

GOD, THE NATIONS and CORONAVIRUS

1 An Unanswered Question

There is a widespread failure to grapple seriously with the Coronavirus theologically and biblically.

For most Christians, and that includes Christian leadership, the appearance of the virus appears to be simply “one of those things” that tend to happen. The focus of response is to pray that God will bring it to a close, grant a vaccine, comfort those afflicted and help the powers that be to handle it wisely. Whilst nothing in that response can be said to be wrong or irrelevant, it remains insufficient in that the question of why the plague has come to us has scarcely been explored. There is in fact a great reluctance to enter into that kind of discussion. But is God actually saying something to us at a deeper level that we ought to be hearing? Is he trying to say something about our nation, and our world? Are we in fact under some divine displeasure?

The bible is certainly not silent on these questions, quite the reverse. As we shall see, there are large tracts of Scripture which focus on precisely those issues. No doubt such questions will have crossed some people’s minds, but they seem only to hover vaguely in the shadows. Where those questions have been raised, the response, spoken or unspoken, has been largely along the lines that “we do not know and we cannot really tell”. So, we shrug our shoulders and press on with the immediate and practical. Many even dismiss a discussion of such questions as unhelpful.

But the questions still remain. They cannot to be ruled out as mediaeval or primitive. The idea that we might be under some sort of judgement cannot be dismissed as “a very crude response that causes a lot of unnecessary harm” as a recent Christian publication put it. On the contrary it deserves a careful biblical examination. The main reason for that is that the Bible has a very great deal to say about the question of judgement, both personal and national.

Furthermore, at a practical level, our prayer response to the pandemic is very important, and we need to know whether that prayer response should be simply petitions for such things as the government and the health service etc. or whether some sort of repentance is called for.

Repentance, however, is fundamentally a response to having sinned or incurred the divine displeasure. Traditionally this would have been the immediate response of the churches to the virus. If repentance is to have any sensible or meaningful part in the prayer response, it is very important to know whether we have in some way incurred divine displeasure in the nation.

2 Reasons for the Neglect

Even in the Evangelical Christian world this question of judgement has had minimal exposure and suffered a somewhat negative response. In two recent publications by eminent scholars, for example, the question of judgement and the Coronavirus has been raised but has been pushed to the side-line in favour of more “practical” and “positive” enquiries. Two reasons are advanced for this. First, it is maintained that we do not have the prophetic insight in our day to make any such judgement as to whether any particular “visitation” is a sign of God’s displeasure or not (we no longer have an Amos or an Isaiah). This is a highly debatable claim.

We live in an era in which we have seen some remarkable outpourings of the Holy Spirit across the world and in which the prophetic gift has been clearly at work. That gift has been evident not merely in simple personal prophetic activity but also on a much larger national canvas. Certainly, such prophetic activity must be tested (that has always been the case) but it has undoubtedly been present. The late Jonathan Sacks the Chief Rabbi, writing in *The Times* during the great Asian Tsunami, denied such prophetic gifting existed that could enable us to describe that visitation as a judgement. That was understandable since he spoke as a Jewish observer for whom the “prophets” belonged solely to history. A Christian observer, however, must come from a very

different perspective since we live in the age of the Holy Spirit. We can have, and indeed very much need to have some insight into what God is doing in his world.

Second, we are warned that the whole question of the relationship of any particular sin and judgement is more complex in Scripture than we might at first imagine. Both authors refer to the classic case of Job. They point out that we are told that Job was “righteous” despite the disasters which overtook him. Those disasters were both natural and humanly inflicted, and his “comforters”, taking the prevailing stance, insisted that in view of what had happened to him he must be under judgement for his sins. But God stood by Job in his protestation of innocence and roundly rebuked his “comforters”: Job was right and they were wrong.

We are warned, therefore, to be very careful and not jump too readily to judgemental conclusions. We are also reminded that Jesus himself rebuked his own disciples who, taking a similar stance to Job’s comforters, wanted to know whose sin had caused the condition of a man born blind. (Jn 19:1ff) Jesus told them it was not caused by any person’s sin and went on to heal the man “*for the glory of God*”.

