

Thoughts from Alexandria, Egypt about the Bible



By J.Paul Reno

I once had the privilege to speak at the fifteenth annual Baptist seminar for pastors and Christian workers in Egypt and other nearby countries. Due to some last-minute problems the conference was held in Alexandria, Egypt, instead of Cairo. Circumstances were such that I had plenty of time to observe and consider several issues, including one which I have pursued to a degree since I have returned.

In Isaiah chapter nineteen we see quite a bit regarding the land of Egypt. I want to look at the last two verses of the chapter, verses twenty-four and twenty-five.

“In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land:

Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel Mine inheritance.”

This is quite a blessing. There is something to consider in the phrase, “blessed be Egypt My people” It is a real rallying cry for the believers in the time of persecution in their churches. They refer to it often. If it is used from time to time in a message it will bring a smile in the midst of their suffering to realize that God has such for them. They do not consider that this has been fulfilled in any time in their history. They do not consider that this is something that is contemporary or even existent today. They see this as a prophecy yet to be fulfilled.

Certainly, they were not under God's blessing in Isaiah's day; nor since, as they have been under the heel of the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman conquerors that followed. I do not think they could be called the people of God when they were under their idolatrous Pharaohs, various periods of self-government, nor the Muslim control that they have known for close to 1300 years. The words, “Blessed be Egypt My people,” just do not fit. They have not been under a blessing and they have not been God's people in the times of history, and there are not many of God's people in the land at this point.

These believers were gathered together at this seminar and they had proved they were willing to lose their homes, families, health, jobs, liberty, and life if need be just to see fellow Egyptians become the

people of God. One of the men who was ordained in the ministry came under the recommendation of having been stoned, beaten, and imprisoned for the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was part of the recommendation that he could be counted on to stand faithful when things became difficult-- he had already proven himself. Not many in the United States could have such testified of them for their ordination.

Alexandria was a seaport city of over three million people. It was founded, of course, by the Greek emperor Alexander the Great about 32 B.C. (There is some dispute on the date.) It soon became the key city for shipping, education, philosophy, religion, and politics. It was the home of Euclid and many other scholars. Its lighthouse of about six hundred feet was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Their library contained over one million volumes. Alexandria became the second most important city in the Roman empire. Here the Septuagint was said to have been produced. There was a very large Jewish community here. According to Acts 18:24, it was the home of Apollos. Two of the ships for Paul's voyages were from Alexandria. The Alexandrians were one of the groups disputing with Stephen in Acts chapter six. The city was deeply rooted in its Greek heritage and pagan philosophy, especially of Plato. Philo, a Jewish philosopher born in 20 B.C. was the developer of Jewish Platonism. He used allegories to interpret the Scripture, calling it "the method of the Greek mysteries." Tradition would have us to believe that Mark took the gospel to Alexandria and died while ministering there. Clement, a philosopher who taught Christian Platonism, came there approximately A.D.200 as the head of the Catechetical School. He strongly believed in divine inspiration to the human rational soul as part of the scripture. It has been written that in his soteriology baptism is decidedly more prominent than redemption by the blood of Christ. Very characteristic is the presentation of salvation as an educational process. (Mr. Hort of the infamous Westcott and Hort, said this about Clement, "In Clement, Christian theology in some important respects, reaches its highest point. There was no one whose vision of what the faith of Jesus Christ was intended to do for mankind was so full or so true." This is high praise for someone who taught salvation by baptism and an

educational process as well as personal divine inspiration apart from the Scriptures! That will tell you how Mr. Hort thought when you see who he honored as the highest understanding of what it meant to trust in Jesus.) Oregin was a student of Clement in Alexandria, and soon after became the head of the Catechetical School. He also was fully given over to the allegorical approach, not only to the Scriptures, but also of history. This is what he had to say about history, "History is compared to a ladder of which the literal facts are the lowest rungs." He felt the same way about the Scriptures, yet is called one of the "Church Fathers." He believed that hell was only corrective to produce purity, and that even the devil might find salvation when the evil in him was purged out. He denied the fall of man, as well as depravity. It is said that Westcott, the partner of Hort, was in general sympathy with both Clement and Oregin. Thus Alexandria helped sow both the doctrinal and philosophical errors that led to the underlying errors in our modern English Bible.

