment and redemption of the people of God only as acts embracing all mankind, and which made the entry of the nations into God's kingdom the goal of universal history.

Yahweh is a unique God, who is incomparable to any other gods, but He is also a God of universality, who shows no favouritism. This is based on the foundation of universal ownership – i.e. that God is the Creator of all things and all peoples, and therefore can lay claim to everyone and everything (Psalm 24:1-2; 89:11-12; 95:3-5). Bauckham makes use of the term "transcendent uniqueness" (quoted in Wright 2006:81), which he views as YHWH's unchallenged supremacy and superiority, with all created things serving and remaining subject to His rule and oversight.

In the Ancient Near East, the gods of the nations were regarded as being interested only in the affairs and interests of their own nation (Wright 2006:85). However, in contrast to these narrow national interests of the other, lesser gods, the God of Israel shows Himself to be sovereign over history. He is not just concerned for the interests of

Israel, but also for the outworking of His plans in all the nations. The gods of the nations of the Near East were believed to get involved in the activities of their own nations who paid homage to them, and most especially in their military efforts. In contrast, the fact that YHWH claimed to be interested in and involved in the affairs of all the nations, set Him apart as distinctive (Is 41:2-4, 25,: 44:28 – 45:6). It also points to the nature and character of God, and His desire to be known by all the nations, and not just the nation of Israel.

The characteristics of the God of Israel are written in the narrative of the OT, as He often chose to reveal Himself through the events of history. YHWH showed Himself to be incomparable to all the other gods of the nations of the region, when He brought Israel out of captivity in Egypt. This is revealed when it is exclaimed in Exodus 15:11, “Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” This incomparability of YHWH became known as He humbled and overcame the powers or gods of Egypt. The acts of Moses over and against Pharaoh was really an affront on the gods of Egypt, and YHWH showed Himself strong, superior and victorious (see Ex 12:12). In this way, God showed Himself to Israel, and Egypt, as being greater and incomparable. However, this defeat of the gods of Egypt was not an end in itself. It was for the purpose of creating and leaving a legacy and explanation of who He was, so that He could ultimately become known by all who witnessed this historical act.

Another way in which YHWH made Himself known in the earth was through the life and narrative of Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12 was not exclusively for Israel, but for the purpose of “the nations” – “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). The heart of the Abrahamic covenant was never for Israel to be an exclusive nation, but to incorporate all those who were willing to make Yahweh their God, and to place their trust in Him alone. The presence of God with Israel, whilst wandering in the desert, or in the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, was for the purpose of attracting people from all nations to worship Him. Israel was intended to be “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6).

Fee and Stuart (2002:176) speak about the four “theological passions” of Isaiah, one of which is “the inclusion of the nations (Gentiles) in his people (2:2; 52:15)”. Therefore, even when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they included a mixed multitude – “A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock” (Ex 12:38).

Furthermore, when Israel came to the land of Canaan, and were mandated to drive out the existing inhabitants (e.g. Deut 6:19, 7:1, 9:4), this was not the act of a cruel and macabre God. Rather, it revealed the heart of a God who desired to wrestle people and nations from the deceitful control of false gods. Steyne (1999:141) explains it in terms of a holy war: “Holy war is the encounter between God and the powers of darkness. It is found in the conflict between the worship of God and the worship of false deities inspired by demonic powers”. Therefore, since Canaan was riddled with perverse practices such as child sacrifice, sensuality in false worship, sexual license etc., the heart of God was to win the people away from such damaging and perverted practices. According to Steyne (137), the reason that YHWH required the total destruction of the Canaanites, was so that Israel would not be seduced by their wicked practices. Deuteronomy 9:4 puts it like this:

Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you.

Wright (2006:187) calls it the “missiological dimension of the Bible’s polemic against idolatry”. He goes further to say (188):

Since God’s mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and call us to join him in that conflict.

This reveals once again that the acts of God in history, and in particular pertaining the nations, are not because He is exclusive or parochial by nature. Rather, His purpose is inclusive by definition, however, based on a sole dedication to belief in YHWH alone, and submission to His laws and ways. He desires to rid the people of the “deleterious effects of idolatry” (188), and to woo them back to Himself. This is because YHWH desires what He knows is best for them.

The fact that Israel failed to fulfil their God-given mandate of remaining separate from the gods of Canaan, was one of the reasons that gave rise to the passionate rhetoric of the prophets. Even though God had shown Himself faithful, powerful and superior, once they had entered the Promised Land of Canaan, Israel “played the harlot” (Ex 34:15-16; Lev 17:7) and pursued the foreign gods of the dispossessed nations – “Instead of trust and obedience in the God who brought a helpless people out of slavery into nationhood, she settled for rites and rituals to excite the local gods to do her bidding” (Steyne 1999:138). This necessitated the voice of the prophets to be heard, as God called His people back to Himself. However, when they failed to respond, the God of the nations needed to show His character and consistency by means of judgment against Israel, as they were taken into captivity.

The fact that Israel needed to encounter judgment due to her evil actions, highlighted that YHWH was not a nationalistic God, but a just God, who remained true to His Word. This made YHWH more than a narrowly nationalistic God who would side with Israel regardless of actions and choices. YHWH had chosen Israel to be a testimony to the truth, and this carried a large measure of responsibility (Wright 2006:97).

Therefore, God shows Himself to be consistent in character, and in His passionate desire to have the nations know Him and obey Him, in order to enter into His blessings and benefits. This could be applied equally to Israel, as well as the other nations that God warned, and then ultimately judged due to lack of response to His calls through the prophets.

The writings of the prophets of the OT divulge a God who is inclusive by nature. Isaiah is indeed one of the prophets who highlights this, with Isaiah 19:16-25 being one of the

central scriptures in this regard – “Isaiah 19:16-25 is one of the most breathtaking pronouncements of any prophet, and certainly one of the most missiologically significant texts in the Old Testament” (Wright 2006:491). This scripture refers to the fact that Egypt and Assyria, two of Israel’s greatest foes, will one day be incorporated into Israel. It shows the “converting love” (493) of YHWH, as He goes beyond mere peace-making. In fact, “The archenemies of Israel will be absorbed into the identity, titles and privileges of Israel and share in the Abrahamic blessing of the living God, YHWH” (493).

Furthermore, the prophets make clear that nations will come to hear the name of God. Amos 9:11-12 is a case in point, in which the prophet refers to an “eschatological reversal of status” (Wright 2006:496), as foreign nations take on the name of God. This refers to a time when Israel will be expanded, not through national birthrates, but by the conversion and inclusion of those who were excluded before. According to Amos, and similar scriptures (e.g. Ps 47, 87; Is 56:7; Zech 2:10-11; 9:7), Gentile nations will be included in the covenant promises and blessings of God. They will become identified with YHWH, as well as with God’s people, Israel. This is not to say that the Gentiles will be a separate category, or a sub-set of Israel. Rather, there will be one people, which will comprise all people from all nations who choose to make YHWH their God. Paraphrased by Wright (498), the prophets are saying, “You, Zion, will become a multinational community of people from many nations, all of whom will belong to YHWH, and therefore they will be rightly counted as belonging to Israel”.

Indeed, this theme of inclusivity and the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God is carried through into the NT. In fact, Isaiah is often quoted as a reference to give understanding for what is being proclaimed as having been achieved through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, it seems that the book of Isaiah informed the understanding of the church regarding its role of going to the Gentiles - Isaiah 29:14 is referred to in 1 Corinthians 1:19; Isaiah 40:13 in 1 Cor. 2:16; Isaiah 66:4 in 1 Corinthians 2:9; Isaiah 11:10 in Romans 15:12; Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47; Isaiah 52:5 in Rom. 2:24; and Isaiah 52:15 in Rom. 15:21 (Dempster 2001: n.p.)

There is clearly significant continuity between Old and New Testaments. The mission of God towards inclusivity maintains momentum, and actually comes to fulfillment in the

NT and ministry of Jesus, and then the early church. Although Jesus often claims to primarily be called to the house of Israel (e.g. Matt 10:6; 15:24), there are distinctive cases where Jesus expands the activity of His ministry beyond native Israel, and reaches towards the Gentiles. For example, Jesus heals the Roman centurion's servant (Matt 8:5-13) and marvels at his faith; the healing of the Gadarene demoniac (Matt 8:28-34); the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:21-28); the parable of the tenants of the vineyard (Matt 21:33-46), amongst others.

In addition to this, the ministry and expansion of the early church points clearly to the fact of inclusion of Gentiles. This is most evident in the following cases: on Pentecost (Acts 2), when there was an array of different nationalities within Jerusalem, and who experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; Peter's vision in Acts 10, and his subsequent encounter and embracing of Cornelius and his household; Phillip's ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:25ff), who was quick to respond to the explanation about Jesus; and the council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), which grappled with the practicalities of this new-found inclusion of the non-Jews into the promises of God for salvation through Jesus. It has even been noted that the very structure of the book of Acts points towards an expansion and inclusion of the Gentiles. The book starts in Jerusalem, which was the place of the temple and heart of Israel, and it ends in Rome, which had become a meeting place of all nations.

Peter writes in II Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Wright (2006:500) sums up the OT when he says, "the mission of God was that the distinction would ultimately be dissolved as the nations flowed into unity and identity with Israel". He goes further to describe the inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of God, as revealed clearly throughout the NT, as "the gloriously comprehensive missional theology of the nations" (529).

b) Theology of the Prophetic Books

i) The nature of prophetic literature

According to Bullock (1986:37), the OT prophets were clustered around historical crises, assessing the moral and theological climate within Israel. The first historical crisis was the Neo-Assyrian period, after the captivity of Israel by Assyria. Then there was the Neo-Babylonian period, followed by the Persian period after the exile. During the times of the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua and the Judges, there was less need for prophets. However, from the end of the Judges until the end of the OT, the prophets were an integral part of Israel's history.

According to Bullock (1986:37) there were various phases in the development of the prophetic ministry in Jewish history. There was the non-literary or pre-literary movement, as the prophetic oracles of these prophets in the early history were not recorded. It was only really from the rise of the monarchy, and the emerging ministry of Samuel, that the prophetic ministry started to play a more significant role in the life of Israel. The prophets then started to become like a moral compass for the kings and for the nation. During the pre-exilic period the prophetic literature began to emerge, as the prophets started to record their oracles or burdens. The third phase in the prophetic movement was the post-exilic phase.

Primarily, the ministry of the prophets was oral, and not recorded as we have it today. According to Gunkel (quoted in Sweeney 1996:15), the prophets were speakers and not writers. Gunkel maintained that their message was spontaneous, spoken into the context of everyday life – in the streets, the temple, or the royal courts. They spoke in short units that were easily memorized. They chose different social settings for their prophetic activities, but the temple was the main location for their performances, and where they were also composed and recorded.

There were the narrative accounts of prophets such as Elijah and Elisha (I Kings 17:1ff). However, in time, there was a transition from stories about the prophets to a focus on the content of the message of the prophets. It was during the 8th century BC that there

was an emergence of collections of disconnected “logia”. This was predominantly in the form of poetry, with an emphasis on rhythm and parallelism, but with little or no regard for an explanation of context or chronology. There was also little concern for the biographical information about the lives of the prophets. The message of the prophet was spoken in the first person, as the prophet’s ego was totally integrated into the message, as if “he were his master himself speaking to the other” (von Rad 1965:37).

As more time passed, the often spontaneous outbursts of the prophets were gathered into “little complexes” (von Rad 1965:39). This may have been done by the prophet, or by a scribe or disciple. Isaiah 8:16 and 30:8-15 reflect this burden to make a record of the burden of the prophet, so that it can be “for a time to come” (Isaiah 30:8).

Although they were original thinkers, they made use of well-established patterns or genres. According to Bullock (1986:42), there are five classifications of prophetic literature. There are the prophetic oracles, under which the oracles against the nations fall. There are visions, poetry, biographical narrative and autobiographical narratives.

Moreover, von Rad (1965:4) has highlighted the fact that the prophets were not always the lone rangers in singular communion with God as we have often regarded them to be. They were also informed by older traditions, which they then made relevant to their time and context. Based on this, the reader of prophetic literature notes that there are certain patterns or prophetic techniques that were common to the OT prophets.

One of the genres of prophetic literature was the prophetic book, which focussed on the punishment and restoration of Israel and Judah – the book of Isaiah would be classified as falling within this genre. According to Sweeney (1996:16) there were principles of composition, and not just haphazard utterances. Sweeney refers to the “tripartite schema” – firstly, the judgment against Judah/ Israel; secondly, the judgment against the nations; and thirdly, the promise for Judah/ Israel and the nations.

Within these categories, there were four main themes that consumed the ministry of the prophets. They had a passion for history, and sought always to understand history from a divine perspective, and interpret the historical experiences of Israel in the light of divine revelation. Secondly, they spoke to kings, seeking to advise them in some cases,

or to forewarn them in other cases (Bullock 1986: 45). The warning may have been of a pending judgment that could be avoided through repentance, or about a pending attack by a foreign nation. Thirdly, the prophets spoke vehemently against the false gods which lured Israel into spiritual adultery in regular cycles. They sought to expose idolatry, constantly calling Israel back to faithfulness to Yahweh alone (Bullock 1986:47; Seitz et al. 1992:500). Finally, the prophets spoke against social oppression, concerning themselves with the cause of the poor, the widows and the orphans (Bullock 1986:48).

When one looks at the subject of the prophets of the OT, there is a constant reference to the centrality of the Torah in the ministry of the prophets. As much as prophets are often considered to be predictive and foretelling, it is also clear that the prophets were men who were inspired to look backwards. To the extent that the Torah provided “detailed instruction on living within the covenant” (Barton 1986:154), the prophets were men who would consistently assess the extent to which Israel was living up to the standards given by Moses. According to Barton (1986:18), “when the prophets came to write their own books they were drawing on words already prepared for them by Moses”.

Western culture and modern Christianity view prophecy as predictive and eschatological in emphasis. However, according to the Jewish tradition, the prophets were more concerned with ethics than eschatology, and were viewed more as teachers of moral law. They gave inspired commentary of the Torah, to be transmitted from one generation to the next. In this sense, the prophets acted as “filters...to make the inapproachable light of the Torah bearable for human eyes” (Barton 1986:17).

A term that has been used for the theology of the prophets is “Deuteronomistic Theology”, due to their didactic reference back to the Law of Moses. According to this understanding the emphasis would not be so much on accuracy of historical record, nor ability to predict the future with accuracy, but rather on their ability to maintain the essence of the Torah, and the consistency of the character of God (Barton 1986:20). Therefore, the prophets were “tradents of authentic tradition” (21), or proto-rabbis in that they sought to apply what they knew about the nature of God, to the condition of Israel

in their time. In this sense, they were theological reformers as they sought to maintain the fundamental laws of God” (Bullock 1986:49).

In fact, it is widely held that the OT was like three concentric circles. In the centre was the Torah with the prophets forming a layer around this central pivot. The next layer was the Writings. However, they were all seen as interdependent and centred. In fact, further to this tripartite view of OT literature, Barton (1986:93) argues for a bipartite understanding. He believes that there was the Torah, and then all other writings that were non-Torah, including both the Prophets and the Writings.

In contrast to the Hebrew understanding and Jewish scriptures, the Septuagint (LXX) was influenced more by the Greek and Christian tradition, and therefore had some variance with the above (Barton 1986:33). The LXX arrangement is eschatological, with no grades of scriptural authority. It gives a linear account of the divine purpose, starting with creation and ending in the consummation. The prophetic therefore is viewed as pointing towards the fulfilment of God’s plans. Similarly, in the LXX, the prophetic books are towards the end, which gives the sense of pointing beyond the OT and towards a future fulfilment of the prophetic promises. According to the structure of the LXX, the historical books (Pentateuch and Former prophets) point towards the past. The wisdom books speak about how to conduct life, and therefore point to the present. The Latter prophets, including Daniel and Lamentations, are regarded as pointing towards the future.

These contrasts between Hebrew and Greek understandings do not necessarily set them against each other. Rather, they can be seen as different spheres of the whole, each containing valuable truths. As said by Barton (1996:34), an examination of the Hellenized Jew, Josephus, “is a further help in establishing a thoroughly harmonious hypothesis, in which the history of the canon and history of the Jewish and Christian perceptions of prophecy march hand in hand.

Therefore, the prophetic literature shows itself to be rich in content, history and purpose, within the life of Israel and the church. They were inspired men who could look backwards with understanding, have insight into the present, and could discern the

mind and plans of God for the future. Isaiah the son of Amoz was one of these such men.

ii) The nature of prophecy

The prophets of the OT were given one of four titles used to describe them: “man of God”, “seer”, “visionary” or “prophet”. According to Barton (1986:117), there were a variety of ways in which these prophets received inspiration – dreams (Gen 37:5-11), auditions (I Kings 22:20-22), waking visions (I Sam 28:13), or communications through angels (Zech 1:9). It is these messages which the prophets received, as recorded in the OT, that have provided such a rich Biblical content. In fact, Barton says, “Without prophets, there would be no Scriptures” (96). In other words, with the writings of the prophets, the Sadducees had the Torah. It is the nature of these insightful, piercingly honest, and sometimes strange sayings that we now turn to analyze.

One of the characteristics of these words of the prophets which has caused consternation in attempts to understand and interpret the contents, is the prophet’s seeming disregard for chronological time. Grudem (1994:1097) uses the term “prophetic foreshortening” which refers to any scripture that sees “future events but does not see the intervening time”. Further in this regard, Ladd (quoted in Grudem 1994:1097) says:

The prophets were little interested in chronology, and the future was always seen as imminent...the OT prophets blended the near and the distant perspectives so as to form a single canvas. Biblical prophecy is not primarily three-dimensional but two; it has height and breadth but is little concerned about depth, i.e. the chronology of future events... the distant is viewed through the transparency of the immediate.

This confusing use of time in prophecy has led commentators to question whether the prophets were predominantly addressing the issues of their time (forthtelling), or speaking of the future (foretelling) in their prophecies.

An integral part of this battle to comprehend the meaning of the prophets is because we often try to grasp a Hebrew worldview with Western understanding (Kaiser 1987:85; von Rad 1965:99). If we are to fully appreciate the prophets, then we need to be sensitive to the Hebrew worldview. The understanding of history and time is a case in point - "The question of the specific way in which Hebrew thought understood time and history brings us into an area of great importance for the correct understanding of the prophets" (von Rad 1965:99). According to von Rad (100), "Israel's perception of time was taken from a different angle than ours", and therefore, trying to force our Western concepts onto the prophets, "is tantamount to applying a concept of time to the prophets' teaching of which they themselves were quite unaware" (115). This sensitivity to the Hebrew worldview when trying to interpret the prophets can open up new possibilities of interpretation and application which were previously hidden from minds that are predominantly Western and linear by training.

A further illustration of this is presented by Kaiser (1989:51), who says that "prophecy is best understood by going back into the past in order to perceive what God is going to do in the future". This draws on the simple logical awareness that if a person has not lived in the future yet, then he can only draw on past idioms to express their prophetic sense of what will happen at a future time. Therefore, "if the future bears certain analogies to the historic past and if God's method of operation has a consistency and pattern to it, borrowing the past in order to help us conceptualize the future is a most logical way of proceeding" (51). Kaiser believes that prophecy should not be limited to historical considerations, as liberal critics want to do. Rather, the supernatural dimension needs to be upheld, and the dynamic link between contemporary times and the purpose of God for the whole of history (85).

The discussion then needs to consider whether the weight of OT prophecy was intended to be predictive in nature, or whether it was aimed at the issues of the specific historic time period of the prophet. According to Muilenburg (quoted in Bullock 1986:45), even though Hebrew prophecy was predictive in nature, it was always primarily concerned with the contemporary issues that the prophets were facing in their day.

Further to this, some of the early commentators, such as Ben Sira (quoted in Barton 1996:131), believed that the prophets were “spokesmen for a moral and demanding God who addressed themselves to the state of Israelite society in their own day and uttered rebukes and warnings of immediate application”. Josephus believed that the “prophets spoke to the concerns of people in their own generation, and does not always think of them simply as clairvoyants” (134). In addition, Philo alleged that prophetic warnings were of imminent punishment for present sins. Similarly, Eusebius understood that, “Moses and the prophets were not concerned with predicting matters which were transient and of interest only for the immediate future” (137).

Barton (1986:137) believes that the prophets exhibited an ability to sense the movements of political events in the present and near future. This is in sharp contrast to an understanding of prophecy with an emphasis on longer-term “prognostications”, which lays an emphasis on an eschatological scale of predictions, including revelation of unknowable information. It stresses the predictive nature of prophecy.

In this regard, Conrad believes that Isaiah was written for a future time (Barton 1995:108). Likewise Bullock emphasized the predictive nature of prophecy, maintaining that YHWH’s ability to know future events (Amos 3:7), was in contrast to the idols who could not predict, let alone speak. This formed an important part of the polemic against the idols, which is a constant theme in the prophets, including Isaiah (Bullock 1986). Kaiser (1989:43) says further in this regard:

While the prophets often clothed their thoughts in terms or formulae belonging to an earlier period of revelation, this does not mean that their thoughts failed to transcend what had previously been spoken. Nor does this tie with the past mean that they could not transcend their own historical and cultural limitations. In fact, they frequently related the past and present to the unseen future under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, Childs (quoted in Kaiser 1989:109) says that Isaiah was not meant only for one particular period of time. Therefore, as is the case in Isaiah in its final form, oracles from the periods of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, are meant to be decontextualized, extracting general principles which are neither time nor culture specific. From this perspective, Childs (109) regards Isaiah as being more akin to the Wisdom literature, which provides insight into the general human condition, which can in turn be applied the same in all ages.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the prophets was their special and intimate relationship with God. This meant that the prophets were regarded as having access to information that was not known to ordinary people, i.e. it was esoteric by nature. This information was inspired, in the sense that it would not otherwise have been known if not revealed by God (Barton 1986:131). The prophets were spokesmen or the available scribes of God, with prophetic content that came from God and not from man – it was “revealed truth” (103). As maintained by the early Christian Fathers, “The importance of the prophets lay in the secrets they revealed, not in their opinions about the current state of affairs in Israel or Judah” (137). Correspondingly, authors such as Barton (1986) and Wilson (1951) argue for a view of prophecy with emphasis on its application to readers in their own time. It is indeed true that Biblical prophecy cannot have a meaning for a modern reader today that it didn’t have in the original context. This means that the reader must seek the original author-intended meaning, as it was intended for the audience of the day. However, having attained that meaning, the principles contained in that original meaning can have instructional and applicational significance for modern readers.

In this regard, Wilson (quoted in Broyles 2001:258) speaks about an Imaginative-Practical theology, or “this is that”. This understanding seeks to make the ancient scriptures alive and active in the lives of contemporary readers, so that we can experience the power of the scriptures for ourselves. This opens up what Wilson terms “multiple interpretations” (261), and the “inexhaustible meaning of the Bible” (261). This could potentially be viewed as *sensus plenior*, which would be a problematic approach to understanding and applying prophecy. However he believes that we should “be able

to recognize that the text prohibits some interpretations without its meaning being exhausted by one interpretation” (260). This brings the scriptures alive, in the same way that Jesus made the ancient writings of the OT alive for the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, when He explained how the OT prophets had been fulfilled in Himself (Lk 24:13ff). Suddenly the OT prophets could move from being references to the ancient past to relevant and applicable to their current lived experience, and even fulfilled in their midst. Similarly when Peter stood up to preach on the day of Pentecost, he was able to interpret what he was witnessing firsthand in front of him, and related it to what had been spoken by the prophet Joel centuries before, and so he was able to proclaim, “But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:17 KJV). The prophetic promise was being fulfilled in their midst and was relevant to their lives.

It is positive and desirable that the prophetic literature be kept alive and relevant to a current reader, so that the work of the prophets is not relegated to a distant time, and with no bearing to the present. Therefore, if this above Imaginative-Practical approach means that the meaning of the ancient prophetic text is not altered, but only applied and fulfilled in the present time, then there could be merit. However, if it means that the current reader can extract a meaning that was never intended in the original prophecy, then this would not fit into sound grammatical-historical interpretation, and would need to be disregarded.