3 The Biblical Emphasis on National Judgement

This may be a salutary warning, but what both writers are bound to admit is that there are biblical passages that quite clearly do point to the fact that there are times when nations were very definitely brought under God’s judgement on account of their sins.

It is impossible to claim that natural or man-made affliction is never seen in Scripture as a national judgement (or personal judgement for that matter). If it is wise to be careful about ascribing judgement to sin, it is equally wise to be careful of the fact that it may actually be true, and that in such situations it is vital to recognise its truth. It is there for our admonition and benefit. It is certainly not something to downplay.

Whilst we could question whether it is legitimate to apply the story of Job to the issue of national judgement except in terms of a very general caution, what we cannot question is the sheer volume and clarity of biblical writing that deals with this issue of national judgement. There is much that makes very clear to us that God does bring judgements on nations, that these judgements are both natural and human in shape, and that they are the consequence of human wrongdoing.

This fact of the widespread pervasiveness of the subject in Scripture needs to be stressed. The prophetic literature of the Old Testament is very considerable indeed.

To begin with, we have the large contribution of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel along with the so-called minor prophets which together form a further substantial contribution. Those prophetic books in fact together make up over a quarter of the Old Testament, and the major underlying theme of all of them is precisely the theme of national judgment. We come to understand through them exactly why it was that the Jewish nation in both its Southern and Northern parts was brought to destruction and exile by the two great superpowers of the day, Assyria, and Babylon. It was all on account of sin in the nation. The people were under the judgement of God.

It is worth taking note of the fact that whilst that judgement was actually taking place the Jews refused to face up to what was happening and would not countenance the idea of judgement: they rejected the prophets who were trying to enlighten them. But as a consequence of the exile in Babylon they were eventually brought to a profound recognition that God had indeed judged their nation. This truth was so impressed upon them by what had actually happened to them in exile that there was a complete adoption of the words of the prophets as part of their Scripture. It is striking to think, for example, that the collection of Jeremiah’s prophecies of coming judgement which had been contemptuously and literally burned in the fire by a Jewish king were, after the exile, collected together once again and enshrined as God-given truth.

This theme of national judgement is not confined to the Prophets, however. Most of the Old Testament consists of a history of the Jewish nation. Starting with the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the promised land, it traces in some detail that history through its early settlement in Canaan, through its “judges” and its early kings, through its splitting into two kingdoms after Solomon and the two hundred years of rivalry between those kingdoms.

If there is any consistent biblical “historical philosophy” underlying this lengthy period it would be very simply that when the nation sought its God and was obedient to his commands, the nation was blessed, but when it chased after idols, neglected its God, and ignored his commandments, then it came under the judgements of God. Again, and again the biblical story points out this simple moral.

The nation started off in fact with a covenant from God, given at Sinai, in which God promised blessing if it walked in his ways, but warned that trouble in all sorts of ways would come if it strayed from his paths. This was God’s nation and this is how God would deal with them as a nation. This was a covenant with a very clear choice between blessing or judgement. The great prophets of the time of the exile were deeply aware of this covenant. They were also deeply aware that the Israelites were in dire danger of judgement for their behaviour and disregard for the covenant.

4. The Inclusion of Gentile Nations in the Prophetic Warnings

One of the most important features of this formidable prophetic literature is that the prophetic utterances of judgement were not solely directed at the Jews.

What the prophets had to say about judgement on the Jewish nations they also proclaimed on the contemporary surrounding nations. The most obvious example of this is found in the very first chapter of the book of Amos where severe prophecies of judgement against the nations surrounding Israel are sounded even before Amos begins to prophesy against the Jews. Those nations are listed: Philistia, Syria, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. God reproves their behaviour and threatens them with destruction.

We also find that the three largest of the prophetic books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, have a total of no less than twenty-three chapters entirely devoted to the coming judgements on nations other than the Jewish nations. Three of the smaller prophetic books, Jonah, Nahum, and Obadiah do not mention Israel or Judah at all, but deal exclusively with Assyria and Edom. Very significantly the great “superpowers” of that era, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon all find themselves rebuked by God and under the threat of eventual destruction.

