

Israel—Still God's Timepiece in the Middle East

*“Therefore fear
thou not, O my
servant Jacob,
saith the LORD;
neither be
dismayed, O Israel:
for, lo, I will save
thee from afar, and
thy seed from the
land of their
captivity; and
Jacob shall return,
and shall be in
rest, and be quiet,
and none shall
make him afraid.”
—Jeremiah 30:10*

TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE

East is once again dominating the world's news—specifically, unrest in Egypt and Syria. In Egypt, President Mohammed Morsi, who had been in office for only two years, was deposed by a military coup in early July, 2013. Protests, which were directed against him in late June, are now targeting the military leadership that replaced him. Thousands have been killed and injured in these civil uprisings, which have now gone on for over two months. There is much uncertainty as to how and when stability will return, as well as in what direction the new powers of government will lead the country.

In Syria, conditions are even worse. The government of President Bashar Assad, facing an all-out civil war in his country, has been accused, with mounting evidence, of using chemical weapons in an attack on his own people, including women and children, in late August, killing an estimated 1,500 people—a number which could rise further. At this moment, world leaders are weighing the possibilities of an appropriate response to this alleged atrocity.

The turmoil in Egypt, Syria, and other countries in the Middle East perhaps raises questions in the minds of sincere Bible students as to just how these and other related events may fit into the fulfillment of prophecy. Certainly, it is evident that the world has been in a great “time of trouble” for nearly one hundred years, and yet as we see some of these events going on before our eyes, we may at times be unsure of their import or significance in God’s arrangements.

Thankfully, we have the Bible’s assurance that God has all things under his control and supervision. In addition, rather than looking to Middle East nations such as Egypt, Syria, or any others for that matter, as a guide to God’s purposes, the Scriptures clearly show that our eyes should focus primarily just on one nation—Israel. It is Israel which is God’s timepiece, not only in the affairs of the Middle East, but in those of the whole world. Indeed, as the Time of Trouble accomplishes God’s ultimate purpose of overthrowing the present evil order of this world, and ushering in the Messianic kingdom of Christ, the focal point of Bible prophecy is Israel.

PROPHETIC TESTIMONY

In short, the prophecies of the Bible indicate that Israel will eventually be the victim of a powerful attack by nations from the north and other surrounding quarters. It also appears evident that great impetus will be given to the decision of those powers to invade Israel, by a calculation that the nations which had formerly befriended her are not in a position to defend her, or have ceased being friends with her altogether. The prophecies imply that no one will come to her defense, and Israel will stand alone against the invaders.—Ezek. 38:8-13; Jer. 30:14

Looking at the reality of current events through the eyes of Bible prophecy, we conclude that God's hand is at this time directing world affairs in such a way as to shape the balance of power among the nations to eventually bring about the finale of this present Time of Trouble—Armageddon. It is likely that the coming invasion of Israel by the armies of Gog, and the destruction of that army (Ezek. 38:1-7), will be the spark that sets off the final whirlwind of trouble on a global scale. Jesus, prophesying of that time, said that only God's intervention will save the world from such "great tribulation."—Matt. 24:21,22

For centuries, Israel has been the focal point of God's interest in the course of world affairs. Their place in history has been well marked out in the Bible, and from our twenty-first century vantage point we can look back at their past and trace how accurately God's Word has been fulfilled.

Probably no other people have passed through trials so deep, so discouraging, and so enduring as

have the Jews. Their polity was destroyed by the Roman legions in A.D. 70. They were driven from their ancient homeland to scratch a hazardous living in ghettos in hostile lands. They have been persecuted beyond imagination. The simple fact of their existence today as a nation among nations is eloquent, living testimony to the faithfulness of God, and to the trustworthiness of his Word of truth.