Barton (1986:154) presents four modes of reading the prophets. Firstly, the “halakah” or ethical approach, which regards prophecy as giving directions for how life should be lived in order to be pleasing to God. The second approach is eschatological, whereby the prophets are regarded as predicting divine intervention in history within the lifetime of the reader. The third approach is “historiographical” (228), whereby “the function of prophecy... is to reveal the shape and consistency of God’s plan for human history” (153). This is similar to the second mode, but with less emphasis on imminent eschatological break-in. The fourth mode is mystical, or speculative theology, in which the prophet is seen as a mystic who has approached the inner mystery of God, which goes beyond natural reason.

Although there is a measure of overlap between these modes, this third mode is more concerned with the cyclical nature of history, rather than just the fulfillment of certain events breaking into history. The aim is to show that God is in control of history, and not the exactitudes of when certain events will take place. This understanding highlights that divine inspiration is needed to elicit the patterns and consistencies of God's providence within history, rather than an emphasis on once off accurate predictions.

To this we can add some aspects of the fourth mode (speculative theology), which seeks to comprehend the nature of God, in order to recognize His hand in the events of history. It has "more concern for the recurrent patterns of divine activity than for discerning a single direction in historical events" (Barton 1986:235), and has a "philosophical interest in the nature of God". This allows the student of prophecy and of God to discover repeated patterns in history and in His dealings with people (261). This understanding and approach would mean that it is more important to extract the principles and patterns of Yahweh from Isaiah 19:1-15, rather than the exact detail of historical fulfillment.

In assessing all of the above viewpoints on the nature of prophecy, we need to heed the warning of Walter Kaiser. He warns against the extremes on both ends of the spectrum. "Radical criticism" that "wants to limit prophecy to purely historical considerations and thereby to rid it of its supernatural character" (1985:85). Barton (1986:140) says, "Biblical scholars are sometimes accused of relegating the Bible to the position of merely an 'old book' by insisting on trying to read it in its original historical context to the detriment of its authority for the present". On the other end of the scale, those who want to understand and apply prophecy without any reference to the primary historical setting and context are undermining the true meaning of the text, and thereby making it devoid of any real value or power. If a prophecy can mean something different to every generation, then it can mean anything, and is therefore denuded of any power or meaning at all. According to Kaiser, prophecy is the bridge between God's plan for history, and contemporary history (85).

Therefore from all of the above, it seems clear that prophecy needs to be understood, interpreted and applied using a strict grammatical-historical approach which seeks

primarily to illicit the original author-intended meaning. However, once the historical context has assisted to understand the text's authentic meaning, there are clearly principles, patterns and repeated themes in the oracles of the prophets which can be applied and hold significance for whatever time or age the reader is living in.

iii) Oracles against the nations

The oracles against the nations are the clusters of prophetic burdens which are found in Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 25-32, Amos 1-2, and Zephaniah 2:14-15. While they are normally in series (as per above), they can also be individual oracles, such as Isaiah 34, Nahum and Obadiah. The oracles against the nations are addressed to nations whose "fortunes affected Judah and Jerusalem" (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887), and "generally speak of a punishment or destruction that is taking place or that will take place in the future" (Sweeney 1996:26). According to Sweeney, although the oracles are addressed to a foreign nation, they are ultimately intended for Israel (26).

Although there are authors e.g. W. McKane [quoted in Peels (2007:85)] who have claimed that the oracles against the nations texts are xenophobic and narrowly nationalistic by nature, it seems evident that the consensus of more modern scholarship is that the oracles against the nations are evidence of an universalist understanding of salvation (e.g. Kaiser 1974:3). Similarly, Peels (2007:87) states:

In the same way as ancient prophetic war oracles cursed the enemy and strengthened one's own armed forces, the oracles against the nations are thought to have been a consolation and encouragement for the assaulted Israelites. It is hard to imagine that this was indeed the universal purpose of the oracles against the nations.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the oracles against the nations rather served a dual purpose. They were intended both for Israel, as well as for the foreign nation.

According to Robinson and Harrison (1988:886) Isaiah's vision was global. Peels (2007:88) says that YHWH was not limited by geography or ethnicity. In fact, he maintains that the oracles against the nations were a call to conversion, because YHWH is concerned for the nations, and not just Israel (which has been discussed in A(c) above).

Furthermore, the view of the oracles against the nations as being intended for the hearing of Israel, and not the heathen nations to which they refer, comes up against a problem when the oracle refers directly to the nation of Israel, as in Isaiah 22 and Amos 2. There are occasions when the words of judgment against a nation are followed by words of welfare (e.g. Jer 46:26; 48:47; 49:6; 49:39). Similarly, in Jeremiah 51:59ff, Jeremiah commands Seraiah to read the scroll in Babylon itself, and then to throw the scroll into the Euphrates, which would lead one to believe that the oracle was intended for the hearing of the foreign nation, and not just Israel.

These oracles against the nations reveal that YHWH is in command, and makes use of the massive movements of history to bring about His purposes. There are nations that YHWH uses as instruments of judgment against other nations. Examples of this are Assyria being referred to as "the rod of My anger, and the staff in whose hands is My indignation" (Isaiah 10:5), or the Median empire being used against Babylon (Isaiah 13:17). However, even though YHWH uses heathen nations for His purpose in the earth, these nations are still constrained and subject to Him (Psalm 2:1; Isaiah 8:9-10; 14:24-27). Ultimately, it is the Name of God that is established as Mighty, and not the nation used as an instrument of judgment – "The rationale of the oracles against the nations: the erection of the 'throne' of YHWH" (Peels 2007:87).

The next step in the process of understanding the oracles against the nations is to ask why these judgments are taking place against the nations. The evidence of the scriptures, in particular the oracles against the nations contained in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Zephaniah, highlight four likely reasons why God issued judgment against them.

Firstly, there is the issue of hubris, or the pride of the nation. When a nation mocks God and turns against Him, they become a target to judgment (Peels 2007:88). This is certainly a recurring theme found in the following passages – Isaiah 16:6; Jeremiah 48:26; 49:16; 50:29; Ezekiel 27:3. There is an evident repetition of phrases such as “mighty men” (Jeremiah 46:15; 51:30), “arrogant” (Jeremiah 46:26,29; 49:16; 50:31,32; “strongholds” (Jeremiah 47:18; 51:53;) all of which centre around the sense of self exaltation.

Secondly, another reason for the judgments against the nations, and potentially the ultimate target of such judgments, is the false gods or idols that the nations are serving (Is 16:2; Jer 46:25; 50:2,38; 51:47,52). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the term used for YHWH on repeated occasions in the oracles against the nations is The Lord of Hosts. In this way, it is as if He is emphasising the fact that He is the true God, who is over and greater than all other false gods. YHWH is a jealous God (e.g. Josh 24:19) who requires absolute devotion (e.g. Josh 24:15), but who also knows the emptiness and comparative powerlessness of any other god or source of help.

The third reason, and related to the previous, is misplaced trust. This sense of basing one’s trust in anything other than YHWH Himself can refer to treaties with foreign nations (Jer 42-43), alliances (as in the case of Ephraim’s alliance with Damascus), government (Is 20:5; Jer 48:17,18), wealth or treasures (Jer 49:4), or the plans of man (Is 22:11; Jer 48:7).

The final potential reason for such judgment seems to be the mistreatment of Israel through taking them into captivity or oppression. This is evident in Ezekiel 25:6, 12; 26:2, where it seems that those nations who have not treated Israel righteously become the target of God’s wrath.

In spite of the above possible reasons that have been given, the heart of God is not so much for judgment as it is for response to His warnings, and the requisite repentance. After the prophets have done all that they can to forewarn and call people back to God, the only option left to God is judgment - “Divine discipline has failed; only judgment remains” (Robinson and Harrison 1988:888). Ultimately, the heart of God is to get

people to turn back to Himself, as He knows that He is the only true God. The phrase that is oft repeated in this regard is “They will know that I am the Lord” (Is 17:7; Ezek 29:6,9; 30:8,19). Peels (2007:87) says, “The oracles unanimously put the acts of God at the centre and contain a concentrated preaching of the God who reveals Himself as ‘the King, whose name is the Lord Almighty’”.

Therefore, it seems that the oracles against the nations did indeed serve as a warning to Israel. It was a warning to not place their trust or confidence in other nations who were about to be destroyed, and as a warning not to follow their example in turning to foreign gods. However, it does also seem that the oracles against the nations also reveal the universal nature and mission of God, and can therefore be said to serve a dual purpose.

Isaiah 19 itself has two parts to it. The first part, verses 1-15 focuses on the judgment against the nation. However, the next portion up to verse 25, unveil God’s plan to incorporate Egypt and Assyria into an alliance with Israel (Robinson 1988:889):

Chapter 19, which is an oracle concerning Egypt, contains both a threat (vv 1–17) and a promise (vv 18–25), and is one of Isaiah’s most remarkable foreign messages. Egypt is smitten and thereby led to abandon its idols for the worship of the Lord (vv 19–22). Still more remarkable, it is prophesied that in that day Egypt and Assyria will join with Judah in a triple alliance of common worship to the Lord and of blessing to others (vv 23–25). Isaiah’s missionary outlook here is remarkable.

The theology of the oracles against the nations points to God’s heart for all nations to come to the knowledge of Himself. Although Israel was chosen to carry and demonstrate His light and laws, Israel was not an exclusive end in itself.

c) The theology of Isaiah

It has been said of Isaiah that “Of all the prophets of Israel, Isaiah stands out as incomparably the greatest” (Robinson and Harrison 1988:887). Oswalt (2001, n.p.) has

said that “There is no other book in either Testament which comprehends the whole of biblical theology so completely as does Isaiah... Thus in many ways the book of Isaiah offers a summary of biblical theology”. Clearly, Isaiah was significant amongst the prophets and the times in which he was living in Judah.

There can be no doubt that the prophet Isaiah stands out as one of the most significant prophets of the OT, and therefore the book of Isaiah as a highly noteworthy book. Herbert (1988:1049) has said, “Isaiah is to the OT as the Book of Romans is to the NT, a book filled with rich theological truth”. It seems that Isaiah had the ability both to live very much within his age, and the issues of his time, and yet to transcend his immediate historical context, with the ability to see the grand drama and purposes of God in history. Smith (1992, chap 1, n.p.) says it like this: “Never perhaps has there been another prophet like Isaiah, who stood with his head in the clouds and his feet on the solid earth, with his heart in things of eternity and with and hand in the things of time, with his spirit in the eternal counsel of God and his body in a very definite moment of history”. Furthermore, Smith (n.p.) says, “While other prophets were called to illuminate single parts of the near or distant future, Isaiah let the light of his prophetic word fall on the great wide circumference of the entire future of salvation”.

It is believed that Isaiah the prophet was also a scribe of history, or historiographer. This view is based not only on the content of his prophecies, and seeming keen interest in history. It is also founded on II Chronicles 32:32 which says, “Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah and his deeds of devotion, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel”. Isaiah clearly had an eye for international dynamics, in addition to his constant concern for national Israel. He had an interest, and also a role to play, in Israel’s foreign policy (Hogehaven 1990:351). Isaiah 37 illustrates how king Hezekiah sought out the counsel of Isaiah, in this case when under threat from the approaching Assyrians. Indeed, the threat of Assyria was one of the major themes of the book of Isaiah, which was based on the fact that Assyria was the rising dominant force of that region, with the view to subjugate the surrounding nations, including Israel and Judah.

Isaiah spoke and ministered as more than just someone who could read the national and international dynamics of his time. Rather, he was a prophet with insight, and therefore able to interpret and explain the real reason and meaning of historical events. He recognized that God had a divine design for human history. He acknowledged that God was the Mind and Hand behind human interactions. Human history was not the making of great men or kings of nations, but rather the outworking of God's plan towards the vision that He has in mind. With this in mind, Isaiah was not bound by mere events, but was able to remain steadfast in his conviction that the God of history desired to establish Zion.

This fact is illustrated in Isaiah 10, in which Isaiah is able to not only identify the pending threat of Assyria within the region. He was able to explain that it was God who was going to use the force of Assyria to bring about His intended purposes in history. Even though this meant that Israel (the northern kingdom) was going to be taken into Assyrian captivity, Isaiah was very clear in his understanding that this was the planning of God, in response to the rebellion and disobedience of Israel. However, even Assyria worked on God's terms, and this was to be done on God's terms. Hence, in Isaiah 10:12 it says, "So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness". This reveals that God is not subject to the forces of history. Rather, it is the forces of history (kings, nations, armies) that are subject to the design and plan of God, to ultimately bring about what He has destined. This is clearly demonstrated in the writings of Isaiah, and is an integral dimension of the theology of Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah clearly demonstrates that Isaiah had a constant eye to the affairs and interests of Israel. However, once again, Isaiah shows that he doesn't have a narrow nationalistic and immediate focus alone. In contrast, Isaiah introduces the universalism of God. Dempster (2001, n.p.) says, "Since Yahweh is the great Creator of all human beings, he is concerned not only for the future of his people Israel, but also for that of all the nations". In line with many of the other OT prophets, Isaiah proclaims that God's ultimate purpose is worldwide dominion, and therefore He has a purpose to

extend salvation to all nations, and to include them within His family of the faith. Joel (2-3), Amos (1-2), Obadiah, Habakkuk (1-3), Nahum (1-3), and Zephaniah (3), Zechariah (9-14) are all scriptures that underpin a universalistic teaching.

Isaiah points to the fact that the salvation of YHWH is not based solely on a nationalistic birthright, but that salvation comes by grace and by faith. As a result, salvation is extended to include the Gentile nations. Consequently, Jonah was able to bring a message of salvation to Nineveh in contrast to Nahum's message of doom. Sweeney (1996:46) says of Isaiah's oracles against the nations, "Chapters 13-27 constitute a prophetic announcement concerning the preparation of the nations on the day of YHWH for YHWH's worldwide rule". More pointedly, Isaiah 19 is regarded as being a clarion declaration of God's universalistic purposes. Both judgment and salvation are intended for all the nations. Isaiah 19:19-25 points to the fact that the Assyrians and Egyptians, together with Israel, will be called Yahweh's people.

There are a number of repeated themes in the book of Isaiah. One of them is the constantly repeated cycle of judgment and hope, which are coupled throughout the book. Although Isaiah often at times presents the threat or announcement of judgment, it is followed by the promise of hope thereafter. It is as if there is a divine pattern, which moves from judgment to the next step of hope. It reveals that the heart of God is not to punish people in a cruel and unrelenting manner. Rather, His heart is to punish people in order to purge them, and to bring them back to Himself. God wants people to turn from what is detrimental to themselves (e.g. idolatry, false gods, injustice, unfaithfulness etc), and to return back to their Source, who wants only the best for them. Judgment therefore comes for the benefit of the people, so that they can enter back into the hope and salvation that God has destined them for.

Further to the above, Isaiah relentlessly contrasts Yahweh with the false gods of the nations. Isaiah refers to God continually as the "Holy One of Israel" (e.g. Is 1:4; 5:19; 5:24; 10:20; 12:6) , setting Yahweh apart as distinctive from the other gods of the nations. This builds a thread of thought, consistent with the theme of God calling people (from all nations) back to Himself. It also sounds an echo of truth, so that the hearers

cannot say that they have not heard or understood, as this truth should reverberate within their ears.

Another repeated theme in the theology of Isaiah is that of the Messianic promises which echo throughout the book. Smith (1992, chap 1, n.p.) says that Isaiah was a “Prophet of the gospel before the Gospel”. There is a constant pointing, not only to a hope in the near-future, but also to a distant future hope of a redemption which supersedes all that has gone before. This points to Christ, and to the salvation that will be accessible to all people, based on the grace of God, and accessed by faith. This prophetic unction that proceeds from Isaiah highlights the awesome futuristic insight that Isaiah carried.

Although one may not say that the predictive nature of prophecy is a theme in Isaiah, it certainly is an assumed premise which runs consistently throughout the book, and which therefore can be said to inform the theology of Isaiah. The prophet is evidently future-oriented in his prophetic view and utterances. The question remains as to whether Isaiah was focused mainly on the short-term or immediate future, and was interested in the historical circumstances that were in his day, or, it may be said, that Isaiah could see well beyond his day. In this regard, Smith (1992, chap 1, n.p.) says, “The Biblical view, however, is that God on occasion revealed to a prophet the circumstances of a future period”.

It seems that the reasonable common ground is that Isaiah was both a forth-teller, and a fore-teller. He preached the word of God to the people and situations of his day. He made constant reference back to the original Mosaic or Sinatic covenant with Yahweh. He was concerned with the issues within Israel, as well as the surrounding nations, and spoke directly to those matters. However, it is also clear that he was futuristic, and was able to predict and fore-tell the activities of God in the future. The question then remains, as to how far into the future that he was able to see and fore-tell. Nevertheless, for the sake of understanding the theology of Isaiah, it remains evident that Isaiah had an eye and a mind towards the future. He not only perceived the historic and contemporary rhythms of God’s dealing with people and nations (i.e. judgment and corresponding hope), but he was also part of establishing an understanding of God’s

ongoing rhythms, which could be applied well into the distant future. He was futuristic in extreme senses of the term – short-term historic future, as well as the longer-term eschatological future. This is an important component of Isaiah's theology.

Therefore, in conclusion, the theology of Isaiah is based on God's overarching divine design for human history, a "thematic unity", which includes judgment and hope, universalism and inclusiveness of Yahweh's purposes for all the nations, the Messianic theme, and the premise of the predictive function of prophecy. These main points are the backbone of the entire book and psychology of Isaiah the prophet.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that Isaiah 19:1-15 was written by Isaiah son of Amoz, and falls within the category of the oracles against the nations. Although a definitive statement cannot be made about the author-intended audience, it seems likely that Israel was the primary audience, but that there was also an intention for the nation of Egypt to hear the oracle, and to respond to its message. The heart and intention of God towards universal salvation is evident from the full weight of scripture, and is potentially one of the motivations behind Isaiah 19:1-15.

So far this study of prophecy has shown a range of two extremes – prophecy as being solely for the actual time and circumstance of the prophet, in contrast to prophecy as purely eschatological. We have established that prophecy can also bring to the fore a truth about God and His dealings with people and nations, which can then be applied to another nation at a later stage in history. This understanding of the nature of prophetic literature has laid the foundation for the potential understanding that the principles or consistent patterns of God revealed in Isaiah 19:1-15 can be applied today, and are not confined as a once-off act of YHWH at one particular period of time. This allows us to explore the applicability of the principles made clear in Isaiah 19:1-15, to the time and place in which we are living, or to any other nation at any period in history.

CHAPTER 3

Probable reasons for judgment

A. LITERARY REVIEW

The text of Isaiah 19:1-15, which has been chosen as the scope of this study, shows itself to be the subject of some diverse opinions. However, there are also certain factors which have commonality of interpretation, and yield some important insights into the mind and theology of Isaiah, as well as the nature and character of Yahweh.

a) The views of various scholars on Isaiah 19:1-15

Isaiah 18-20 is seen as a grouping of oracles within the oracles against the nations, as all three deal with Ethiopia and Egypt. Robinson and Harrison (1988:888) read Isaiah 18 as being a desperate effort by Ethiopia to seek assistance from Judah in view of the threat of Assyria. Ethiopia therefore sent ambassadors by boat up the Red Sea (“Which sends envoys by the sea, even in papyrus vessels on the surface of the waters” [18:2]). This interpretation is also purported by Bullock (1986:138), when he says, “in Isaiah 18:2 Isaiah may be speaking directly to the Ethiopian envoys who visited Jerusalem”. Isaiah encourages them to return home and to witness the strong arm of Yahweh as He enables Jerusalem to withstand an attack by Assyria, which was fulfilled in 701 BC (“As soon as a standard is raised on the mountains, you will see it, And as soon as the trumpet is blown, you will hear it” [18:3]). This would result in the Ethiopians paying homage to the God of Jerusalem when they witness this mighty turn of events:

At that time a gift of homage will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, Even from a people feared far and wide, A powerful and oppressive nation, Whose land the rivers divide - To the place of the name of the LORD of hosts, even Mount Zion (18:7).

Chapter 20 is a description of Isaiah's prophetic enactment of what will happen to the inhabitants of those lands when Assyria invades. He therefore strips down to his undergarments, perhaps only on occasions over a period of three years, to represent prisoners being marched off by a foreign power, stripped of their outer garments. According to Robinson and Harrison (1988:889), it also serves to reveal how foolish it would be for the Judeans to trust in Egypt, as they would not even be able to look after themselves, let alone provide support to Judah.

Isaiah 19 is sandwiched between these oracles, and is considered "one of Isaiah's most remarkable foreign messages" (Robinson and Harrison 1988:889). The theological context is therefore one of warning of future judgments by God, as He is the director of world history, and in command of the forces of history. Isaiah 10 has already revealed how God can use the mighty Assyrians to bring about His purposes ("Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation, I send it against a godless nation And commission it against the people of My fury To capture booty and to seize plunder, And to trample them down like mud in the streets" [Isaiah 10:5-6]), but at the same time bring judgment against the Assyrians themselves:

So it will be that when the Lord has completed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, He will say, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness." For he has said, "By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this, For I have understanding; And I removed the boundaries of the peoples And plundered their treasures, And like a mighty man I brought down their inhabitants, And my hand reached to the riches of the peoples like a nest, And as one gathers abandoned eggs, I gathered all the earth; And there

was not one that flapped its wing or opened its beak or chirped."

Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, Or like a rod lifting him who is not wood." (10:12-15)

According to Isaiah, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is in charge of history and will use whatever nations necessary to bring about His plans.

Smith (1973:77) has said of Isaiah 19: "The 19th chapter of the Book of Isaiah contains the most important prophetic utterance concerning Egypt in all of the OT". In the light of this, it is interesting to consider how interwoven Egypt was in the history of the Hebrew people. Up to the time of the Greek civilization, it was the greatest civilization of the ancient world (47). According to Smith, Egypt was symbolic of the world, with all the allures and temptations of "modernity", which provided "a magnetism from which Israel was never fully loosened" (57), as it contained riches, wisdom and an indulgent culture.

The question then needs to be asked, as in chapter 2 A(c), as to the purpose of the oracle against Egypt. Is the purpose forewarning the Egyptians against a coming judgment of God, so that they can prepare and potentially repent, if not before the judgment, then hopefully after the process of humiliation? Or, is the oracle intended as a warning to Judah, so that they do not place their hope in the temporary might and power of Egypt, rather than in the permanent and dependable strength and character of Yahweh? These questions will be considered in greater depth in section C of this chapter (Probable reasons for judgment). In the meantime, suffice to say that there are authors and interpreters who argue for each of these possibilities.

Sweeney (1996:267) identifies the various genres of prophetic literature, and in particular the Prophetic Pronouncement, of which Isaiah 19:1-15 falls into a sub-category, termed a Prophecy concerning a Foreign Nation. This type of prophetic genre speaks of the destruction of a foreign nation by an enemy, but with the hand of God behind it (1996:267).

Marlow (2007:229) has said that Isaiah 19 does not refer to actual historical events but is rather metaphorical in nature, making use of a rhetorical device which highlights great opposites in history. It points out the great reversal from order to chaos, or from greatness to humility. This view however stands very much alone and in contrast to the more accepted view of Isaiah and prophetic literature in general, which maintains that there is a strong corroboration between the prophetic utterances of the OT and historical realities. In fact, Smith (1973:13) speaks of the dependability of the chronology, history and geography of the bible, and as being authenticated in history over time, even if not immediately.

As much as there are variances of understanding on certain points regarding Isaiah 19, there are other points that yield relatively consistent interpretations. One such consistency is the belief that the oracles against the nations of Isaiah 13-23, as well as those of Jeremiah 46-51 and Ezekiel 25-32, all emphasise the total and ultimate sovereignty of Yahweh, and His ability to direct history according to His purposes. In other words, Yahweh has a predetermined outcome for the nations and kingdoms of the world, and has planned a strategy in order to bring it to pass (Is 37:26).

In this regard, Eichrodt (1967:183) considers that everything that was to happen in the future, was inevitably fashioned by God's preparation and verdict. The prophetic interpretation of history is based on the assumption of a divine, systematic ordering of all events. Eichrodt (184) speaks of "the comprehensive vision of the world-process as a wondrous structure fashioned by the divine wisdom". Similarly, Barton (1995:36) highlights the vanity and ineffectiveness of human political affairs, in contrast to the overarching power and vision of God to bring about His will in history and the nations. The prophets believed that God was always in control, and the determinant of national destinies, with an ultimate strategy in mind of bringing all nations to Himself. In this regard Isaiah 19 reveals how the proverbial wisdom of mighty Egypt could be turned into folly, when set against the purposeful plans of God for the same nation.