What we have here, therefore, is a large biblical panorama of God’s dealings with the nations of the world. He raises them up and he puts them down, and he judges them in accordance with their behaviour. We have a global perspective of God, his judgements, and the nations. This is not just a matter of historical interest.

We are being given living principles for a living world. It is essential that we give attention to the message that is being spelt out so clearly and at such length in these chapters, and especially so in our own generation: God judges nations.

5. The Purpose of the Prophetic Ministry

The intention of God in sending the prophets to the Jewish and surrounding nations was not to bring destruction and judgement. They were sent as “watchmen” whose job it was to warn of the dangers that lay ahead and to show the nations how to avoid such catastrophes. **Far from being messengers of “doom”, they were in fact messengers pointing out a pathway leading to peace and blessing.**

That pathway, however, was one which demanded repentance and a complete change of lifestyle, for the lifestyle of the nations was one in which the living God had been dethroned in favour of idols and in which basic moral behaviour was ignored. That lifestyle, and nothing less than that, had to change if judgement was to be averted.

It is precisely at this point that the strictures on the moral behaviour of the nations which the prophets brought from God for their generation become relevant for our own society. When we look at the prophets, we are actually looking into a mirror in which we can see reflected the true nature of our own moral condition. And we can see where moral failure is likely to lead. That is why the prophetic books are part of Scripture. They warned then, and they still warn now. They are not negative “doom” books but positive recipes for blessing. They are there “for our learning” rather than for our condemnation. Their message is so clear that we ought not to need a special prophetic gift in order to see what God is saying to the nations. It is only when nations (and people) are so spiritually blind that they simply are unable to see where their actions are leading that they need a “prophet” to underline what is obvious.

6. The Failings of the Gentile Nations

What, then, were the moral failures that the prophets exposed which brought on those biblical nations such severe judgements?

When Amos arraigned the nations surrounding Israel, he referred to the persistency of their sins and enumerated them. He focused on their gross humanitarian crimes: Tyre and Gaza (Philistia) both sold whole communities into slavery, and Edom gladly received them; Edom viciously attacked Israel and deliberately slaughtered any captured womenfolk – a form of genocide; Ammon likewise “*ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend its borders*”; Moab callously desecrated the dead remains of the Edomites. It was for these persistent crimes that Amos prophesied that war and destruction would come on those nations. Isaiah followed Amos with the same strictures on those same nations.

Other prophets went on to proclaim that God’s judgement of Assyria would follow on account of its lust for empire. This was vividly described by Nahum who, prophesying about Nineveh the Assyrian capital, said, “*With an overwhelming flood (God) will make an end of Nineveh*”... “*that city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims ... who enslaved nations*”. Isaiah castigated the pride of another “superpower”, Babylon: it had shown the “*arrogance of the haughty, the pride of the ruthlessstriking down people with unceasing blows, and relentless aggression*”. Habakkuk described Babylon as “*a ruthless and impetuous people ... a law unto themselves ... bent on violence ... arrogant and never at rest ... greedy as the grave ... making itself wealthy by extortion*”, and he pronounced, “*The cup (of judgement) is coming round to you*”.

Clearly there was an expectation on God’s part that those nations should have known that what they were doing was evil. Their blindness was due to the gross idolatry of their religious culture which had nothing to say about their moral obligations, but, on the contrary, actually encouraged the cruelty and inhumanity of their actions.

We might well consider, however, that we as a nation cannot be considered guilty of such humanitarian crimes and that we are thankfully free of such behaviour. That may or may not be the case. It is doubtful if we are as guiltless as we think: contemporary unlimited abortion, for example, is something to be seriously considered. But if we take a wider view of the world as we know it, gross humanitarian crimes are to be found in many nations and amongst many of their leaders. No wonder “*His judgements are in all the world*”! (Ps. 105:7)

The world was “flooded” for its wickedness in the days of Noah, and violent Sodom and Gomorrah were swallowed up by great earth movements before ever Israel became a nation. It is important that we have this wide view of the world, and also that we have a long historical perspective of its

nations and leaders. “*His eyes watch the nations*” (Ps. 66:7) has always been true and remains true in our times.

