

# The Middle East and Bible Prophecy

## Bible light on current events

THE Middle East is the most keenly watched area of the world. And little wonder: it is central to the economic stability of the world. The September 11, 2001 attacks in America, and many terrorist attacks in other parts of the world are linked to the problems in the Middle East. All the major world powers are therefore drawn into the possibility of serious conflict, and for many years the Middle East has been the most likely place for World War III to begin. This explains the urgency for lasting peace treaties and long-term security arrangements.

### Why the Middle East?

When we ask why the Middle East has been so important we have only to consider one word – *oil*. The world's economies have been (and still are) dependent upon Middle East oil. After the Yom Kippur war in 1973 the Arabs used the oil weapon to devastating effect. The price of oil was raised and supplies were cut. The following ten years were known as '*the oil decade*'. Western economies were severely disrupted, suffering the crippling burdens of inflation, recession and unemployment. Developing countries, spurred on by the high price of oil, sought to exploit their own natural resources and borrowed heavily from western banks. The fall in oil prices in the 1980s bankrupted these countries who then could not repay the interest on the loans, let alone the loans themselves. The consequence is that all nations, strong and weak, have been drawn closer into the politics of the Middle East.

But the Middle East has only relatively recently been so important. The recent history of the area can be divided into three phases:

**Phase 1:** The first phase began in the 19th century when Britain, France and Russia developed their imperialist ambitions. Whoever controlled the Middle East controlled the trade routes to India. What became known as the 'Eastern Question' was the policy of Britain to prop up Turkey as a buffer against Russian ambitions to obtain a Mediterranean seaport. The First World War saw the end of this phase, with Britain and France replacing Turkey as protectors of Palestine, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria.

**Phase 2:** The second phase occupied the period between World War I and World War II. To understand what happened then we need to recognise the new force which emerged towards the end of the 19th century – *Zionism*, the movement to create a homeland for Jews in Palestine. In 1917 the British Foreign Secretary announced what was known as the Balfour Declaration which committed the British Government to support the idea of a national home for the Jews in Palestine. The Declaration also said that nothing should be done to infringe the rights of the Palestinians. Yet ancient conflicts reawakened as Arab as well as Jewish nationalism grew.

**Phase 3:** The League of Nations after the First World War gave Britain the Mandate over Palestine which she held until 1948. In 1948 Israel declared itself an independent State, and was formally recognised by the United Nations. So began the third phase of Middle East politics and the bitter conflicts which have continued ever since.

Looking back over this history it is easy to identify the factors which led to the present situation. But in the 19th century who could have predicted that out of the conflicting ambitions of the world powers would come the State of Israel ó the most troubled and potentially explosive place on earth? One noted historian wrote in 1980:

“A century ago geo-politicians could have foreseen the continued colonisation by Russia and the United States of the empty lands to the East and West; *but who could have foreseen that far more astounding colonisation in the eastern Mediterranean, the creation of the State of Israel?* We may like it or not í we may deplore it as the last western crusade, the latest venture of western imperialism, seeking not trade but settlement í but we cannot deny that *it is an extraordinary historical achievement.*” (Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and Imagination*)

Readers may be surprised to learn that Bible students did dare to predict what would happen ó and got it right. Take the following example written by a Christadelphian in 1849, long before Zionism was born:

“The restoration of Israel is a most important feature in the divine economy. It is indispensable to the setting up of the Kingdom of God í the restoration of the Jews is a work of time, and will require between 50 and 60 years to accomplish í There are two stages in the restoration of the Jews, the first is before the battle of Armageddon; and the second after it í The pre-adventual colonisation of Palestine (i.e. the settlement of the land before the return of Christ) will be on purely political principles; and the Jewish colonists will return in unbelief of the Messiahship of Jesus.”

The writer, Dr. John Thomas, was not a prophet; simply an ardent student and believer of Bible prophecy. But how could a Bible student be so confident that the land, which was for centuries a wilderness of little consequence, would become the most important place on earth? This booklet is intended to answer that question and to show how the Bible maps out world events in advance, so that men and women may understand that God is controlling affairs according to a pre-determined plan.

