



THE MIDDLE EAST AND BIBLE PROPHECY

THE Middle East is in turmoil - civil wars, brutal insurgency, millions of refugees fleeing to Turkey, Jordan and Europe, bombings on the streets of Paris and Brussels, Palestinian statehood unresolved, Gaza rockets, the Intifada continuing with stabbings on the streets of Jerusalem. Russia warns that the Middle East is bringing the world to the brink of World War Three.

WHY THE MIDDLE EAST?

But the Middle East has not always been so important. The modern history of the area can be divided into three phases:

1. The first phase began in the nineteenth century when Britain, France and Russia developed their imperialist ambitions. Whoever controlled the Middle East controlled the trade routes to India. What became known as the 'Eastern Question' was the policy of Britain to prop up Turkey as a buffer against Russian ambitions to obtain a Mediterranean seaport. The First World War saw the end of this phase, with Britain and France replacing Turkey as protectors of Palestine, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria.
2. The second phase occupied the period between World War One and World War Two. To understand what happened then we need to recognize the new factor which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century - Zionism, the movement to create a homeland for Jews in Palestine. In 1917 the Balfour Declaration committed the British Government to support the creation of a national home for the Jews in Palestine. The Declaration also said that nothing should be done to infringe the rights of the Palestinians. Yet ancient conflicts reawakened as Arab as well as Jewish nationalism grew. Today many Arab

- organizations still consider the Balfour Declaration to be “a crime against the Palestinian people”.
3. The League of Nations after the First World War gave Britain the Mandate over Palestine which she held until 1948. On May 14, 1948 Israel declared itself an independent State, and was formally recognized by the United Nations. So began the third phase and the bitter conflicts which have continued ever since. What made the Middle East so important globally over this period is that the world's economies have been heavily dependent upon Middle East oil and gas.

Looking back over this history it is easy to identify the factors which led to the present situation. But in the nineteenth century who could have predicted that out of the conflicting ambitions of the world powers would come the State of Israel - the most troubled and potentially explosive place on earth? One noted historian wrote in 1981:

“A century ago geo-politicians could have foreseen the continued colonization by Russia and the United States of the empty lands to the East and West; *but who could have foreseen that far more astounding colonization in the eastern Mediterranean, the creation of the State of Israel?* We may like it or not ... we may deplore it as the last western crusade, the latest venture of western imperialism, seeking not trade but settlement ... but we cannot deny that *it is an extraordinary historical achievement.*” (Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and Imagination*)

But Bible students did dare to predict what would happen - and got it right! Take the following example written by a Christadelphian in 1849, long before Zionism was born:

"The restoration of Israel is a most important feature in the divine economy. It is indispensable to the setting up of the kingdom of God ... the restoration of the Jews is a work of time, and will require between fifty and sixty years to accomplish ... There are two stages in the restoration of the Jews, the first is before the battle of Armageddon; and the second after it ... The pre- adventual colonization of Palestine (i.e., the settlement of the land before the return of Christ) will be on purely political principles: and the Jewish colonists will return in unbelief of the Messiahship of Jesus." (J. Thomas)

How could a Bible student be so confident that the land, which was for centuries a wilderness of little consequence. would become the most important place on earth?

THE LAND OF PROMISE

From the very first book of the Bible the Middle East has been at the forefront of God's plan for mankind. More than 3,000 years ago, God called Abraham to leave his home in one of the great Middle Eastern cities of antiquity, Ur of the Chaldees, to wander in Palestine as a nomad. Abraham obeyed because he believed and trusted God. He was to become the father of both Jewish and Arab nations.

God made promises to Abraham which were at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:8 that God “preached before the gospel unto Abraham”! Those promises were about the nation of Israel, the land of Palestine and about one descendant in particular. God would give the land of Palestine to Abraham as an everlasting possession. The promise is contained in the words: “All the land which thou seest. to thee will I give it. and to thy seed for ever” (Genesis 13:15). This promise is yet to be fulfilled. Abraham is dead and buried. How could he inherit the land “for ever”?

It is at this point that we have to realize that the fulfilment of the promises rests upon the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, though Son of God, was also the descendant of Abraham through Mary his mother. He was the promised “seed”, or descendant. of whom God spoke to Abraham. It was the work of the Lord Jesus Christ to make possible the blessing of the forgiveness of sins by which men and women may have everlasting life. The Bible teaches that Abraham, because of his faith in God's promises, including the future “seed”, received forgiveness of sins and will be raised from the dead. He will then be given everlasting life so that he may inherit the land of promise “for ever”.