This brings us to the theme of judgment in Isaiah. The book of Isaiah brings to the fore the paradox of judgment and grace (Barton 1996:107), and how in fact the judgments of God against nations are not intended for their ultimate destruction but rather for their

salvation and redemption. However, wherever a nation is set in opposition to the knowledge of God and His plans for the nation, God's divine economy requires a form of judgment in order to bring the nation to its knees, so that they return to God and submit to His rule. According to Smith (1973:15) history is "the redemptive handiwork of God", where antagonistic governments must be brought into line with the plans of God in order to be incorporated into His kingdom (26). Judgment therefore becomes a necessary tool in the holistic strategy of God towards ultimate salvation. If the voices of the prophets were heeded, then judgments would not be necessary.

Further to the above, one of the obstacles to submitting to God is pride. When nations become powerful, successful and self-sufficient, they begin to stand in opposition to the ways of God, and resist the voices of the prophets. This pride can be due to the military might, or in the case of Egypt the pride of men in the courts of Pharaoh (Is 19:11-14). This is why it would seem that the oracles against the nations open with an oracle against Babylon (Is 13:1ff) , which was the seat of world dominion at the time, and ends with Tyre (Is 23:1ff), which was the chief merchant city of the ancient world (Kaiser 1974:4). However, because God is universalistic by nature, and not narrowly nationalistic (Burnett 1986:179; Smith 1973:38; Steyne 1999:232; Wright 2006:454), He uses judgment as a means to an end for all nations. Such is also the case of Isaiah 19, which is highly universalistic in nature, especially taking into consideration verses 16-25.

Pride was seemingly an issue for Egypt at the time of Isaiah, and in particular amongst the leaders of Egypt (Smith 1973:40; Wilson 1951:69). Egypt was noteworthy in the ancient world for its superior wisdom (Smith 1973:88). It is therefore interesting that Isaiah targets the wise men of Egypt (vv 11-15), and undermines the very wisdom of Egypt (Kaiser 1974:103). The city of Zoan was the ancient city of Tanis, which had been a city of importance since 2500 BC, and the residence of Egyptian kings in the 13th century, and it remained prominent in days of Isaiah. Similarly, Memphis was the centre of Memphite dynasties with many huge temples, and was the location of the most powerful priesthood, which also reveals that the centre of political power lay in lower Egypt at that time (Smith 1973:88-89). However, according to Isaiah, these officials were stupid and incapable of leading the people. These Egyptian court officials who

gave counsel to the king, regarded themselves as custodians of national traditions and wisdom, and were in the lineage of ancient royal families. Therefore, the taunt of Isaiah was poking at the very heart and centre of power and identity in Egypt. As in Genesis 41, the wise men of Egypt are shown as incapable of understanding what Yahweh wants and plans to do. The contest in Isaiah 19:12 between Egypt's wise men and the prophet of Israel emphasized the superiority of Jewish prophets over the wise men, therefore glorifying Yahweh (cf Gen 41; Is 43:8; 44:6ff; 45:20ff; Dan 2).

In the more immediate historical context of Isaiah, "The link which joins chapters 13-23 together is that they concern nations who have encountered or will encounter Assyrian rule or threats and who take part in useless and profitless coalitions against Assyria" (Dumbrell 1984:118). In contrast to these international and regional alliances, God desired that the nations would turn to Him as their Source, and trust in His goodness and ability to deliver them from the belligerence of Assyria (Dumbrell 1984; Barton 1996; Kaiser 1974; Wong 1996).

According to von Rad (1965:160), Isaiah's definition of faith in Yahweh was the elimination of all self-reliance, and leaving space for Yahweh's sovereign action. In this regard, Isaiah viewed "being still" as strength, as it was a sign of trust and reliance in Yahweh alone (Is 7:4; 30:15), without reverting to self-help and the plans of man. Barton (1996:117) maintains that the primary and central burden of Isaiah's message to the kings of Judah was the need for faith, and a total steadfastness in trusting Him alone, without the need for political alliances, nor showing greater respect to the enemies of Judah by fearing them, because Yahweh was utterly trustworthy. If Isaiah 19 was addressed to Judah rather than Egypt, then it would have been part of Isaiah's call to trust God, and not to trust Egypt, who was about to be reduced in the future.

A final point of interest from commentators relating to Isaiah 19:1-15, is the prophet's seemingly intimate knowledge of Egypt. Huddleston (2000:243), in his review of Currid's work, speaks of the biblical author's knowledge of Egyptian practices and beliefs, which adds credence to the oracle against Egypt. Similarly, Marlow (2007:230) highlights the centrality of the River Nile to the nation and fabric of Egypt, and relationship between the Nile and the social order. The annual flooding of the Nile was essential, and

provided the impetus for the economy, and thus the framework for holding society together. Therefore Isaiah's prophetic sense of the river drying up (vv 5-10) was an affront to the very livelihood of this prosperous nation. It also highlighted the extent to which "Yahweh was the ruler in the social and natural realms" (Sweeney 1996:269). The ensuing drought (vv 5-10) was beyond the consequences of a foreign ruler, but revealed the direct intervention of Yahweh, and an end to the well-known fertility of Egypt - fish was the staple diet of the ordinary people; papyrus and reeds were used in the manufacture of linen, which was an important export.

Watts (1985:254) speaks about how the combination of internal factors (19:2-3) with the external pressures (19:4), as well as ecological disasters which impact on the economics, are cumulative and stack up to bring Egypt to its knees. It would therefore seem that Yahweh had a multi-pronged approach to tackle the Egyptians from all conceivable angles, to the point where there was no avenue of escape, for the express purpose of leading them away from false gods, and back to Himself.

b) Analysis of interpretive issues

There are a number of interpretive issues pertaining to Isaiah 19:1-15. Some of the issues will be discussed in section C of this chapter, which considers the probable reasons for God's judgment of Egypt. Section C will also discuss more fully whether the ultimate target of this judgment was the idols of Egypt, or whether they were just one of the means of bringing judgment, but for another reason (e.g. social injustice). However, there are some interpretive issues that will be discussed, which will assist with the reading and analysis in section B below.

One of the main issues that battles to find final clarity is to ascertain when the prophesied judgment of Isaiah 19 was actually fulfilled in history. Watts, as well as Kitchen, Procksch and Eichrodt (listed in Watts 1985:253), believe that Shabaka best fits this description of a "fierce king" (vs 4). Shabaka was the Ethiopian king, who planned to subjugate lower Egypt, and then became the 25th Dynasty of Egypt (716-712 BC). Bright (quoted in Watts 1985:253) on the other hand proposes the Ethiopian Pianchi who ruled over the delta cities around 730 BC as being the fierce king of verse

4. Boufflower (1930) and Smith (1973:87) believe that this fierce king was Psammethichus, who ruled Assyria from 663-609 BC.

During the late 8th century, there were 4 dynasties competing for power, until Shabaka finally took over (Sweeney 1996:271). This period of internal conflict, of Egyptians fighting Egyptians as prophesied in Isaiah 19:2, would corroborate Shabaka as being the fierce king and cruel master (v4). Wildberger (Wong 1996:397) however does not believe that Shabaka or Pianchi are foreign enough, and therefore deems that the cruel master is in fact Sargon (ruler of Assyria), as it is more akin to a foreign domination, which is what the text seems to imply (“I will deliver the Egyptians into the hands of a cruel master” Is 19:4). Driver also accepts that Sargon was the fierce king (Smith 1973:87).

Kaiser (1974:99) provides some other possibilities of historical timeframes. He maintains that the literary composition of Isaiah 19:1-15 was not 7th century, and therefore it was not referring to a possible Assyrian campaign leading to the conquest of Egypt. The next possibility is then the Persian period, from 404 BC at the revolt of Amyrtaios, up to 343 BC, when there was the reconquest by Artaxerxes III Ochos. This means that there was both conquest and instability (as per verses 2 and 4), due to 5 changes of monarchs and repeated revolutions and revolts. Alternatively, according to Kaiser (99) Isaiah 19:1-15 could have predicted the attack by Antiochus III in late 3rd BC. Or if written in the late 3rd century, it could have been the revolts of the Egyptians against the Ptomelies in 217 at the battle of Raphia.

However, Kaiser (1974:100) goes on to say that the actual historical date of fulfilment is not important for interpretation. Rather, Kaiser says, “Its real significance lies not in its scanty historical content, but in the insight which it gives us into the faith and thought of a Jew who did not allow the political impotence of his people to shake his belief that Yahweh remained the lord of the nations and the guide of their fate”. This is consistent with what Barton (1996:109) states – “the reader is meant to draw general theological instruction from the oracles which is not time-bound or culture-specific”. In other words, the oracle is meant to give insight into the general human condition, which is applicable in every era equally. The oracle also then gives insight into the mind of Yahweh, and

patterns of judgment that occur at His hand. Watts (1985:253) also considers that if one removes oneself from the details of precise historical context, then any one of the many kings that conquered Egypt would fill the title of “cruel master”. Smith (1973:87) suggests that Isaiah did not have a specific individual in mind, and that any foreign ruler would always seem like a hard lord to the conquered. So too, Barton (1995:109) points to the fact that most of the works of Isaiah are orientated towards the future, and are intended for readers living at a time later than himself.

Smith (1973:102) notes that over the centuries Egypt was ruled by many foreign powers, and that there was never a successive Egyptian son who was raised up to rule in the place of his father. In other words there was no natural succession of rulership from father to son, but rather repeated waves of invasions who sought to rule over Egypt. From 350 BC Egypt was subject to the Persians, and then the Macedonians. She was governed by the Ptomelies for 300 years, and then in 30 BC became a province of the Roman Empire. She was then under the rule of Constantine, and from 614AD under the Saracens. The Mamelukes were very cruel rulers from 1250, and then it was the Turks from 1517. In this regard, Urquhart (nd:42) says, “Again and again has Egypt changed masters, but among them all no son of hers is numbered”. This is also interesting in the light of the prophecy of Ezekiel 29:15, when the prophet says: “It will be the lowest of the kingdoms, and it will never again lift itself up above the nations And I will make them so small that they will not rule over the nations.” This fact will have some bearing on later discussion in section C of this chapter.

It is therefore very difficult to conclude with finality when this prophecy of Isaiah 19 was fulfilled in history. The realistic possibilities are many. However, Isaiah 19:1-15 clearly points to a pattern of judgment that would happen at some point, or multiple points, in history, by the direct Hand of Yahweh.

The other interpretive issue that requires some discussion is based on verse 14 – “The LORD has mixed within her a spirit of distortion”. This verse could well point towards a type of spiritual being who has the ability to bring distortion or confusion (Hamori 2010:16). Eichrodt (1967:55) asks whether the Holy Spirit has the power to be used for evil or destruction, in the same way that the spirit of jealousy is referred to in Numbers

5:4, and the spirit of harlotry is referred to in Hosea 4:12; 5:4. This would be the same type of spirit of falsehood (Hamori 2010), or activity of the Holy Spirit that sent Saul into fits of delusion (I Sam 16:14-23; 18:10-12; 19:9-10). In the same way, I Kings 22:20-22 refers to a similar such spirit of deceit or enticement. Such a spirit is also referred to in Judges 9:23-24, and in II Kings 19:7. Although it is difficult to believe that a harmful spirit can be sent from Yahweh, Isaiah 19:13-14, as well as the other scriptural references, do seem to point to this possibility. Perhaps it can be best be understood as a justifiable means to an end – part of God’s ultimate strategic plan to bring people back to Himself, which is the very best outcome for all people.

In conclusion, no matter what the interpretive issues are and some of the finer details of the oracle against Egypt, there can be little doubt that Isaiah the prophet had been a student of history, and understood the workings of Yahweh within the nations. He was no more recording something that had happened in the past, than he was a diviner of everything that was going to happen in the future. As Niccacci (1998:223) has purported, the prophets were men of faith, and had studied the dealings of Yahweh from history, in respect to how He dealt with nations. Based on their relationship with Yahweh, and their astute regard for history, the prophets were able to detect patterns or regularities in Yahweh’s dealings with humanity, and more especially towards His own people. One of the functions of true prophets was the ability to apply the correct principle of God to the events of the day, based on understanding and communion with God. Niccacci (224) summarizes it well when he says, “Although the prophet could not predict the future in detail, still he could have a vision of the general course of history, taking into consideration the present circumstances and the balance of forces at work.” This could also be true of Isaiah with regards to his burden for Egypt in Isaiah 19:1-15.

B. EXEGESIS OF ANCHOR TEXT

a) Author-intended meaning of Isaiah 19:1-15

I have chosen to use the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation as the basic translation for this exegetical study, due to its high formal equivalence. However, Today's International Version (TNIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT) will be used as secondary sources during the process. On a few occasions, tertiary reference will be made to the New King James Version (NKJV), which will bring out some useful variants

Below is the primary translation of Isaiah 19:1-15, based on the NASB. However, textual variations have been included, with footnotes to explain these variants.

¹The burden² concerning Egypt
Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come
to Egypt;
The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence,
And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.
²"So I will incite Egyptians against Egyptians;
And they will each fight against his brother and each against his
neighbor,
City against city and kingdom against kingdom.
³"Then the spirit of the Egyptians will be demoralized within
them;
And I will confound their strategy,
And they will resort to³ idols and spirits of the dead

² It is the NKJV which seems to bring out most accurately the Hebrew word בִּרְעָא, which is translated as burden. This carries more of the sense of the passion of the prophet in conveying his message, both to Judah and to Egypt.

³ The NASB ("so that they will resort to idols...") creates a causative sense, as if God is causing the Egyptians to turn to their idols and ancestors. However, none of the secondary or tertiary translations give the same sense, using the conjunction "and", or in the case of the TNIV, no conjunction at all.

And to mediums and spiritists.⁴

⁴"Moreover, I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a cruel master, And a mighty king will rule over them," declares the Lord GOD of hosts.⁵

⁵The waters of the Nile River will dry up,⁶ And the river⁷ will be parched and dry.

⁶The canals will emit a stench, The streams of Egypt will thin out and dry up; The reeds and rushes will rot away.

⁷The bulrushes by the Nile, by the edge of the Nile And all the sown fields by the Nile Will become dry, be driven away, and be no more.

⁸And the fishermen will lament, And all those who cast a line into the Nile will mourn, And those who spread nets on the waters will pine away.

⁴ The NKJV uses "charmners" instead of spirits of the dead . These terms have connotations of necromancy, and therefore the only alteration will be "spirits of the dead" (TNIV; NLT) instead of "ghosts of the dead" (NASB).

⁵ It is interesting to take note that the NLT uses the term "Lord of Heaven's Armies", whilst TNIV uses "Lord Almighty". The NASB rendering ("Lord God of hosts") therefore more fully captures the sense of God being primary amongst other heavenly or spiritual beings, which could include Satan and his demonic hosts in this context.

⁶ The alternate for "waters from the sea" of the NASB, are "river" (TNIV), and "the waters of the Nile will fail to rise and flood the fields" (NLT). Given the context of economic and ecological crisis, it is most likely that the body of water being referred to is the Nile River, which was critical to the economic activity of Ancient Egypt. The original Hebrew word נַחַל can also mean river.

⁷ Similar to 5 above, this likely refers to the Nile River.

⁹Moreover, the manufacturers of linen made from combed flax
And the weavers of white cloth will be utterly dejected.

¹⁰And the pillars of Egypt will be crushed;
All the hired laborers will be grieved in soul.

¹¹The princes⁸ of Zoan are mere fools;
The advice of Pharaoh's wisest advisers has become stupid
How can you men say to Pharaoh,
"I am a son of the wise, a son of ancient kings"?

¹²Well then, where are your wise men?
Please let them tell you,
And let them understand what the LORD of hosts
Has purposed against Egypt.

¹³The princes of Zoan have acted foolishly,
The princes of Memphis are deluded;
Those who are the cornerstone of her tribes
Have led Egypt astray.

¹⁴The LORD has mixed within her a spirit of distortion⁹;
They have led Egypt astray in all that it does,
As a drunken man staggers in his vomit.

¹⁵There will be no work for Egypt
Which its head or tail, its palm branch or bulrush, may do.

b) Meaning for the original readers

The prophetic burden or oracle that Isaiah foresees is regarding the future of Egypt and points to a judgment of God that will come against that great civilization of the ancient world. Reference to the Lord riding on a swift cloud is a biblical portrayal of God coming

⁸ The TNIV and NLT use the word "officials". Clearly, they are the leaders of Zoan, which was an ancient capital of the Pharaohs, which is sufficiently captured in the NASB use of "princes".

⁹ Alternate rendering of "distortion" are "dizziness" (TNIV), "perverse" (NKJV), and "foolishness" (NLT). These connotations however are sufficiently implied in the definition of the given word "distortion".

in the context of judgment or punishment (see Psalm 18:10; Psalm 104:3; Daniel 7:13; Matthew 24:30). When the prophet says “is about to come to Egypt”, it is difficult to ascertain what time frame is being presented. It could be the near future, the distant future, or a pattern of judgment that will remain over Egypt for as long as they are ruled by or serving the idols of Egypt.

At a cursory reading it seems that the idols of Egypt are under threat and in trepidation due to the impending approach by God. This trepidation of the idols could be for a number of reasons: firstly, it may be a cast back to the Exodus narrative, when the idols of Egypt were brought under the judgment of God (Exodus 12:12; Numbers 33:4); secondly, it could refer to the fact that the idols were the real target of God’s judgment.

The Egyptian people will likely also be in fear and trembling at the presence and arrival of God’s judgment (verse 1). If this judgment is to take place through a foreign human or national agent, such as Assyria (which will be discussed below in relation to the “cruel king” in verse 4), then it is understandable that the people would be in dread of the pending foreign invasion or colonization. There is also the possibility that it is figurative language, forming a parallel with “the hearts of the Egyptians” (v 1b). This would emphasize the fact that all of Egypt, both idols and people, will tremble before Yahweh.

Verse 2 speaks of internal civil conflicts at various levels. From a historical perspective, there are various views on when and how this Egyptian feuding took place. These various understandings are dealt with in detail in the Literary Review (section A) of this chapter. In essence, the historical referrals could be Shabaka or Pianchi, however these are considered to not be foreign enough. Sargon, the Assyrian ruler is another possibility, and would fulfill the definition of foreign ruler. Kaiser (1974:99) believes that it could refer to a later Persian ruler, Artaxerxes III Ochus. These foreign invasions, or the threat thereof, could have been the cause of the internal conflicts, and this could have been at a number of junctures in Egypt’s history, given the repeated historical experience of foreign domination.

Based on verse 3, it is likely that the Egyptians will be demoralized by the judgment of God. The Hebrew word for “spirit” (of the Egyptians) is ruach (), which apart from

spirit, can also be translated courage, or mind, Although courage may be a rare extension of the meaning, it could be understood in context, considering the terrible happenings which were expected to take place. From these possibilities it seems that the Egyptians will be overwhelmed and experience a sense of powerlessness when confronted by the judgment that they are likely to endure.

It is not immediately evident which strategy is being referred to in verse 3, but it seems plausible from the verses that follow that it could be the economic plans of the nation (references to economic activities in verses 5-9), political strategies (which are mentioned in verses 11-14), or religious rituals (referred to in verse 3c).

The third part of verse 3 speaks of idols, spirits of the dead, mediums and spiritists. Idols come from a Hebrew word “elil” () which means an empty or vain thing. The next three words in the Hebrew all have connotations of necromancers (“at” [ת]), whilst spiritists includes the sense of a conjurer (“yiddehonee” [, or a wizard (in the sense of a “knowing one”), which can also infer communication with the dead or the spirit realm (Strong 1984).

Verse 4 introduces the notion of Egypt being handed over to a “cruel master”. As mentioned in the Literary Review (section A. above), there are so many possibilities put forth for who this cruel master could be. There are many kings that have conquered and ruled Egypt, most especially in the Late Period of Egyptian history (732 BC to 30 BC), which seems to indicate the beginning of a constant decline in Egypt, with successive foreign powers ruling the nation of Egypt – from the Nubians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, and then finally becoming a Roman province in 30 BC. Some authors have advocated for Shabaka, the Nubian who ruled Egypt from 721-707 BC (Smith 1973:87). The prophetic burden of Isaiah could well have foretold of a pattern of repeated colonization from that time forward, which would point to the nature of prophecy and multiple fulfillments, which was discussed in chapter 2 (The Nature of Prophetic Literature).

Verses 5-10 form the next unit of thought and theme which focuses on the Nile River which is predicted to dry up. The Nile River was central to the Egyptian civilization for a

number of reasons. Due to the fact that Egypt received little or no rainfall (Zech 14:18), the flow of the Nile and its annual flooding was a lifeline to a desert country, and central to its economic activity. The annual August flooding of the Nile (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown 1961:531) made the Nile seem like a sea (19:5). Failure of such flooding was equivalent to a natural disaster for Egypt (Sweeney 1996:265), and impacted on the livelihoods of the Egyptians people.

The economic activities centred on the Nile included fishing, agriculture and the growing of flax for cloth. Hence the drying up of the Nile was a direct affront to all those involved in these industries, thereby thrusting Egypt into famine and social instability. According to Sweeney (1996:265) the linguistic construction of this section “presents a sequence of events leading from natural disaster to human suffering”. The drying up of the Nile is viewed as an act of YHWH against Egypt, or a theophany (265).

The ancient Egyptians believed that the annual rise of the Nile and accompanying flooding, which irrigated the lands along the Nile, was a gift of their gods (Watts 1985:254). The failure of the Nile to flood would consequently make the Egyptians feel abandoned by their very own gods. Furthermore, the oracle reveals YHWH as the supreme ruler over the weather and over nature (254), thereby elevating YHWH as superior to the gods of Egypt.

The stench that will be emitted from the canals (verse 6) could refer to the irrigation systems that had been built to channel water into the nearby fields (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown 1961:531), or the rotting plant life that would lie along the edge of the Nile (Sweeney 1996:265).

In Numbers 11:5 we learn that there was an abundance of fish which the Israelites ate whilst they were in Egypt. The drying up of the Nile was going to undermine this very readily available source of daily sustenance for the Egyptian people (Ps 105:29). Reference to those who cast a line and those who spread a net (verse 8) could point to the fact that there are individuals who fish in the Nile, as well as those whose business is fishing. This would clearly lead to lamenting, mourning and pining for a better day.

Egypt was famed for the fine linen which it manufactured (Ex 9:31; 1Ki 10:28; Pr 7:16; Eze 27:7). The flax plant that was grown for this famed textile industry would die, and so would the industry, thereby leading to desperation amongst its workers and dependents (verse 9).

Reference to the “pillars of Egypt” (verse 10) could lead to a couple of interpretations. It could make reference to the fact that people built sluices and dams along the Nile in order to farm fish in “artificial fishponds” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown 1961:531). Or, it could refer to the flax or linen industry as being a pillar of the Egyptian economy, which was now under threat due to the depletion of the Nile. Or it could refer to all the economic activities which centred on the continuous flow of the Nile (fishing, agriculture, manufacture of linen), and would be decimated by its drying up.

Verses 11-15 form the next unit of thought in this prophetic oracle of Isaiah. Essentially it is a taunt against the Pharaoh and his supposed wise-men or counsellors, who collectively represent the wisdom and proud tradition of Egypt. However, according to these verses they are not able to discern or understand the purposes of YHWH for Egypt.

According to Sweeney (1996:265) there are four distinctive statements that are made. The first focuses on the foolishness of the officials of Zoan and Pharaoh’s advisors. This is followed by a rhetorical question which highlights their incompetence. The next rhetorical question seems aimed directly at Pharaoh, questioning the wisdom of his officials who cannot fathom what YHWH plans to do to Egypt. The final section summarizes Isaiah’s view of these inadequate officials, and then explains in verse 14 that it is YHWH who brings confusion to Egypt. This leads to a sense of the absolute control of YHWH in contrast to the lack of wisdom and discernment of Egypt’s finest minds and leaders. Sweeney (268) proposes that this highlights the “difference between the God of Israel and God of Egypt”.

The cities that are named in verses 11-15 (Zoan and Memphis) were seats of power in ancient Egypt. Either city could have been the capital under Sethos (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown 1961:531), and hence represent the centre of authority and government.

