

Iraq in Prophecy? What the Scriptures say about the Middle East

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With Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Middle East has again seized the attention of the world. Prophecy students are scouring verses of Holy Writ in an attempt to find, hidden in the writing of the prophets, tomorrow's headlines.

Though for the most part Seventh-day Adventists have not been absorbed with the Middle East, in recent years many church members have accepted a theology that applies prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, as well as statements from Ellen White, to *current* events in the Middle East, such as the Iran-Iraq war or, most recently, the confrontation between the U S and Iraq over Kuwait. Are events in the Middle East part of the present truth message that God has entrusted to Seventh-day Adventists? And what are the dangers to the church if this Middle East-centered interpretation is wrong?

Theology, Not Geology

No question, Bible stories that dealt with salvation history have focused almost entirely on the Middle East. But why? Was the land itself-the rocks, the trees, the hills-somehow, in and of itself, holy? Or was this emphasis placed on the Middle East simply because of who lived there?

"Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation" (Gen 12:1, 2).

This great nation, of course, was ancient Israel, the Jews, who sat in the center of the civilized world. Travelers, merchants, wayfarers from Africa, Asia, and Europe, would readily

come in contact with this unique people who worshiped the Lord as God. With the Jews placed at the apex of civilization, the surrounding nations could learn about the true God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

The Middle East's importance, therefore, came not because of any mystical quality in the dirt, but because God had centered His salvation activity for the world in Palestine by placing His ancient people there. Had for some reason the Lord sent them northward into Europe, then the Bible might have been filled with such names as Bonn, Paris, and London, not Jericho, Damascus, and Jerusalem!

The issue isn't geography, but theology. The Middle East was important because Israel was important, and Israel was important only because of its special relationship with the Lord. Israel alone-in a covenant with God-is what made the Middle East *at that time* the focus of the Bible.

Holy Land?

If the birth of Israel thousands of years ago in the Middle East made the area significant, then wouldn't its rebirth do the same there today too?

It depends. If the covenant promises made to ancient Israel are applicable to modern Israel, then yes, Israel's presence would again make the Middle East prophetically important. This view-that the covenant relationship to ancient Israel was unconditional and that it applies to the Jews as a corporate body even now-is dogma for many evangelicals, which explains their obsession with the modern Hebrew nation.

Adventists as a whole don't accept this understanding of the covenant. Repeatedly the promises in Scripture made to ancient Israel were conditional. "It shall come to pass, *if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord . . .*" reads promise after promise. Israel as a political entity didn't obey the voice of God, and therefore the promises made to it *as a nation* were eventually invalidated. Instead, the promises went to the New Testament church, composed of

Jews and Gentiles from all over the world. "You are a chosen people," Peter wrote to believers in various countries, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9, NIV).

Adventists believe that "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29, NKJV). Few among us believe that modern Israel enjoys the same covenant promises made to their ancestors. Instead, the remnant church-with the gospel, the sanctuary, the law, the health message-has taken the place of ancient Israel. Also, how many hundreds, if not thousands, of times has Ellen White referred to us as Israel or spiritual Israel?

What, then is the significance of the return of the Jews to Palestine? It's important to them, of course-and after what the Jews have suffered, they certainly have the right to safe and secure borders. But does their presence make the Middle East holy or the center of Bible prophecy? If a large number of Jews makes a place sacred, then for years the holiest place on earth must have been Brooklyn!

The Middle East was significant *only* because God's people were there. Where are they now? In more than 180 nations all over the world. Therefore, why would the Bible now direct us toward the Middle East, when it is no longer the center of God's salvation activity for the world? The answer, of course, is that it doesn't. Nothing in Ellen White's writings ever points to the Middle East as the focus of last-day events either.

Some, however, teach that they do. One proponent quotes Ellen White's statements that when the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are understood as they should be, a great revival will happen among God's people. He then asserts that because all the prophecies of Daniel have been fulfilled, in order for Ellen White's statements to make sense Daniel has to be reinterpreted and its prophecies placed in the future.

This reasoning is false on two major points. To start, all the prophecies of Daniel have

clearly *not* been fulfilled: "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed" (Dan 2:44). "And 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" (Dan 12:1). Which of these events have already happened? (See also Dan 7:27).

Also, Ellen White's statements about Daniel and Revelation don't automatically mean that the books need a future fulfillment. If, for example, Adventists understood 1844 and the investigative judgment the way they should, the way that the pioneers came to understand them, that alone could bring revival.

Faith Undermined

Actually, Ellen White warns against those who apply past prophecies to the future: "Some will take the truth applicable to their time, and place it in the future. *Events in the train of prophecy that had their fulfillment away in the past are made future, and thus by these theories the faith of some is undermined*" (*Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 102, italics supplied).

She then describes in even more detail exactly what is being promoted within Adventism now: "From the light that the Lord has been pleased to give me, you are in danger of doing the same work, presenting before others truths which have had their place and done their specific work for the time, in the history of the faith of the people of God. You recognize these facts in Bible history as true, *but apply them to the future*. They have their force still in their proper place, in the chain of events that have made us as a people what we are today" (*Ibid.*, 102-3, italics supplied).

How accurately she describes those today who, while paying lip service to the historical Adventist interpretation of, for instance, Daniel 8, nevertheless place it in the future. The activities of the ram, the goat, and the little horn of that chapter-so crucial to Adventist interpretation-have now become Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, or Iraq, or the United States

involved in a Middle East conflict. The subtle, long-range effect of this type of interpretation can only, as Ellen White warned, undermine faith.

It's no coincidence that Daniel 8, unquestionably depicting "the chain of events that have made us as a people what we are today," is one chapter that has been subjected to much reinterpretation. Keeping in mind Ellen White's statement, "After this period of time, reaching from 1842 to 1844, there can be no definite tracing of the prophetic time" (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 7, p. 971), if we place all of Daniel 8 in the future, then we must place the 2300 days, the center of the chapter, in the future as well, with a date other than 1844 for the cleansing of the sanctuary, in verse 14. Also, because the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9, which points to Jesus, is inextricably linked to the 2300 days of Daniel 8, then it too must be given future dates as well. When many Adventists are not firmly rooted in our historical interpretation of these crucial prophecies to begin with, it's easy to see how these theories can destroy our message.

In recent years Adventists have suffered from a dearth of study and preaching on prophecy. As a result, many members feel a vacuum, a need. Someone then appears, quoting Ellen White, preaching orthodox Adventism (at least in certain areas), even doing a good work (such as printing and distributing Spirit of Prophecy books), and sincere saints, impressed by the apparent faithfulness of the ministry, let down their guards and get snagged in false theology. Satan will do anything to deceive us, and if he can have those who, while appearing to be faithful Adventists, are introducing speculative theories that can subtly undermine the message-he will do it!

Of course, the situation in the Middle East is dangerous, and it could bring about an economic collapse that sets the stage for final events. But to take the precious prophecies that have given our church a distinct message and turn them into Saddam Hussein's battle plans is a perversion of historical Adventist interpretation, a misuse of Ellen White, and a subtle attempt at sabotaging the truths on which our church is founded.