ISRAEL BLINDED BY LACK OF FAITH

Strangely enough, the real import of this astonishing fact is almost totally lost, not only upon the world in general, but upon the Jews themselves, who have been the principal actors in this great drama. For this little nation came into being, at long last, against all odds of probability. Almost certainly, any other people, after nearly two thousand years of afflictions such as they suffered, would have been swallowed up and assimilated into the cultures of the countries to which they had been scattered. Nothing but the power and providences of God himself could have accomplished the preservation of their identity as a people.

While the Jews themselves are largely blinded to the fact that even today the great God of the universe is directing their destiny, those whose hearts have been blessed with an understanding of the Heavenly Father's great plan of the ages have their faith strengthened as they watch the unfolding of events in the land of Israel and in the surrounding region of the Middle East.

While Abraham was dwelling in Canaan, God repeated this promise, saying, "Lift up now thine

eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth.” (Gen. 13:14-16) Again, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him, and once more definitely confirmed the promise. He said, “I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, . . . all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” (chap. 17:8) On a still later occasion, after Abraham had demonstrated his faith by his willingness to offer his son, Isaac, in sacrifice, God made an additional remarkable promise to Abraham, to the effect that in his (Abraham’s) seed “all the nations of the earth” would be blessed.—chap. 22:18

Thereafter, God went to great lengths to assure the descendants of Abraham of his love and care for them. Over and over again he assured them that they were his people, and he their God. In the third month after he delivered them from bondage in Egypt, when they were about to begin their long journey through the wilderness, he seemed especially anxious to assure them of his love and care for them as his very special people. “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself,” he told them. “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”—Exod. 19:4-6

Even after repeated instances of faithlessness during the forty-years’ journey through the wilderness,

and having arrived at Jordan before going into the promised land, God again spoke to them through Moses. “Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all the people that are upon the face of the earth.” (Deut. 7:6) A thousand years later, and after numerous additional breaches of their covenant with him, God still loved and cherished them, though he found it necessary to correct them, as a father disciplines unruly children. Through the prophet Amos, he told them, “Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”—Amos 3:1,2

“YOUR HOUSE IS LEFT UNTO YOU DESOLATE”

Their final loss as a nation, because of their faithlessness, of their privileged status as a special treasure unto God and as a kingdom of priests, occurred some seven centuries later when, in spite of the many signs that he was indeed the long-promised Messiah—the “seed” of blessing—they rejected Jesus. It was Jesus himself, after the Jews as a whole had made clear their disbelief, who pronounced the words of doom upon their house. He said to them, “Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the

fruits thereof." Then, as though signifying the sorrows that should later befall them, he added, "And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And . . . the chief priests and Pharisees . . . perceived that he spake of them."—Matt. 21:42-45

Shortly thereafter, Jesus announced their final national rejection, in these words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."—Matt. 23:37-39

With what sorrow Jesus must have spoken these words concerning that people who had been his Father's special treasure! Surely the words of Moses must have passed through his mind—"The LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him."—Deut. 32:9-12

These words of Moses were not without a hint of the tragedy that, so long hence, was to take place, for he further said, "Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee. . . . They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me

to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not [now] a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.”—vss. 18,21

THE “REWARD” OF FAITHLESSNESS

The Apostle Peter later enlarged on this theme, and showed that it is the called ones of the present Gospel Age, both of Jews and Gentiles, who inherit the promises to be God’s special treasure and kingdom of priests. He writes, “Unto you . . . which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. But ye [footstep followers of Jesus during the Gospel Age] are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; . . . Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God.”—I Pet. 2:7-10

Not long after Israel’s final rejection as a nation, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and the Jewish people were scattered among the nations of the world. Over the ensuing centuries the land of Israel itself became subject in turn to Rome, the Moslems, Egypt, the Turks, and finally, in 1920, to Great Britain under a League of Nations’ mandate.

“WHAT IS OUR INIQUITY?”

