

The Troublesome Middle East

“Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. 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 of the earth be gathered together against it.”
—Zechariah 12:2,3

THIS REMARKABLE PROPHECY, written by Zechariah many centuries ago, reveals God’s intentions regarding the children of Israel after they have been regathered to the land of their forefathers at the end of the Gospel Age, and when they have been restored as a nation. The prophecy indicates that there will be many enemies who will be gathered against them at that time, but that their enemies will reel as a result of their actions, and by drinking of the cup of trembling. Their ultimate destruction is also foretold by the prophet. Many living during the present time have been witnesses of the regathering of the people of Israel to their ancient homeland. We all see the fast-moving events

of our day as they transpire in the troublesome Middle East.

Nearly two thousand years ago a great event occurred in that part of the world—Palestine—which is also called the Holy Land. That great event was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The news of this mighty miracle, however, was not flashed around the world, as it surely would be if it were to take place in our time. In those days the news was restricted to a little band of Jesus' disciples. The Apostle Peter, when telling about this great event said, "Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10:40,41) Peter and others were, therefore, witnesses that Jesus Christ had indeed been resurrected from the dead, and that this great event had occurred in the land of Palestine.

After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach the Gospel throughout all the world, and to announce that "It is he [Jesus] which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick [living] and dead." (vs. 42) The proclamation of the Gospel has included the announcement that Jesus was raised from the dead, and thus his resurrection has become common knowledge throughout the civilized world. Some have sincerely believed these blessed things, and have endeavored to be faithful in following in the footsteps of Jesus. To others, however, it has been but a pleasant story, a sort of folklore based upon the imaginations of the disciples of Jesus, whose minds, it is said, became

overstimulated by the trying circumstances through which they had passed.

Those early disciples believed that Jesus had come to establish the kingdom which the holy prophets of Israel had foretold. While their hopes were temporarily dashed by his crucifixion, they were convinced that he had been raised from the dead; and they again had confidence that he was their foretold King, as spoken by the psalmist who said, "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." (Ps.72:8) After his resurrection, Jesus announced to his disciples that "all power" had been given to him "in heaven and in earth." (Matt. 28:18) Surely one with such great power would be able to set up that kingdom of promise, and the government that was to extend its influence throughout all the earth.

Jesus soon left them, returning to the heavenly courts. However, the angels promised that he would come again. (Acts 1:11) So the hope and inspiration of the Early Church was in the return of their Lord and King, and in the kingdom which they believed he would then establish. (vs. 6) They believed this kingdom would be the panacea for all of earth's ills, including the sentence of sickness and death. Paul wrote that Christ would reign until he had put "all enemies under his feet," and that the great enemy death would ultimately be destroyed.—I Cor. 15:25,26

ISRAEL IS REGATHERED

But that was nearly two thousand years ago. Today, the area of the world where these glad tidings

originated, and from where they went out to the nations far and wide, is in the grip of the most distressing and terrifying circumstances ever experienced. After Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, the Israelites were scattered throughout all nations, but now they have repossessed at least part of the promised land, and have become an independent nation among nations. Withal, however, they find themselves in a desperate confrontation with many of their Arab neighbors even as in the days of old. Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and other nations are involved in continuing tensions with Israel even as they were in Old Testament times.

The difference now is that these nations, in the world family of nations, have not been rated among the strong and powerful of the earth, as they once were. Until recent years they have been viewed as inconsequential, and of importance only to the extent that the western powers could profit from their natural resources, principally oil.

ISRAEL IN CONFLICT

Suddenly this situation has changed. Not that these small Middle Eastern nations have in themselves become strong from a military point of view, but because of their geographically strategic position in a struggling world of more powerful nations, and because their natural resources are coveted and, to an extent, essential to the economic stability of some of the greater powers of earth. Further, the rising tide of terrorism is being used as a weapon to be feared.