The New Testament sets Abraham before us as the great example of how to please God - by believing what God has promised. Through Jesus Christ those same promises are today open to all people who share the faith of Abraham, whether they be Jews or Gentiles:

“so then they which be of faith *are* blessed *with* faithful Abraham.” (Galatians 3:9)

“And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”(3:29)

THE VISION OF THE PROPHETS

After Abraham came the prophets of Israel and Judah who received visions of future glory; visions of the time when God's Son and appointed King, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule the earth in righteousness from Jerusalem, his capital city. Here is one example written 700 years before Christ:

“out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem ... nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (*Isaiah 2:3,4*)

There are many other similar prophecies which make up the Bible teaching of the kingdom of God on earth. It was the good news of this kingdom which the Lord Jesus preached. During his ministry he demonstrated the way in which we can enter the kingdom of God, and he made that way open through his death and resurrection. All who believe and are baptized into Christ and seek to follow their Master have the glorious prospect of an eternal place in that kingdom. Not even death can stand in the way because when Christ returns to establish the kingdom he will raise his followers - including Abraham - from the dead.

But in AD 70, just forty years after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ, Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, was destroyed by the Roman armies. The vision of the prophets seemed shattered.

As the centuries rolled on, Palestine came under the rule of the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, and the Turks. For the most part the land lay neglected and waste. The Jews were banned from Jerusalem, scattered throughout the world and subjected to brutal and remorseless persecution. To many it seemed that God's purpose with Israel had been abandoned in favour of the Christian world. Church theologians developed the doctrine that the Church itself was the kingdom of God on earth and that the Pope was God's appointed ruler.

But these long years of despair for the Jews were clearly foretold by the prophets - and by Jesus himself. In his Mount Olivet prophecy the Lord Jesus Christ predicted that:

“They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations.” (Luke 21:24)

In these words the Lord summed up many Old Testament prophecies which were to come true in horrific detail. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, written before Israel entered the land of Palestine 1,500 years before Christ, it was predicted of the Jews that:

“The LORD shall scatter thee among all people ... thou shalt find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest.” (28:64,65)

And yet in all these prophecies God makes clear that He does not intend to cast off the Jews for ever. Through Jeremiah He said:

“Though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee.” (Jeremiah 30:11)

The Apostle Paul warned the Gentiles to beware of the conceit which said that the Jews were finished and that God was now only interested in Gentiles. In Romans chapter 11 he asks: "Hath God cast away his people?" and then answers. "In no way", and later adds:

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery .. that blindness in part is happened to Israel. until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." (Romans 11:25)

The words of Christ and of the Apostle Paul are completely in keeping with the prophecies of the Old Testament scriptures. Israel was to be scattered throughout the world: they would maintain their identity, and in the last days return to their land where they would become the beginning of the kingdom of God which will bring blessings to Jews and Gentiles. We have seen the partial fulfilment of these prophecies but there is still much to happen. The present State of Israel does not recognise Jesus as the Messiah and many Jews do not even believe that they have been regathered to Israel in fulfilment of prophecy. A major change of heart is necessary, and indeed this is predicted in passages such as Ezekiel 37 and Zechariah 12. The latter passage sees Israel invaded by foreign powers and only then turning to God. It is at that time that Israel acknowledges Jesus (verse 10). This is the time that Christ comes to deliver Jerusalem and to re-establish the throne of David (Acts 3:21; 15:16).

BIBLE PROPHECIES OF THE LAST DAYS

Once we have grasped that Israel is at the centre of God's plan we have the key to understanding the direction of world affairs today. Through the prophecies of scripture we can discern a clear pattern in current events. Here are some of those important prophecies:

Preparing for Armageddon: The important event in the Middle East which paved the way for the re-establishment of the State of Israel was the demise of the Turkish Empire. In a remarkable Bible prophecy in Revelation 16, reference is made to the drying up of the river Euphrates. The purpose of this was to make way for the events which will draw all nations into the Middle East arena. The result is described as the battle of Armageddon:

"And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared ... to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. (16:12-14)

Working on the basis that political powers in scripture are frequently referred to by the river which ran through their territory, Bible students at least as far back as the eighteenth century interpreted the drying up of the river Euphrates as the shrinking of the then powerful Turkish Empire. They anticipated that this would be followed by the return of the Jews to the land of Palestine and eventually the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth. The drying up of the river was accomplished through the First World War. Britain drove the Turks out of Palestine in 1917 and this paved the way for the emergence in the Middle East of new nations, some with ancient Biblical names such as Lebanon and Syria: but most of all it allowed the space for the setting up of the nation of Israel.