#### The land of promise



From the very first book of the Bible the Middle East has been at the forefront of God's plan for mankind. More than 3,000 years ago, God called Abraham to leave his home in one of the great cities of antiquity, Ur of the Chaldees, to wander in Palestine as a nomad. Abraham obeyed because he believed and trusted God. He was to become the father of both Jewish and Arab nations.

God made promises to Abraham which were at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:8 that God "preached before the gospel unto Abraham!" Those promises were about the nation of Israel, the land of Palestine and about one descendant in particular. God would give the land of Palestine to Abraham as an everlasting possession. The promise is contained in the words: "All the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever" (Genesis 13:15). This promise is yet to be fulfilled. Abraham is dead and buried. How could he inherit the land "for ever"?

It is at this point that we have to realise that the fulfilment of the promises rests upon the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, though Son of God, was also the descendant of Abraham through Mary his mother. He was the promised "seed", or descendant, of whom God spoke to Abraham. It was the work of the Lord Jesus Christ to make possible the blessing of the forgiveness of sins by which men and women may have everlasting life. The Bible teaches that Abraham, because of his faith in God's promises, including the future "seed", received forgiveness of sins and will be raised from the dead. He will then be given everlasting life so that he may inherit the land of promise "for ever".

The New Testament sets Abraham before us as the great example of how to please God "by believing what God has promised. Through Jesus Christ those same promises are today open to all people who share the faith of Abraham, whether they be Jews or Gentiles:

"So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham." (Galatians 3:9)

"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (3:29)

### **The vision of the prophets**

After Abraham came the prophets of Israel and Judah who received visions of future glory; visions of the time when God's appointed king, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule the earth in righteousness from Jerusalem, his capital city. Here is one example written 700 years before Christ:

"Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:3,4)

There are many other similar prophecies which make up the Bible teaching of the Kingdom of God on earth. It was the *Good News of this Kingdom* which the Lord Jesus preached. During his ministry he demonstrated the way in which we can enter the Kingdom of God, and he made that way open through his death and resurrection. All who believe and are baptized into Christ and seek to follow their Master have the glorious prospect of an eternal place in that Kingdom. Not even death can stand in the way because when Christ returns to establish the Kingdom he will raise his followers including Abraham from the dead.



The seven-branched lampstand and other trophies being taken by the Romans from Jerusalem (Arch of Titus in Rome)

But the Jewish nation rejected God's Son and consequently, in AD 70, just 40 years after the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ, Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, was destroyed by the Roman armies. The vision of the prophets seemed shattered.

As the centuries rolled on, the Middle East came under the rule of the Saracens and then the Turks. The land of Palestine lay neglected and waste. The Jews were scattered throughout the world and subjected to brutal and remorseless persecution. To many it seemed that God's purpose with Israel had been abandoned in favour of the Christian world. Church theologians developed the doctrine that the Church itself was the Kingdom of God on earth and that the Pope was God's appointed ruler.

But these long years of despair for the Jews were clearly foretold by the prophets and by Jesus himself. In his Mount Olivet prophecy the Lord Jesus Christ predicted that:

“They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” (Luke 21:24)

In these words the Lord summed up many Old Testament prophecies which were to come true in horrific detail. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, written before Israel entered the land of Palestine 1,500 years before Christ, it was predicted of the Jews that:

“The Lord shall scatter thee among all people: thou shalt find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest.” (28:64,65)

And yet in all these prophecies, as in the words of Jesus, there was hope. Jerusalem would be trodden down by the Gentiles “until ...” God has never intended to cast off the Jews for ever. Through Jeremiah He said:

“Though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee.” (Jeremiah 30:11)

The Apostle Paul warned the Gentiles to beware of the conceit which said that the Jews were finished and that God was now only interested in Gentiles. In Romans chapter 11 he asks:

“Hath God cast away his people?” and then answers, “in no way.” He goes on to repeat the words used by the Lord Jesus himself:

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, — that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” (Romans 11:25)