Memphis was the place of residence of the kings, and housed many of the senior military personnel (531). Therefore when YHWH addresses and ridicules the leaders inhabiting these major centres through the prophet, He is striking at the very heart and pride of the nation.

These advisors obviously boasted in the genealogy and inherited wisdom, and hence the reference to being the son of a wise king (verse 11). This hereditary or traditional wisdom is therefore being exposed or undermined by YHWH, as it cannot stand in the face of the intentions of YHWH against Egypt, and their very best men cannot discern or predict what is to take place (verse 12). Furthermore, the ruling castes (“cornerstones of her tribes” verse 13) who are meant to provide direction and strategy to the people, are accused of leading the people astray. Therefore even all the combined leadership or headships of the tribes (a collective of the entire nation) are exposed as being incompetent. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1961:531) claim that these cornerstones of the tribes comprise the two ruling castes – the priests and the military (or “warriors”). A combination of these two mainstays would signify the wisdom and strength of the nation, which are ridiculed through the prophet.

In verse 14 Isaiah says that YHWH has caused the confusion of Egypt’s leaders, so that they are like drunkards – helpless and out of control. From Isaiah’s perspective, they are neither seeing straight nor acting normally. In this regard, Clendenen (2007:n.p.), says:

How has this stupidity overcome Egypt? Using imagery of drunkenness (19:14), the prophet pictures God as “mixing, brewing” (*māsāk*; NIV “poured”) a confusing and distorting concoction that makes the Egyptian wise men disoriented in their spirits. They stagger about not knowing what direction to go; like shameful drunks, they will fall down in their own vomit.

In this state there is nothing anyone can do to help them.

This highlights the extent to which YHWH is in control, and the leaders have been outwitted. Their wisdom has been exposed as inadequate, and their priests as being unable to predict or understand the future. It also reveals that the greatest wisdom of a

great ancient civilization is foolish in comparison with the all-knowing of YHWH who is in charge of history, and is superior to all the greatest wisdoms of men.

Verse 15 reinforces the socio-political catastrophe that is facing Egypt, mostly due to the economic collapse caused by the drying of the Nile. This desperation will not be confined to the lowest or humble peasants (“tail” or “rush”), but will include the “head” and “branch” (i.e. the ruling class).

There is no doubt that the oracle of Isaiah forewarns that Egypt will face a disastrous situation at the Hands of YHWH, which will be an accumulation of all the negative factors working against her – natural, economic, and the resultant internal socio-political instability. This pending calamity will expose the leaders and traditional wisdom of Egypt as being inadequate. It will highlight the greater power and wisdom of YHWH and will bring Egypt to her knees in humility, and will shatter her prideful boast.

C. PROBABLE REASONS FOR JUDGMENT PRONOUNCED IN ISAIAH 19:1-15

The next important step in this study is to consider what are some of the probable reasons for this threatened judgment against Egypt. In the next section I will explore the four main possible reasons.

a) Judah’s trust in Egypt

The first of the four possible reasons given for Yahweh’s judgment of Egypt is because of Judah’s trust in Egypt. Due to the international dynamic that was happening in the time of Isaiah, and the dominant theme of an aggressive Assyrian Empire being a threat to surrounding nations, it was common for kings to seek alliances with other nations, in an effort to combine military and political power. Under the reign of Hezekiah, there was a pro-Egypt party that had emerged in Jerusalem, who sought to align themselves with Egypt for support and security. According to Oswalt (2001:n.p.), “only woe lies ahead for those who rush to ally themselves with the nations and refuse to wait for God, who is the true king of the universe.”

Some of Isaiah's other references to Egypt (viz 30:1-7; 31:1-3), point to the fact that "even Egypt, whose help is vain and empty" (30:7), which suggests that Isaiah repeatedly warned Judah against placing their trust in Egypt. Hamborg (1981:147) suggests this is the reason for the judgment pronounced on Egypt in Isaiah 19. He writes, "it seems that Isaiah announced judgment on Egypt, not because of any sin that Egypt had committed, but because Judah was relying on Egyptian help against Assyria instead of relying on Yahweh".

There are a number of scholars who interpret the reason for the oracle against Egypt the same way as Hamborg. Fee and Stuart (2002:180) treat Isaiah 18:1-20:6 as a whole, and deem the central theme to be such misplaced trust. Although they propose that the emphasis is more on the pronouncement of judgment rather than giving reasons for the judgment, they do believe that Yahweh is hoping to highlight that Egypt is not a trustworthy source of confidence on which they can rely.

Wong (1996:392) points to Isaiah 31:1-3 as holding the key to understanding Isaiah's attitude towards Egypt. Judah's feelings of reliance, dependence and confidence which they exhibit towards Egypt, should rather be directed towards Yahweh. Wong proposes 5 potential reasons as to why an alliance with Egypt would be wrong. Firstly, due to the fact that Egypt could be viewed as a symbol of the slavery of Yahweh's people, and that an alliance with them would be akin to a reversal of the Exodus story. Sawyer (quoted in Wong 1996:393) highlights the fact that Isaiah's three-fold reference to horses, chariots and horsemen (Is 31:1), is consistent with such a reference in Exodus 15:1.

The next possible explanation that Wong (1996) gives is that the term "Egypt" does not necessarily mean the nation of Egypt, but rather the grouping of pro-Egyptian Jews. If this is true, then references such as "house of evildoers and...workers of iniquity" (Is 31:2) would refer to this political grouping within Jerusalem, rather than Egypt per se. Furthermore, according to Wong, it could be that Yahweh is unhappy with the fact that an alliance has been sought with Egypt, without consulting with Yahweh. Hence, there is nothing inherently wrong with the alliance, but rather the lack of regard for the guidance of Yahweh. Finally, given that Isaiah viewed Assyria as an ordained instrument of judgment against nations (Is 10:1ff), turning to Egypt was tantamount to

an attempt to escape or hide from the divine process of judgment which had been purposed by Yahweh.

Sweeney (1996:271) proposes that by depicting Egypt as internally divided and weak (vv 2-4), Isaiah was attempting to undermine the confidence that was being placed in Egypt as a regional power. Indeed, this would correspond to the historical fact that the northern kingdom of Israel had revolted against Assyria in 724-721 BC (II Kings 17:4) on expectation of Egyptian assistance, which led to the capture and exile of Israel. Isaiah was trying to warn against a similar misguided choice. The other historical possibility that Sweeney purports is that the Philistine revolt against Assyria in 713-711 BC had involved Egypt, but had proved ineffective. Therefore again, it was purposed as a warning against relying on Egypt. Of these two options, Sweeney prefers the former, although the principle is identical.

Hamborg (1981:148) is of the same understanding as above, suggesting that all Isaianic references to Egypt come with a warning against seeking help from Egypt. He alleges that Isaiah 19:16-25 was a later insertion, and therefore Isaiah 19:1-15 would have traditionally been followed by 20:1-6, which would have been a reinforcement of the same central theme of Egypt being an unreliable ally.

Furthermore, Hamborg (1981:149) interprets Isaiah 18 to be a promise that Yahweh would deal with Assyria in His own time and in His own way. In the meantime, no coalitions against Assyria would be fruitful, and therefore there was no use entering into the agreement with Ethiopia that it was seeking with Judah. According to Hamborg, this was consistent with Isaiah's holistic theology.

However, Hamborg (1981:153) does identify a range of reasons for judgment, which are largely religious in nature – i.e. a lack of trust and loss of primary relationship with Yahweh. In amongst this list, Hamborg identifies the pride (or hubris as being more accurate) of a king (Is 37:23,29) as also being a central contributor towards judgment. He also identifies magical practices (Is 2:6) and idolatry (2:8,20) as being causative reasons for judgment against a nation. Both of these factors will be discussed in sections (c) and (d) below.

Consistent with all of the above, von Rad (1965:165) defines faith as the elimination of all self-reliance, so as to rely entirely upon Yahweh. He asserts that Isaiah's appeal to Judah was to leave space for Yahweh to act on their behalf, and therefore to desist from making their own plans, most especially with any of the nations surrounding them. In this way, all glory would be accredited to Yahweh when these nations observed the deliverance and faithfulness of the God of Israel, through whom He was seeking to make Himself known to the nations of the world. The two references to being quiet and still (Is 7:4; 30:15) are an encouragement to be confident in the strength of Yahweh, by quiet trust.

Von Rad (1965:163) suggests that Isaiah 10:5-19 is a passage which reveals clearly how the prophets viewed history. According to von Rad, "Everything stands or falls on the precondition that the prophet claims to know the divine plan which lies behind an actual political event of his time, in this case the Assyrian invasion of Palestine".

From all of the above authors and references, it can be seen that Judah's trust in Egypt is a potential reason for the judgment of Egypt. However, there are other possibilities that need to be considered before we can make an informed decision with regard to the most probable reason.

b) Egyptian enslavement of Israel

Another possible reason for judgment is the historic Egyptian enslavement of the Israelites. According to Acts 7:6-7 any nation that held Israel in bondage would in turn be judged:

But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE'.

Similarly, part of the Abrahamic covenant was that those who blessed Abraham would be blessed, and those who cursed Abraham would be cursed (Gen 12:3). Therefore, there is the possibility that Isaiah's proclamation against Egypt could have been based on this historic oppression or enslavement,

However, the counter to this would be to consider why all the other nations in Isaiah 13-23 are being judged. Have they all done harm to Israel and therefore receiving recompense, or are there other contributing factors? According to Fee and Stuart (2002:194), the nations neighbouring Israel which are being condemned in Jeremiah 47:1-49:39, is a result of their pride, as well as their mistreatment of Israel. In this same vein, the doom of Babylon in Jeremiah 50:1-51:64 is due to her cruelty to God's people, as well as her arrogance and idolatries (194). Therefore, it seems nations that mistreated Israel could receive judgment as a result. However, whether this was the prime reason, or just one of a combination of factors, we cannot be absolutely sure. The above examples do also point to pride as being a contributing factor, which we will examine in the next section.

c) The hubris of Egypt

A further consideration is the pride or hubris of Egypt. This is put forward by Hamborg (1981:158) when he says, "In the relatively few instances where Isaiah does give a reason for judgment against a foreign nation, it is often the sin of pride or hybris (hubris). This concept of hubris of nations is one which should be included in a study of prophetic theology".

According to the Websters Online Dictionary (Accessed: 10-07-2009), hubris is:

Exaggerated pride or self-confidence often resulting in retribution. It is a common theme in Greek tragedies and mythology, whose stories often featured protagonists suffering from hubris and subsequently being punished by the gods for it. The word carries the connotation of the perpetrator comparing him/herself as equal to or greater than a/the god/ess/es.

This could well have been the case of the Egyptian Pharaohs, who had set themselves up as being like gods in the nation, and could well have attracted the judgment of God.

Wilson (1951:69) says of the Pharaohs that they were like god-kings. The Egyptian understanding of state was that it all belonged to the ruler, who was a god – “The state was summed up in the person of a god” (72). The Pharaoh was regarded as an intermediary between the people and the gods (73), and he was responsible for bringing fertility, prosperity and the like, even more so than the priests of Egypt. Although this concept of the god-king will be discussed in more detail in section 3(d) below, it will suffice at present to say that there was reason enough for any Pharaoh to exhibit pride or hubris, as he lorded over his people with no equivalent to himself, except the gods, of which he was considered a part.

Smith (1973:38) has said that judgment was the wrath of God towards those who resist His will and boast of their might and wisdom, and who try to exalt selves to heaven. To some extent this is something like the pride of the king of Tyre (Ezekiel 28:11-19; see also Is 14:13-14; 16:6; Jer 50:29,31,36; Ezek 28:2). Smith goes on to say that “of the reasons given by the prophets for the judgment that is to fall upon these nations, fundamentally there is the spirit of pride” (39). We also know from the NT that God opposes the proud (James 4:6).

Therefore, it would be consistent with the theology of the Bible, as well as an understanding of the nature of God, that He opposes those who are proud (e.g. Is 40:4; Ps 138:6; Jam 4:6). It is certainly likely that pride was one of the reasons for the judgments of God, although it could well have been intertwined with a cluster of reasons. In other words, pride is abhorrent in itself, but can also lead to actions that would call for rebuke and judgment from God. For example, a proud ruler with no equal, such as the Pharaohs of Egypt, was unlikely to care for the needs of the poor, as they were far above such everyday struggles. This secondary spin-off from pride could also have been a cause for divine justice, which will be considered in the next section.

d) The idols of Egypt

Another important probable cause for God's judgment that needs to be considered is the idols of Egypt, and the people's worship and reliance on them. This seems immediately evident in 19:1, when the idols of Egypt are referred to as trembling at the presence of Yahweh. Smith says of this fact (1973:81):

It is significant that the first statement made regarding God's judgment upon Egypt involves her idols, a theme that will appear again and again in the prophecies... there is no judgment pronounced upon any of the gods of any one nation in the Old Testament, except those of Egypt.

Smith goes further to recognize the link between "the activity and doom of the gods of a nation with the governmental doom of that nation" (84). According to Smith (85):

In no nation of the ancient world was the activity of people and government so dominated by the gods as in Egypt. ...Egypt was filled with temples to these gods, and their various priesthoods exercised the most powerful influence over that land during many periods of its history, and were exercising such influence in the days of Isaiah.

Furthermore, the worship of idols and other gods was in direct contravention of the first and second commandments given to Moses, and recorded in Exodus 20:1-6:

Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the

children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

For generations, Egypt had worshipped and served gods other than Yahweh, and had set up idols in the land. According to the commandments, this carried with it a consequence, which Egypt could well have been reaping at this time.

What is not immediately evident is the timing of the judgment. All of the nations surrounding Israel had been worshiping idols for centuries, and so the question needs to be asked as to why the judgment against Egypt at this particular time? Perhaps the iniquity of the Egyptians had reached a certain equilibrium according to the divine economy of YHWH. In Genesis we read that the punishment of God was delayed against the Amorites because “the sin of the Amorite is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16). Similarly, there could be a time on God’s scale of divine justice when the iniquities of a nation reach a point that requires the pending judgment to be fulfilled (cf Rev 18:5ff). Alternatively, the timing of the judgment was aimed at teaching Israel the appropriate lesson needed at that particular historical juncture. This will require the full investigation about the most probable reason for the judgment taking place, which this current section is exploring.

i) The Plagues of the Exodus as Precursor

The Exodus encounter between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt also gives us some insight into the real spiritual dynamic taking place. Exodus 12:12 is a key scripture in this regard – “For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments--I am the LORD”. This indicates the fact that God’s judgment in Exodus, and in particular the striking of the first born children, was intricately tied with a judgment against the gods of Egypt. In this regard Patrick (1995:113) says, “Exodus xii 12 interprets the slaughter of the first-born as a judgment ‘on the idols of Egypt’”. In other words, the physical outworking of the judgment was actually aimed at the gods, and not against the children. Numbers 33:4 puts it this way:

“while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn whom the LORD had struck down among them. The LORD had also executed judgments on their gods”. This further highlights the link between God’s judgments and the gods or idols of the nation.

In addition to this, Jeremiah represents God as saying, “The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, says, ‘Behold, I am going to punish Amon of Thebes, and Pharaoh, and Egypt along with her gods and her kings, even Pharaoh and those who trust in him’” (Jer 46:25). Similarly, Ezekiel prophesies: “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘I will also destroy the idols and make the images cease from Memphis. And there will no longer be a prince in the land of Egypt; and I will put fear in the land of Egypt’” (30:13). These scriptures again paint a picture indicating that God’s judgment of the rulers of Egypt is linked to the idols or false gods over the nation.

Once again Patrick (1995:115) says that “Egyptian religion did indeed deify the Pharaoh, but not in isolation from the gods; he ‘incarnated’ various gods according to his function and stage in life”. This points to an overlap and mysterious intersection between the Pharaoh and the god or idol whom he served and incarnated. This is further underlined and explained when Patrick (115) refers to Pharaoh as the “god-king of Egypt”. He goes on to explain (115):

It should not be overlooked that the Pharaoh was a god and that he was Yahweh’s adversary in this capacity. It was not only because he was the ruler of Egypt that he is represented as Yahweh’s adversary in the contest to free Israel, but also because he was known as a god, having control not only over the Egyptians, but also over Yahweh’s people whom he oppressed and enslaved.

This sheds greater light on the matter of God’s judgment as being levelled at the idols of Egypt, and not merely at the people, nor necessarily for the sake of Judah.

It is evident that each of the plagues against Egypt were, in fact, targeting one of the gods which was regarded as sacred to the ancient Egyptian people (Adeyemo

2006:97). When the water of the Nile turns to blood, this reveals that Yahweh is superior to the Nile and the associated deities such as Apis, Isis and Osiris. The plague of the frogs is an attack on the goddess Heqet who had a head of a frog and body of a woman, thereby making frogs to be sacred and associated with fertility. Furthermore the striking of the dust can be seen as an attack on Set, the Egyptian god of the desert. The flies could symbolize the sun god Re or Uatchit, both represented by insects. The death of the domestic animals could have been the usurping of the gods Apis, Khnum and Ammon, or the goddess Hathor, all of which were represented by animals. The boils may well have been an affront to the goddess Sekhmet (who controlled sickness), Sunu (the god of pestilence) and Isis, the goddess of healing. The goddess of the heavens (Nut) would have been exposed as inferior by the hail, whilst the god of harvests (Osiris) would have been overcome by the destruction of the harvest. Darkness would have shown God's greater power than the sun god Re, who Pharaoh was meant to incarnate and represent. It is therefore evident the judgments of God in the Exodus account were directed against the gods of Egypt, in an attempt to make known that Yahweh is greater and more powerful than all of the greatest and most revered gods of Egypt.

In a review of Currid's book entitled *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, Huddleston (2000:243) notes:

For the author, the plagues against Egypt are not reflective of natural disasters (contra Petrie and G Hort), nor are they a literary creation of the Yahwist (contra Van Seters and Zevit). Rather, they are to be interpreted as polemic directed at the Egyptian gods.

If this was the case in the judgment of God exercised against Egypt in earlier times, then it is likely to correspond with the reference to the "idols of Egypt" in Isaiah 19:1. God's ultimate desire is not to harm the people or the human rulers of Egypt, but to dispose of the gods of Egypt which are deceiving and misleading the people. God's heart is not to destroy or kill people and their livelihoods, but to rid them from the bondage of the gods that they serve, and to point them back to Himself. Although in the short-term and for the greater good people may be killed in judgment, this in itself can prove redemptive for other people who learn the required lesson. However, ultimately

the final judgment of God will be retributive for those who have not responded to His repeated warnings.

This would also be consistent with a large portion of the OT, in which the prophets are constantly calling the people away from false gods and idolatry, back to their true and faithful God, who is Yahweh, and who delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians. The oracle against Egypt (and the other surrounding nations) demonstrates such a desire for YHWH to warn of looming judgment, even though He is not covenanted to them like He is to Israel. This would be the case as long as these oracles against the nations are seen as warnings and carry the opportunity to repent. Warnings against idolatry form a strong theme in the scriptures (e.g. Ex 20:4; Lev 26:1; Deut 7:25; 11:16; Is 2:20; 17:8; 42:8; Jer 51:47) and was as much a passion for the prophet Isaiah, as it was for the other prophets. These warnings come from the desire of God's heart not to have to punish people through judgment, but rather for people to respond to His voice through the prophets.

Wright (2006:93) speaks of the Exodus encounter as a double-edged sword. It serves both to release Israel from slavery in Egypt, but also as a power encounter between the power gods of Egypt and the power of Yahweh. There is the recurring motif, starting in Exodus 5:2, and then being repeated throughout chapters 7-14 – “then you will know” (e.g. 7:5), and “so that you will know” (e.g. 8:22), which Wright calls the “monotheizing dynamic” (950). This is aimed both at Israel and Egypt.

In fact, Pharaoh is invited onto the same learning curve as Israel, on which he is shown the full extent of the power of Yahweh, in contrast to the ineffective power of the gods of Egypt. This is not an ego-trip for Yahweh, but has the express purpose of drawing the Egyptians to Himself – “the prophet looks forward to the day when Egypt too will come to know YHWH as Savior, defender and healer” (Wright 2006:95). Yahweh desires to be known and understood for who and what He is, in contrast to the false gods of the nations, and this is the driving force behind the Exodus story.

Although it may be anachronistic to refer to Yahweh as a Good Father when the Egyptians did not know Him in such a way, it is valid to consider in terms of assessing

the probable reasons for the announced judgment against Egypt, even if it requires hindsight. The scriptures liken God to a good Father, who wants the best for His children, beyond what a natural father would do for his own children (e.g. Lk 11:11-13). In the same way as a parent loves his/her child and desires what is best for the child, so God is a good Father who wants the best for His children (Eph 1:15; Jam 1:17). A good parent disciplines a child who is wayward, and so does Yahweh rebuke His children who wander from His commands (Heb 12:3-11). In the natural, a parent whose child is suffering an addiction would be happy for the child to go into a rehabilitation centre, even though it would be the start of a painful and difficult process. So too, God is prepared to send His children through a judgment process, in order to rid “the child” of a non-beneficial enslavement to a foreign god or idol. It is therefore plausible that this was a reason that Yahweh brought judgment to Egypt – in order to rid the nation of the false gods that they were serving.

The desire of Yahweh was to expose the ineffectiveness, deceit, and powerlessness of the false gods that the Egyptians were choosing to trust, over and against a God who was trustworthy, truthful and good. This may not have been the experience or understanding of the Egyptians from their existential standpoint, but it is the possible heart motive of YHWH for the judgment process being pronounced through the mouth of Isaiah.

Marlow (2007:229) contends that the prophetic utterance in Isaiah 19:5-10 is ultimately the clash between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt, in an effort to demonstrate “the superiority of YHWH over the gods of Egypt”. Similarly, Smith (1973:63) says:

Murphy has well said in speaking of these miracles (i.e. acts of judgment against Egypt) being directed against the deities of Egypt, ‘Egypt has become the avowed antagonist of God. It is the controversy between light and darkness in which the God of heaven and earth manifests His presence and power on behalf of His people and against the defiant nation. This nation is for the time being the representative of all heathendom, which is the kingdom of the prince of darkness’.

Consistent with the above, Currid (reviewed by Huddleston 2000:244), speaks of how the Hebrew model of reality conflicted with that of the “ancient near eastern pagan mythologies”. Steyne (1999:111) says, “In a power encounter with Egypt’s gods, God clearly triumphed”. Therefore there is ample evidence to suggest that there was historical precedence for the power clash between the God of Israel and the multiplied gods of the nations around them, most clearly reflected in the Exodus narrative.

Isaiah 19:16-17 refers to the fear that is invoked in the hearts of the Egyptians. Watts maintains that this fear is caused by a recognition of the purpose of God that He has against Egypt. Further, Watts (1985:255) says, “The thought that the event celebrated in Passover might repeat itself in Yahweh’s plan was awful to Egypt”. In other words, when the Egyptians recall the plagues (Exod 7-10) and the death of the first-borns (Exod 11-12), they are overcome by fear, as they recall how once before the God of Israel had shown Himself to be more powerful than their own gods. In this way, there is a strong interconnection between the plagues of the Exodus and the prophetic oracle of Isaiah aimed at 8th century Egypt.

Further to the above, the prophet Isaiah makes frequent reference to Yahweh as “the Lord of Hosts” (cf. Is 1:24; 3:1; 10:16, 33). This is reference to the unlimited power of God, and singles Yahweh out as the Lord who controls all powers of heaven and earth. This ultimate power and authority of the God of Israel is encapsulated in the name “Yahweh Sebaoth” () (Is 6:3; 13:4), which means “the almighty God of Israel who rules over the armies of heaven and earth, who is mustering his forces for battle” (Kaiser 1974:15).

This section has investigated whether the Exodus plagues serve as a precedent for us to better understand and establish the probable reason for the judgment of God against Egypt. What this exploration has established is that the idols of Egypt may well have been the reason, or at least one of the reasons, for the punishment from God inflicted on Egypt. Alternatively, the actual cause for the Exodus plagues may have been the enslavement and mistreatment of the Israelites, but the idols became the ultimate target of this divine intervention, as per the Exodus account. This could provide the informing

theology which better enables us to conclude a probable cause for the judgments of God against Egypt.

