

PROPHETIC STAGE SETTING

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Russian President Vladimir Putin has shocked the world by inviting the radical Islamic terrorist organization, Hamas, to visit Russia. Putin has said that Russia never considered Hamas to be a terrorist organization. Even the French have not gone that far. Russia is developing very strong relations with Iran and Syria, two of the Islamic nations that are most militant in their policies against Israel and the United States. Why is this development potentially important for Bible prophecy? It is important because we are witnessing a growing alliance between Russia and many in the Muslim world. Just such an alliance by Russia and a group of nations will come down to invade Israel in the latter days according to Ezekiel 38—39.

CRITICS

It is not surprising that liberals and unbelievers would be critical of Bible prophecy since they usually reject the notion of a supernatural and sovereign God. However, there are many critics within the evangelical community that also despise and speak out against our views of Bible prophecy. Barbara Rossing, a Lutheran seminary professor from Chicago says, "It sounds biblical, but it's a made-up framework." She insists that we, "distort the meaning of a handful of Bible verses to justify wild theological conjecture."¹ "Apparently these prophecy enthusiasts are not aware of the dismal track record of so many 'prophecy experts,'"² barks fellow critic, Gary DeMar.

Are our views of Bible prophecy just made-up from our reading of newspaper articles and history books? Is there some correlation between what we believe the Bible teaches on these matters and where we are in history at the present time? Are we as misguided as our critics so often contend? I would say that we are clearly on track with where history is now and where it is headed. The major items within our view of what the Bible teaches about the future are right on track even though some of the speculation within our camp about our views have clearly been in error.

STAGE SETTING FOR THE TRIBULATION

I think it is consistent with our view of prophecy to develop a scenario of players and events, which will be in place when God's plan for Israel resumes in the tribulation, after the rapture. 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 views the rapture as imminent (could happen at any moment with no intervening events required to occur), but at the same time believe that we are at the end 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.³

The present church age is generally not a time in which Bible prophecy is being fulfilled. Most prophecy relates to a time after the rapture (the seven-year tribulation

period). However, this does not mean that God is not preparing the world for that future time during the present church age—in fact, He is. But, 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. I 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.⁴

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The Bible provides detailed prophecy about the seven-year tribulation. In fact, Revelation 4—19 gives a detailed, sequential outline of the major players and events. Using Revelation as a framework, a Bible student is able to harmonize the hundreds of other biblical passages that speak of the seven-year tribulation into a clear model of the next time period for planet earth. With such a template to guide us, we can see that already God is preparing or setting the stage of the world in which the great drama of the tribulation will unfold. In this way this future time casts shadows of expectation in our own day so that current events provide discernible signs of the times.

A point to remember is that just as there was a transition in the early church away from Israel as God’s mediatorial instrument to the church, so it appears that there will be a transition at the end of the church age as God sets the stage to resume His unfinished plan with Israel after the rapture. The church age clearly began on the Day of Pentecost. Forty years later when the destruction of Jerusalem took place in A.D. 70 a specific prophecy relating to God’s plan for Israel was historically fulfilled. This was the final fulfillment relating to the transition from Israel to the church. During the last 100 years we have seen events occur which are setting the stage for the players to be in place when the rapture brings to an end the church age and God resumes His plan for Israel during the tribulation. Since Israel is already a nation and somewhat in control of the Old City of Jerusalem, then, those prophetic elements are already in place awaiting the unfolding of tribulation events.

In addition, there are general predictions about the course of the church age such as a trend toward apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-16; 2 Tim. 3:1-17). These do not relate to the timing of the rapture, but are instead general trends about the church age. What Bible believing Christian does not see the expedient rise of apostasy in our own day? It is important to realize that when speaking of a general characteristic like apostasy, no matter how bad something may be it can always get a little worse or progress a little further. Thus, it is tenuous to cite general characteristics, apart from clear historical indicators, as signs of the last days. Regardless of how much our own time may look like it fits that trend, we can never be certain that there is not more development yet to come.

SOME OTHER AREAS OF STAGE SETTING IN OUR DAY

The study of Bible prophecy is divided into three major areas: the nations (Gentiles), Israel, and the church. More detail is given prophetically concerning God's future plans for His nation—Israel. God has an amazing and blessed future for elect individual Jews and national Israel. Israel is God's super sign of the end times.

One would have to be totally ignorant of developments within the world of our day to not admit that through the efforts of the European Union Humpty Dumpty is finally being put back together again. This is occurring, like all of the other needed developments of prophecy, at just the right time to be in place for the coming tribulation period. "A generation ago, no one could have dreamed that an empire formed of the nations that were part of old Rome could possibly be revived," notes Hal Lindsey. "But today, as Europe is on the advent of real unity, we see the potential fulfillment of another vital prophecy leading to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵

In conjunction with tribulation events, Ezekiel 38—39 teaches that there will be an invasion into Israel by a coalition lead by "Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal" (Ezekiel 38:2). Chuck Missler concludes, "All the allies of Magog (Russia) are reasonably well identified and all of them are Muslim."⁶ Russia and her allies are poised and ready to attack in our own day.

It is not surprising to realize that many biblical passages speak of an end-time role for Babylon as God's enemy (Revelation 14:8; 17—18). "What are the specific signposts that can serve as indicators of God's end-time program for the world," asks Dr. Charles Dyer? "The third sure signpost is the rebuilding of Babylon."⁷

Conclusion

There are signs of the time, which indicates that we are likely near the time of the start of the tribulation. Many others could be noted. It is clear that we are seeing the major end time players being prepared in our own day for their future roles during the tribulation, in spite of what the critics say. But before the curtain rises, the church will rise into the air at the rapture. More than looking for signs of the time, I am daily waiting for our Savior to come at any moment. How about you? Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Barbara Rossing as stated in Rick Kennedy, "The End Is Near," *Dallas Observer*, (Feb. 9, 2006 edition), p. 2, internet edition viewed on Feb. 15, 2006. www.dallasobserver.com/Issues/2006-02-09/news/feature_2.html

² Gary DeMar, *Islam and Russia in Prophecy: The Problem of Interpreting the Bible Through the Lens of History* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2005), p. 4.

³ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 129.

⁴ John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, revised (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 217.

⁵ Hal Lindsey, *Planet Earth—2000 A.D. Will Mankind Survive?* (Palos Verdes, CA: Western Front, 1994), p. 221.

⁶ Chuck Missler, *The Magog Invasion* (Palos Verdes, CA: Western Front, 1995), p. 121.

⁷ Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991), pp. 208-09.