The words of Christ and of the Apostle Paul are completely in keeping with the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures. Israel was to be scattered throughout the world; they would maintain their identity, and in the last days return to their land where they would become the focus of the Kingdom of God which will bring blessings to Jews and Gentiles. We have seen the partial fulfilment of these prophecies but there is still much to happen. The present State of Israel does not recognise Jesus as the Messiah and many do not even believe that Israel has been regathered in fulfilment of prophecy. A major change of heart is necessary, and indeed this is predicted in passages such as Ezekiel 37 and Zechariah 12. The latter passage sees Israel invaded by foreign powers and only then turning to God. It is at that time that Israel acknowledges Jesus (verse 10). This is the time that Christ comes to deliver Jerusalem and to re-establish the throne of David (Acts 3:21; 15:16).



This map, which shows the positions of present-day countries of the Middle East, may help the reader to follow the discussion of the outworking of Bible prophecy

#### **Bible prophecies of the last days**

Once we have grasped that Israel is at the centre of God's dealings with mankind we have the key to understanding the direction of world affairs today. Through the prophecies of Scripture we can discern a clear pattern in current events. Here are some of those important prophecies:

**Preparing for Armageddon:** The important event in the Middle East which paved the way for the re-establishment of the State of Israel was the demise of the Turkish Empire. In a remarkable Bible prophecy in Revelation 16, reference is made to the drying up of the river Euphrates. The purpose of this was to make way for the events which will draw all nations into the Middle East arena. The result is described as the battle of Armageddon:

“And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared í to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.” (16:12-14)

Working on the basis that political powers in Scripture are frequently referred to by the river which ran through their territory, Bible students at least as far back as the 18th century

interpreted the drying up of the river Euphrates as the shrinking of the then powerful Turkish empire. They anticipated that this would be followed by the return of the Jews to the land of Palestine and eventually the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth. The drying up of the river was accomplished through the First World War. Britain drove the Turks out of Palestine in 1917 and this paved the way for the emergence in the Middle East of new nations, some with ancient Biblical names such as Lebanon and Syria; but most of all it allowed the setting up of the nation of Israel.

**Russia and Israel:** The battle of Armageddon is described in part in Ezekiel 38: the prophet foresees a massive confederacy of nations invading the land of Israel just before the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The leader of the confederacy is called Gog of the land of Magog. Bible students have consistently looked to Russia to fulfil the role of Gog. Magog was an ancient name for the land of the Scythians in the southern part of what is now Russia and the Ukraine. This invader comes in confederacy with many other peoples against Israel. The ancient names of these allies cover territories now occupied by other former Soviet Republics and European countries.

Israel is referred to in verse 8 as:

“The land that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people, against the mountains of Israel, which have been always waste: but it is brought forth out of the nations.” (Ezekiel 38:8)

For 2,500 years this prophecy has been awaiting the latter-day return of the Jews to the land before it could be fulfilled. Now that the Jews are back, its fulfilment is imminent. When the prophecy was written the Scythians were a nomadic people and Russia did not exist. It was not until about AD 1000 that a recognisable Russian nation came into existence. It was not until the Second World War that the USSR became a superpower.

But what of Russia today? The collapse of the Soviet empire and the removal of the ‘Iron Curtain’ changed perceptions about Russia as an aggressive power, a reputation which she deservedly gained from her invasion of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. The rapid break-up of the USSR surprised everyone but it has left the way open for Russia, the largest and most powerful of the republics, to dominate the scene. Russia’s political and economic instability, and the resurgence of ethnic and religious conflicts such as that in Chechnya, may be important factors in precipitating events which will bring about the invasion of Israel.

**Russian Allies – Persia, Ethiopia and Libya:** Ezekiel 38:5 adds that in league with Gog (Russia) will be “Persia (Iran), Ethiopia and Libya”. These three countries therefore deserve special attention.

**Iran:** In Bible times Iran was known as Persia and the Persian empire was one of the great world empires. Unlike many ancient nations Persia has continued as a distinct nation, to emerge into the modern world ready to fulfil Bible prophecy. Between the Second World War and the Islamic revolution in 1979 Iran was pro-Western. Now she is fiercely antagonistic towards the West and especially Israel. The development of closer links between Russia, the former republics of the USSR and Iran will be something to watch for as events turn towards the final conflict.