This tragic outcome should not have been unforeseen by discerning Jews, for God had repeatedly warned them of the terrible consequences of disobedience to their covenant. For example, he had

said to the Prophet Jeremiah, "Behold, I will cause to cease out of this place in your eyes, and in your days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride. And it shall come to pass, when thou shalt shew this people all these words, and they shall say unto thee, Wherefore hath the LORD pronounced all this great evil against us? or what is our iniquity? or what is our sin that we have committed against the LORD our God? Then shalt thou say unto them, Because your fathers have forsaken me, saith the LORD, and have walked after other gods, and have served them, . . . and have forsaken me, and have not kept my law; . . . Therefore will I cast you out of this land into a land that ye know not, neither ye nor your fathers; and there shall ye serve other gods day and night; where I will not shew you favour."—Jer. 16:9-13

SCATTERED AMONG THE NATIONS

Much earlier, when the Israelites were about to cross Jordan into the promised land, Moses recited to them the manifold blessings that should be theirs if they kept their covenant with God. However, he also pointed out to them the pains of disobedience, saying, "It shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee."—Deut. 28:15

Then follows an astounding list of curses, including the statement that they shall "be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth. . . . And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword,

among all nations whither the LORD shall lead thee. . . . And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou wouldest not obey the voice of the LORD thy God. . . . And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other.”—vss. 25,37,62,64

When Jacob went down into Egypt, his entire family totaled just seventy souls. (Deut. 10:22) Some 300 years later, on leaving Egypt, the number of males twenty years old and upward who were “able to go forth to war” amounted to a multitude of over 600,000, not counting the tribe of Levi. (Num. 1:45,46) This would suggest that, including all women and all those males under twenty years of age, the number of Israelites that left Egypt would approximate some 2.5 million people. Truly, God’s promise to Abraham that his seed should be as the stars of heaven and as the sands of the seashore (Gen. 22:17) was abundantly fulfilled in this literal way (Deut. 10:22), even as the Apostle Paul later confirmed. (Heb. 11:12) No wonder Egypt’s king, who “knew not Joseph,” was alarmed at their presence in the land of Goshen.—Exod. 1:7-12

There is no way, of course, to determine how many Jews there were at the time of their rejection of the Messiah and their subsequent scattering into the far nations of the earth. However, we do know that they failed to keep their covenant with God, and it is therefore fair to assume that as a result their numbers were indeed reduced even as Moses had prophesied. We also know that, whereas in their relatively short stay of a few centuries in Egypt their numbers had increased from a mere

seventy people to some 2.5 million, yet in the following 4,400 years from that time to just prior to the Second World War they had grown only to about 16 million in all the world, of which number some 6 million later perished in the Holocaust during that war.

We also know that the curses which were foretold to result from disobedience have fallen heavily upon that sorely oppressed people. It well may be that the sentiments of many Jews are truly reflected in the words of the Jewish milkman in the play, "Fiddler on the Roof," when he wistfully prayed, "Lord, we know we are thy chosen people; but why don't you choose someone else for awhile?"

THE FLICKERING HOPE OF A HOMELAND

Yet through all these agonizing centuries there was ever kept alive in the hearts of many Jews, albeit as a mere flickering flame, the hope of one day returning to the Promised Land. It sustained them in their afflictions; it kept them alive in their ghetto existence. Finally, in 1878, as a consequence of the Berlin Congress of Nations, the way was cleared for the purchase of land in Palestine by Jews. Jewish colonists began to trickle in from Europe to eke out a precarious existence among hostile neighbors.

When World War I began in 1914, it signaled the end of the "times of the Gentiles," during which Israel and its people had been "trodden down" by Gentile nations for over twenty-five centuries—since the time of their last king, Zedekiah. (Luke 21:24) At the end of World War I, Palestine came under control of Great Britain, whose foreign

minister, Lord Balfour, issued the Balfour Declaration, whereby the British government pledged support to the Zionist hope of establishing a national home for the Jews in Palestine.

For those who entertained it, this hope was further strengthened in 1920 when Great Britain acquired Palestine as a mandate from the newly created League of Nations, and Jews in modest numbers found their way to that land. However, when Hitler came into power in Germany in 1933, the frightful persecutions that followed drove greater numbers to seek refuge in Palestine. Those who succeeded in doing so were the fortunate ones, for during the Second World War some 6 million Jews were cruelly massacred, constituting one of the blackest stains to foul the history of so-called human civilization since the world began.

