

“Middle East Meltdown” (A study in Isaiah 17)

Please note: this article was originally published in “Prophetic Witness” magazine, November 2010, before the current war in Syria.

Is Mount Everest shrinking? Some people think so. Due to global warming and the melting of glaciers there are fears that the world's tallest mountain may have lost at least 4 feet off its official 29,028ft height. Hardly a lot, but enough to keep Chinese scientists on their toes as they monitor the situation. However, this is nothing compared with the meltdown that is coming in the Middle East before the Lord Jesus returns – one that has nothing to do with global warming, but everything to do with divine judgment. In Isaiah 17 we are told of three events that will alter the geo-political landscape in a big way. These are...

1. The Removal of Damascus & her Allies (v1-3)

Amazing as it may seem to us today, the Bible prophesies the destruction of Damascus, leaving it in an uninhabitable state. Isaiah says, ***“The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap.”*** (v1.) According to some commentators this occurred when the Assyrians conquered Syria (then known as Aram) in the year 732 BC. The problem with this view is that, *“Damascus did not in fact become a heap of ruins”* (Barry Webb, IVP BST ‘Isaiah’), but rather has continued until this day. As Hal Lindsey has written, *“Damascus is one of the oldest continuously populated cities on earth. It has never been destroyed – yet.”* (K-House, Personal Update, Sept.2006). In fact, *“Records unearthed in the city indicate that from the third millennium BC to the present, the city has been inhabited.”* (‘100 Gateway Cities’, P75). So it seems that the Assyrian attack on the city where Paul was later converted was at best only a partial fulfilment. The real meltdown is yet to come. The bigger question is, how will it happen?

At this point we must be careful not to read anything into Scripture that is not there. All the Bible tells us is that it will be destroyed, it doesn't specify how. It could be destroyed by an earthquake of mega proportions, such as will strike the earth in the Tribulation, or some other tragedy. However, most prophecy scholars suspect that the real reason will be a nuclear strike from Israel.

There is huge pressure continually put on Israel to give back the 459 square miles of the Golan Heights to Syria in order to secure ‘peace’, even though they are essential for her defence (The Israeli observation posts in these mountains make it virtually impossible for Syria to launch a sneak attack on her, and without them she has no land that can be yielded to an attacker during the first blow of any conflict. They also give an enemy a unique vantage point for firing down onto Israel from.). It is not inconceivable that the United Nations will eventually force Israel to do so, leaving her only one form of defence – a nuclear strike.

According to one publication (Prophecy in the News, August 2007), Syria sees such a threat as a very real possibility. *“Several Middle-East news sources have lately informed the West that Damascus is being war-hardened. Important state papers and art treasures have been moved to secret locations. On July 10th, WND reported, ‘The Syrian government, preparing for a war with the Jewish state, has given its officials and top contacts alternative phone numbers to key government ministries in case the Damascus phone system is knocked out during an Israeli aerial bombardment.’ ”*

We will have to wait and see. But the effects of such a devastation would be far-reaching. Muslim tradition says that Jesus will appear at this location on the Judgment Day. If our understanding of this text is correct and Damascus is destroyed before the Lord's return, then obviously this will undermine a very

important teaching of Islam. Certainly the effects spread to Damascus' allies as well, as Isaiah goes on to speak of the destruction spreading to Aroer (central Jordan), Ephraim (the 'West Bank'), as well as the down fall of the whole Syrian kingdom. ***"The cities of Aroer are forsaken: they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid. – a picture of total desolation – "The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria..."*** Dimshak, the man attributed with being the founder of Damascus, could never have foreseen such an end to his oasis city. But Isaiah saw it and the prophetic fulfilment seems closer all the time.

2. The Reduction of Israel and her Altars (v4-11)

In v4 there is a parallel drawn between the destruction of Syria and her allies and the diminishing glory of Israel at this time. It says, ***"...they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith the LORD of hosts. And in that day it shall come to pass that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean."*** The terminology of being 'thinned-out' sounds like the diminishing of her armies and resources, perhaps as a result of conflict with her neighbours. This is also suggested by the next verse, which uses a farming analogy to describe what happens. ***"And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim."***(v5.) Israel may win the war, but it will be at a heavy price leaving her with just a remnant of survivors. Yet, in v6, we are assured that a few people will definitely be left after this terrible incident – again through a farming analogy. ***"Yet gleanings shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the LORD God of Israel."***

Whilst this event has a negative effect on the nation's strength, the positive side is that it causes Israel to stop and think about their need for God's help. ***"At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images."*** (v7-8) At first sight this seems to be the much prayed for spiritual awakening promised in Romans 11:25. However, we must be careful not to read too much into this verse as the following passage suggests that it is only a temporal seeking after the Lord. Their turning to God, will perhaps be similar to the way in which many Americans went to church the Sunday after 9/11 but soon went back to their disinterested ways a few weeks later.

Certainly the effects of this meltdown stay with them, and the prophet connects it to their spiritual sins. ***"In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and has not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants and shalt set it with strange slips."*** (v9-10).

What are these "pleasant plants" and "strange slips"? Barry Webb explains this for us in his commentary on Isaiah. He says, *"The worship of the Canaanites consisted largely of the performance of rites which were thought to induce fertility in floor and field by a kind of sympathetic magic...slips were induced to grow and blossom at an artificially rapid rate, probably at a shrine. But of course the evidence which they appeared to give of the potency of the god was false, and participation in such rites by Israelites showed that they had turned their backs on the Lord..."* (P91) In other words, they were a type of fertilizer

giving rapid growth which they then attributed to their idols. Applying this understanding to the future, it seems that the ever inventive Jew will come up with a method of producing speedy growth to their crops in those days, restoring economic prosperity after the war. Yet without true repentance and a turning to the Lord Jesus they still will not know peace with God or relief from suffering.

“In that day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.” (v11.) This is true for many today who have great material prosperity but are spiritually bankrupt. They have everything money can buy, but not what it can't. They have 'heaps' of good things, but they can't find satisfaction in them because of their spiritual state. They need the Lord Jesus Christ who said, ***“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35)*** Only He can give true satisfaction.

*“Friends all around me are trying to find
What the heart yearns for, by sin undermined;
I have the secret, I know where 'tis found:
Only true pleasures in Jesus abound.”*

(H.D. Loes)

3. The Rushing of the Nations and their Annihilation (v12-14)

The final stage of the meltdown comes when a coalition of greedy nations make an attack on Israel, in order to steal their land, but end up being destroyed by God Himself. ***“Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. And behold at evening tide trouble; and before the morning he is not This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us.” (v12-14)*** Many, if not most prophecy teachers believe that this is a reference to the famous Gog and Magog invasion spoken of in Ezekiel 38-39, in which an alliance of predominantly Muslim nations attack Israel... only to be destroyed by fire from heaven. It is a case of divine judgment on Israel's enemies leaving the world with no doubt who the one true God is. ***“...and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel” (Ezekiel 39:7).***

Interestingly, Syria is not mentioned in the Ezekiel 38 list of nations who attack Israel on this occasion as we would normally expect, causing us to believe that the destruction of Damascus happens beforehand and is the catalyst to what follows. The pieces of the jigsaw certainly seem to fit. But the big message of Isaiah 17 is, that the geo-political landscape of the Middle East will be drastically changed from what we see today. The world changes almost overnight. Meltdown occurs on a massive scale. How wonderful that these things are all revealed to us before hand in the Word of God. Scripture truly is the script of the last days. No wonder Benyamin Elon (a Jewish rabbi and member of the Knesset) wrote, “If you do not know how to read the Bible, you cannot understand the daily paper.”