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THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Any time Israel becomes involved in a war in the Middle East many people, including some non-Christians, want to know if it is in any way related to Bible prophecy. My answer is always "yes and no." "Yes," since just about any geo-political event involving Israel relates to Bible prophecy in some kind of stage-setting way. On the other hand, "no," since almost all end-time Bible prophecy relating to Israel will not start to be fulfilled until after the rapture, during the seven-year tribulation period. Every time something happens in the Middle East relating to Israel it certainly causes me to wonder even more, "Isn't the rapture about to take place?"

STAGE SETTING

The rapture is a signless event. There are no signs leading up to the rapture, it could take place at any moment. There are currently signs in the world that God is preparing for events that will take place after the rapture during the tribulation period. This scenario views current events as increasingly setting the stage for end-time events, even though they will not commence during the current church age. Such a model allows a pretribulationist futurist to see the rapture as imminent (could happen at any moment with no intervening events required to occur), but at the same time believe that we could be the last generation of the church age. John Walvoord has noted:

In the present world scene there are many indications pointing to the conclusion that the end of the age may soon be upon us. These prophecies relating to Israel's coming day of suffering and ultimate restoration may be destined for fulfillment in the present generation. Never before in the history of the world has there been a confluence of major evidences of preparation for the end.¹

Stage-setting is not the "fulfillment" of Bible prophecy. So while prophecy is not being fulfilled in our day, it does not follow that we cannot track "general trends" in current preparation for the coming tribulation, especially since it immediately follows the rapture. We call this approach "stage-setting." Just as many people set their clothes out the night before they wear them the following day, so in the same sense is God preparing the world for the certain fulfillment of prophecy in a future time.

Dr. Walvoord explains:

But if there are no signs for the Rapture itself, what are the legitimate grounds for believing that the Rapture could be especially near of this generation?

The answer is not found in any prophetic events predicted before the Rapture but in understanding the events that will follow the Rapture. Just as history was prepared for Christ's first coming, in a similar way history is preparing for the events leading up to His Second Coming. . . . If this is the case, it leads to the inevitable conclusion that the Rapture may be excitingly near.²

BUILDUP TO THE TRIBULATION

I believe that the current War in the Middle East is a buildup to the start of the tribulation when Israel will enter into a covenant with the antichrist of the Revived Roman Empire (Isa. 28:18; Dan. 9:24–27). The first three and a half years of the tribulation are a time in which the antichrist will promise to protect the nation of Israel. We know that after setting up his image in the rebuilt Temple in the middle of the seven-year period that he will persecute that nation (Rev. 12). We also know that all the nations of the world will be against Israel during the tribulation (Zech. 12–14), which is why they gather against Israel at the Campaign of Armageddon (Joel 2–3; Rev. 16:16). Thus, we can see increasingly today that because of the current situation the world increasingly is turning against God’s regathered people—Israel. How is this happening?

For a brief understanding of how the Middle East got to where it is today I need to do a quick survey of its history. If you begin with the rise of Islam in the seventh century we see that Mohammad and his established a militant religion who’s goal became the conquest of the world. Islam took over the entire Arabian Peninsula and began spreading out from there. As Dave Hunt has noted: “Islam divides the entire world into Dar al-Islam (the house of peace) and Dar al-Harb (the house of war) and demands perpetual jihad everywhere against Dar al-Harb, i.e., non-Muslims. There can never be ‘peace’ until Islam has subjected the entire world to Allah.”³ This explains the militancy of Islam today as it pursues global conquest.

Devout Muslims do not believe that there should be nations within Dar al-Islam. Mohammad had a single empire and this is why great leaders throughout Islamic history have been the ones who have unified Islam under a single empire. This was accomplished by Saladin (around 1,000 A.D.) and later the Turks (around 1500 A.D.). The nineteenth century saw a steep decline in the Ottoman Empire and it finally fell in World War I when the British and French conquered it. After World War I the British and French divided up the former Ottoman Empire into the nation-states that we have today. Oil had just come onto the world scene and the Europeans did not want any particular Arab state to have too much oil so they chopped up many into very small countries.