Russia and Israel: The battle of Armageddon is described in part in Ezekiel 38: the prophet foresees a massive confederacy of nations invading the land of Israel just before the establishment of the kingdom of God. The leader of the confederacy is called Gog of the land of Magog. Bible students have consistently looked to Russia to fulfil the role of Gog because Magog was an ancient name for the land of the nomadic Scythians in the southern part of what is now Russia and Ukraine. Of great interest is the fact that at the time of the prophecy of Ezekiel the Scythians had just invaded the Middle East as far as Egypt. Ezekiel sees this people return in the latter days against Israel with overwhelming force in confederacy with many other peoples.

Israel is referred to in verse 8 as -

... the land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people, against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste: but it is brought forth out of the nations.
(*Ezekiel 38:8*)

For 2,500 years this prophecy has been awaiting the latter-day return of the Jews to the land before it could be fulfilled. Now that the Jews are back, its fulfilment is imminent. Interestingly, the 'mountains of Israel' are located on the West Bank where Israeli settlement expansion has been met by vociferous international condemnation. Yet the prophecy suggests that Israel will occupy this territory at the time of the Gogian invasion.

But what of Russia today? The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the removal of the 'Iron Curtain' changed perceptions for a while about Russia as an aggressive power. However, wars in Chechnya and Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Ukraine have reminded the world of Russia's steely determination to assert its power to promote its expansionist ambitions. And now, as Bible students have expected, those interests extend deep into the Middle East. In 2015 Russia intervened in the Syrian conflict and in so doing strengthened its naval and air bases in Syria. USA policy was to step back. How could Russia invade Israel if America, the world's leading superpower, stood in the way? But recent *events* have radically and rapidly changed the landscape. Who now would argue that a Russian-led invasion of Israel is such a far-fetched idea?

Russian Allies - Persia, Ethiopia and Libya: Ezekiel 38:5 adds that in league with Gog (Russia) will be "Persia (Iran). Ethiopia and Libya". These three countries therefore deserve special attention.

Iran: In Bible times Iran was known as Persia and the Persian Empire was one of the great world empires. Unlike many ancient nations Persia has continued as a distinct nation, to emerge into the modern world ready to fulfil Bible prophecy. Between the Second World War and the Islamic revolution in 1979 Iran was pro-Western. Now she is fiercely antagonistic towards the West and has an especial hatred of Israel. Bible students have long anticipated close links developing between Russia and Iran, and this has been borne out in recent years. With Russia a defender of Iran's nuclear programme, a co-sponsor of the Assad Syrian regime and a major supplier of missiles to Iran - to the dismay of Israel.

Ethiopia: "Ethiopia" is a translation of the Hebrew word 'Cush' which referred to the people south of Egypt, probably covering today what are the troubled countries of South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. In recent years the ancient nation of Ethiopia has dropped out of the international news headlines, having at one time been a communist state closely allied to Russia. Further developments may be expected in this part of Africa to bring 'Cush' back into a more prominent and anti-Israeli position. Watch out for Russian involvement

Libya: "Libya" translates two Hebrew names: 'Put' (or 'Phut') and 'Iubim' which were near neighbours of ancient Egypt and Cush. For two millennia after Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied, Libya languished as a downtrodden colony of the greater powers. Following the Second World War the discovery of oil revolutionised Libya's economy and gave it international prestige and political influence. In 1969 Colonel Gaddafi came to power and virtually overnight Libya shifted from the pro-western conservative Arab camp to become a radical socialist state with a foreign policy which evolved from "an obsessive hatred" of Israel. With the demise of Gaddafi Libya has descended into anarchy, fiefdoms and a centre of insurgency, and further international involvement is likely. Again, watch out for the role of Russia.

The Spoil: Ezekiel 38 describes a motive for the Gogian invasion of Israel – "to take a spoil, and to take a prey" (verse 12). Bible students for many decades have thought that this might be oil. The only problem was that it was the Arabs not Israel who had the oil. And then, in the last decade huge gas and oil fields have

been discovered off the coasts of Israel and Egypt and in the Golan. These discoveries are a major geopolitical threat to Russia because now Europe could have an easy alternative to Russian gas. No wonder Russia is desperately keen to help Israel and Egypt manage the new found reserves, even promising military protection!