It was also in Alexandria that the so-called oldest manuscripts seemed to have been produced with their great variations from the received text, as well as from each other. Thus the city added the shame of altering the Old Testament text in the Septuagint and the New Testament text in the Greek copies, to the doctrinal and philosophical foundation for how one should approach the Holy Scriptures. It was some city to preach in!

What did it cost Egypt, and especially Alexandria, to have so treated God's pure words? In A.D.641 it was conquered by the Muslims and has been in poverty ever since. The lighthouse is gone. The library is destroyed, the volumes burned. Alexandria was reduced to a town of only five or six thousand by the early 1800s. Now, the Christians are persecuted. Church buildings are sometimes burned or simply taken over by the government. Preachers are jailed. Mosques are built and supported with government money.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us Jesus upholds "*all things by the word of His power.*" Perhaps sin against the Word of His power might lead to the breakdown of other things otherwise held up. As the Word is rejected and replaced we would expect a general breakdown to occur. What has happened in England, Scotland, Germany, and the Netherlands

over the centuries? What is happening in the USA, Canada, Australia, and South Africa today? Such thoughts ran through my mind as I sat in sessions that required police guards for our very safety. I thought also of the former USSR. The believers there have taken a clear stand for the pure Word of God. When the Living Bible was translated into Russian and smuggled into churches they responded by saying, "Don't send us any more of this! Send us the pure Word of God!" Since then there has been a change of government and greater freedom for the gospel. Here is seen that the rise and fall of nations is tied to their treatment of the purity of the Scriptures.

One of the questions asked in Alexandria was, "Why do you have so many different versions of the Bible?" When we witness to the Muslims this causes a major problem. They question, 'If Bible translations contradict each other how can you believe the Bible? The Qua-ran always says the same thing.'" I heard a number of variations of this question in my time there. I thought of those greedy publishers who would corrupt the Scriptures and even print contradicting versions just to make money! Their consciences are taught by profit. They do not care if they keep the lost away from the truth by their own hypocrisy. One of the young Egyptian men told me of a friend that he had been witnessing to who had been an exchange student in the United States. A well-meaning Christian here had taken him to a Christian bookstore to purchase a Bible for him as a going-away present. The Muslim youth was baffled by the variety of versions and decided that a book translated in so many different ways could have no definite truths worthy of his consideration. Of course, the Christian gloried in the variety from which he could choose what to believe. This Muslim young person now mocked the Egyptian believer who told that story.

While these sobering thoughts were in my mind, thoughts far more encouraging were intermingled. This group of Christian leaders had refused to have anything to do with the modern, new translation project of the Arabic Bible. When they were approached about the more modern version, they refused. In fact, they further threatened a permanent boycott of the Bible Society if they would ever print anything else but the right version of the Bible. They would not buy

anything ever from them again if they so much as once printed anything wrong. That takes courage! They showed an unusual openness to the word of God. They followed the literal interpretation of the Scriptures. They desired to receive and practice whatever was taught in the Scriptures. They seemed to be the very opposite of their forefathers. Perhaps they had learned a lesson that other nations should study.

I tried to prepare myself for this trip by learning what I could about Egypt from the Scriptures, tour guides, travel books, and several other sources. One of the things from the Scriptures that seemed to be missing from the travel literature was the fish farm industry. It should have been sizable enough to see and important enough to write about.

In Isaiah 19:10, God speaks of how he will judge Egypt. He says, *“And they shall be broken in the purposes thereof, all that make sluices and ponds for fish.”* That is an industry big enough for God to note that He is going to judge it and the people involved in it. But as I looked through other literature, I saw nothing about this topic. When I asked about the fish farms the response was, “What fish farms?” I answered, “The ones Isaiah wrote about!” This created an unusual excitement. There are very few fish farms in Egypt today, and what are there are of the most elementary type. The breeders were thrilled to hear that God spoke of fish ponds in their country. That is a little hard for us to understand. If there were a prophecy that a certain industry was going to be judged in America and that industry did not exist, we would know that something was going to have to happen. The Egyptians wanted to know how to set these fish ponds up! They were asking a fellow pastor how much land and how many laborers would be needed to operate them? What kind of fish would be put in? Within ten days they had a committee of believers to investigate the possibilities. They had even spotted a couple of pieces of land that they might be able to lease or buy. They asked what information and technical details could be gathered in the United States, translated, and sent to them. There were several engineers in the group to whom I tried to explain, through an Arabic interpreter, what the word *sluices* meant. Was this the explanation of the way to aerate the water? Was