If indeed this is the case, then it could be a finding which would make Isaiah 19:1-15 applicable to any nations that practice idolatry in the modern age, whether it be USA, Japan or Ghana. The plagues of the Exodus narrative potentially point to a general principle or pattern of God which gives insight into His dealings with the idolatry of nations, and how He purposes to bring them back to Himself. It is difficult to conclude definitively whether the worship of idols is the sole reason for the Exodus judgment, or whether the idols became the target as a result of another sin (e.g. social injustice; mistreatment of the poor). In either case, the Exodus narrative has revealed that God does indeed aim judgment at the idols of Egypt. If this is the case, then it is precedent for the fact that God can target idols over nations as a means of carrying out judgment or punishment against any people who do not heed His voice.

ii) Gods over nations

In the modern world in which many people live today, observers might say that national leaders are empowered by the people who vote them into office, based on the functioning of the democratic system. However, this is very different to how the leaders of the ancient world operated, especially in the Near East. From an Egyptological perspective, the Pharaoh was a son of god. Holladay (2002:58) says that a king of that time was regarded as a son of the god who empowered or “sponsored” the king.

This also corroborates with Wilson’s (1951:69) understanding and explanation of the Egyptian rulers, who he refers to as god-kings. This encapsulated how the king was regarded as acting on behalf of the gods, and hence he was often referred to as “Good God” and “the Lord” (103). The state was regarded as belonging to the king who was a god, and nationhood and effective social functioning was given by divine sanction via its god-king who was both owner and ruler of the land.

One such lasting depiction of the superior state of the god-king Pharaohs are the pyramids, which were seen as the eternal home of the ruler, and therefore worthy of all the efforts of the nation to construct. Similar to the shape of the pyramid, the Pharaoh

was the highest pinnacle of the nation, competing with no peer (not even the priests) in communicating with the gods. In fact, the Pharaoh was regarded as seated in the divine circle of the gods, and there was a seeming interdependence between the ruler and god over the nation. The ruler was an extension of the god, and the fall of the national ruler equated to the defeat of the god (Steyne 1999:109). It is almost as if the natural leader corresponded to a national god.

When Israel was being lead into the Promised Land, God gave very clear instructions for the Israelites not to give themselves over to the gods of the pagan nations of Canaan (Deut 11:16; 12:29-31). However, we know that the Israelites, in spite of the consistent warnings of the prophets (e.g. Josh 24:14), chose to serve foreign gods (e.g. II Kings 17:8), cutting off fellowship with Yahweh, and therefore incurring judgment in order to bring them back into right relationship. The God of Israel declared Himself to be a “jealous God” (Ex 20:5; Josh 24:19), and that He would not share His glory with another (Is 42:8). God requires singular affection, worship and obedience (Deut 13:4) – this is the life that He has destined and purposed for people to live in the earth, for their benefit and blessing (Deut 30:15ff).

My investigation then needs to turn to the nature of these so-called gods of the nations, and why God did not want people to go after them and to serve them. Were they real gods who influenced nations and rulers, giving power, authority and direction, bringing about fertility of the soil, and who demanded real loyalty (sacrifices) from its subjects? Or, were they simply man-made beliefs that were delusional, and only really had power in the minds and belief-system of a group of people?

In this regard the deities of other nations are often referred to as “worthless gods” (von Rad 1965:340) in the following scriptures – Leviticus 19:4; 26:1; Isaiah 11:8,18,20; 10:10f; 19:1,3; Psalms 96:5; 97:7. Steyne’s (1999:114) view of the power encounter of Exodus, is that the Egyptian gods were shown to be inferior in power to Yahweh, but their reality and limited power was never refuted. Steyne (114) also says very clearly that the gods of Egypt were demonic spirits.

These demonic gods of Egypt desired for Pharaoh to seek independence from Yahweh, not submitting to His rule or authority (Steyne 1999:114). This would correspond to the NT references, when Paul speaks of the god of this world blinding the mind of unbelievers (II Cor 4:4), and the prince of the power of the air who works in those who are not subject to the rule of God (Eph 2:2). Steyne claims that the plagues targeted the gods of Egypt, and showed them to be incomparable to Yahweh (Exod 4; 7:7-12; 12:12).

And so God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex 10:20, 11:10) so that He could show the full scope of His power. In other words, Pharaoh's own heart was hard, but he would not have held out for 10 plagues in his own strength. God strengthened his resolve in order to complete the judgments and to reveal the full extent of His superior power over and against the full spectrum of Egyptian gods.

We then need to consider what "worthless gods" actually means – are they simply inferior in comparison to Yahweh, or are they non-entities? Wright (2002:162) explores this very question, and asserts that the answer includes two possibilities. Either the idols are backed and empowered by demons, or they are merely man-made images, but with the possibility that demon powers could infiltrate and have influence through the actual idols. He maintains that there is more OT theological evidence for the latter, but that there is also sufficient Old and New Testament evidence to believe that gods could represent the demonic order (162), and that there could be spiritual presence and power behind the corresponding idols.

The OT examples are found in Deuteronomy 32:16-17,21, and Psalm 106. Both of these point to how the Israelites turned away from their God, and began to serve and worship foreign gods. Now, if these "gods" were non-entities, then one wonders why God would be jealous. Further evidence about the demonic reality behind idols is drawn from the NT. In I Corinthians 10:18-21, Paul indicates that when people sacrificed to idols, they were in fact sacrificing to demons.

Although Wright (2006:187) believes that there is more OT evidence for idols being the construction of man's hands (e.g. Ps 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Hab 2:18-19), he does believe

that there is space to believe that demons can infiltrate and have effect through idols – “gods and idols may be implements and gateways to the world of the demonic”. Wherever the truth lies in this analysis, it is clear that idols distract people away from the true God, and have deleterious effects (188), and that God is always calling people away from idols, and back to the only true God.

Furthermore, Faur (1978:3) proposes that “the god infused his spirit into the idol and identified himself with it”. In this way, the idol went from the work of a man’s hand, into a living idol, with the ability to perceive. When the idol was consecrated, it was transformed from a mere image into a living idol, by being imbued with the spirit of the god, and became the personification of the god itself (6). Pagan religion believed that it was this idol which affected rain, fertility, health and other occurrences of nature. However by Biblical standards it was not permissible, because it violated the Sinatic Covenant (Exod 20:4ff; Deut 31:16,20), by taking away exclusive worship and relationship with the true Creator.

Steyne (1999:166) states that Israel was not delivered from Egypt simply to enjoy freedom and benefits for herself. Rather, she was called to demonstrate and bear testimony to the distinctiveness of Yahweh over and above other gods. Israel was to represent the only true God and the only true religion in the earth. According to Steyne, all other religions can be ascribed to powers of darkness (167). He alleges that there are only two religions in the world – the worship of Yahweh, and the worship of Baal. All other religions, other than the worship of Yahweh, can be labelled Baalism, which he defines as – “worshipping man-made divinities, fostered by demonic spirits, intent on keeping God from receiving the worship of mankind” (167). In essence, it is involvement with spirit-beings, and is “simultaneously deistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, centred in a hierarchy of “gods”” (170). The devotees of these gods would then seek to gain favour from the gods by means of ritual, libations, self-depravity, and the like – in essence, whatever pleased and cajoled the god to act on their behalf. Whether Steyne’s strong bipolar view is accurate or not, it highlights the kind of religious practices that defined Egyptian society, and which the Pharaohs aligned themselves with. This subjection to

the gods may well have been placing themselves under the influence and sway of demons.

Ancient Egypt placed great emphasis on death, and in fact more focus on the afterlife than any other ancient civilization (Smith 1973:103). This can be borne out by the building of the pyramids to house the corpses of the Pharaohs. Moreover the greatest form of literature to come out of Egypt was the Book of the Dead, which highlighted the extent to which most of Egypt's gods were related in some way to the issue of death, judgment and eternal life (103). Therefore when Ezekiel (31:14-18; 32:16-32) paints a vivid word-picture of Pharaoh's certain descent into Sheol (or the underworld), "it is a rebuke to the whole scheme of Egyptian thought and aristocratic idea that the Pharaohs would live forever under the propitious favour of the gods to whom they had offered extravagant sacrifices" (103). Therefore, once again we can state that the purpose of judgment was to unmask and reveal the deception (lies, misinformation) and death-trap of the prevailing Egyptian philosophies and religions of the day which held sway over all the thought processes of the people of Egypt, and ultimately to turn them towards Yahweh and the truth.

This section has sought to do some examination of the kind of idolatrous system that is likely to have prevailed in ancient Egypt, which could well have been demonic in nature and influence, seeking to distance people from loyalty to the true God, and to deceive people into devotion and worship. The latter was certainly true of Egypt, as we have seen that ancient Egypt was full of shrines and temples to the gods that she honoured and recognised. It also seems evident that this false religious system, or potentially demonic devotion, is what Yahweh sought to free Egypt from, and may well have been the primary reason for the judgment against Egypt that was announced by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 19:1-15.

iii) The mission of God

In this section I will explore the OT revelation of Yahweh as an inclusive God with a desire to see all people groups and nations turn away from false gods and towards Himself. This could provide some evidence towards the possibility that the judgment

against Egypt (Is 19:1-15) was presented with the intention of rescuing the Egyptians from their false gods, and not just with the exclusive interests of Judah in mind. If this was the case, it may show probability that the idols of Egypt were the probable reason, or the target of God's judgment.

The mission of God in the earth is inclusive and universal. The nation of Israel was chosen proceeding from Abraham for the purpose of bearing testimony to the nations of the knowledge of God, not to withhold it. In this regard, Wright (2006:495)) has done an extensive work in identifying mission as the central theme of the whole narrative of scripture:

It is God's mission in relation to the nations, arguably more than any other single theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative. God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. There are voices and visions within the OT that looked for the day when nations would be included within Israel in such a way that the very word Israel would be radically extended and redefined.

The mission of God therefore is not just multitudes of individuals, but entire nations. God's desire has always been to bless all the nations of the earth (462).

Through the writings and insight of the prophets God has been depicted as the "Great Puppeteer" of all the nations, and not just Israel. Israel was just one of the nations that God was manoeuvring for the sake of his grand scheme. This in itself sets the God of Israel apart from the other gods of the nation, which by definition, were interested in the confined nationalistic affairs of that one nation. According to Wright God has a "multinational sovereignty" (2006:464), and He holds "ultimate, universal direction of the destiny of nations (Deut 32:8; Jer 18:1-10; 27:1-7" (264). Motyer (quoted in Wright 2006:465) says that God is the Agent of all racial migrations – "In this regard it is no more a privilege to be an Israelite than to be a Hottentot".

It is interesting to note that Isaiah 19:1-15 is followed by verses 16-25, of which Wright says it is “one of the most breathtaking pronouncements of any prophet, and certainly one of the most missiologically significant texts in the OT” (2006:491). Therefore, it seems abundantly clear that the heart of God would have been as much for Egypt as a nation, as it was for Judah or Jerusalem. The prophetic pronouncement of Isaiah 19:1-15 may well have been a double-edged sword, serving to forewarn the Egyptians, as well as warning or teaching the leaders of Judah a simultaneous lesson. However, God always had a desire for Egypt to return to Him, which was so often the windward side of the judgment. The leeward side however was reconciliation with Himself – “Beyond judgment, there lie restoration and renewal in the plans of God” (495).

In this context the story of Jonah is an interesting one in that it portrays God’s heart towards an abundantly evil nation. By sending Jonah to speak of their pending doom unless they repent (Jonah 1:2), God shows His intent. Then, after re-directing His prophet back to the original mission (3:2), God is willing to relent of His judgment (3:9), in response to their repentance as a city. The interesting twist comes in what is revealed as being in Jonah’s heart – a certain stinginess of spirit that Nineveh should be forgiven. Wright (2006:461) proposes that Jonah can be seen to represent the nation of Israel, and that this account serves as warning to Israel to change her attitude towards other nations, even enemy nations who were deserving of God’s retribution.

Further to the story of Jonah, it is worth noting that he was not the only OT prophet to be sent to a foreign nation (Wright 2006:503). Elijah the prophet travelled to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where he stayed with the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:8), who then gave herself to Yahweh. The same goes for Elisha who spent time in Damascus, capital of Syria, although scripture does not reveal what he did there (II Kings 8:7-15).

It begs the question as to whether God would have relented of the calamity that was due to Egypt, if the nation had repented in response to the pronouncement of judgment through the mouth of Isaiah. If Egypt had responded with repentance and humility, and turned back to Yahweh as their only true God, one then wonders how different the course of history would have been for them as a nation, and the region from that time onwards. However, that is all conjecture.

The Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12 was not exclusively for Israel, but for the purpose of “the nations” – “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). Fee and Stuart (2002:176) speak about the four “theological passions” of Isaiah, one of which is “the inclusion of the nations (Gentiles) in his people (2:2; 52:15)”. Therefore, even when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they included a mixed multitude – “A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock” (Ex 12:38). The heart of the Abrahamic covenant was never for Israel to be an exclusive nation, but to incorporate all those who were willing to make Yahweh their God, and to place their trust in Him alone. The presence of God with Israel, whilst wandering in the desert, or in the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, was for the purpose of attracting people from all nations to worship Him. Israel was intended to be “a light to the nations” (Is 42:6).

This kind and gracious heart of Yahweh, provides the motivation for judgment. Psalm 78:34 puts it like this – “When He killed them, then they sought Him, and returned and searched diligently for God”. This is further clarified in Hosea 6:1-3:

Come, let us return to the LORD
For He has torn us, but He will heal us;
He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.
He will revive us after two days;
He will raise us up on the third day,
That we may live before Him.
So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD
His going forth is as certain as the dawn;
And He will come to us like the rain,
Like the spring rain watering the earth.

This reveals a prophetic pattern – when people turn away from God, He threatens them with judgment through the mouth of the prophets, for the express purpose that the warned people will heed His warning and repent (as did the people of Nineveh in response to the preaching of Jonah). If they do not respond, then He will bring about the predicted judgment, hopefully exposing their need of God, as well as the ineffectiveness

of idols, with the primary desire that it will cause the people to come back to Himself – “When divine discipline has failed, only judgment remains” (Robinson and Harrison 1988:888).

To conclude this section it is evident that the mission of God forms a strong basis of informing theology in the OT. There seems to be sufficient plausibility to believe that the pronouncement of judgment made against Egypt (Is 19:1-15) was for the purpose of Egypt, and not Judah alone. It may have served a dual purpose, but that certainly included God’s desire for Egypt to turn back to Himself. It also reveals that God always desires to release nations and people from any idolatrous or demonic power that is holding sway over their lives, as this amounts to unnecessary deception and enslavement. As Podhoretz (2000:39) says – “The war of monotheism against paganism and idolatry is the main unifying theme of the entire book of Isaiah”.

D. CONCLUSION

The prime reason for this analysis of Isaiah 19:1-15 has been to investigate its meaning for the original hearers or readers, and to examine what possible relevance this oracle may have to any contemporary audience. Although one can seldom be definitive on the meaning of a biblical text that was constructed and presented more than 25 centuries ago, there are sufficient threads of relevance and significance that are worth pursuing further.

One of the main reasons to consider Isaiah 19:1-15 as being worthy of study is due to its reference to the “idols of Egypt”. The patterns and principles that are contained in the oracle against Egypt which have been discussed in this section could well be applicable to any modern nation that gives itself to forms of idolatry and the serving of false gods. If this is the case, and there are potentially real-life consequences of judgment being experienced by nations, then it will certainly be a valid exercise to explore the lead further. More especially, if a nation does practice religious rituals that are idolatrous or which give credence to false gods, then any understanding that can shed greater light on the matter will be useful in understanding the dealings of God in this regard.

Chapter 4

Significance for contemporary Africa

A. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

In the preceding chapters 2 and 3, I have explored both the context and meaning of the chosen text (Isaiah 19:1-15), and the probable reasons why judgment was being threatened against Egypt. One of the possible reasons was the Egyptian practice of idolatry. In the light of this possibility, in chapter 4 I will first of all consider the consistent and self-revealed nature of God (i.e. His universal purpose and the inclusiveness of His plans); I will then explain why contemporary Africa is the chosen area of focus, and then turn to the pivotal role of worldview and how it informs our interpretation of the world and scripture. This will be followed by a survey of some of the traditional and common religious practices of Africa, and then an examination of these through the eyes of various commentators, before we consider how these truths can be applied.

a) Is God Nationalistic or Universal by nature?

The truths of God are not nationalistic or selective. Rather, there are divine principles which are written into the fabric of the created order (John 1:1-3; Heb 1:3; Col 1:16-17), which have consequences for all people – if heeded, for good (Deut 30:19-20; Jn 8:51; 14:15), and if contravened, potentially for judgment or harm (Deut 28:15ff; Hos 4:6; Amos 2:4; Rom 1:18ff).

Yahweh is the God over all nations, and His express desire is to be known and served by all people everywhere (Ezek 18:23; II Pet 3:9). One of the reasons that Yahweh threatens judgment is to bring people back to Himself (Josh 24:14ff; I Kings 18:21). First of all, God calls through the prophets. If the initial voice of the prophets is not observed, then He warns more earnestly with the threat of judgment (Jer 7:15; 15:1ff; Hos 9:17). However, within every threat of judgment there is an opportunity for repentance (e.g. Jer 18:8). Judgment first carries mercy (Jam 2:13) and offers a way out through repentance and change of behaviour (e.g. Jonah 3:10).

Yahweh desires for no people anywhere or of any era to be deceived into serving false gods, which only leads into bondage and servitude (Is 45:20; Jer 10:5; 50:38; Dan 5:23; Hab 2:18; I Cor 10:19-20). As the One who knows all and sees the beginning from the end (Rev 21:6; 22:13) , He knows what is truth, and what is best for all people whom He created to be exclusively His own. He is a jealous God who will share His glory or fellowship with no other gods (Exod 20:5; Josh 24:19). This is the reason that He is so passionate in His pursuit of people, and will never give people over without first calling, cajoling, and then threatening unto judgment. All of this however is based on both a loving desire for people to turn back to Himself (Neh 1:9; Is 44:22; Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7), but also combined with His divine justice by which He governs the world (Deut 32:4; Zeph 3:5; Jn 5:30; Rom 2:2).

b) Why contemporary Africa?

The very basic reason for choosing to focus on contemporary Africa is simply a matter of being relevant to the context in which I live and work as a pastor, based in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. At times, I have also lived and ministered in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

There are many different “Africa’s” that make-up the continent of Africa – e.g. Southern Africa, Africa, West Africa, Islamic Africa, rural, urban, first world and third, amongst others. Furthermore, all cultures are dynamic and not static, and so it is not possible to freeze a culture as a test-case, as one might do in a laboratory examination. For the

purpose of this study, the focus will be on Africa, which comprises 55 nations¹⁰ – 49 on the continent, and 6 island nations (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa>. Accessed: 10-11-2011). Although this will include all the nations of Africa, including the predominant Islamic nations of the north, it is likely that it will apply mainly to sub-Saharan Africa which is where the majority of the traditional African religions are practised (Mbiti 1991:30).

B. WORLDVIEW

a) The dilemma of worldview

One of the challenges that immediately gets called into play by this study is the matter of worldview. As human beings, and as a masters student, I am acutely aware of the fact that I am the product of a worldview – an upbringing, education and experiences which have shaped the way that I view, interpret and interact with the world around me. This also impacts on the way in which I analyze and assess people who have practices that are different and foreign to my own.

I started this study with an earnest desire to establish biblical truth and to apply it as objectively as possible to the world that surrounds me in Africa. However there is always the risk that I fall prey to some evaluations that are both personal bias and distorted. The Word of God remains a fixed reference point by which we can attempt to ascertain truth and can be viewed and upheld as the final authority. Although in this regard, I acknowledge further that the Word of God itself needs to be interpreted, which is by nature a potentially subjective and imperfect process, depending on the individual involved in the process. As Asumang (2008:2) points out – “No worldview is immune to either error”.

¹⁰ During the course of writing this chapter, South Sudan was declared an independent nation (7 July 2011), and this figure includes this newly constituted nation.

b) What is worldview?

Paul Hiebert (2008:11) believes that people's behaviour and beliefs are underpinned by worldview. In other words, worldview is the deepest information code that consciously and unconsciously informs and shapes our actions, responses, attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, a change in either behaviour or belief is of little consequence if the underlying worldview is not fundamentally changed as well. This is one of the main reasons that so many African Christians are torn between the new understanding that they discover after believing in Christ, and yet rooted in African traditional practices at the same time (Taylor 1963:23). This is due to the fact that even though their beliefs and behaviours have changed, the all prevailing worldview has not, presenting a dilemma to such a person¹¹. For this reason, an understanding of worldview is vital in the context of this study.

According to Hiebert (2008:28) worldviews are models of reality and models for action which serve a number of purposes to people. A worldview provides "plausibility

¹¹ Illustration of this dilemma of worldviews can be clearly seen in the example of a 20-something year old Zulu-speaking lady in our own local church in Durban, KZN. She is a long term believer in Christ and the daughter of a believer, living and educated in a suburb on the outskirts of Durban. Her family lineage traces back to rural KZN (originally Msinga and now Maphumulo), which means that she is exposed to a whole other set of cultural traditions and expectations when she spends time with her extended family at certain times of the year and on special occasions. When she goes into this more traditional African context, there is a collision that takes place between what she believes in and understands as a Christian, over and against the demands of those in the extended family who believe that she should continue a lineage of African traditions. This leads to a tension in her when it comes to traditional rituals and the exposure to medicines and even the preparation of certain foods. In this more traditional context she is reminded by the elders of her lineage, and the expectation that she commune with the ancestors. Certain dreams are interpreted as ancestral callings back to her original purpose, and the veracity of the conflict can even lead to verbal abuse by older people in the extended family. This sets up a conflict on the rational and spiritual levels of her own being as she grapples with symbolism which comes to her in dreams (e.g. fearful presence of snakes or a sense of drowning). Her relatives will explain to her that there are African traditional remedies, which would be inconsistent with her faith in Christ.

structures” (29) in answer to important questions. These “plausibility structures” are built on assumptions, generalizations and images or pictures. They also provide emotional security in a world filled with so many dilemmas and contradictions. They validate cultural norms, being both predictive and prescriptive in function. Worldviews also integrate culture, but at the same time allow us to monitor cultural change over time, given that no culture is static in nature. Hiebert (30) also maintains that worldviews provide psychological reassurance as people seek for continuity between what they believe and what they experience as reality.

There are different methods for studying worldviews (Hiebert 2008:89) – one is “etic”, in which the researcher studies with their own set of assumptions, and the other is “emic”, in which the researcher seeks to study with the target culture’s own set of assumptions and values. It is important to distinguish which approach an anthropologist or researcher is using in order to understand the assumptions that one makes from the outset. In my case, I remain aware of my own worldview (“etic”), but I will do my best to draw on as many African authors as possible in order to get an insider perspective (“emic”).

Hiebert (2008:71) also points out the fact that there are two complementary ways of viewing culture. One is synchronic, which looks at the underlying structure, being something like a cross-section through the culture at any one time. In contrast, a diachronic view is a more fluid perspective over time, being more concerned with a narrative view, and thereby being softer in understanding. These two contrasting views do not compete with each other for validity, but rather work well together in developing a holistic view and appreciation for the subject matter.

Geertz (1973) proposed an approach called symbolic anthropology which viewed culture as a system of symbols which are produced through human interpretation of the world, but which in turn help to construct public meaning. Therefore, the role of the researcher is to try and interpret the guiding symbols of the culture under study, and to uncover the deeper meaning, rather than just the functional meaning which a person gives as an easy explanation for doing something.

A study of worldview is therefore a study of the glasses or lenses through which people view objects or experiences. It is not the object or experience that is important, but rather the set of assumptions and “givens” that already exist inside the person’s head, by which the person evaluates and make sense of the “outside reality”.

According to Crowhurst (2007:13), culture is a human construct, and therefore it is always open to change. In this understanding, new information and feedback have the potential to adjust the existing worldview. However, even this new information is filtered through a knowledge that pre-exists, and so it is “enculturated” – “new principles live in local clothing” (13).

Geertz (1973:89) proposed that all culture has religion at the root, and Wright (quoted in Crowhurst 2007:14) says that all cultures are profoundly theological. Crowhurst maintains that all cultures must ultimately surrender to a kingdom culture given that no culture is entirely conducive or harmonious with the kingdom of God. In other words, the kingdom of God confronts and challenges all existing cultures and preconceived knowledge (e.g. Jn 11:18-45). She believes that unless there is an underlying worldview adjustment, there can be no real or meaningful change in behaviour.