Israel, Sheba, Dedan and the West: The prophecy of Ezekiel 38 describes opposition to the northern invasion of Israel by a southern grouping called "Sheba, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all the young lions thereof" (verse 13). Sheba and Dedan were nations in the Arabian peninsula. "Tarshish" represented the most westerly trading areas of the ancient Middle East seafarers. Bible students, for at least 150 years, have consistently identified Britain and the English-speaking countries as fulfilling this description. Here we have, then, a Western alliance with Saudi Arabia and her near neighbours to the south of Israel in opposition to the Russian-led invasion. The Iraq war proved the reality of this alliance. Within weeks, a multinational army of half a million troops and devastating weaponry was assembled on Saudi soil. Since the civil war in Syria, the realignment of southern Sunni Arab states against Shiite Iran has taken a dramatic turn, pushing Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states into closer collaboration with the USA and Britain - and even with Israel. This is a remarkable turn of events indeed, but one which aligns well with Bible prophecy.

Israel and the Arabs: If the Arab nations surrounding Israel can be traced back to Abraham through his son Ishmael, then the roots of Jewish/ Arab resentment can be traced back 3,500 years. The prophecy concerning Ishmael in Genesis 16:12 says:

"And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

A distinctive characteristic of the Arabs is their professed desire for unity but their inability to maintain it. The Economist once described the Arabs as "a world against itself": that disunity has prevented them from developing sufficient strength to oust the Jews from Israel, a desire which many of them still hold.

The Arab nations tried in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 to destroy Israel. Their intentions were in complete accord with the prophecy of Psalm 83 which describes peoples who live in the territories known today as Jordan, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The Psalmist says:

"They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance." (verse 4)

There is no indication in this psalm that they succeed in overthrowing Israel, as has been borne out in every Arab-Israeli war to date. But several prophecies suggest that some Arab nations will be allied to Russia during the final conflict and will capitalize upon Israel's calamity. In particular, prophecies about Gaza and Lebanon (the home of Hamas and Hezbollah - see Joel 3:4), and Ammon, Moab and Edom (present-day Jordan) denounce their cruel opportunism (e.g. Obadiah 1:13,14).

In Isaiah 16 the territory of modern Jordan is mentioned in relation to refugees created by the final conflict. Recent events have given us a dramatic picture of that future; huge numbers of Syrian refugees have been accommodated by Jordan throughout the Syrian civil war. In Isaiah 34 the southern part of Jordan is the scene of a tremendous outpouring of God's power unleashed upon the invading armies. Ultimately, however, as shown in Isaiah 11:14, territory presently in Jordanian hands will come under the control of Israel and reap the benefits of the rulership of Christ.

Israel and the Palestinians: In 1967 the Arab nations surrounding Israel planned to annihilate her, but Israel

dramatically won the famous Six-Day War. occupying the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The extent to which these "occupied territories" should be handed over to Palestinian control has been at the forefront of international attention. Behind the present tension lies the question of who owns the land. Whatever the political rights and wrongs of the long running dispute. in the Bible God has made it clear that the land belongs to Christ. and will be given to Abraham and his descendants through the line of his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (Israel).

In Genesis 12:7 Abraham, the father of both Jews and Arabs. was told. "unto thy seed will I give this land". In Galatians 3:16 the Apostle Paul tells us that the seed was Christ So then. Christ before he was born, was promised the land of Israel. The Bible says Christ will return from heaven to set up God's kingdom on earth: the centre of his government will be Jerusalem and the land of Israel. A repentant and believing section of the Jewish people will form the nucleus of the population. The kingdom will bring countless blessings to the whole world, and not just to Israel. The Bible tells us, "All nations shall call him blessed" (Psalm 72:17).

Jerusalem: If the Middle East is the centre of God's plan with the earth. then Jerusalem is its epicentre. From the very first. when God brought Israel out of captivity in Egypt. He spoke of "the place where He would set His Name. That chosen place was Jerusalem. There David was established as king over the first kingdom of God on earth and Solomon built the first temple. After its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC and a seventy-year captivity, Jewish exiles returned to built the second temple on the same site. This temple survived through New Testament times to be destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 in fulfilment of the prophecy that Jesus himself pronounced: "verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another. that shall not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2). Around AD 134 the Emperor Hadrian, out of hatred of the Jews, built a new city on the site calling it Aelia Capitolina and ploughing it with oxen (thereby fulfilling the prophecy of Micah 3:12). At the end of the seventh century AD the muslim rulers built the Dome of the Rock over the place where the Jewish temple had stood. And herein lies the root cause of today's crisis - the city of Jerusalem contains the holy sites of all the Abrahamic religions, Judaism. Christianity and Islam.

Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be trodden down by the Gentiles "until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). In 1967 Israel captured the Old City. Since then Israel has made Jerusalem its capital city though most other countries refuse to accept this. The Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. resisting Jewish claims, even to the point of denying that there ever were Jewish temples on the "Temple Mount".

