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IS AMERICA IN BIBLE PROPHECY?

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

No one disputes the fact that America has a unique history during which it became, and continues to be a preeminent feature in global affairs. The recent war in Iraq is but one example. In a quarter of a millennium it has become a nation unlike any other nation in the history of the world. In some respects, it rivals nations with much longer histories. Yet the Bible is remarkably silent when speaking about the role of America in Bible prophecy. Dr. Tim LaHaye writes, "One of the hardest things for American prophecy students to accept is that the United States is not clearly mentioned in Bible prophecy, yet our nation is the only superpower in the world today."¹

Dr. LaHaye has put his finger upon the source that likely generates the often ask question, "How does America fit into Bible prophecy?" Rarely, if ever, does anyone ask, "How does Mexico, or Canada, or Chile fit into Bible prophecy?" The United States has a strong Christian heritage and is currently the world's only superpower. Since many Christians believe that we are near the end of the age, it is hard to envision a prophetic scenario which excludes America—the world's most influential nation. Yet, other nations are the focus of biblical prophecy.

AMERICA WILL BE INCLUDED WITH THE NATIONS

There are no specific references to the United States in Bible prophecy. However, there are biblical statements about what the nations in general will be doing during the tribulation period. Passages like Haggai 2:6-7, Isaiah 66:18-20, and Zechariah 12:2-3 speak of all the nations involved in end-time events. These kinds of references clearly will include the United States in their fulfillment, but they do not teach us anything specifically about America in prophecy.

Some have brought forth various biblical passages from which they theorize that America is included in a more specific way. I will now address the merits of some of these suggestions.

IS AMERICA REFERENCED IN EZEKIEL 38?

These two chapters refer to the Battle of Gog and Magog and speak of their invasion of Israel. Ezekiel says this will occur "in the latter years" (38:8) and "in the last days" (38:16). The invasion involves a coalition headed by "Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal" (38:2). Magog has been identified as ancient terminology for the area including modern day Russia, The Ukraine, and Kazakhstan.² Ezekiel further identifies Magog as coming from "the remote parts of the north" (38:6).

Gog will lead the invasion of Israel, but Ezekiel 38:5,6 says that other nations will join with him. Persia (Iran), Ethiopia or Cush (Sudan), Put (Libya), Gomer and Beth-togarmah (Turkey).³ All the allies of Magog are reasonably well identified and they are all presently Muslim. Interestingly, such an alignment of nations is already configured on the world scene in our own day.

I believe the invasion will most likely take place before the tribulation officially

begins, but after the rapture.⁴ Such a view would help to explain a vacuum on the world political scene at the beginning of the tribulations left by the removal of the influence of Russia and her Muslim allies, and possibly even the United States due to the conflict. This would then prepare the way for the Revived Roman Empire (Western Europe) and the Antichrist to sign the covenant with Israel (Daniel 9:24-27).

Perhaps the strongest case for America in Bible prophecy can be made from a statement found in Ezekiel 38:13.

“Sheba, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages, will say to you, ‘Have you come to capture spoil? Have you assembled your company to seize plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to capture great spoil?’” (Ezekiel 38:13)

It is argued that “the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages,” refers to the colonies of Western Europe and the nations that have subsequently arisen from them. This would include North America and the United States. Thus, the response to the invasion of Magog into Israel from Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and its villages will be one of nonintervention. They will simply say, “Have you come to capture spoil?”

Who are Sheba and Dedan? “Sheba and Dedan are not difficult to identify. They are located in the modern country of Saudi Arabia.”⁵ Sheba and Dedan are said to be in alignment with “the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages.”

The identity of “the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages,” is the key phrase for those who believe this to be a reference to America. What are the arguments for this interpretation?

First, merchants of Tarshish refer to the Phoenician maritime and trading community located in Spain during the general time of King Solomon, 3,000 years ago. Second, the merchants of Tarshish, during the last 500 years, developed into the modern mercantile nations of Western Europe like Spain, Holland, and Britain. Third, the phrase “with all its villages” or the variant rendering “with all its young lions,” would be a reference to its trans-Atlantic colonies, which would include America. Thus, it is reasoned, because America is the most dominant of these Western nations, this must be a reference to America.

This view is strongly espoused by Stuart McBirnie, who concluded:

In the light of such conclusive scholarship, coming to light most significantly at this time when the nations indicated by Ezekiel to be involved in a great Middle Eastern war, we can now say with definite assurance that the merchants of Tarshish and “the young lions (colonies) thereof” must include the Western nations of Europe and the Americans, particularly the United States.⁶

David Allen Lewis agrees:

So the young lions of Tarshish would definitely refer to the North American

colonies as well as the European colonies, and hence bring the U. S. into this prophecy as one of the nations that will strongly protest the Russian invasion of Israel in the last days.⁷

How valid is such an explanation of this passage? We will now examine the viability of the individual elements in this view and then assess the overall interpretation.