7 The Failings of the Jewish Nations

The twin nations of the Jews at Amos’ time would certainly have thought that they were free of the gross humanitarian sins of which their neighbour nations were so manifestly guilty. But they too found themselves arraigned before God.

They were wilfully ignorant of just how far their own moral fibre had weakened over the forty or fifty years that they had lived in unparalleled peace and prosperity. Their religion may have retained its outward rituals, but the moral demands of godly living which were enshrined in the covenant that underlay that religion had been completely lost sight of. In its place there was widespread idolatry with all the evil practices which it encouraged.

Those nations may have named the name of Jehovah but their practices were thoroughly pagan. The more we dig into the nature of their society the more we see how much a reflection it is of our own nation, which has rapidly been losing its Judeo-Christian heritage and its moral undergirding. This is not only true of our country but of the whole of the “western world” of today.

It was to those nations and society which, like our own, had long possessed a knowledge of God and his commandments that God sent his prophets with severe words of coming judgements. It is when we look into this “mirror” that we realise the need to take stock of where we are. In a very real sense those prophetic books which reveal God’s dealings with these two Jewish nations are still acting as “living prophets” to our own nation, for God is consistent in his dealings. God means us to take note of the Scriptures.

Amos led the way in spelling out what was amiss in Jewish society. He began his prophetic work in a very vibrant, luxurious, and prosperous Samaria (the Southern Jewish kingdom).

A powerful king still reigned, trade was booming and the sophistication of refined luxury was very evident everywhere, except with the poor. It was a consumer age. Everywhere he saw fine new buildings, spacious new homes, exotic food, and drink. Everything spoke of the wealth created by unhampered trade with other nations. It was a society very much like our own western society.

Below the wealth and prosperity, however, there were some very disturbing features. In a terse phrase Amos put his finger on one of them, “*Father and son use the same girl*”. He was referring to the temple prostitution that was part of the idolatrous practices of the day. Fertility cults openly encouraged such prostitution. It was part of the religious process of making sure of good harvests. When religious rites encourage such behaviour, sex rapidly spreads and becomes unbridled. Promiscuity and even perversion quickly follows. Sexual behaviour was at a very low ebb in Samaria and tolerated.

We need to be aware that the permission to be “free” about sex does not always require some hideous idolatry. It can equally come when a prevailing philosophy or world view is of the “enlightened” opinion that so-called taboos which restrict sex to a committed relationship are to be jettisoned in favour of the “right” to enjoy sex just as and when we see fit.

It is very disturbing to think that for sixty years (since the notorious change in the 1960s) there has been a continuous downward trend of sexual licence in our own nation and that we are so awash in it that we are scarcely aware of its depth.

Amos also took note of the greed and love of money (“*the root of all evil*”) that motivated so many and produced a vast gulf between the very rich and the poor. Unfettered trade led to the worship of Mammon, an ugly idol. It led also to dishonest business practices and widespread corruption. Amos noted that there was also corruption even among the judges. Violence was endemic in

society. Habakkuk, who a century later in the southern kingdom of the Jews was the counterpart of Amos, prayed desperately in a similar situation, *“Why, Lord, do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds”*. Hosea, a contemporary of Amos, verbalised starkly God’s view of the nation, *“The Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed”*. (Hosea 4:1-2)

Here, then, in this large volume of Scripture we have a wide mirror into which we can look and reflect on our own situation nationally. It tells us of the consequences of pursuing a godless course.

In doing so it calls us to make a careful examination of our own national behaviour and a sober judgement on it. It is no different from other parts of Scripture which provide us with a mirror by which we are intended to keep a check on our own personal behaviour. We are expected to make assessments and act accordingly.