From the prophecy of Zechariah 12-14, it is clear that Jerusalem is the very last place that Israel will give up. When the invasion of the land comes, a remnant of the nation will be defending Jerusalem. They will stand on the brink of total defeat. Half of the city will be taken captive but then, as Zechariah says, "The LORD shall go forth, and fight against those nations" (verse 3). At that time Jesus will be revealed to the Jews as Israel's Messiah and some at least will submit to his authority. He will replace their unbelieving spirit of self-confidence and stubbornness with a new spirit of trust and obedience in God and His Son. Jesus himself called Jerusalem "the city of the great King" and one day soon. "They shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 3:17).

ISRAEL AND THE UNITED NATIONS

The references in Zechariah 12-14 to "all nations" being involved in the final siege of Jerusalem are of particular interest in the light of current events. In Isaiah 43 the prophet says:

"let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye [Israel] are my witnesses, saith the LORD." (verses 9,10)

Fulfilment of this drama has been evident in a most stunning way on many recent occasions at the United Nations General Assembly where Israel's representatives rehearse the history of Israel and quote from the Hebrew prophets. But ever since 1967 the UN has denounced Israel and its occupation of Jerusalem and the West Bank {whilst failing to denounce so many of the very awful atrocities across the world). The effect is to draw all nations into the Middle East crisis. Consider that in December 2015, in Jakarta, Indonesia. there was an "International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem": the point being made is the illegality of Israel's occupation. Similar conferences have been held in Africa, the Pacific Region and in Turkey in recent years. This opens up the possibility that the Russian-led invasion of Israel could in some way come under the auspices of the United Nations, in the way in which the USA intervened in Iraq and Bosnia. But whoever sets their ambitions on that city should consider the words of Zechariah 12:

"Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about ... And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people; all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people (nations) of the earth be gathered together against it" (12:2,3)

"PEACE AND SAFETY"

The prophecies we have briefly reviewed have to do with the build-up for Armageddon, the situation in the Middle East before the establishment of the kingdom of God. But there is another strand of Bible teaching, parallel with these prophecies which, surprising as it may seem, leads us to expect the development of Middle East peace immediately before Armageddon. In Ezekiel 38, when the Gogian confederacy invades Israel, Israel is said to "dwell safely" (verse 8) and the invader says, "I will go to them that are at rest, that dwell safely" (verse 11). The Apostle Paul alludes to the same phenomenon when he writes: "The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety (security): then sudden destruction cometh upon them" (1 Thessalonians 5:2,3).

Remarkably, despite the bitter antagonism against Israel from her neighbours, a peace process has at times developed considerable momentum. It started in 1977 when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt visited Israel. Slow progress was made until the Gulf War. Then in 1991 the Madrid Conference led to real progress, resulting in the famous handshake in 1993 between the prime minister of Israel and the leader of the PLO, and both men became Nobel peace prize-winners in 1994. In 2000 at Camp David a final settlement was nearing conclusion, only to fail at the eleventh hour particularly on the question of the status of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. It was at that meeting that Yasser Arafat claimed, to the dismay of US President Clinton, that there never was a Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Following this, the Al Aqsa intifada erupted and still continues today on the streets of Jerusalem. But more recently in the wake of the Syrian war and the fight against ISIL, there have been signs that it may be Russia rather than the USA that will broker the "peace and security" that will take the world's attention away for the invasion the Bible predicts.

"BE YE ALSO READY"

Who would dare predict the tortuous course which Middle East events are taking? Only through a right understanding of the Bible can we make sense of it all. If we focus too closely on day-to-day events, a clear pattern may not be discernible. But if we stand back for a moment and view the broad sweep of both the history of the Middle East and current events through the eyes of Bible prophets, we can see a clear picture emerging. The world is moving rapidly towards the great conflict in the land of Israel and the return of Christ to set up the kingdom of God on earth. It is that kingdom of which all the prophets spoke and in which all the promises of God will finally be fulfilled.

None of us knows exactly when Christ will come, nor indeed the exact order of events leading up to it.

nor at what point in the final crisis Christ calls his disciples to his judgement seat. What we can be certain of is this: the tide of events is sweeping towards the great climax of history at breathtaking speed. We can be part of that kingdom through faith and obedience to the King, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is little time left to prepare.

STEPHEN PALMER

Bible prophecies often concern political events, and this booklet certainly touches on a number of international political developments - happenings which Christadelphians believe will herald the second coming of Christ. It should be noted, however, that Christadelphians are not themselves active in politics or protest, nor concerned to make political statements.

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