According to Crowhurst (2007:159) the gospel message of the kingdom which is in our midst (Matt 4:17) is an affront to what we believed and maintained before knowing the gospel. For this reason whatever we knew before (our underlying worldview) must bow the knee and give way to this new revelatory insight. Kasongo Munza (2005:iii) would agree with Crowhurst on this point, as he advocates for a new worldview based on the reign of God, which would in turn require an uprooting of any cultural practices that are not in line with God’s revealed will. Munza believes that the kingdom of God is the standard over and against which every culture must be judged.

Munza (2005:5) deems worldview to be subconscious and assumed, and therefore most often people are unaware of the worldview which informs their lived experience, nor how it is doing so. This is in line with an old adage that if you want to know the temperature of the water, do not ask the fish. In other words, when we are so submerged and familiar with our own worldview it is difficult to be critically aware of the

role that it plays in our life and perspectives. It is therefore the subject of the African worldview to which I now turn in an effort to objectify some of the underlying assumptions that inform the psychology and religion of Africa.

c) Is there a common African worldview?

The purpose behind this question in the scope of this particular study is to ascertain if we can actually refer to contemporary Africa – does such a concept or entity exist? In other words, does Africa subscribe to a common set of philosophies and presuppositions that provide a common thread of belief? As a continent of such scale and diversity, is there actually an African worldview which can be uncovered and described as common?

According to a number of authors such a common set of values does indeed exist. In *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti refers to a “traditional solidarity” (1969:266), and to “the values of our African Zamani”. Mbiti (266) goes on to say, “Religion in Africa has produced its own society with a distinctly religious set of morals, ethics, culture, governments, traditions, social relationships and ways of looking at the world”. Similarly, Uzukwu (1981:344) states: “A comparative study of African religions reveals a certain measure of unity in the way Africans experience God”.

The works of authors such as Magesa (1997), Mbiti (1969, 1975, 1986), Parrinder (1969), Bediako (1995, 2000), Olowola (1996), Ferdinando (2007), Nurnberger (2007) and Turaki (2008), reveal that there are certain common traits and characteristics in Africa. These authors point to an overlap of culture and religious practices, including social connectivity, ancestral veneration, dynamism, the spirits, views on death and the afterlife, rituals, festivals, traditional healers, magic and the role of religious leaders.

Taylor (1963:18) speaks of the non-articulated African worldview which persists independent of formal African Traditional Religious practices. Taylor says that although there is not one homogenous African Traditional Religion throughout Africa, there are a “remarkable number of features that are common” (19) and that there is a basic worldview which “fundamentally is everywhere the same”.

In a similar vein Edward Blyden spoke of an “African Personality” that the world needed (Bediako 1995:12). He said that this “African Personality” had certain common characteristics, which included cheerfulness, an openness to the spiritual realm, a religiosity, harmony with nature, and an ability to suffer and serve.

Part of this “African Personality” is an acknowledgement of the ancestors. Parrinder (1954:57) says that “it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the religious foundations of Africa without going through the ‘thought-area’ occupied by ancestors”. Magesa (1996:47) explains the role of ancestors as being like the principle thread in the spider-web of African societal connectivity. If that principle thread breaks then the whole structure collapses. In tandem with this Carmody (1981:144) speaks about how the ancestors are a central part of the African experience.

Correspondingly, in his book on *African Religion* (1997:xiii), Magesa says that in spite of the new rituals that Africans take on in the form of Christianity and Islam, it is still the old and original reference points and meanings that remain – “the main principles constituting African Religion remain the force behind African religiosity and identity, the source and basis of religious meaning”. Therefore statistics which speak of rapid Christian growth in Africa fail to recognize that Africans still remain deeply psychologically and emotionally grounded in African Traditional Religions. According to Mbiti (quoted in Magesa 1997:6) “traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples”. In this way, according to Aylward Shorter (quoted in Magesa 1997:6), for many Africans, Christianity is merely an overlay on top of existing African belief systems. All of this points to the fact that there seems to be this common underlying sense of African religious experience which undergirds most of Africa, and which continues in the face of Christianity and Islam.

Mbiti (1991:3) has said that “the African heritage is rich, but it is not uniform”. He goes on to outline both the similarities and the differences, and to explain how some of the African heritage emerged on the African soil, whilst others have come into being through interaction with other peoples over the course of history. Similarly, some African traditions have been exported and adopted by others, most especially religious and musical. He goes further to state that although each African group has its own heritage

and distinctiveness, that there are sufficient similarities in aspects of culture and religion, “which makes it possible to speak of African culture (in the singular)” (8), at the same time as remembering that there are varieties of expressions in different regions.

Magesa (1997:14) has asked whether there is an African religion or a number of African religions – is there homogeneity or a multiplicity? Mbiti’s view is that there are multiple African Traditional Religions, but that there is a singular African philosophy that informs them all, which he says comes “from a common mental structure” (quoted in Magesa 1997:14). He therefore poses that there is a singular basic belief, but with multiple expressions in which there is complementarity, symmetry and integration (15).

This notion of a united African culture is further enforced in a book written by Maquet entitled *Africanity: The cultural unity of black Africa* written in 1972 in which he speaks about common African culture and religion. He refers to “Africanity” as being a “broad cultural synthesis...based on similar experience of the world” (quoted in Magesa 1996:17).

This theme of “unity in diversity” (Magesa 1997:16) is further underlined by EW Smith (quoted in Parrinder 1951:4) when he says, “In spite of cultural diversities there is, I believe, an underlying identity in religion. There is sufficient identity to warrant our speaking of African religion”. Therefore, although there may be different emphases and modes of expression, the essence remains common across Africa as a whole.

Taken even further afield, Magesa (1996:18) believes that there is an “African kernel” of thought and religious systems which are distinguishable in the Carribean, Brazil and other places where the African diaspora has spread around the world. In this way he maintains that there is a generic whole which is implemented differently from one place to the next, both within and beyond Africa

Olowola (1993:8) presents the three basic principles of African cosmology as being: 1) God as creator; 2) the spirits as God’s agents; 3) sacrifices as the means of relating to this supernatural order. He believes that these form some of the overlap of commonality across Africa as whole.

Similarly, the African scholar Awolalu (1996:22) upholds that there are 6 fundamental beliefs of the Yoruba of Nigeria. These six beliefs are: 1) the world was created by the Supreme Being; 2) this Supreme Being also brought into existence a number of divinities and spirits which act to maintain order in the created world; 3) death is the doorway to the next stage of being, and therefore prominence is given to death as continuation of life; 4) the divinities and spirits, together with the ancestors are in a “supersensible realm”, but remain interested and involved in what happens in the earth; 5) the mysterious and powerful life forces in the world are to be feared; 6) to live a peaceful life in the earth, people need to live according to the design and directives of the Supreme Being and His agents. Awolalu believes that these core beliefs can be applied to most forms of African Traditional Religion across Africa.

Based on the above general African recognition and obedience to the hierarchy of spirit beings in the realm beyond the earth, Parrinder (1969:xii) has questioned whether west African religion can be classified polytheistic. In fact, he goes further to ask whether west African religion can be considered polydemonic, which is a factor that will be discussed further in section C below.

What Parrinder (1969:2) does claim to have found in his investigation of the west African religious practices, is that as much as obscure villages may have “some practice stamped with their own special emphasis... they certainly have much more in common with their neighbours”. He purports that the west African languages have easily identifiable categories for 4 common religious understandings, which correspond and overlap very much with those given by Olowalo (1993) and Awolalu (1996) above, the only additional dimension being that of charms and amulets (12).

Moreau in his book *The World of the Spirits* (1990:100) has a chapter in which he explains or classifies the spirit realm of Africa. At the same time as recognizing the danger of generalization associated with such a broad stroke, Moreau presents a table of comparisons for three of the largest people groups of Africa – viz western Sudanic and tropical west African; Bantu; Nilotic. This table highlights some of the differences between these groups. However, he still goes on to claim: “No two were exactly alike, though we will find some themes which appear to have been almost universal” (102).

In contrast to all of the above evidence and conviction about a common African worldview, Mogoba (1985:12) believes that generalizations are a problem when studying African theology. Part of his concern, echoed by Manas Buthelezi (Mogoba 1985:13), is the idealization of Africa, especially her history, rather than more in-depth anthropological studies of the present. This is also based on the fact that all cultures change over time, and that often Africa is treated as a static test case, rather than understanding the subtle nuances over time. Mogoba (12) refers to Pobee's view of African Traditional Religions as being an alloy (as is Christianity), which points to an ability to morph and flex in response to pressures and needs.

This concern for over-generalization is the same as that expressed by Moreau (1990:100) when he says: "Anthropologically we are not describing any single existing people, and the generalizations thus presented will not be completely applicable to any single ethnic group". However, after stating such a caution, he does proceed to list the central and core features of African religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Therefore to conclude this section, there seems to be overwhelming agreement that there is a common African belief system or underlying philosophy which allows us to refer to Africa as a subject of study and analysis. Although generalization is a risk, the above views are presented by individuals who have conducted in-depth research across many particular instances, and therefore provide credible understanding and insight in this field. Heed will be observed in the process, but there is a substantial enough foundation to proceed with an investigation into these common religious practices of African people in Africa.

To conclude this section on worldview, I will present some of the cultural and religious worldview of the West, which has had such an influence on the form and expression of modern Christianity.

d) Christianity wrapped in western worldview

It would be imbalanced of me to consider the African worldview without also referring to the presence and influence of the western worldview in the "colonizing" process of

Christianity. The word colonize is being used as a twofold reference in this instance – firstly, that Christianity was birthed in a near-eastern worldview has been colonized largely by the west, and then re-presented to the rest of the world under this new guise. Similarly, Christianity has been so much at the forefront of the west’s colonization process over the centuries, and has often seemed to be for the purpose of taming the colonized, in an effort to make people subservient and more willing to obey the incoming “master” (Bediako 1995:7).

Whilst in the process of considering the worldview which predominates in Africa, it is also important to point out the extent to which Christianity has been dressed up in a western worldview, and that the form of Christianity which was presented in Africa as the pure standard, was in fact informed by certain cultural bias and opinion.

According to Bediako (1995:7) Christianity has been distorted by the west to suit itself. He makes reference to Edward Blyden, a West-Indian born Liberian citizen who wrote at length about how Christianity contributed to the submissiveness and dehumanization of the “Negro”. Blyden went so far as to claim that the colonization process in Africa was a clash between African spirituality and European secularism. He believed that the Europeans who colonized Africa, most often with Christianity as the vanguard, had lost their original spirituality and fallen prey to an increasing materialism. Although he maintained that Christianity in its pure form was the highest form of spirituality, he upheld that they needed a Christianity without European distortions – “The Bible without note or comment” (12). The Europeans had wrongly turned Christianity into a “local religion” (13), when in fact it was a universal religion with universal applications. Blyden struggled with the disconnect between the original teachings of Christ, and the form of Christianity being promulgated by the west.

Bediako (1995:57) has also claimed that Christianity is universal and not European by definition. Bediako (2000:32) has said, “For Christianity is, among all religions, the most culturally translatable, hence the most universal, being able to be at home in every cultural context without injury to its essential character”. Unfortunately, missionaries prescribed a “prefabricated theology” (2000:16) without any understanding of the target culture to whom they spoke. This is why Nurnberger (2007:301) has said that the

“dichotomy between Christian assumptions and African culture” has rendered Christianity ineffective in Africa. Perhaps if Christianity had been better regarded and presented as the universal religion that it is, then it may have been less disconnected from the African experience and African culture.

In this same vein, John Mbiti (1996:7) has had the following to say:

The gospel had already travelled far, in time and distance, before reaching and settling in modern Africa. Along the way it has been wrapped up with many layers of cultures and histories and many layers of theologies and traditions. These layers have both riches and weaknesses contained in them. To a large extent Christian Africa is living on borrowed or inherited Christianity.

Blyden believed that this resulted in an alienating effect on African life, with a form of Christianity that had taken no note of the spirituality and knowledge of God that was already in the soil and psyche of Africa. This led to a discontinuity between African Traditional Religions and the “foreign” Christian alternative.

Magesa (1997:12) has spoken about the “unmitigated ethnocentrism of early white colonizers’ and evangelists’ views of African culture”. This meant that the early carriers of the Christian message missed the points of intersection which God had already prepared in the hearts, minds and culture of Africa, thereby missing the opportunity for continuity and connection. There was an unequal and unfair comparison between the European “ideal” and the African “real” (12). This made European culture appear superior, and African culture appear undeveloped and inferior in comparison.

Brown (1982:5) addresses the issue of “ethnocentric ignorance”, and the “gross misconceptions” that have shaped many of the interactions between the west and Africa. He says that this “typical, narrow, Western perspective of Africa” (5) as being intolerable, but unfortunately often too close to the actual truth of the exchange between these worldviews.

According to Magesa (1997:4) when world religions meet, Christianity is more vocal and aggressive and therefore more dominant. Hence there is no real conversation as equals, based on certain unequal presuppositions. Similarly, Pobe (quoted in Mogoba 1985:5) refers to a “working misunderstanding” whereby the missionary preaches and the evangelized people receive the whole package without question or conversation, as if they are a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). However, “both the missionary and the evangelised person interpret things in their own way. This illustrates something of how worldviews went past each other without ever engaging with each other in the process of coming to the truth of the gospel message.”

In order to avoid this disjuncture, Alyward Shorter (quoted in Mogoba 1985:5) speaks about two processes that need to take place simultaneously: “The undressing of Christianity from a foreign culture and the dressing of Christianity in the indigenous culture... Since Christianity cannot exist without some dress or other, there cannot be culturally naked Christianity”. Shorter goes on to speak about the need for “dialogue” between the two religions. He says that dialogue leads to synthesis, whereas working misunderstanding leads to syncretism (6). This begs an answer to the call from Mbiti - “We have eaten theology with you, will you now eat theology with us?” (Bediako 2000:xiii).

Crowhurst (2007:2) uses the term “contextualization” as the “attempt to weave together this good news to individual cultures”. She quotes Allan Turner who said that in Africa the gospel “must be served in an African cup” (2). This points to one of the central dilemmas that Christianity has had in Africa, which is an inadequacy in dealing with the real lived African experience. Often times the gospel has answered the questions that the west would ask, and not the honest and real questions of Africa (Taylor 1963:16).

This equates to a call for a “theology of the grassroots” (Bediako 2000:x) which relates to “an authentic African experience”. This would require a spontaneous, implicit or oral theology which is not the exclusive domain of academia and books written in English. In part, this is because “Indigenous languages provide dimensions of perception that are non-existent in the English language” (xii). Bediako refers to “Jesus of the deep forest” which speaks to a theology which relates to where people live their everyday existence.

He gives the example of an illiterate Ghanaian woman who praises Jesus in her vernacular, and uses her everyday symbols as reference points – e.g. “Jesus is the grinding stone one which we sharpen our cutlasses” (8). Bediako (1995:59) also speaks about the power of the Christian faith being communicated in the vernacular. This would be consistent with the experience of the people in Jerusalem hearing and understanding the gospel in their mother-tongue on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5,12).

In contrast to the above, the pre-occupation with the western worldview led many Africans into “no-man’s land” – somewhere between their traditional beliefs which formed the bedrock of their worldview, and this wonderful new Christian message which was presented in such a foreign idiom (Taylor 1963:18). Because Christianity did not deal adequately with the full spectrum of African spiritual experience (its unity and multiplicity), it has led to ambivalence for those who have chosen to become Christians.

Therefore in conclusion, this section has examined the form of Christianity which was clothed in the western worldview (idiom, symbols, language and selective emphases), and how this distorted form has missed the opportunity for connection and dialogue with the concepts of God that already existed in Africa. It has gone on to address the need for Christianity to become rooted in the actual soil and everyday lived experience of real Africans for whom Jesus is their everything, if allowed to be incarnated in symbols that are meaningful to themselves. This now leads to the next section which considers both the correspondence and clash of African Traditional Religions with Christianity.

C. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

Taylor (1963:18) uses a Gandan proverb which says, “He who never visits thinks his mother is the only cook”. This is perhaps an apt way to open this section in which I seek to understand African Traditional Religions. On one hand we will explore African Traditional Religions as being the fertile soil in which the gospel message had the opportunity to be sown. I will first present views of how African Traditional Religions correspond with Christianity, and how the pre-Christian heritage in Africa had

conceptions of God which had potential continuity with the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, I will then examine the ways in which African Traditional Religions clash with the Christian message, and the possible discontinuity between them. This will lead to an assessment of African Traditional Religions as potentially being idolatrous in nature, and then also the primacy of Christ.

a) Correspondence and Continuity with Christianity

Mbiti (1996:17) has identified four strands of Christianity in Africa: 1) Ancient Christianity which came from Egypt and Ethiopia; 2) the Christianity produced by the missionaries from Europe and USA; 3) the indigenous or independent church movement; 4) European immigrants living in southern Africa who remained “closed to the realities of African presence”.

Furthermore, Mbiti (1996:12) acknowledges four reasons for the expansion of Christianity in Africa – firstly, the missionaries; secondly, the spontaneous evangelism of African Christians themselves; third, African missionaries amongst their own people and other African nations; and fourthly, African Traditional Religions themselves, which prepared the soil of Africa’s heart for the message of the gospel message. This perspective gives some balance to the Christian infiltration of Africa. The foreign missionaries were only one of the avenues by which the gospel came into Africa, and a flawed one at that.

It is reason number 4 given by Mbiti above which is most relevant in this context of the discussion, as it points to the potential that African Traditional Religions have had to prepare the soil of Africa for the gospel. The fact that the African worldview and mindset has been geared towards the spiritual realm, and that Africans are by nature religious or spiritual in their understanding of everyday life, has made the African soil less hard to plough.

Taylor (1963:34) has called for an honest encounter between Christianity and the African worldview, which gives rise to the opportunity for creativity and positive intersection – “it is precisely at that point of encounter and contrast and choice that the

church will get its own authentic insights into the Word”, which Taylor believes will lead to an African theology based on understanding, rather than a syncretistic outcome.

Bediako (1995:109) uses the term “translatability” to refer to the universality of Christianity, making it fundamentally relevant and accessible. This concurs with Pobee’s view of both African Traditional Religions and Christianity being like alloys, and therefore able to morph into any indigenous idiom (Mogoba 1985:5). Similarly, Bediako (2000:21) asks for “the assurance that with our Christian conversion, we are not introduced to a new God unrelated to the traditions of our past, but to One who brings to fulfilment all the highest religious and cultural aspirations of our heritage”.

The Nigerian theologian Bolaji Idowu spoke about a “radical continuity” (Bediako 2000:xi) between African Traditional Religions and Christianity. Interestingly, this is in direct contrast to the view of another Nigerian theologian, Byang Kato (1975), who believes in a radical discontinuity between the two, which will be discussed further in section C (b) below. Similar to Idowu, Bediako believes that “primal religion” provides the substratum into which the Christian message was embedded (xi). This corresponds to how Paul appealed to the Hellenistic tradition in order to explain Jesus to the Greeks. And hence, Christianity has historically spread most rapidly in societies with pre-existing primal religions, with even animism providing a seedbed for Christian acceptance (21).

Jebadu (2007, n.p.) goes so far as to say that the ancestors should be included in the communion of the saints. He believes that syncretism is acceptable because it is biblically compatible, and provides a pathway for inculturation. This is consistent with Fashole-Luke (Bediako 1995:223) who sees ancestral veneration in the same light as the communion of the saints. Bediako (226) believes that ancestral veneration is consistent with an OT regard for predecessors. He also proposes that this communion of the saints should include the lesser known or unnamed (“those of the non-mainstream catalogue”) of previous generations in Africa who have believed for and prepared the way for the arrival of Christianity – this ultimate divine being coming amongst us, which was fulfilled in Jesus and conveyed in the Christian gospel message (225).

According to Magesa (1997:10) the seeming disconnect between the OT and NT is akin to the disconnect between Christianity and Africa. This is due to the lack of recognition of the historical consciousness of God in Africa, as a seedbed in which to plant the new – “Misguided, they thus failed to perceive the new in the old and the old in the new. They failed to see authentic inspiration in African Religion and its importance for humanity’s search for God”. Hence, there was more of a focus on the discontinuity rather than the possible overlaps in understanding.

The western presentation of the gospel evidently missed the African concept of salvation. According to Mbiti (1996:155), the African view of salvation is about the total life of the person:

For it to make sense to African peoples, to penetrate into the depths of their being, it has to enter their total worldview. For African peoples, therefore, to make full sense, biblical salvation has to embrace their total world, both physical and spiritual. No area of the African world can afford to be left out.

This can be extended to include the need to address the socio-political environment of contemporary Africa (163). Furthermore, Meiring (2007) believes that this kind of holistic understanding of salvation, in contrast to the dualistic reality for many western Christians, is what African theology can teach the west.

Correspondingly, Asamoah (2007:309) believes that one of the reasons that Pentecostalism has been so prolific in Africa is the correspondence between the African understanding of power encounters in the spirit realm, and the healing and exorcism associated with Pentecostalism. This view of an active spiritual realm with clashes of powers relates well to an African interpretation of mystical causality.

Moreau (1990:123) believes that this historic African intuitive knowledge of spirit realm, its sensitivity to the spiritual realm, and the spiritual importance of all of life, has led Africa to an enhanced receptivity to freedom in Christ, and is therefore part of God’s grand counter-strategy. In other words, “God has ‘turned the tables’ on Satan and used his strategy against him” (123).

It can therefore be seen that there are credible theologians and commentators who argue for continuity between African Traditional Religions and Christianity. They maintain that instead of being at odds and competing for who is more right, it is better served to look for areas of overlap and a bridge of understanding on which to stand and journey across together.

In the next section, I will consider the alternative view and examine the levels at which African Traditional Religions and Christianity seem to clash.

b) Conflict with Christianity

In this section I will present and examine the other side of the coin to what was considered above as being the continuity between African Traditional Religions and Christianity. I will present the arguments and perspectives of mainly African theologians and authors who believe that faith in Christ is counter-culture, and that the kingdom culture is not beholden to any human cultural construct. I will present the difference between general revelation and specific revelation, and how the revelation of Christ supersedes all previous knowledge, and how Jesus potentially fulfils and transcends the function of the ancestors (Bediako 2000:x). I will use the arguments and convictions of various of these authors in consideration of whether any primary aspects of African Traditional Religions can be considered idolatrous in nature.

Olowola (1993:8) has said that historically most critiques of African Traditional Religions were written by non-Africans, referring to them as “ignorant and derogatory criticisms which have been rightly rejected by Africa”. However, in contrast, more recent books on the subject have been written by African authors who Olowola believes are “uncritically zealous in defending the African religious system”. He therefore speaks of the need for a more balanced perspective by African authors, with eye on African Traditional Religions and the Word of God.

i) From general to specific revelation

There have been arguments presented above for the fact that Christianity should be regarded as universal in nature, and therefore able to embed into all cultures anywhere.

However there are other African authors who consider this as being the “thin edge of the wedge”, which gives way to relativism and pluralism. Olowola (1993:7) says that religious relativism is being promoted under the guise of “religious tolerance”. Turaki (2009:88) says that African theology seeks to equate all religions as equal (“parity of all religions”) which he views as a form of religious pluralism. He claims that this results in “an acceptance of universal grace without Jesus Christ or the universalism of salvation without Christ” (88).

Turaki (1999:92) makes an important distinction between general revelation (or Creation Theology) and special revelation (Redemption Theology). This general revelation presents a broad or general concept of God, with a general fallenness of humankind, and no concept of salvation. Special revelation on the other hand claims that God has made Himself specifically known and understood through Jesus Christ, and emphasises the concept and experience of salvation (100). Therefore, Turaki purports, it doesn't matter what traditional religions say of themselves, but what the bible says of their activities. He believes that theological correctness is more important than cultural correctness (99).

Similarly, the Nigerian theologian Olowola (1993) explores the various components and aspects of African Traditional Religions, but then concludes that no matter what positives there may be – e.g. evidences for God, belief in the Creator and spirits – he still maintains that African Traditional Religions are deficient. He says that the “general revelation” contained in African Traditional Religions is not sufficient to lead people to an accurate knowledge of God as through Jesus Christ, and to the resultant living communion and eternal salvation (63). This is well summed up when Turaki (2009:185) says:

Some African theologians and scholars lump these two [Creation and Redemption Theologies] together and thereby produced a substandard theology for African Christians. This theology confusion results from their presuppositions that are weak in biblical inspiration and authority.