**Ethiopia:** In the Authorised or King James translation of the Old Testament scriptures, the name ðEthiopiaö is a translation of the Hebrew word -Cushø Ullendorff, in his book *Ethiopia and the Bible*, states that Cush referred to ðthe entire Nile valley south of Egypt, including Nubia (Sudan) and Abyssinia (Ethiopia)ö. Ethiopia in Bible times was an influential country but with the fall of North Africa to Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, Ethiopia was cut off from the world. Early in the twentieth century Ethiopia came under the forced protection of Italy. It was liberated by Britain in 1941 and maintained a pro-Western stance. Then in 1974 famine and civil war led to the overthrow of Haile Selassie and to the establishment of a Marxist state with strong Russian and Cuban support.

In 1991 a new régime took control. Ethiopia is politically very fragile and further developments can be expected. Since ancient Cush (Ethiopia) in Bible times encompassed part of what is now the Sudan, we may yet see that country, already riven by armed conflict, come into alignment with its Ethiopian neighbour. Recent events show just how quickly seemingly unlikely predictions can fall into place.

**Libya:** The King James translation of the Bible uses the name ðLibyaö to translate two Hebrew names: -Putø (or Phut) and -Lubimø which were near neighbours of ancient Egypt and Cush. For two millennia after Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied, Libya languished as a downtrodden colony of the greater powers. Following the Second World War the superpowers could not agree on the future of Libya at the United Nations and this precipitated the creation of an independent state. But Libya was extremely poor and dependent upon the West. Britain and the USA gave aid in return for military bases in Libya. Then the discovery of oil revolutionised Libya's economy and gave it international prestige and political influence.

In the 1960s, Arab nationalism grew, as did anti-Israel feeling. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Libya placed an oil embargo on countries supporting Israel. In 1969 Colonel Gaddafi came to power. Virtually overnight Libya shifted from the conservative Arab camp to become a radical socialist state with a foreign policy which evolved from ðan obsessive hatredö of Israel.

We certainly could not rule out further political changes in Libya but, as with Ethiopia, Libya illustrates how ó and how fast ó countries can move into the alignment required of them by Bible prophecy. In this alignment, the part played by the Islamic religion should not be under-estimated. Nations which have no other point of contact have been brought together by a shared religion as well as by a common attitude towards the Jewish nation.

**Israel and the West:** The prophecy of Ezekiel 38 describes opposition to the northern invasion of Israel by a southern grouping called ðSheba, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all the young lions thereofö (verse 13). Sheba and Dedan were nations in the Arabian peninsula. ðTarshishö represented the most westerly (and also probably the most easterly) trading areas of the ancient Middle East seafarers. Bible students, for at least 150 years, have consistently identified Britain and the English speaking countries as fulfilling this description. Here we have, then, a Western alliance with Saudi Arabia and her near neighbours to the south of Israel in opposition to the Russian-led invasion. This predicted alliance was given dramatic reality following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Within weeks, a multinational army of half a million troops and devastating weaponry was assembled on Saudi soil. During the 1990s, the US became committed to a long-term

presence in the area and further confrontation was inevitable. With Britain and other allies, the US invaded Iraq and deposed its president.

**Israel and the Arabs:** If the Arab nations surrounding Israel can be traced back to Abraham through his son Ishmael, then the roots of Jewish/Arab resentment can be traced back 3,500 years. The prophecy concerning Ishmael in Genesis 16:12 says:

“And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

The peculiar characteristic of the Arabs is their professed desire for unity but their inability to maintain it. *The Economist* in 1988 described the Arabs as “a world against itself”: that disunity has prevented them from developing sufficient strength to oust the Jews from Israel, a desire which many of them still hold.