In one sense we do not need a special “prophetic gift” to engage in this. This is simply normal Christian activity. This is why we read the Bible, to make sure we are living as we should. What we do need, of course, is a spiritually alert mind, a mind in tune with the Spirit of God. There are times when the Spirit particularly jolts us and makes our conscience burn as we read Scripture or hear it preached, but we should be able to recognise simply with a spiritually alert mind that we have undoubtedly reached a critical point at this time in the nation, and that things are clearly getting worse rather than better.

We may need some sort of “prophetic” jolt in our own generation to help us in our assessment of how serious the present situation is, as indeed Amos’ generation did, but it seems very clear that “the writing is on the wall”. Indeed, it has been getting increasingly clear as this present century has progressed.

8 The Failure to Take Stock

The Israelites in the time of Amos did not have a spiritually alert mind. In Amos 4:6-12 the prophet rebukes them because they simply had not been listening to God for a long time. He reminds them of occasions in their recent past of famine (*“empty stomachs”*); of harvests blighted by lack of rain and of a gross lack of drinking water; of blight and mildew striking their gardens and vineyards; of locusts devouring their fig and olive trees; of plagues (*“like those of Egypt”*); of young men killed with their horses in battle (*“your nostrils filled with the stench of your camps”*). All these afflictions they had experienced but had never associated them with God nor recognised them as warnings from him that all was not well. They had *“not been listening”*, and they *“had not returned to their God”* in any penitence.

This is a highly instructive and highly relevant passage particularly at the present time when we face the Coronavirus pandemic. In the first place Amos took stock of all these different afflictions and prophetically attributed their happening to God.

God had been speaking to the nation through them; he had been saying to the nation that he was wanting it to return to Himself, to his word and to his laws. He had been speaking to it in the language of judgement, but the people and their leaders simply did not understand why these things had happened. They should have known God was speaking because these afflictions had been exactly what God in his covenant had warned would come if the nation left his paths. They should not have needed a “prophetic voice” to interpret God’s visitations on the nation. The Israelites, however, did not hear them as warnings. They were spiritually deaf, their minds were on other things, and so they did not return to their God or acknowledge him. Neither would they listen to Amos.

Amos was, of course, by no means the only prophet to make the connection between natural disasters and national sin. All the prophets made that connection, because all of them lived in the knowledge of the covenant God had made. It was perfectly natural for Amos in his prophetic thinking to recognise “*plagues – like those of Egypt*” as an example of God’s judgements. The “plagues of Egypt” which Moses had invoked were extraordinarily varied, ranging from flies and frogs to the pollution of the very waters of the Nile, which was at the heart of Egypt’s economy. Those plagues even included a deadly affliction which took away Egypt’s “firstborn”. In addition to those that were seen in Egypt, Amos would also have been keenly aware of the different “plagues” that afflicted his nation throughout its rebellious past history.

Certainly, an affliction like Coronavirus, had he witnessed it, would have been immediately marked as a “plague” in his understanding. He would have found it quite incomprehensible that anyone should have any doubts that God was at work in the coming of such a plague. It would be spiritually foolish to dismiss his understanding as merely the superstitious thinking of a by-gone age: he spoke as a prophet of God and with divine recognition that God was at work. God was not indulging an unenlightened superstition on the part of his prophet; he was revealing truth.

There is nothing in Scripture to warrant any thought in our day that God has superseded this way of speaking by his judgements. In our day we think almost entirely in rational terms and understanding, but we cannot eliminate the action of God and his divine interventions in natural events, even if we can offer human explanations for them. Our sophisticated generation is as slow to grasp this truth as it is to grasp the truth of God Himself.

In the second place, Amos 4 teaches us that we need to take stock therefore of what is or has been happening in our nation which might be indicating divine displeasure. What troubles have we seen or are seeing?

Genuine faith in a Creator God demands that we recognise God to be active and “hands on” in the very flow of history and its events. He speaks through his word but he also speaks through his creation; and he speaks through the historical events of personal and national life.