As much as there has been a presentation of views in Section C (a) above for the possibility that African Traditional Religions provided a God-ordained seedbed for the Christian message which was to follow in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), there is also a contrary view that such traditional religious beliefs were in fact an “anti-preparation” for the gospel. Moreau (1990:120) believes that African Traditional Religions could well have deceived the people of Africa into wrong concepts of God. For example, it presented a distant Creator God who was unapproachable; it required a works mentality; it over-emphasised respect for parents and the ancestors which enslaved people to the past; it regarded evil spirits as neutral and useful to people for their own ends; it resulted in intimidation, and gave an illusion of spiritual control but which was not authentic. In this way, African Traditional Religions could be said to conflict with the gospel message.

In the next section the African worldview, as expressed primarily through African Traditional Religions, will be evaluated over and against the biblical standard of salvation and knowledge of God. This will then lead to a presentation of the primacy Christ.

ii) Idolatry

Moreau (1990:119) has pointed out that the early missionaries desired to understand and to classify the spiritual activities that they observed in Africa, which Moreau refers to as the occult. He does caution however, that “the resulting evaluations were nothing more than a (Western) cultural evaluation of the African belief system, and not an accurate biblical evaluation” (120). For this reason, I will allow the voices and opinions of mainly African authors come to the fore, interspersed with the views of those who have been close to Africa for a long period of time, and have done extensive research into the topic. In this way, I trust that I will not fall into the tendency trap which Moreau points out above.

Throughout the ages that humankind has lived on the planet earth Satan has sought to divert attention and glory away from God, and to direct it towards himself (Moreau 1990:120). There is no people group in the world that has escaped this deliberate

offensive strategy of Satan, although different methods may have been used for different groups. Moreau believes that there are two purposes for Satan's attempt – firstly, to enslave people and to hold them under his sway, and secondly to misguide people away from the entrance of the gospel.

One of the ways in which Satan has attempted to achieve this, is to mislead people into believing that the God whom their spirits hunger after and seek, is beyond the reach of humans, being transcendent and unattainable. Along this stratum of thinking, Uzukwu (1981) sought to find the common and united thread in the way that Africans experience God. He believes that the African concept of God is of transcendence (a distant and absent God), which he says is well summed-up by the Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame when he says: "He [the Pre-existent] is not a Being, that is to say an essence. The Bantu have excluded him from all categories of Being [*ntu*]." (quoted in Uzukwu 345). In this manner, God is the "Ground of Being" from which all human life emerges.

This concept of God as being unattainable by living people, then gives additional power to the local or territorial spirits which form such a vital part of the African religious worldview (Uzukwu 1981:346). These spirits are fickle and unpredictable (346) which results in the need for constant appeasement through sacrifices. This would seem to be part of Satan's grand scheme of diverting attention away from God and onto lesser spiritual beings.

According to Turaki (2009:266) the intermediaries of the Bible (e.g. priests, prophets etc.) are very different to the intermediaries of African Traditional Religions, which are more like surrogate gods or substitutes for the Supreme Being who appears so "remote or distant". Turaki believes that the concept of the Trinity is the antidote to the traditional African concept of intermediaries. That is, from a biblical and Trinitarian perspective, God appoints an intermediary from within Godhead, and worship is directed towards those within the Godhead - "What are called intermediaries in the traditional religions are what God disowns and condemns in the Bible" (267). For this reason, Turaki believes that "African Traditional Religion is nearer to heathen religions described in the Bible" (265).

Turaki (2009:345) is unambiguous in his interpretation of the traditional religious practices which are prevalent across Africa, when he states, “We need to address a situation where man in traditional Africa is religiously very busy, yet God takes a secondary position or none at all. This is idolatry.” He maintains that African Traditional Religions imply that God has equally important intermediaries as Jesus (87), which is unbiblical and condemned.

Others believe that the ancestors were more than mediators, but were in fact regarded as gods. Buti Tihagale (Nurnberger 2007:vi) says that the “African ancestors were not and are not mediators. They were understood to be “gods”, spiritual authorities in their own right, who wielded power over their descendants without references to God at all”. He goes on to claim that to consult the dead is to “empower the past” and to “obstruct the way to the future” (vi). Similarly, Magesa (1997:49) states that in times of great need, the ancestors are invoked, sometimes being referred to as gods, but never as God. Therefore, whether these spirit beings are regarded as intermediaries or gods, they are taking the place of the revealed will of God, which has been made plain for all people in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:3).

It is this treatment and regard for spirits, intermediaries or gods which form such an integral part of the African religious experience, which presents problems for many commentators. According to Olowola (1993:63), “This worship of the spirits (no matter how cleverly it is spun), remains polytheistic in essence, and therefore an abomination to God”. Similarly, Kato (1975:20) claims that it is “unrealistic to deny that idol worship is part and parcel of African traditional religions”. He does qualify this by saying that not all traditional practices in Africa amount to idolatry, but it does form a major part (20). It is therefore clear that there are elements of idolatry implicit in the African religious experience and practice.

Nkwankpa (2006:840) describes idolatry as being “anything that supplants God in people’s lives”. According to Exodus 20:1-6, it is “described as serving, worshiping, or following any image, spirit, god or idol apart from the true and living God”. Nkwankpa believes the NT gospel message requires a “total separation” from anything that is demonic or idolatrous by nature (I Cor 10:14). He also uses I Cor 10:21 to enforce this

need for separation, and how unacceptable it is to drink from the cup of demons and also the Lord's cup. He asserts that God punished Israel's idolatry by allowing Gentile nations to conquer them (Ps 106:40-43). In contrast to Paul's command for a clear separation from idolatry, Nkwankpa claims that modern African theologians are calling for an accommodation of African Traditional religious beliefs into Christianity, whereby the God of the Bible would become the Paramount Ancestor. He contends that demonic powers have been given legal leaseholds over certain lands through certain African traditions, rituals or festivals. This requires humility and repentance – a turning away and separating oneself from certain evil and idolatrous practices.

Ndjerareou (2006:861) outlines the dangers of following after other gods than Yahweh. He alleges that in Africa “they created a whole pantheon of gods to take care of different human needs”. This gave rise to the invocation of these spirits to deal with human affairs, and the Most High God was relegated to beyond human communication. This is false, and is contrary to the biblical understanding that there is only one mediator between God and man, and that is Jesus (Jn 14:6; I Ti 2:5). There is no benefit from serving gods that have been made by human hands (Is 44:9-11), which only leads to unnecessary bondage and servitude, when true freedom is on offer through Jesus Christ alone (Jn 8:36; Rom 8:2; Gal 5:1).

Kato (1975:16) speaks about an “incipient universalism”, which is taking place in Africa context. He speaks about the pitfalls that lie along the path of trying to over-accommodate African Traditional Religions. As much value as there is in an indigenous theology, it cannot be achieved by the betrayal or compromise of biblical truth. He asserts that “Christianity cannot incorporate any man-made religion” (17) in an attempt to appease any regional theologies.

Olowola (1993:44) points out that Israel's sin in the OT was not that they rejected Yahweh, but that they wanted to combine with the worship of other deities (especially Baal). This amounted to compromising syncretism, and was rebuked by Yahweh (Deut 32:16; Josh 24:14ff)). Further to this, Steyne (1997:167) explains that Baalism, in a sense, represents all other religions other than the biblical belief in God. It amounts to

the worshipping of man-made deities, which are fostered by demonic spirits, intent on keeping God from receiving the worship of mankind.

Olowola (1994:44) therefore states: “Africa’s traditions, in directing their worship to spirits, are worshipping only those spirits, and not worshipping the Creator God”. He goes further to articulate (45):

In short, Africans worship the divinities and spirits because of their perceived function, and in order to explain and cope with the problems of the environment. But in so doing, Africans are worshipping creatures rather than the Creator. Such worship is totally unbiblical and must be considered strictly unacceptable to Biblical Christianity on the continent.

This same African author states that many Africans use unbiblical rationalisation to justify such unbiblical practices. For example, Parrinder believes that west Africa exemplifies polytheism with a pantheon of gods (Olowola 1993:42). However, Idowu (quoted in Bediako 2000:xi) justifies this approach by labelling it modified monotheism. Olowola then provides biblical perspective (I Cor 8:4-6) by asking to whom the worship is directed – the One who sent the message, or the messenger? (43).

Nkansah-Obrempong (2006:1454) explains how the word “powers” in the NT can refer to angelic hierarchies, and at other times can refer to demonic powers (e.g. Eph 6:12). These powers are all created beings (Col 1:15-16) and thus should not be worshipped (1455). He goes on to say, “Scripture forbids us to worship or put our trust in any other spiritual beings – including ancestral spirits – or the spiritual forces of witchcraft or demonic powers channelled through charms, amulets and the like (Col 2:18-19)”.

Further to the above, one of the key issues in this debate is that of sacrifices, rituals and festivals and to whom these are targeted. Steyne (1990:63) explains the importance of ritual to manipulate or invoke the demonic spirits which set themselves up over nations or in cultures, but in opposition to God. He reveals how manipulation and control takes place by the need for a “correct formula” (93) in order to have influence in the spiritual realm. According to Moreau (1990:116), all of this amounts to occultic practices and is

the deceptive work of Satan in an effort to hold sway over people and distract them away from the simplicity and power of the truth revealed through Jesus Christ (II Cor 11:3).

Turaki (2009:269) makes plain what he believes when he says, “Beliefs and practices that seek to placate the spirits of the dead through elaborate burial ceremonies, prayers, offerings and sacrifices to the dead ancestors for help and protection and speaking to or calling up the dead, are all condemned on the Bible (Deut 18:9-12, 14; I Sam 28:3, 9ff; Ex 22:18)”. He says that “solicitation” of spirit-powers is according to prescription, through traditional festivals, ceremonies, and sacrifices (341).

According to Unger (1994:14) this kind of “heathen idolatry was interpreted as initiated and energized by demonic activity and deception”. He refers to these sacrificial and ritualistic practices as “ethnic demonology”, which has certain characteristics, viz – extravagance and superstition, degrading tone, enslaving by nature, unsound in theology, and resulting in no actual deliverance “in spite of fantastic rites to try and control and appease evil spirits” (29). In his understanding of the world and spiritual realities, there are gods which set themselves up over nations, and which have the ability to demonize and enslave a civilization (ix). Part of the enslavement and bondage is the need for ongoing appeasement of unpredictable spirits which have the capacity for good or evil. This factor will be developed further in Section D below, but does provide some useful perspective and insight in the current discussion.

Olowola (1993:49) claims that the reasons Africans make sacrifices is either in thanks for favour (e.g. for a good crop), or out of the need to make right with a spirit power (i.e. to appease or propitiate), as the spirits are regarded as having power to influence daily life. These sacrifices result in communion and fellowship with the spirit powers, with blood sacrifices being in place to establish new bonds between people, deities or ancestors. Magesa (1997:286) articulates that the spirits have power to cause good or evil, and therefore cannot be ignored. Sacrifice is the means by which to curry favour with these spirit beings.

Asumang (2008:14) says that contemporary Africa and first-century Mediterranean worlds share common views on the existence and operation of the spirit world, and especially evil spirits. Asante (2001:35) therefore says that any presentation of the gospel in Africa needs to be able to explain and address concepts of evil and bewitchment in order to be holistic and fully effective. Christ must “provide a complete and decisive victory over the powers (Asumang 2008:15).

Munza (2005:11) explains that the traditional African worldview requires for harmony to be maintained between the living and the dead, and one of the ways of doing this is through sacrifices. Similarly, Magesa (1997:78) elucidates that the ancestors are not passive but active in visiting their descendants. Ancestors can also possess people (79), and pay visits through calamities (warning that something is not right in the relationship) and thereby catching attention and inducing an appropriate reply, which requires prayers and rituals to restore solidarity.

Aylward Shorter (quoted in Magesa 1997:79). has said that religious ritual in Africa is “an appeal to spirit beings who have the power to influence events, undertaken with the intention that they do so”. These are done through rituals of redress which are addressed to the ancestors and which seek to maintain positive status-quo; rituals of life-crisis; and rituals of liminality. Similarly, Nyamiti (quoted in Magesa 1997:52). describes how the African worldview is life-affirming by definition, which is dependent on the life-forces of others, including the ancestors – i.e. communion, communication, solidarity

The question that comes to mind is what are these “life-forces”, “spirit-powers” and “ancestors” which are being referred to? Is it possible that these are all different words describing demons or demonic hierarchies that have set themselves up in the culture and worldview of Africa, for the purpose of holding back and keeping out the fullness of the light which is made manifest in Jesus Christ? Berkhof (1977:65) asserts that spirit powers can become incarnated in a worldview, which can be in conflict with a Godly or kingdom worldview. These powers (Greek: *stoicheia*) can even provide a good life, full of order, structure and respect, but all of this can be separate from Christ (31).

Munza (2005:76) certainly believes this when he claims that “the problem is not the tree (Africa). It is the ground (African worldview) and shameful lack of humility of God’s people”. He contends that the African worldview is a source of Africa’s own problems and this stands in the way of solutions to these problems. He maintains that there is a need for a new worldview based on the reign of God, and to uproot any cultural practices that are not in line with God’s. He goes further to say that this is applicable to all worldviews, whether African or non-African.

Although one might claim that African traditional sacrifices are similar to the sacrifices of Israel in the OT, one also needs to remember that the prophets gave consistent warning against relying on multitudes of sacrifices rather than genuine obedience to God (e.g. Is 1:11ff; Mal 3:10). Yet, even in spite of any similarities between OT sacrifices and African traditional sacrifices, the current fact remains that the need for ongoing sacrifices has been surpassed and supplanted by the full and final work of the cross of Jesus (Heb 9:13-17). Olowola (1993:57) says, “African traditional sacrifices... are inadequate and done away with, and have no place in the new times that God has given us in Christ”. The sacrifice of Christ was the great and final sacrifice (Heb 9-10). Olowola notes an interesting observation of how a song sung by the Yoruba Christians explicitly denounces other gods (61-62).

According to Magesa (1997:285), it is “the relationships of the vital forces in the universe (which) constitute the complex of African religion”. This may be true, but it also seems to point to the possibility that Africa to a large extent continues to live under the unnecessary sway and influence of spirits who demand ritual sacrifice and obedience in order to bring good and avoid harm. The fact that these power spirits are unpredictable and fickle points more to the capricious nature and corrupted character of Satan and his demonic cohorts than anything else (Jn 10:10). It is clearly plausible from the above to believe that Africa is being enslaved and held in bondage to forms of idolatry which have become embedded in the African psyche. This servitude to demonic powers could continue to hold Africa beholden to the past (ancestors, traditions, rituals, festivals and the like), and blind her (I Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2) to the fullness of the truth that has been revealed in and through Jesus Christ (Jn 1:18; Heb 1:1-2).

It is to this primacy and pre-eminence of Christ to which I will turn in the section that follows.

iii) The primacy of Christ

In his article on Syncretism, Lasisi (2006:900) points to the fact that syncretism is not always bad. In fact, he claims that there are many accepted Christian practices today which are the result of syncretism from the west – some examples of these are Easter and Christmas, as well as the design of many church buildings. The space for creative diversity that Christianity allows for needs to help the church to relate to the surrounding contemporary culture, which is increasingly pluralistic. He believes that Christianity can in fact learn from Islam in its attempts to make it relevant to various communities to which it is being presented. He does however make a solid stand when he says that “contextualization must be accompanied by a firm stand for the absolutes or cores of the gospel message” (900).

He goes further to warn against any slide towards Christo-paganism. An integration of the gospel message with the target culture is not wrong, as long as “the finality and supremacy of Jesus Christ alone as our Lord and Saviour is not sacrificed at the altar of multicultural and religious relativism” (Adeyemo 2006:900). Similarly, Willimon (quoted in Crowhurst 2007:23) asserts that a conversion to Christianity without a corresponding change in worldview amounts to compromise – “The persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world but how to keep the world from subverting the church”. Crowhurst (2007:173) also quotes Miroslav in this same regard, who said:

At the very core of Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures. A response to a call from that God entails rearrangement of a whole network of allegiances... Departure is part and parcel of Christian identity.

It is this journey of departure which African Christians are invited to partake in, in order to enter into the full benefits of the destination to which we have all been called.

Further to the above, Turaki (2006:480) assesses the role of ancestors in traditional African culture and religion. He claims that the best approach is that taken by the Hebrew author, written to a context very similar to that of African Traditional Religions. In this approach, the ancestral understanding and approach can be said to be fulfilled and superseded by the sacrificial work of Jesus, and that Jesus has now replaced the previous role of the ancestors in mediating on their behalf to God. Turaki concludes by stating:

All the intermediaries of African theology or of any other religion or culture are inferior to the person and work of Christ. He is the superior mediator by virtue of this deity and his work of redemption. And just as he fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the Jewish religious system, so he has fulfilled, transformed and supplanted the ancestral cult and traditional religions of Africa.

Turaki (2009:268) has said elsewhere that there is only One who qualifies as a mediator, and that is Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12; I Tim 2:5; Phil 2:9-11). Supplementing this view of Turaki, Olowola (1993:630) says that the African sacrificial system (no matter how noble or meaningful) is inadequate for salvation, which comes through the work of the cross alone.

Demarest (quoted in Olowola 1993:28) goes even further when he asserts that “every form of natural religion, whatever label it bears, is an expression of sinful man’s refusal to honour the God who has plainly revealed Himself through the several modalities of general revelation”. In the same way that the OT was a foreshadowing of the Ultimate and Final which was made known and achieved through Jesus, so too all general revelation has been surpassed and replaced by the same truth of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

In his book *The Primal Vision*, Taylor (1963:146) speaks of the “Tender Bridge” between the living and the dead, which is inclusive and incorporative of all humanity, both present and past. As much as this is a noble ideal, and a symbol which can be used of

Christ, it seems unnecessary to walk across a tender bridge to the ancestors, when a permanently secure and accessible bridge has been constructed and completed through Jesus. The confusing shadows and half-lights that people used in the past have been overwhelmed by the bright light which has been displayed through Christ (Jn 1:4-5). Turaki (2009:97) says it clearly – “Whatever role ancestor’s had in traditional society it is transformed and made obsolete at God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to transform the role and functions of the ancestors.”

Meiring (2007:1) presents the African idea of “theology from below”, or “as below, so above”. The positive of this is that a theology is encouraged which can commune easily with people and their everyday lived experience. However, the contrary to this is that Jesus is the heavenly and biblical pattern which cannot be replaced or improved. As much as this full heavenly truth about Jesus needs to be communicated and understood in such a way that it becomes earthly in outworking, this does not allow licence to adjust the truth to every regional culture, including Africa.

Nurnberger (2007:59) draws some parallels between ancient Jewish culture, including respect and recognition for those who had pioneered the faith and passed on – viz Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, apart from this respectful reference point, they never sacrificed to these ancestors, but rather made intimate and direct contact with the Almighty God to whom they had pointed and directed. Similarly, even though Jesus was of the lineage of David, David played no role in the ministry and life of Jesus. Likewise, even though Jesus was of the fleshly lineage of David, when He died and ascended He left the flesh behind and rose to a new life. So too, Paul says that we are to leave the flesh behind and take on a new and higher identity of the spirit through Christ.

Furthermore Nurnberger (2007) asserts that Jesus spoke of the kingdom as absolute priority, and demanded exclusive loyalty to the King of the Kingdom – a loyalty that could be shared with no one else. Jesus went further in even being critical of family ties which were obstacles to discipleship and obedience to the present truth (Matt 10:37; 12:48-50). The new life in Christ represents freedom from every other form of authority, apart from to Christ. Paul fought vehemently to maintain and explain that freedom in Galatians and Philippians. In the light of these biblical truths, it becomes abundantly

evident that allegiance to Christ and what He has achieved is primary, and there is no need for shadowy substitutes.

Turaki's (2009:179) passionate view about the primacy of Christ is summed up well in these comments:

Christ-power is the biblical answer to this traditional quest for the lesser spirit-power in Africans... Traditional African spirituality is saturated with spirit-power, either of spirit beings or of cosmic powers. Such spirituality leads only to spiritual idolatry as the real Eternal Spirit who is God, is often left out. Any form of spirituality that does not deal directly with the Eternal Spirit, is spiritual idolatry. Thus, our spirituality must be rooted in the Eternal Spirit and not to surrogate spirit beings and spirit-powers.

Turaki (2009:179) goes on to explain that those African predecessors who lived prior to the cross will be judged by the same standards as all people, whether Jews, Gentiles, Africans or non-Africans (Rom 2:11). That criterion will be the faith and expectation of a coming Messiah (Rom 4:3b; 4:9-15). However, now that the work of the cross has been made complete and has been made known in the earth, it is faith in the historic and present work of the cross, and not the future, which has become the criterion of God's judgment (Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:16).

Turaki (2009:546) suggests that the object of our discussion should not be on "how Africans understand and interpret the Bible and Christianity from the primacy of their religion and culture, but how the Bible defines Africans in terms of their traditional religion, culture and worldview". The eternal principles and plans of God cannot be adjusted to suit individuals. Instead, it is individuals and cultures that need to adjust to the eternal truth of God.

In this same vein, Olowola (1993:57) goes further to say that "African traditional sacrifices as well are inadequate and done away with, and have no place in the new times that God has given us in Christ". In the light of the great and final sacrifice of Christ, there is no need any longer for further sacrifices by which we can appease God

(Heb 9:13-14; 15-17). The work has been done, and needs no repeating or improvement through the best or most meaningful intentions of humankind.

Therefore, to conclude this section which has looked at African Traditional Religions, it is abundantly clear that there are many contrary voices on this topic who can argue vehemently and convincingly for their perspective. There is no doubt that the western form of Christianity is steeped in its own worldview which has blinded the unseeing eyes to its own shortcomings and biases. The self-serving assumptions of the western world in general, also caused well-intentioned early propagators of the gospel to Africa to miss many of the clues that African Traditional Religions and culture presented, clues which would have pointed to the pre-existing knowledge of God that was evident in Africa, and which was groping towards a Messianic saviour to come. This pre-Christian awareness of the Supreme Creator could have been used as the seedbed for the planting of the new seed of the Christian message.

At the other extreme, some of the pre-Christian notions of God have proven to be a hinderance to a true and full understanding and acceptance of the Christian message. Some of the pre-existing views of God may well have become a stronghold of Satan in an effort to blind the minds of people to the simple truth of Christ and His all-conquering sacrifice. This has potentially resulted in large sections of Africa's people being held in the bondages of African idolatry, which over-venerates the deceased, and which dabbles in the world of spirit powers, ritual sacrifices and festivals. This could well have become the legal entrance for Satan and demonic powers to have set themselves up as deceiving and self-serving mediators, who seek to attract glory and attention to themselves, and to turn people aside from direct communion with God, which has been made fully possible through Christ.

If this form of idolatry has indeed taken root in the worldview and psyche of Africa, making it very difficult for people to choose categorically between the Christian future or the African way, then Africa is possibly being held in a form of spiritual slavery. Although this may seem like a political incorrectness to say, it is more important that we are theologically accurate than culturally polite. The danger of the latter is that we bow the knee to practices and experiences which have been clearly defined as opposed to the

God of the Bible, who demands exclusive and primary loyalty and worship (Ex 20:3). When this primary love becomes shared or watered-down by religious compromise, then a form of syncretism has emerged which is relativistic in nature – i.e. that Christ is an option, but not the exclusive or only way. This is contrary to a central tenet of the Christian faith (Jn 14:6; I Tim 2:5). It is not without reason that God says of Himself that He is a jealous God, and that He will share His glory with no other (Exod 20:5; Josh 24:19; Is 42:8). It was for ordained and inspired purpose that the prophets of old consistently called the people of Israel back to an exclusive loyalty and worship of Yahweh, and invited other Gentile nations to partake of that same communion, by repenting of pagan and demonic idolatry, so often rolled-up in their culture and social norms.

