

*“His eyes watch the nations”* Ps. 66:7

God’s involvement with the nations is evident throughout Scripture. God told Abraham that he had been chosen in order that the nations of the world might be blessed through him. God has never been concerned for anything less than the whole world. The reason is simple: *“I made the earth and its people”* (Jer. 27:5) He is never pictured as allowing history (which is all about nations) to be something in which he has no concern or control. The revelation of the Old Testament comes out of an historical narrative which involves nations, especially the Jewish nation, and, in that narrative of events, as far as the nations are concerned, God can only be seen as a “hands on” God. *“His eyes watch the nations”* is what we learn from the Psalmist (Ps 66:7). Job records that *“He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations and disperses them”* (Job 12:23). Everywhere he *“rules”* the nations, and they are exhorted to *“Be still and know that I am God”*. This personal God is concerned for all people everywhere.

### 1. God Speaks to the Nations of the World

The prophetic writings of the Old Testament are particularly clear about the fact that God has dealings with the nations of the world. Though Amos has such a devastating word to bring to Israel, the collection of his prophecies that have come down to us actually begin with a series of prophetic statements concerning the nations which surround Israel: the Syrians, the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab (Amos 1-2). It is very evident from what Amos had to say about these nations that his “eyes were watching” them. In this respect Amos is followed by very many of the other prophets. For example, Jeremiah was told right at the outset of his ministry, *“See, I have made you a prophet to the nations”* (Jer. 1:15) The prophetic voice for him was to nations, not just to individuals or even one nation. Whilst the main weight of the writings of the prophets falls, naturally, upon the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, bringing severe warnings about their behaviour, the same kind of warnings are very clearly being given to the surrounding nations. These nations actually included three superpowers, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, all of which featured in the prophets, as well as the smaller nations which bordered on Judah.

**“Jeremiah declared God’s mind to all the surrounding nations”**

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the three largest of the prophetic books, have a total of no less than twenty three chapters devoted entirely to nations other than Israel and Judah. Of the smaller prophetic books Jonah, Nahum and Obadiah do not mention Israel or Judah at all, the first two dealing exclusively with Assyria and the last with Edom. Habakkuk’s writing is mainly concerned with how God will first use Babylon in judgement on Judah and what God will then do to Babylon. Zephaniah speaks prophetically about God’s dealings with a number of different nations. All the “major” prophets, therefore, and six, at least, out of the twelve “minor” prophets address the destinies of nations and the part God plays in ordering those destinies. Thus the word of God among his prophets is by no means exclusive to his “own nation”, even if he has a special purpose for them in the world. God rules among the nations, speaks to the nations, has an active concern for the nations and decides their destinies.

### 2. The Prophetic Words were made known to the Nations.

In some instances reference is made to nations other than Israel or Judah in order to reinforce the message to those two Jewish nations. Isaiah’s pronouncements of coming destruction to Egypt are meant to stop Judah trying to look to Egypt for help when they were oppressed by Assyria. It may be that Amos’ pronouncements on Israel’s neighbours were meant similarly to reinforce the message of devastation that was to come on Israel itself. However, it is clear that God does not always make prophetic announcements over particular nations simply for the benefit of Israel. His concern is directly with those nations, even if his prophets belong to the Jews, and in a number of instances he insists that his word is actually heard by those nations concerned. The reason for this is simply that he has a considers those nations in their own right.

An obvious example of this is found in Jonah. He was sent to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, with a message to preach against its wickedness. God’s desire was to let Nineveh know its danger, and he looked for repentance. Jonah knew this, of course, but could not bear the thought that, after he had proclaimed destruction, God would show him up by having mercy on Nineveh and sparing it. So God had to fight his own prophet to make him speak to Nineveh. God’s final word to Jonah about that city was, *“Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”* (Jonah 4:11). Jonah did not want to receive that word. The truth is, however, that God was concerned for that nation, and he still remains concerned for every nation of the world. He shows it by being ready to speak to them.

Jeremiah also made the word of the LORD known to the nations of his day but in a different manner, as the following passage indicates:

*“This is what the LORD said to me: “Make a yoke out of straps and crossbars and put it on your neck. Then send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon through the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. Give them a message for their masters and say, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him”’”* Jer. 27:2-7

Thus Jeremiah had the position and profile in Judah to be able speak to all the envoys of the surrounding nations and declare to them the mind of God. Jer. 25:17 sums up his work in his own words, *“So I took the cup from the LORD’s hand, and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it”*. God did actually cause his word to the nations to be heard by them, and at the highest level of government. The failure of those nations to respond does not invalidate God’s concern for them.

### 3. God weighs and judges the Moral Behaviour of Nations.

The major work of the prophets whose writings are in the Old Testament was to warn the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah that their ways were not right before God and that severe judgements were likely to fall on them as a consequence. In other words, they brought a call to repentance - a repentance that meant a turning back to the righteous ways to which God had called them when he formed them as a nation in the wilderness. It was this same theme of warning that God sounded to the other nations: as with his own people their ways were not right. Though they were not in a covenant relationship with God, as were the Israelites, there was an expectation on God's part that they would behave in ways that were righteous. Thus, whilst the prophets did not accuse the other nations of spiritual "adultery" and "prostitution", as they did the Jewish people on account of their turning from Jehovah, they warned them severely about the inhuman behaviour they were perpetrating.