The Merchants of Tarshish

What does the phrase “the merchants of Tarshish” mean? Tarshish appears to be a wealthy trading community on the extremity of the Mediterranean world. “Tarshish is ancient Tartessus in the present-day nation of Spain. This view is supported by standard Hebrew language reference books..⁸ One work states:

We read often in the OT of “ships of Tarshish” which were large, oceangoing vessels (Ezk 27:25) that carried all sorts of precious cargo, especially metals such as silver and gold (I Kgs 10:22; 22:48; II Chr 9:21; Isa 60:9; Jer 10:9; Ezk 38:13) as well as iron, tin, and lead (Ezk 27:12).⁹

Harvard Professor, Barry Fell, has done extensive study on these matters and their relation to activities in pre-Columbus America. Dr. Fell says:

From the Bible we learn that the ships of Tarshish were the largest seagoing vessels known to the Semitic world, and the name was eventually applied to any large ocean-going vessel. . . . the ships of Tarshish became proverbial as an expression of sea power. . . .

it is not unlikely that the merchants of Tarshish may have been associated with the trans-Atlantic migration of the Celts who came to America. Indeed James Whittall, with whom I have discussed the decipherment of Tartessian inscriptions here in America, thinks that the American Celts were deliberately brought here by Phoenicians, who wanted mining communities to exploit American natural resources, and with whom they could then trade. If this hypothesis is correct, then Tartessian vessels would surely have played a major role in the Celtic migration to New England.¹⁰

There does appear to be a significant basis to support the notion that the merchants of Tarshish are connected with the seafaring Phoenicians of 3,000 years ago. These merchants naturally established trading posts scattered along their various routes. Dr. McBirnie may well be right when he concludes:

Only in the past half-dozen years has much light been thrown on the historic location of ancient Tarshish. Books and articles in learned archaeological journals written before that time now seem to have rather limited value. In some instances, they are more confusing than helpful, despite the prestige of

their authors. The reasons for certainty of identification are found in recent archaeological discoveries which confirm that ancient authorities were right all along in their identification of Tarshish as a Western European colonizing power based in Spain.¹¹

With All Its Villages

The other important phrase in this passage refers to the “villages” or “young lions” of Tarshish. First, is the Hebrew word *kepire* best translated into English as “villages” or “young lions?” There is no question that the Hebrew text favors a rendering of “young lions.”¹² Some English translators were apparently influenced by early Greek and Syriac translations of the Hebrew which support the reading of “villages.” However, the original Hebrew is authoritative, not a translation, regardless of the age of other translations.

Young lions are often used as figures of energetic rulers. Such would most likely be the case if this translation were used in this text. “Villages” would certainly make sense in the geographical context of Sheba, Dedan, and Tarshish. Either rendering would fit. Again, perhaps it would be best to remain with the MT [Hebrew Masoretic Text] (a somewhat harder rendering, though sensible).¹³

Mark Hitchcock says, “Young lions are often used in the Scripture to refer to energetic rulers. Therefore, the young lions who verbally oppose God’s invasion are strong military and political leaders who act with Tarshish.”¹⁴

Although “young lions” is to be preferred, whether it is the villages that are protesting or their leaders—young lions—the point is the same. Dr. McBirnie summarizes the significance of this interpretation:

“Young lions” is, in the Hebrew, “whelps” or “cubs”; obviously offspring or colonies. The “Merchants of Tarshish” were definitely colonizers. This is the plain and logical meaning of the phrase Ezekiel used.

After all, what else could he say if the mysterious vision was for a future time? He must perforce have used the terms and names of his own day. He probably did not understand the full implication of what he wrote. But he surely would say that, long after his time, a new confederacy of power would arise from the Western Atlantic nations, whose armies, riches and power might also provide the means of a future role in the reservation of Israel.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

I believe that if America is referenced in Bible prophecy, this passage is the best bet. However, this passage could include the entire Western Hemisphere. This does not mean that America will have become an insignificant nation during the tribulation. That may be true, but it also could be that she is somehow part of the Revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist, since our country originated as colony established by Europe.

In spite of the apparent biblical silence on this subject, it does not mean that America's role in end-time prophecy is not clear, for it is very clear. The United States will be included in the prophetic destiny of the Gentile nations. In the meantime, believers are to be about the work of preaching the gospel, living a godly life, and looking for the blessed hope and appearing of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹Tim LaHaye, "Is the United States in Bible Prophecy?" *National Liberty Journal*, 26:2 (February 1997), p. 16.

²Mark Hitchcock, *After The Empire: Bible Prophecy in Light of the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers 1994).

³Hitchcock, *After The Empire*, pp. 5586.

⁴Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of The Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio, TX.: Ariel Press, 1982), pp. 69–83.

⁵Hitchcock, *After the Empire*, p. 100.

⁶W. S. McBirnie, *Antichrist* (Dallas: Acclaimed Books, 1978), p. 89.

⁷David Allen Lewis, *Prophecy 2000* (Green Forest, AR.: New Leaf Press, 1990), p. 103.

⁸See Francis Brown et al., eds., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew—Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, rev. ed, 1977) p. 1076-77; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew & Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 875; and Hitchcock, *After the Empire*, pp. 100–101.

⁹R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 Vols., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), II:981.

¹⁰Barry Fell, *America B. C.*, New York: Pocket Books, 1976, 1989), pp. 93-94.

¹¹McBirnie, *Antichrist* p. 62.

¹²Brown, *New Hebrew—Lexicon*, p. 498.

¹³Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 Vols., Frank E. Gaebelien, Gen. Ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), vol. 6, p. 933.

¹⁴Hitchcock, *After the Empire*, p. 101.

¹⁵McBirnie, *Antichrist* p. 79.