The essence of the Christian message is that the way has been opened to the Father by a better sacrifice which is once and for all time (Heb 10). Any other path to God or any other intermediary to God is unnecessary and deceptive. The Bible states clearly that we must not remain ignorant of the schemes of the enemy (II Cor 2:11; 4:4; Eph 2:2; I Tim 4:1; II Pet 2:1; Jude 1-12; Rev 2:3), who is always seeking to turn people away from the God of the universe and Father of all humankind. When this gospel truth is presented in the clear light of day, and other options are placed alongside as holding the same or equal value, then there is evidently a division of loyalties and inadequate response to the gospel message which is equally available for both Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:11ff). From a biblical perspective and premise, any renunciation of the gospel carries a measure of judgment, whether in this life or in the age to follow (after-life). It is however the passionate heart of a loving Father to take every measure possible to reach out to and to warn people so that they can come back to Himself. He will even take seemingly harsh measures in order to get the attention of people so that they can respond correctly to Him, which was made abundantly clear in previous chapters through the analysis of Isaiah 19:1-15.

D. APPLICATIONS

In the final section of this chapter, I will consider the above discussions through a “demonic grid”. In other words, I will seek to understand whether the demonic realm can be deemed to play a role or have an influence in the arena of African Traditional Religions, and the potential sway that they have on the lives of ordinary people who have become beholden to a belief system which may be misleading.

I would like to reiterate that any of these potential truths presented below could be applicable to any nation on earth – rich, poor, Asian, Australian or European. However, my chosen focus on Africa is for practical interest and concern due to the relevant application to where I live and work.

a) The reality of the demonic realm

The demonic realm has also been referred to as the “excluded middle” (Hiebert 1982:35). The reason for this being that this realm can often be overlooked or excluded from deliberations about the nature of reality. The basis for this exclusion may well be the rational, materialistic and objective world that has become a predominant worldview for many, and so the concept of influence from an unseen world may be deemed as archaic, superstitious or outdated. Another reason may be due to what Barnhouse (1974:156) refers to as “camouflage”, which he explains as demons being hidden or concealed inside something which masks what it really is. In other words, Satan or the demons can remain incognito, so that where there is no perceived enemy, there is no need for defence (157).

Grudem (1994:412) defines demons as “evil angels who sinned against God and who now continually work evil in the world”. Unger (1994:183) says that Satan is considered as being the head over these fallen angels (demons), and that there is a hierarchy of demons who fulfil various tasks in seeking to deceive and destabilize the purposes of God in the earth. Barnhouse (1974:127) believes that there is a correspondence between the organization of demons and that of angels, most obviously because of their angelic origins.

Barnhouse (1974:132) goes further to speak of how Satan and his demonic cohorts correspond to earthly governments, even down to corporals at the level of municipal affairs. Some of the scripture references that are used to maintain this argument are Daniel 10:10ff – where the angel who delivered the answer to Daniel’s prayer, explains that he had been delayed by 21 days by the prince of Persia, until such time as the chief prince Michael came to his assistance; Ecclesiastes 5:8 – which speaks of how one official watches over another, and that there are higher officials who keep watch over those ones; and Isaiah 14:4ff) – where the prophetic utterance regarding the king of Babylon seems to parallel an address to the fallen Lucifer (Grudem 1994:413). However, this so-called knowledge pertaining the organization of the demonic realm can never be stated with utter confidence, as the scriptures do not give sufficient evidence for such definitive clarity. Rather, these views need to be treated as possibilities based on some Biblical evidences.

Further in this regard Wink (1986:87) asserts that there are angels over nations. Wink (95) quotes Buber as saying “every nation has a guiding spiritual characteristic, its genius, which it acknowledges as its ‘prince’ or its ‘god’”. He claims that these angels are not evil in themselves, but have a tendency towards idolatry – that is, by drawing attention and praise from people to themselves, and thus worship is invoked from the people of that nation over which they have jurisdiction. He alleges that “angels of the nations have a will of their own, and are capable of resisting the will of God” (91). This can result in the angel over the nation becoming synonymous with the state, and thereby becoming like a god to that nation.

Berkhof (1977:20) refers to these corruptible angels over nations as “world powers” which he claims are the powers which rule over life outside of Christ. This form of subtle governance can be manifested in human traditions, public opinion or cultural feasts and festivals, which maintain their control through fear of consequence if not adhered to. In this way these world powers become structures (or *stoicheia*) which become guardians or trustees (74) over the life of individuals and cultures or people-groups. In this way, people can become enslaved to an ideology or worldview (65) which has become detached from the revealed truth of God through Jesus Christ. This kind of loyalty to

something other than Yahweh amounts to the clever deceit and trickery of Satan and the demons (Jn 8:44; I Cor 4:4; Eph 2:1-2; I Tim 4:1-3).

Berkhof (1977:31) uses the example of Hitler and Nazism in Berlin in the 1930's, where the world-power provided a form of order or structure, and a good life, but separate from Christ, and which led the people into deception. According to Berkhof (31) "they acted as if they were the ultimate values, calling for loyalty as if they were the gods of the cosmos". This is an example of how a corrupted angel can become incarnated in a worldview, which comes under the misleading design of Satan, and then is ultimately used to bring death and destruction. This corresponds to Grudem's (1994:417) proposition that such subservience to a fallen power (or demon) will usually lead to evil and destructive practices – see Deut 14:1; 23:17; I Kings 14:24; 18:28; Ps 106:35-37; Hos 4:14.

Wink (1986:201) also argues for the fact that "the appointment of gods over the nations is not a temporary or evil expedient but a permanent aspect of the divine economy". He then goes on to suggest that the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9) may have been such a god over the nation (1988:26) when it called for Paul to come to them. However, once again, this needs to be viewed as a possible interpretation of this scripture, but not the only one.

Furthermore Steyne (1999:167) contends that any man-made religion is a form of Baalism, and therefore has demonic control and manipulation at its root, in order to counter the purposes of God in the earth. Accordingly, he believes that such Baalism always seeks to wrestle exclusive loyalty and worship away from Yahweh, as happened repeatedly with the Israelites in the OT.

From all of the above, it seems plausible and consistent with certain Biblical revealed truth, that angels that were possibly set-up by God over nations, as a form of delegated and useful authority, may have become corrupted over time one by one, or have been corrupted as a once-off event at the corruption and fall of Lucifer. These corrupted angels could have in turn taken captive nations or cultures over which they preside, in an effort to illicit worship and loyalty to themselves, along the lines of the Luciferian

motif. If this is the case, then it will be interesting to explore how these demonic forces or world-powers can exercise influence and control over people groups by permeating culture for the end of deceit and destruction, which I will do in the next sub-section below.

b) Human interaction with demons

One of the main ways in which humans interact and communicate with demons is through idolatry. Grudem (1994:416) uses two main scriptures as the basis for his argument that in the OT gods, idols and demons were referring to one and the same thing. Deuteronomy 32:16-17 says,

They made Him jealous with strange *gods*;
With abominations they provoked Him to anger.
“They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
To *gods* whom they have not known,
New *gods* who came lately,
Whom your fathers did not dread.

Similarly, Psalm 106:35-37 says,

But they mingled with the nations
And learned their practices,
And served their idols,
Which became a snare to them.
They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the
demons.

It is the interchangeable use of gods, demons and idols in the above scriptures which leads Grudem to propose that the false gods of the OT were in fact demonic powers, most often represented by idols of some form, shape or name. He further believes that Paul upheld the same understanding based on I Corinthians 10:20 where he says that pagan sacrifices are in fact made to demons. Grudem (417) therefore concludes that “all the nations around Israel that practiced idol worship were engaging in the worship of

demons". Similarly, Unger (1994:60) claims that idols are nothing, but "the demons behind are the real existences". He also makes reference to Psalm 96:5, which states "For all the gods of the peoples are idols".

Wright (2006:139) explores whether in fact idols are "nothing" or whether they are "something". In weighing biblical evidences, he believes it is not demons which create or pre-empt idols, but rather it is possible that demons are opportunistic in seizing upon an idol within a culture as a gateway or entrance into that culture (183). From his balanced perspective Wright (163) states, "at the very least it is clear that we cannot adopt simplistic categorizations, such as the view that all non-Christian religion is entirely demonic or that it is all purely cultural".

This indeed leaves room for us to suspect that demons could well make use of idolatry in order to exercise some control and deceit of people. This would then lead to a loyalty to the demonic power, which would need to be maintained by rituals, feasts or festivals. Steyne (1990:63) declares that "the spirit world is motivated to action through correct formulae which induce the spirits to do man's bidding". This leads to sacrifices and offerings being made in order to maintain favour and blessing from the gods or demonic powers that have infiltrated the belief system of a people. Ritual can be seen as a means of manipulating the spirits (93). On the other hand the need for ritual practices can be seen as the means by which the spirit has control over a person or people, and by which it demands ongoing loyalty. The use of fear of negative consequences if they fail to fulfil the contract that has been set-up between the person/people and the spirit, can be a further means of control. In this way ceremonies come to play an important part in maintaining favour with the demonic power, and in appeasing the power sufficiently to do their bidding.

In his commentary on Exodus 20:3-5 Moreau (1990:8) explains that the sin of idolatry can be continued within a family to the third or fourth generation. He says further that Christian ministers who have experience in dealing with demons claim any occultic activity can continue down generations, leaving subsequent generations subject to demonic oppression (9). The release from such demonic influence is broken when a person ultimately rejects or renounces the sins of their forebears – "When demons claim

ancestral links... counsellors have found that the victim is helped by renouncing any ancestral occultic practices, which removes the grounds for oppression” (9).

Furthermore, Moreau (1990:14) discusses the passage in I Samuel 28:3-20 where Saul seeks counsel from the departed prophet Samuel. His conclusion is that it is unclear whether it actually was the spirit of Samuel, but he does say “the only thing we can be sure of is that such actions will open the door to Satanic deception rather than true spiritual revelation”. He further presents the three grounds for sin as being sin, passivity and fear (90). On the ground of sin he believes that ancestral is one of the ways in which the door is opened to Satan, purporting that demons are given a legal right to harass people due to permitted entry by a previous family member.

This view is shared by Steyne (1990:186) when he asserts that spiritism is occultic, and that demonic powers may well be able to impersonate a deceased personality. According to Steyne, given that demons know all past history, they are able to recall the past. However, they don't know the future, and therefore need to manipulate people to believe a future which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although one can never be entirely sure that necromancy is or isn't demonic, it certainly goes contrary to total loyalty to God, and takes people outside of the welfare and protection of God.

It therefore becomes clear that at whatever juncture humans choose to turn aside from loyalty to God alone, and to give attention to other spiritual powers by whatever means, permission is granted to demonic powers to hold sway over that person, and potentially their offspring as well. This has relevance to this topic of research, as it seems plausible to believe that certain African Traditional Religious practices are idolatrous by nature, and can therefore be considered entrance for demonic authority into their lives. This point then leads us to consider how God responds to people when such human loyalty is shown towards demonic powers.

c) God's response to human-demonic loyalties

Wright (2006:188) has a chapter which is entitled “The Living God confronts Idolatry”. In his conclusion he gives the following summation which really gets to the essence of his main argument:

Since God's mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict.

Consequently, God's efforts to release people from the bondage of idolatry is not because He desires to punish people (Jer 31:3). On the other extreme, it is because He desires for people to live in the full delight of freedom, which comes from a knowledge of the true Creator (Ezek 38:22-23; Jn 8:32).

God knows that idolatry and the potential demonic influence which traffics through the practice of idolatry, is accompanied by deception, manipulation and futility (Jer 10:5, 15; 50:38; 51:17; Dan 5:23; Hab 2:18; Acts 17:29; I Cor 10:19-20). This is the principle informing Isaiah's warnings in Isaiah 40-48. It is also the motivation of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 10:2, 5 when he exposes their emptiness and compares them to a scarecrow which has an outer form but no substance. According to Wright (2006:185) the purpose of the prophets in this regard was to identify, expose and denounce idolatry in all its forms.

It is this premise which forms the basis for knowing why God seeks to break people away from their idolatry. It is what Wright (2006:95) calls the "monotheizing dynamic", which he claims is the motive which drives the entire narrative behind the release of Israel from Egypt, which was as much for the attention of Egypt (Ezek 30:19) as it was for Israel (Ex 6:7) – for both nations to come to know God as the only true God. The question then becomes – how does He do this?

In the Exodus narrative which was discussed in chapter 2 in the exegesis of Isaiah 19:1-15, it was made clear that God's judgment against Egypt was in fact a judgment on the gods in which she trusted (Ex 12:12; Num 33:4; Jer 46:25; Ezek 30:13), for the express purpose of exposing their inferior power compared to Yahweh. Similarly, God used Assyria as an instrument of judgment (Isaiah 10:5-6; Hab 1:1ff) to bring judgment

against Israel after they have turned from their true God and chosen to serve and follow after false gods (Jer 27:4-6).

In the same way that Israel was used by God to bring judgments against the inhabitants of Canaan (Lev 18:24-28; 20:23; Deut 9:1-6), so too God would use other nations for the same purpose, even if Israel was the nation needing to be brought back into line with God's design (Is 10:1ff). This points to the fact that God is both transcendent and universal, and has no favourites. He simply demands loyalty and obedience (Hos 6:6), and is prepared to use judgments in order to bring this to pass (Ex 12:12; Ps 9:16; Ezek 25:11; 30:19; 38:22-23).

The ongoing, unchanging and ultimate mission of God remains the same for all nations. His desire is that all nations abandon the false gods or demons which they serve, and be reconciled to Himself in order to enjoy true freedom and righteous living (Deut 4:6-8; 26:19; 28:9-10; 29:24-28; Ps 96; Ezek 36:16-21; Jer 13:1-11). In this light, Wright (2006:186) says, "God's goal of blessing the nations requires... that the nations eventually come to abandon their gods and bring their true worship before the living God alone". He goes on to speak of the "adulterating syncretism" of the nations that surrounded Israel, who did not remain exclusive in their worship of Yahweh alone. Further to this, since the further and fullest revelation of Himself in and through His Son (Heb 1:1-3), God's desire remains to bring all people to a saving knowledge through the pure gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 10:12-13; I Tim 2:4)

Munza (2005:6) asks why Africa suffers repeated cycles of calamity, and further asks if this is a result of slavery, poverty, lack of education, or the curse of Ham? Or, he asks, is it the African worldview? He proposes that it is the African worldview which has become a fertile ground into which Satan has been able to plant his deceptive and empty philosophies (II Cor 2:11; 4:4; Eph 2:2). These idolatrous practices potentially become the entry point for demonic powers to hold sway, being reinforced continually through rituals, festivals and sacrifices which simply serve to reinforce and give ongoing legal leasehold to demonic powers.

If indeed this is the case, then it would be consistent with the eternal nature and revealed will of God that He would do all within His means to draw people back to Himself. This would include drawing western people away from the potential idolatry of materialism, or European philosophies of humanism, or the false beliefs of any nation of the world. For the purpose of this study, it would be God's desire to win the people of Africa back from any false beliefs and demonic practices which steals their attention away from undivided worship of God alone through Jesus Christ. This would necessitate drastic and heart-felt action on His behalf, including judgments.

Wright (2006:187) maintains that the seeming verdict of the Biblical truth is that idols are the result of the fallen and corrupted work and imagination of sinful humanity (e.g. Acts 17:29). However these idols and false gods can become the gateway or channels of the demonic into the lives of individuals or cultures. In response to this deception and counterfeit belief, Wright (188) argues:

Since God's mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict.

He goes further to speak of the "deleterious effects of idolatry" (Wright 2006:188) as well as the "human addiction to idolatry", which is what God desires to deliver people from. As a loving Father (I Jn 4:16) He desires what He knows is best for His children, and is prepared to go to great lengths in order to bring people back to the freedom of the truth (Deut 7:8; Jer 31:3; Jn 3:16; Jn 8:32; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4; I Jn 3:1).

It is for this reason and express purpose that the subject matter pertaining to potential false and idolatrous belief systems in Africa has been chosen as a relevant area of study. It is intended as an articulation of the heart of God to reveal and expose this potential falsehood, with the intention of averting the possible judgments of God against African false religions. Where the traditional African worldview and religious system is conceivably in conflict with the specific revelation of God in Jesus Christ, there is need

for investigation and correct understanding in order to avert the feasible negative consequences.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

A. SUMMARY

a) Review of primary objectives

The primary objective of this study was to discover what relevance Isaiah 19:1-15 has and how it might apply to Africa today. This objective required an uncovering of the most likely reason for the judgment that was threatened against Egypt in the anchor text. It also required an investigation of African Traditional Religions, and whether or not certain common religious or cultural practices can be considered as being idolatrous.

b) Summary of findings

In an effort to achieve the above stated objectives, chapter 2 examined the historical and theological context of Isaiah 19:1-15. This examination concluded that the anchor text (Isaiah 19:1-15) was the work of Isaiah ben Amoz, who ministered in and around Jerusalem from 740-701 BC. The historical setting in which he ministered was one of the pending threat of Assyria as the new emerging regional power which gave rise to a complex interplay of national loyalties and alliances in an effort to stave off the mounting Assyrian threat. This was coupled with periods of spiritual decline in Judah in which certain sections of people in the political establishment started to look towards other

nations and kings for security, rather than remaining exclusively loyal and dependent on Yahweh.

Although there can be no final authoritative verdict given on who the original intended audience was, it is likely that it was for the hearing of Israel as a warning not to trust in a nation which itself was weak and vulnerable in the hands of God. However, it was potentially also addressed to the Egyptians, based mainly on the fact that God's consistent historical motif has always been universal salvation and therefore to make Himself known to all nations, and not just Israel.

Another aspect of chapter 2 revealed that it is possible that OT prophecy goes beyond the immediate historical context, although it can never mean anything other than what it meant to the original speaker and hearers. OT prophecy can be understood to establish a certain truth and characteristic of God, which can then be applied to other nations and situations at other periods of history. In this way the principles and patterns of God revealed in Isaiah 19:1-15 can be applied to similar situations at other times and to other nations over time, and for the purpose of this research, potentially to contemporary Africa.

Chapter 3 required a grammatical-historical exegesis in an effort to establish the author-intended meaning of Isaiah 19:1-15. Further to this was to explore the possible reasons for the judgment of God aimed at Egypt in the text, and to conclude which of the reasons was most probable. Of the four possible reasons, this section showed that it certainly seems plausible that it was the idols of Egypt which were the target and reason for the threatened judgment.

The three main pillars for this argument were the plagues of Egypt (Ex 7-12) as a precursor to understand the reference to the idols of Egypt in Isaiah 19:1; the historical Egyptian context which regarded the Pharaoh as being a god-king over the nation and therefore idolatrous by nature; and the mission of God throughout history as being the informing theology for interpreting the anchor text. These three key arguments gave strong evidence for the likelihood that it was the idolatry of Egypt that was the most probable reason for the threat of judgment.

The first part of chapter 4 examined the issue of worldview and how a nation or culture's worldview can have such a powerful and informing role to play in shaping people's view and experience of the world. This was an important step in recognizing the divergent worldviews that there are in the world, and how no one perspective is better or more right than another. However it also highlighted the fact that it is the biblical worldview which must remain the standard, although this too is subject to interpretation and personal perspective. Revelation of salvation through Jesus Christ cannot just be placed on top of pre-existing worldview assumptions, but requires some fundamental changes in deepest belief systems which are rooted in worldview.

The second part of chapter 4 explored African Traditional Religions and the extent to which they have continuity with Christianity, but also how they at times conflict with the Christian message. The three main areas of conflict were the fact that revelation and understanding of God since Christ has moved from general revelation to a specific revelation in which people are no longer left to guess at the nature and will of God, but are able to have clear and specific understanding. The second is how African Traditional Religions have the potential to be idolatrous by nature in some regards, most especially in the arena of ancestral veneration. The third point of conflict is that of undermining the primacy of Christ as being the ultimate and fullest revelation of God, and that there is no need for alternative mediators or systems by which to commune with God.

The final section of chapter 4 examined the reality of the demonic realm and the potential influence that demons can have over people and nations. Human interaction with demons is primarily through idolatry, which is a turning aside from singular devotion and trust in God alone. It then went further to give evidence for the fact that God confronts idolatry throughout history in an effort to release people from any bondage to a system or belief which is contrary to exclusive faith and confidence in Himself. One of the ways in which God confronts idolatry is through the threat of judgment, and then the potential discharging of judgment if there is no response.

B. APPLICATION

The main thesis of this research has been that Isaiah 19:1-15 provides a theological basis for believing that God can and will use judgment as a means of challenging and displacing the gods or idols over nations. The anchor passage of Isaiah 19:1-15 revealed that this judgment of God against a nation can take the form of unfavourable weather patterns, an undermining of the cultural or religious wisdom of a nation, ethnic divisions, foreign dominion, corrupt or poor leadership, or the erosion of certain economic securities.

a) Probable, Plausible or Possible

The inclusion of the word “probable” in the thesis proposition needs to be clarified. If something is considered “possible” it means that it is worth considering, and is feasible or conceivable (Collins 1991:571). In the case of this research, there were four possible reasons for judgment that were presented. The term “plausible” means that it is reasonable or believable (561). However, the term “probable” is stronger and more pointed, claiming rather that something is likely or appears to be true (584).

The thesis statement required the establishment of the probable or most likely reason for judgment. The ensuing examination of the anchor text and its related subject matter provided plausible and credible evidence for the probability that idolatry in Egypt was the most likely reason or trigger for God’s judgment. Although it is difficult to establish this truth as being beyond doubt, there can certainly be a measure of confidence that it was more than just possible, but most likely a probable cause. This probability is based on the precedence of the Exodus plagues, an understanding that God will seek to dethrone anyone who sets themselves up as an alternative god over a nation, and the heart and mind of God as revealed in the mission of God throughout history – i.e. universal salvation and inclusivity of all people and nations.

The evidence provided in chapter 4 by predominantly African authors builds a case for some aspects of African Traditional Religions being idolatrous by nature, such as ancestral veneration, traditions, festivals and rituals which pay homage and give credence to spiritual powers that are other than God. These forms of idolatry can

enslave any people who choose to submit to their evil and whimsical sway, holding people in bondage to sacrifices and rituals which reinforce their hold over people's lives. In this way, it is very likely that there are many people in Africa who give power to gods and spiritual formulae which beholden them to the influence and control of demonic spirits who have used forms of idolatry as entry points into the culture and psyche of the people.

b) Accept or Reject?

As to the question of whether idolatry was the most likely or probable cause of the judgments of God threatened against Egypt, from all of the above and previous discussions, it seems reasonable to accept this assertion. However, even if it requires that we downgrade the strength of the claim from probable to possible, then there is still a window of opportunity for this fact to be true. Therefore the truth or pattern of God established in Isaiah 19:1-15 is certainly worth taking note of for the purpose of warning.

On the second aspect of the thesis statement, I needed to weigh whether the probable, or at least possible, truth established in Isaiah 19:1-15 indeed has any implications for contemporary Africa. Once again, from the evidence presented, and most especially by the African authors, some of the practices of traditional African culture and religion could well be idolatrous in nature. This then leads me to uphold that it is certainly plausible to believe that judgments of God could be taking place even in contemporary Africa in response to idolatrous practices.

The fact that the truth of Isaiah 19:1-15 is applicable to Africa does not mean that it could not be relevant to any other nation as well. There is indeed every reason to believe that this threat of judgment could be relevant to any single nation which practices idolatry. This idolatry could be in many forms or traditions, including materialism, cultural pride, a preoccupation with certain pastimes or cultural practices, or over-veneration of patron saints. Therefore such a threat of judgment in response to idolatry is not reserved exclusively for Africa, but has been applied to Africa in an effort to be relevant to my own *Sitz im Leben*.

C. CONCLUSION

From all the arguments and research that have been presented in the preceding chapters and above sections, it is reasonable to conclude that God intended and planned judgment against historical Egypt in an effort to rid the people of the demonic influences which held sway over their lives, most especially through the god-king Pharaoh, the demonic pacts that kept him in power, and the preoccupation with the dead. The pattern or characteristic of God that was established in the OT prophetic utterance of Isaiah 19:1-15 can clearly be applied to times, situations and nations outside of that immediate 8th century historical context – these nations could be from any corner of the globe. However, in my chosen area of focus, and from the writings of many African authors and theologians, it seems that contemporary Africa does indeed continue to practice and perpetuate certain rituals and religious traditions which can be deemed idolatry. It has been proposed that these idolatrous activities can act as pathways for the demonic powers to traffic and gain sway or influence over people's lives. Therefore it is probable to conclude that God could well use similar such judgments against any nation or nations which maintain and practise demonic idolatry. This makes the principles established in Isaiah 19:1-15 relevant and applicable to contemporary Africa.

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