The first two chapters of the book of Amos provide a terse summary of the kind of thing that God found unacceptable among the nations which bordered Israel and Judah. Damascus (Syria) had "threshed Gilead" - probably some kind of genocide; Gaza (Philistia) "took captive whole communities and sold them" - they were into slave trading; Tyre likewise sold whole communities as slaves despite treaties to the contrary (breaking covenants); Edom indulged in the vindictive killing of Jews, "stifling all compassion"; Ammon killed pregnant women in a policy of genocide designed to gain more land; Moab desecrated the dead. These were not isolated instances but were continual offences by these nations (as is indicated by the expression, "*for three sins, even four*"). God, in pronouncing judgement through the prophet Amos, was warning those nations about previous behaviour that they knew only too well was beyond the bounds of acceptability. He expected from them some demonstration of conscience and repentance.

#### Nations without a conscience"

Amos was not the only voice speaking for God and warning these neighbouring lands. Moab's pride and its hatred of the people of God were stricken by Isaiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah spoke against the overweening pride of Tyre in its wealth and worldly political influence. Ezekiel spoke against the bitter revenge that Edom and Philistia had inflicted on Judah. These nations were arraigned by God through numerous prophets for their acts of inhumanity, and he held them guilty, for such acts were self-evidently evil.

#### 4 The Charge against the Superpowers

The charge against the superpowers was much stronger still. Assyria dominated the Middle Eastern countries for over a hundred years from 722 BC to 612 BC. The prophet Nahum spelt out graphically its criminal course of empire and listed the crimes of Nineveh (Assyria's capital): "*The city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! .... charging cavalry, flashing swords ..... many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number ..... all because of the wanton lust of a harlot ... who enslaved nations*". Assyria was an empire built on violence, cruelty, death and wanton destruction. Its objective was to gain as much booty as possible from subject peoples. It knew neither mercy nor compassion. Its behaviour was unspeakably brutal. It sought only power and prestige. The Assyrians were ultimately destroyed by the Babylonians who succeeded them as the premier superpower. Babylon held sway from c. 612 BC to 539 BC, and God's charge against her was the same as that against Assyria, namely wanton lust for power and wealth. Habakkuk speaks out God's charge against the Babylonians with great force: they were, "*ruthless and impetuous people .... they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour ... they come bent on violence ... guilty men whose own strength is their god ... destroying nations without mercy ... wealthy by extortion ... plotting the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life*" (Hab. 2:6ff).

Egypt, though dominated by Assyria and Babylon for two centuries was always a potential threat to them and of potential super-power status. Its general outlook was never very different from the other two super-powers. The same conquest and prestige were its aim, and the same cruelty and oppression were its methods. In addition, both Isaiah and Jeremiah speak of God's distaste at the idols of Egypt. Whilst not having the same guilt as the Jews with their rejection of their betrothal to Yahweh in favour of idols, Egypt's idolatry was none the less obnoxious in the sight of God and for this it was called to account. The selfish exploitation that superpowers are tempted to exercise is always noted by God. Superpowers (or empires) always come and go, stricken down after great prestige, for none ever seems able to escape the temptation to oppress and control in ways that lack justice and righteousness.

#### 5. Judgement on the Nations.

The whole purpose of the prophetic pronouncements was to point out the sin of particular nations and to call them to repentance. The desire of God was that repentance should forestall the inevitability of judgement on their sin. We have a God who, in his grace and compassion, is always seeking to bring blessing to nations. Where this is rejected, however, the outcome is death, destruction, pain, agony, exile and the like, all being described as his judgement.

It is equally clear from the prophetic writings that the nations themselves, in their wanton rejection of God's ways, were themselves to be the instruments of God's judgement in their destruction of each other. Whilst famine and plague are amongst God's armoury of judgement, so also is the sword. In the two hundred years or so that were spanned by the prophetic writings, two superpowers wielded "the sword". The first was Assyria, and the second was Babylon. Each of these in turn devastated the smaller nations of Israel and Judah and their neighbours. Their power and lust for empire became a "*day of the LORD*" for many nations - that is, a day of reckoning and judgement. However, when Assyria had wielded the sword with great devastation and effected the judgement of God on smaller nations, Assyria itself came under the sword in the form of a newly emergent Babylon, and in its turn Babylon, as Habakkuk was to learn, itself was to come under the sword wielded by yet another emergent superpower, Persia.

**The sovereignty of God is never surrendered in all these huge movements of these nations.** God called Assyria, "*the rod of my anger in whose hand is the club of my wrath*" (Is. 10:5). God spoke of Cyrus the Mede (a Persian) as "*his anointed, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations....*" (Is. 45:1). Thus were all the super-powers fulfilling the purpose of God in his very dealings with the nations of the world. It still happens today!