Shortly following the end of World War II, the severe immigration restrictions which had been imposed by Great Britain ended when the United Nations took away their mandate, and opened the way for the partitioning of Palestine. In May of 1948, the Jews proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel at Tel Aviv. The surrounding Arab nations attacked the newborn country, but eventually Israel was successful in repelling the attackers, and even won some Arab territory. Since that time the Jews and Arabs have fought numerous other wars and have engaged in lesser conflicts, nearly all of which have resulted in a stronger Israel.

Truly, the events of seventy years, leading up to Israel's reestablishment as a nation in 1948, may have appeared remarkable in human eyes, even

perhaps in the eyes of Jews. However, they were not so in the eyes of God, because they were by his permission.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Now, some sixty-five years later, world Jewry is watching with uncertainty the outcome of the present civil conflicts in Egypt and Syria, with an eye on the United States to see what, if any, military role this country may take in the region. There is fear that intervention by the United States may result in retaliation against Israel, or that she might be left more vulnerable to future attacks by her enemies, even though she is not involved in the civil conflicts of the Arab nations around her. For in spite of civil unrest and turmoil within Arab countries themselves, many believe that they are still united on one thing: the oft-repeated intention of eventually bringing about Israel's demise.

It is this fear that haunts the hearts of Jews everywhere in the world, even if unadmitted by most. They firmly believe that if such a calamity should be permitted to come about, then no Jew would ever again be safe in any part of the world. Thus it has been that, in the numerous wars and conflicts Israel has experienced since 1948, Jews from around the world have come together in hearty support of her—by demonstrations, by offers to serve Israel in any capacity—even in the army, and by pouring great sums of money into the coffers of that nation in a mighty effort to preserve her national existence. If the nation of Israel were allowed to disappear, they have feared, then their own lives and the lives of their families would once

more, as in the days of their worst persecutions, be in jeopardy. Truly, as one considers the tragic history of this suffering people, one can readily be sympathetic with their dismay.

“THE TIME OF JACOB’S TROUBLE”

That there would come such a time of deep anxiety for the Jewish people following their regathering to their own land is indicated by the prophet Jeremiah. He writes, “Lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it. . . . For thus saith the LORD; We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?” (Jer. 30:3,5,6) It would appear that we are approaching this period described so vividly by the prophet.

What kind of tomorrow, then, may the Jews and the nation of Israel look forward to from this point? The prophets describe a time of great sorrow and suffering to come upon Israel. However, just when all seems hopelessly lost, they will humbly turn their wayward hearts back to God, saying, as Jesus prophesied that they would, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” (Matt. 23:39) Having learned the lessons of their disobedience, God will come to Israel’s aid. Note these words, “Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob’s [Israel’s] trouble; but he [Israel] shall be saved out of it.” (Jer. 30:7) “Then

shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations [that come against Israel], as when he fought in the day of battle.”—Zech. 14:3

“FEAR THOU NOT . . . O ISRAEL!”

After speaking of this time of Jacob’s trouble, and adding that “he shall be saved out of it,” the Prophet Jeremiah offers much hope and encouragement to Israel. “Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith the LORD, to save thee: though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee: but I will correct thee in measure, and will not leave thee altogether unpunished.”—Jer. 30:10,11

In this way, God will clearly reveal both to Israel and to the rest of the world that he is the one LORD God Almighty, and that his promises are true, and his faithfulness everlasting. Israel will be proof of this fact. Just as they were a “curse among the heathen,” they “shall be a blessing,” a living example to all people of God’s attributes of justice, wisdom, power, and love. (Zech. 8:13) To this, Paul adds, “So all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my [New] covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins. . . . For God hath concluded them all [Jews and Gentiles alike] in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.”—Rom. 11:26,27,32 ■