The Arab nations tried in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 to destroy Israel. Their intentions were in complete accord with the prophecy of Psalm 83 which describes peoples who live in the territories known today as Jordan, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The psalmist says:

“They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance.” (verse 4)

There is no indication in this Psalm that they succeed in overthrowing Israel, as has been borne out in every Arab-Israeli war to date. But several prophecies suggest that some Arab nations will be allied to Russia during the final conflict and will capitalise upon Israel’s calamity. In particular, prophecies about Ammon, Moab and Edom (present-day Jordan) denounce their cruel opportunism. For example, the prophet Obadiah says:

“Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity í neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape.” (verses 13,14)

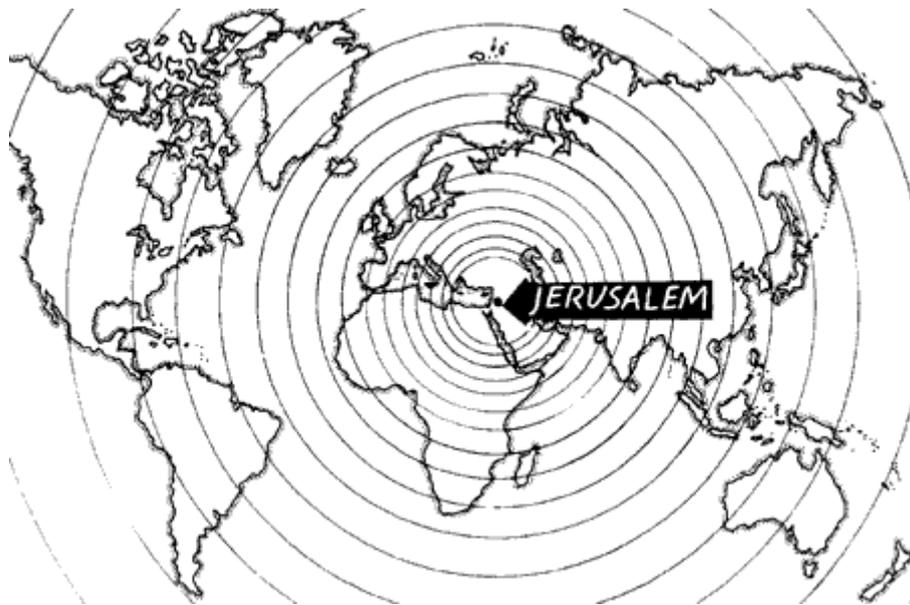
In Isaiah 16 the territory of modern Jordan is mentioned in relation to refugees created by the final conflict. (It is of interest that in the 1990/1991 Iraq War refugees poured into Jordan.) In Isaiah 34 the southern part of Jordan is the scene of a tremendous outpouring of God’s power unleashed upon the invading armies. Ultimately, however, as shown in Isaiah 11:14, territory presently in Jordanian hands will come under the control of Israel and reap the benefits of the rulership of Christ.

**Israel and the Palestinians:** In 1967 the Arab nations surrounding Israel planned to annihilate her, but Israel dramatically won the famous Six-Day War, occupying the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The extent to which these “occupied territories” should be handed over to Palestinian control has been at the forefront of international attention. Behind the present tension lies the question of who owns the land. Whatever the political rights and wrongs of the long running dispute, in the Bible God has made it clear that the land belongs to Christ, and will be given to Abraham and his descendants through the line of his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (Israel).

In Genesis 12:7 Abraham, the father of both Jews and Arabs, was told, "Unto thy seed will I give this land." In Galatians 3:16 the Apostle Paul tells us that the seed was Christ. So then, Christ, before he was born, was promised the land of Israel. The Bible says Christ will return from heaven to set up God's Kingdom on earth: the centre of his government will be Jerusalem and the land of Israel. A repentant and believing section of the Jewish people will form the nucleus of the population. The Kingdom will bring countless blessings to the whole world, and not just to Israel. The Bible tells us, "All nations shall call him blessed" (Psalm 72:17).

**Jerusalem:** If the Middle East is the centre of God's plan with the earth, then Jerusalem is its epicentre. From the very first, when God brought Israel out of captivity in Egypt, He spoke of "the place" where He would set His name. That chosen place was Jerusalem. There David was established as king over the first kingdom of God on earth; and Jesus himself, David's greater Son, called Jerusalem "the city of the great King". The promise that lay behind these words includes the following prophecy:

"They shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem." (Jeremiah 3:17)



Jerusalem is at the meeting point of three continents and so is perfectly placed strategically to become the capital city of the world. The prophet Ezekiel says:

"Thus saith the Lord God, This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her." (Ezekiel 5:5)

Ancient cartographers, taking this passage literally, placed Jerusalem at the centre of their maps.