To the religious Muslim, the division of Dar al-Islam by the British and French was seen as a disruptive influence from the Western Imperialist Crusader and something that needs to be remedied. Devout Muslims not only believed that Dar al-Islam had been artificially divided by the infidel, they also tended to see their new leaders as corrupt representatives of the Crusader who were only interested in Arab oil. Thus, the goal for many Muslims was to try to reunite Dar al-Islam into a single empire so that global conquest could resume. This was the goal of Nasser of Egypt in the 50s and 60s. Saddam Hussein envisioned just such an empire when he started his war with Iran and then invaded Kuwait. Now Iran has its sights set on recreating Dar al-Islam as it pursues conquest through gaining nuclear technology and by destabilizing the Middle East through its proxies Hezbollah and Hamas.

Iran is the power behind this current war. They have a plan to take over the Muslim world and if they are able to do it then they will control much of the world’s oil and would have the income and manpower in which to build a powerful army in order to destroy Israel, America and take over the rest of the world. Their first goal is to reunite as much of the Islamic Empire as possible in order to launch the Islamic goal of world domination. Benjamin Netanyahu, when asked what he thought is Iran’s goals, said the following:

I think this is a test-fire, test-firing of rockets into a Western country. Iran is committed to the destruction of Israel. It denies the Holocaust while preparing a new Holocaust. But Iran is also committed to a demented branch of Shiism which sees an apocalyptic war of millions of casualties in which Shiism will rise and the West will go down. We may be the first target, but we're not the last target. The other kind of fanaticism we witnessed 60 years ago, Nazism, also tried to arm itself with atomic weapons. These mad militancies start with attacks on the Jews, but they never end there. And ultimately the target is our free civilization.⁴

Israel has liberals running their nation at this time in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz and they are notorious for using underwhelming force when overwhelming force is required. Israel, in spite of possessing a great military, have not used it properly in their war with Hezbollah. This sets the stage for Israel to need outside protection and the motive for entering into an agreement with the antichrist. It would not be surprising to see the United States come out of this situation as a diminished Middle East broker and see the European Union step in to take our place. A war weary Israel is increasingly ripe for entering into the "covenant with death" (Isa. 28:18) that will kick off the tribulation. If we are approaching the tribulation then that means that the rapture is even closer.

ISAIAH 17 AND DAMASCUS

Some are wondering if "the oracle concerning Damascus," where that Syrian city will be forever destroyed (Isa. 17:1ff) could occur if Syria were to enter this conflict. No doubt with Israel's nuclear weapons they could certainly wipe Damascus off of the map. However, I do not believe that such a thing will happen in conjunction with this current Middle Eastern war, if one carefully reads Isaiah 17. Isaiah, chapters 13 through 23 speak of God's judgments against Babylon, Egypt, Tyre, Ethiopia and many other cities and countries. These judgments appear to take place when God judges the whole world, which we know from many Old Testament passages will take place during the tribulation and at the second coming of Christ. Further, Isaiah 24 through 26 is a major section about the tribulation period in which God will judge all "the inhabitants of the earth" (Isa. 24:1, 6, 17; 26:9, 18, 21). Thus, it makes more sense to see this cluster of prophecies in Isaiah 13 through 26 as taking place after the rapture and during the tribulation.

Having said all of that, it is very clear that momentous events are taking place that appear to be preparing the world for the last days—the last days known as the tribulation. Even in these troubled times our hope remains the blessed hope of Christ's return in the clouds to rapture His church. Are you ready? Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 129.

²John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 217.

³Dave Hunt, *Judgment Day! Islam, Israel and the Nations*, expanded second edition (Bend, OR: The Berean Call, 2006), p. 188.

⁴ Benjamin Netanyahu, as quoted in an interview with Kenneth Timmerman on Newsmax.com (August 2, 2006) www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2006/8/1/132039.shtml?s=lh.