this the way to circulate the water from pond to pond? Or was this for growing trout that need long, narrow raceways for proper development? I had never given much thought to sluices being connected with growing fish. In fact, I had not given very much thought to those involved in growing fish until I went to Egypt! I just wanted to see the fish farms! When I arrived at home, I decided to check in other Bible translations to see if they threw any further light on the technicalities of fish farming. I was in for a shock! We will look first at what I found in the New King James Version that “does not change any of the words, thoughts, doctrines, or meanings.” The NKJV says, “And its foundations shall be broken. All who make wages shall be troubled of soul.”

The ESV says, “Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved.”

The NRSV is translated, “Its weavers will be dismayed, and all who work for wages will be grieved.” Not only was there no help on the sluices, but the scholars had clarified fish farms as wage-earners. Now, how are they to build wage-earners in Egypt?

I decided to look a little further. I thought perhaps the Living Bible, with its explanations that even children can understand, could help explain these fish ponds. “Great men and small--all will be crushed and broken.” I am sure that the children think of a fish pond every time they read that!

The NIV says, “The workers in cloth will be dejected, and all the wage earners will be sick at heart.”

The New World Translation puts it this way, “And her weavers must be crushed, and all the wage workers grieved in soul.”

The New English Bible said, “Egypt's sinners shall be downcast, and all her artisans sick at heart.” By now, I was sick at heart! How could they do this to my Bible? Where had the sluices and fish ponds gone?

The New Jerusalem Bible says, “The weavers dismayed, all the workmen dejected.”

I was desperate so I also looked in the New American Catholic Bible 1961, “The spinners shall be crushed, all the hired laborers shall be despondent.”

In these translations we have weavers and spinners instead of fish farms! It appears that they took material from verse nine to recreate verse ten, similar to the way that they stole I John 5:7 from our Bible. I noticed that the Jehovah's Witnesses, conservative scholars, Roman Catholics, and liberals were all joining together to dispose of Egypt's fish pond industry!

The textual word for sluices is only used twice in the Old Testament. The word for farm is used only once, but a similar word is used nine times. Eight of those nine are referring to ponds, pools, or standing water. What possible reasons would our modern translators have for such sloppy translation? Is it ignorance of the old language? Is it disregard for accuracy? Is it a fear of ridicule for following the old paths? Is it rationalizing of a subject they do not know anything about? Did they, not knowing anything about the fish ponds and sluices, decide that they could not exist? Was it a lack of confidence in the prophetic preciseness of Scripture? The original translators allowed that God could develop an industry and used language that would not be “en vogue” until centuries later. They did not have to make changes according to their own limited knowledge.

Consider that the Arabic Bible follows the translation of the NASB which says, “And the pillars of Egypt will be crushed; All the hired laborers will be grieved in soul.” This industry was hidden from the very people it was prophesied about.

The Jewish Scriptures only refer to a pre-Aswan Dam time in Egypt's history. When the Russians built the Aswan Dam, the flooding of the Nile became a thing of the past. Before the dam was built, the Egyptians would build pools in the flood plains to trap the water with the fish during the flooding so that they would have the fish after the Nile River went back down. With the end of the flooding this is no longer practical. Any of the modern versions that do speak anything about a fish pond in the verse we were looking at, all refer to this ancient practice. They were translated according to history instead of according to the text.

In Isaiah 19:10 God prophesied of an industry to replace the ancient ways of growing fish in Egypt. Though modern scholars could not see ahead, God protected this truth in our King James Bible.

Though differing in the Arabic Bible, our Egyptian brethren had a confidence in our KJB, and they planned to act on it! A new day is dawning if there is a confidence in the literal interpretation of our Bible. It would be a different Alexandria than the one of history. If this is the typical response, it may lead to the day when we would well be able to say, “Blessed be Egypt, My people!”