There has been an especially dangerous condition developing between Israel and the Palestinian

people, over the granting to the Palestinians of a home land. This has led to much blood being shed among both peoples. Recently the foreign ministers of Israel and Egypt met to discuss the future of the so called "Philadelphi Route," which is a major means of travel in the southern Gaza Strip. This route, which lies along the Israeli and Egyptian borders, has become a crucial point of difficulty in the past few years. It is estimated that there are over one hundred arms-smuggling tunnels that have been excavated under it. Israeli army officials have stated that Palestinian terrorists continue to smuggle thousands of small arms, and great amounts of ammunition, into Gaza by way of this tunnel network. Egypt, and the international community, however, will not accept Israel's present plan to withdraw from Gaza unless they also abandon their military control of this tunnel network. Someone has said that Israel's Prime Minister Sharon is gambling on Egypt's promise to Israel that once they disengage their control over Gaza, including the arms-smuggling tunnels, terrorist activity will subside. Many in Israel are not convinced that this will happen.

A significant vote in the Sharon government recently took place which has significant and long-term consequences for Israeli settlement. This concerned the right of Jews to build communities for themselves in their own historic land. Narrowly defeated by a vote of 40 to 38, the bill would have allowed the Israel Lands Authority to establish a small community of up to 500 families for one particular sector of the population. The Israel Lands Authority thus canceled a tender which was to

lease several lots in one particular Jewish neighborhood. It was decided that the tender would adversely affect the country's Arab citizens. Rather than open the tender so that Arabs could lease land and move into the neighborhood, which would have changed the status quo from Jewish to a mixed Jewish-Arab citizenship, the offer was withdrawn. There is a Jewish National Fund that collects monies worldwide for the express purpose of reclaiming, through purchase, the land of Israel, and the resettling of Jews in their ancient homeland.

Events like these have begun to threaten the national action program that the Jewish people have implemented for over a century for the reestablishment of their homeland under their own control. This was to reverse the effects of nearly 2,000 years of brutal occupation, first by Roman, and then Arab neighbors. Further, it is noted that left-wing politicians are increasingly abandoning the Jewish national enterprise, and are regularly ignoring racist slogans and expressing sentiments to establish a "Jewish free" Palestinian state. In another instance, involving a community near Israel's Ben-Gurion Airport, there has been a systematic emmigration taking place of Jewish residents. Ten years ago the neighborhood was completely Jewish, today it is 70 % Arab.

ARAFAT'S DEATH

In mid November 2004, the *U.S. News and World Report* announced the death of Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization since 1969. Emotions ran high, and wild behavior erupted as his followers crowded into the streets to mourn

his passing. Guns were fired into the air, and many were chanting and crying his name aloud. Others surged toward the helicopter carrying his casket in memory of their seemingly invincible leader. It was an historic moment that ended a tumultuous era. He was buried in Ramallah where he had been a virtual prisoner for the past three years.

With his death there is talk that this may be an opportunity for the Israeli and the Palestinian people to put their differences behind them. It is hoped that their new leader may steer the Palestinian people onto a more peaceful course. Decisions will have to be made as to whether they will continue the armed struggle with Israel, or give diplomacy a chance to settle their differences. Arafat could never quite decide whether there should be a State of Palestine alongside Israel, or a Palestine State instead of Israel.

THE FRAGILE PEACE

Many other similar incidents are happening, and illustrate, to a small degree, the fragile relationships that exists within Israel itself, as well as in the entire Middle East today. Much of what is taking place centers around the tremendous need for oil. Western nations such as the United States and members of the European Union require greater quantities of this vital product all the time. Tensions are at an all time high throughout that region of the world. This situation has taken on more serious dimensions since the United States went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is an increased polarization between East and West, and the cause is in the troublous Middle East.

Since Israel became a nation in 1948, there has been much resentment and hostility directed toward them by their Arab neighbors. Many attempts, through war and political opposition, have been made to destroy them as a nation. We are witnesses of these events, and in this connection we read, "Thine enemies make a tumult: and they that hate thee have lifted up the head. They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and consulted against thy hidden ones. 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. For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee." (Ps. 83:2-5) The psalmist (vss.6-8) enumerates these enemies of the Israeli state as being largely of Semitic origin.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

These events, together with other significant signs of the times, are an indication of the nearness of the long-promised kingdom. Some of these signs are foretold by another of the Old Testament prophets. Daniel foretells that this will be a troublous time, not only in the Middle East, but for all nations. He says, "At that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book." (Dan.12:1) He also portrays the closing years of this age as "the time of the end." (vs. 4) This describes the current era of conflict, and points forward to the end of the present

social order. This order of things will be replaced by the kingdom of our Lord Jesus, together with the faithful members of his bride class. Together they will share in dispensing life-giving blessings to the whole world of mankind. This will occur under the provisions of a new and better covenant than the one under the administration of Moses.