One thing is clear. In the Middle East peace process, Jerusalem is the constant sticking point. The city contains the holy sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But as one writer has said of Judaism, "Its religion is not tied to 'sites' but to the land, not to what happened in Jerusalem but to Jerusalem itself". For Israel, Jerusalem is its capital city now. The Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. But whoever sets their ambitions on that city should consider prophecies such as Zechariah 12:

“Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about it. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people; all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people (nations) of the earth be gathered together against it.” (12:2,3)

The reference to “all the nations” is of particular interest in the light of recent events in which the UN Secretary General has been involved in brokering a ceasefire.

From this and other prophecies such as Zechariah 14, it is clear that Jerusalem is the very last place that Israel will give up. When the invasion of the land comes, a remnant of the nation will be defending Jerusalem. They will stand on the brink of total defeat. Half of the city will be taken captive but then, as Zechariah says, “shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations” (verse 3). At that time Jesus will be revealed to the Jews as Israel’s Messiah and some at least will submit to his authority. He will replace their unbelieving spirit of self-confidence and stubbornness with a new spirit of trust and obedience in God and His Son.

#### “Peace and Safety”

The prophecies we have briefly reviewed have to do with the build-up for Armageddon, the situation in the Middle East before the establishment of the Kingdom of God. But there is another strand of Bible teaching, parallel with these prophecies which, surprising as it may seem, leads us to expect the development of a Middle East peace process. In Ezekiel 38, when the Gogian confederacy invades Israel, Israel is said to “dwell safely” (verse 8) and the invader says, “I will go to them that are at rest, that dwell safely” (verse 11). Therefore we are to expect the development of a state of peace and confidence just before disaster strikes. The Apostle Paul alludes to the same phenomenon when he writes: “The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety (security); then sudden destruction cometh upon them” (1 Thessalonians 5:2,3).

Remarkably, despite the continuing antagonism between Israel and her neighbours and the Palestinians within the land, a peace process has developed, though friction and mistrust continue. It started in 1977 when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt visited Israel, and led to the Camp David Accords the following year. Slow progress was made until the Gulf War. Then in 1991 the Madrid Conference led to real progress resulting in the famous handshake in 1993 between the prime minister of Israel and the leader of the PLO. The words of Yasser Arafat at that time are quite extraordinary: “Mr. Prime Minister – The PLO recognises the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security!” When Mr. Rabin was asked why he entered into the peace negotiations he said, “I believed that the coincidence of events on the international scene, in the Middle East, in Israel were ripe to achieve two goals: peace and security!” Both men became Nobel peace prize-winners in 1994. The very words of Scripture came alive in this amazing development.

At the time of writing the peace process still faces difficulties. Has the “peace and safety” cry of 1 Thessalonians 5 come and gone, or are further developments to take place before the “sudden destruction”?

#### “Be ye also ready”

Who would dare predict the tortuous course which Middle East events are taking? Only through a right understanding of the Bible can we make sense of it all. If we focus too closely

on day-to-day events, a clear pattern may not be discernible. But if we stand back for a moment and view the broad sweep of both the history of the Middle East and current events through the eyes of Bible prophets, we can see a very clear picture emerging. The world is moving rapidly towards the return of Christ to set up the Kingdom of God on earth. It is that Kingdom of which all the prophets spoke and in which all the promises of God will finally be fulfilled.

None of us knows exactly when the Kingdom will come, nor indeed the exact order of events leading up to it. What we can be certain of is this: the tide of events is sweeping towards the great climax of history at breathtaking speed. We can be part of that Kingdom through faith and obedience to the King, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is little time left to prepare.

By STEPHEN PALMER

**Bible prophecies often concern political events, and this booklet certainly touches on a number of international political developments – happenings which Christadelphians believe will herald the second coming of Christ. It should be noted, however, that Christadelphians are not themselves active in politics or protest, nor concerned to make political statements.**

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