When Amos spoke prophetically of judgement to come on the Israelites, he was able to say to them that the evidence for it already lay all around them in what God had already been doing in their nation. Do we have any evidence of this kind in our times? This is an important question to ask, and to give careful thought to. This Scripture passage encourages us to ask it. The answer seems to be a resounding “Yes!” **In fact the evidence presents us with a “Wake-up!” Call.**

9 Today’s World

Taking our bearings from Amos, the presence of the present pandemic has to be seen as a major indicator as to where the world in general, and our own nation in particular, stands before God. We are under clear and severe reproof. But the pandemic is not a lone indicator.

For some twenty years there has been what I have described elsewhere as a “countdown to chaos” afflicting many nations, and which has been getting steadily worse.

To illustrate this, it is instructive to look at the U.S.A. over those years, especially since our own nation is in so many ways a smaller image of American society. That nation has been pivotal for the western world for nearly a century now, both shaping its culture in every way and ensuring its survival. Having a crucial role from the First World War onwards, it assumed an even greater role during the Second World War, and afterwards when for several decades it faced down a nuclear threat from Russia.

As the U.S.S.R. eventually began to disintegrate after economic failure and the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the U.S.A. stood as the proud and undisputed leading world nation. Its pride was all too evident. Its economic supremacy was enshrined in the World Trade Centre buildings, towering

over New York. It seemed to some of its leading political thinkers that its great future work now was to disseminate the democratic ideal and its values across the world. That ideal had finally triumphed over the communist ideology. The outlook looked very positive.

All this, however, was to change rapidly as the new millennium arrived. The World Trade Centre was totally destroyed by terrorists and the President was lured into an all-out war on terror that brought about an attack on Iraq. The intent was regime-change, but the thinking and planning was utterly naïve, and the war was an expensive disaster in every way, not least in the ongoing legacy of violence it released in the Middle East.

Before the first decade had passed the U.S.A. was also involved in a major banking and economic disaster, largely the outcome of corruption by leading financiers, and which had international repercussions. It was a decade of expensive confusion and chaos, and significantly of loss of prestige in the world's eyes. Pride had been dealt a severe blow.

As the second decade of the new century drew to a close America was witnessing a scarcely believable onslaught on the norms of the nation's democratic institutions from the very Presidency itself. At the same time, division and violence has escalated on the streets.

Moreover, in the background lay the extraordinary growth and threat of a resurgent China with which the U.S.A. has found itself in economic conflict. These troubles were not, of course, a series of natural disasters but of human disasters. Whether natural or human, however, disasters of this kind are a reflection of God's dealings with a nation.

If we turn to the United Kingdom, we find that it was itself caught up in the American foreign policy disasters in the first decade of the century and was eventually racked with confusions and bitter divisions of its own as our own constitution came under threat of tearing itself apart on account of the Brexit referendum dispute.

We need to recognise that it is into this kind of scenario that the pandemic has made its entrance, causing much more division and confusion, and bringing a great many more severe economic problems. **We need the simple wisdom to see that this saga of events is the modern version of the afflictions which Amos listed for the Jews in his own day. We would be wise to take his warning – we have not been listening to God.**

10. Conclusion

The Coronavirus has not happened by accident. It has all the hall marks of a warning. It comes at the end of some twenty years when God has brought to us increasing problems of confusion and trouble, political, social, and economic.

All these problems have now been exacerbated by the virus which has affected every part of our national life. It is right for us to concentrate on finding vaccines and to do everything we can to bring relief and comfort wherever it is needed. It is right for us to pray for the mercy of God in the midst.

The real tragedy is that as a nation we have lost touch with God and our national Christian heritage. We have lost the solid moral foundations which underpinned our society. Indeed, intellectually, and socially we have despised our spiritual heritage and turned to "other gods". We no longer know the meaning of the word "repentance", nor the desperate need for it.

However, the virus is a world-wide phenomenon, and the warnings of God are for the whole world. We need to take note of that, for God is not simply concerned with our own nation but with his entire world. The times in which we live are threatening times. We need to cling very close to God. We have the privilege and responsibility of praying mercy into the judgements (see following article).