THE INCREASE OF KNOWLEDGE

The Bible alone supplies the true explanation of the present 'time of the end.' The prophet Daniel foretold a period in human experience in which there would be a great increase in knowledge, and that there would be much running to and fro. (Dan.12:4) It is the fulfillment of this prophecy that we are now witnessing. The general increase of knowledge, together with the much and rapid travel have come about in such a comparatively short time that it is almost unbelievable.

This does not mean that the people today are more brilliant than in times past. Through the invention of the printing press, and other modern day means of mass communication, the accumulated knowledge of the past and present is now made available for all in the various fields of research. Every inventor and scientist is thus helped by the findings of all the others. The people of Solomon's time could have done as well if current methods of communication had been available in their day.

Perhaps the best proof that the general intelligence of the human race has not increased is in the fact that man is not able to find a way to adequately safeguard himself against total destruction by his own inventions and weapons. Now that the increase

of knowledge in this prophetic time of the end has brought all the far-flung nations of earth into each other's backyards, there is a hurrying back and forth of presidents, prime ministers, secretaries of state, ambassadors, and other officials of state, for the purpose of finding solutions for the myriad of problems that exist in all parts of the world. Any one of these problems is serious enough, if solutions are not found, to lead eventually to the total annihilation of the whole world through the use of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons include not only chemical and biological means to destroy mankind, but nuclear as well. The Prophet Daniel forecast this when he indicated that this time of trouble would be such as 'never was since there was a nation.' We are now witnessing this trouble.

One reason the Middle East is now so prominently in the news is the fact that Israel is one of the most powerful nations in that part of the world. Because we are living in the period of time that precedes the establishment of the kingdom of Christ, it is the due time for the ancient people of God to repossess their land of promise. They are liked no more today than they were in the distant past, so the tensions mount, and will continue to increase, until the problems of Israel and the whole world are solved by our Lord's kingdom.

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

This foretold government will be on the shoulder of the Prince of Peace. (Isa.9:6,7) Many centuries have passed since the early disciples looked to Jesus to set up this government.

This does not imply, however, any delay in God's plans of reconciliation for the sin-sick world. During these intervening long centuries, God has been taking out from the Gentiles "a people for his name," a people to be associated with Jesus in the spiritual phase of his kingdom. (Acts 15:14) Now that work is nearly complete; and in his wisdom and overruling providence the Lord has turned loose the forces of knowledge that will continue to stir the world into more and more frenzied action, until man's social order is set aside, and room is made for the kingdom of Christ.—Luke 11:2

THE PROMISED KINGDOM

In that kingdom, the people of all nations will receive their God-given rights. Peace and security will be assured for all. One of our modern expressions refers to this as the abundant life! The Prophet Isaiah forecast that in the kingdom of Christ all would be assured of this abundant life. He describes it in beautiful symbolic language. "In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined."—Isa. 25:6

God, in his wisdom, knew that the human family would need a certain preparation for these blessings, especially an awakening to a realization of their need for them. He has permitted the great increase of knowledge to bring about this awakening, and at the same time give mankind the opportunity to discover that, apart from him and the controls of Christ's future kingdom, the very knowledge that will yet be such a marvelous and

lasting blessing would lead to international suicide without his intervention.

The rich and satisfying blessings of Christ's kingdom will include freedom from sickness and death. The increase of knowledge is helping to pre-prepare the people for these blessings. Medical science is predicting that the time is not far distant when people will be living far past the century mark. We predict, on the authority of God's Word, that when the long-promised kingdom of Christ is established, those who accept the provisions of Divine grace through their Redeemer, and obey the laws of the kingdom, will live forever in peace and harmony with God.

The Revelator described this wonderful promise when he wrote, "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."—Rev.21:4,5

