



## THE MIDDLE EAST in Prophecy



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#### **INTRODUCTION**



### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

ince the conclusion of World War I, the Middle East has emerged as a crucible of geopolitical complexities marked by political turbulence, wars and the oppression of beleaguered populations. This region, with its rich tapestry of history, has been witness to the rise and fall of empires, the birth and spread of major world religions, and the epicenter of enduring conflicts.

In this booklet, we embark on a journey through time and prophecy, unraveling the intricate threads that weave the narrative of the Middle East in Bible prophecy.

#### The cradle of civilization—and three world religions

This is no ordinary terrain. It is the very cradle of civilization, where God created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve.

It is a land steeped in the traditions of three major religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The roots of these faiths are deeply entwined with the soil of the Middle East, making it a spiritual crossroads that has witnessed the convergence and divergence of multiple national interests.

As we delve into the Middle East's history, we encounter the patriarch Abraham and his extended family, whose journey and settlement in this region laid the foundation for the birth of multiple nations, often in competition and conflict with each other. It is a land where the echoes of the past resonate in the present, shaping the relationships of nations and peoples today.

#### The Holy Land and God's plan

The story of the Middle East is incomplete without acknowledging its significance as the area of the world chosen by God to not only create humans, but also carry out key steps of His plan of salvation. What He has done and will do in that area is essential to His plan to eventually offer every human the opportunity to become part of His eternal family.

In the midst of the Middle East is the Holy Land, a land so important to God that He describes it as "a land for which the LORD your God cares; *the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it,* from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11:12, emphasis added throughout).

Since it is literally the focal point of God's attention on earth, it's essential that we understand the Middle East's significance and future.

Most of the events we read about in the Bible occurred in this land. It was where He placed His people and allowed them to grow from an extended family into a nation. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is where He was crucified for the sins of mankind. It is also the city to which He will return and from which He will rule the entire world.

In the modern era, the Middle East has been a theater of dramatic geopolitical shifts. After enduring two millennia of dispersion, the Jews once again found a homeland in this Promised Land.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is the story of a people who reclaimed their historical roots and carved out a nation in the heart of the Middle East. Simultaneously, the Arab world has grappled with the challenge of unity, navigating a complex web of political, cultural and religious diversity.

Today, the inhabitants of these lands continue to wrestle with seemingly unobtainable aspirations, shattered dreams and perpetual conflict. Both Jews and Arabs have put forward their historical claims to the land.

#### Prophecies of war and peace in the Middle East

It is within this tumultuous context that Bible prophecy unfolds, offering insights into the end-time struggles that will mark the upcoming years. Beyond the turmoil, prophecy envisions a future when divine rule will lead to the people of the Middle East transcending their discord and becoming a beacon of harmonious living for the entire world.

This booklet seeks to illuminate these prophecies, unpacking key highlights to provide a deeper understanding of what is already forming in the Middle East. It is a captivating story that demands careful attention.

In the pages that follow, we invite you to join us as we delve into the heart of a region whose history and destiny have been documented by the Word of God.

#### LOCATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The heart of the Middle East is a crescent-shaped region stretching from the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.

The Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis 2:10-14, was located in the Middle East. Additionally, it is believed that Mount Ararat, identified as the resting place of Noah's ark following the worldwide flood, is located in present-day Turkey (Genesis 8:4).

The highlighted region in the map below shows the core nations of the Middle East.

Because human civilization began here, the area has also been referred to as the cradle of civilization and the fertile crescent. As the area developed, it was a prime piece of real estate—the corridor of commerce between the east, west, north and south.

Most of the countries included in this area are part of the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is the largest in terms of area. Egypt, Turkey and Iran have the largest populations.



The Middle East connects three continents: Europe, Africa and Asia. Throughout history, it was fought over by the great empires, and later it was the focal point of conflicts between competing religions. History records that the smaller nations that inhabited this area also regularly fought among themselves.

Although the exact boundaries of this region have varied, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states: "By the mid-20th century a common definition of the Middle East encompassed the states or territories of Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and the various states and territories of Arabia proper (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, or Trucial Oman [now United Arab Emirates]).

"Subsequent events have tended, in loose usage, to enlarge the number of lands included in the definition. The three North African countries of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are closely connected in sentiment and foreign policy with the Arab states. In addition, geographic factors often require statesmen and others to take account of Afghanistan and Pakistan in connection with the affairs of the Middle East" ("Middle East").



Much of biblical history and prophecy centers on a region within the Middle East sometimes called the Levant. This area encompasses the lands on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea—which include modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Much of this booklet will be focused on this relatively small region.

#### **CHAPTER 1**

### ABRAHAM, FATHER OF MANY NATIONS

n order to have an accurate understanding of the complex relations between modern nations in the Middle East, it is necessary to be aware of some of the earlier history of this part of the world. The biblical story of this land primarily has its roots in the story of one man, his kin and their children.

This central figure was Abraham—or Abram, as he was originally called—and his wife, Sarah—or Sarai, as she was originally called (Genesis 17:5, 15). Current attitudes held by today's residents of the Middle East spring from deeply rooted historical and emotional foundations that we will now consider.

Abraham's lineage can be traced through his father, Terah, who was a resident of Ur of the Chaldeans. Like most people at that time, Terah was an idol worshipper (Joshua 24:2).

Terah had at least three sons—Abraham, Nahor and Haran—and at least one daughter, Sarah (from a different mother than Abraham's mother), who eventually married Abraham (Genesis 11:27; 20:12). (During early Bible times, God had not restricted marriages of close relatives.) The family dynamics that developed among these key individuals set the stage for the future, not only of this family, but also of the entire region.

After Haran died in Ur, the family, including Haran's son Lot, moved westward to an area called Haran (Genesis 11:28, 31).

At the age of 75, Abraham heeded God's call to move to a different country (Genesis 12:1, 4). Abraham, his wife Sarah and

Map base image: iStockphoto.com/FrankRamspott

The Middle East is often thought of in broader terms, as shown by the map to the left.

his late brother's son Lot, with all their possessions, made their way to the land of Canaan (verse 5).

It was in this foreign land that God again appeared to Abraham, delivering a promise that his descendants would inherit and thrive in this very land (verse 7).

God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and inherit the land of Canaan must have provided immense encouragement to Abraham (Genesis 12:2, 7). But waiting for this great blessing to be fulfilled was going to be one of the biggest trials experienced by Abraham and his wife, Sarah.

Before delving into the intricacies of this trial and noting the consequences of the decisions they made throughout it, we should turn our attention to the parallel narrative of Lot. The story of Lot, intertwined with that of Abraham, sheds important light on the interconnected destinies of these two figures and their descendants.

#### Lot and his descendants

Lot spent many of his early years with his grandfather Terah and uncle Abraham. After his father Haran died, he moved with the family to a place called Haran (Genesis 11:31). And he accompanied Abraham when his uncle left Haran for Canaan (Genesis 12:4-5).

Although the biblical account provides limited details, it suggests that Abraham had a special affection for Lot, helping him become financially secure and likely sharing what he was told by God. When Abraham became "very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold," Lot also "had flocks and herds and tents" (Genesis 13:2, 5).

In time, Lot's and Abraham's herds grew so large that they had to separate because "the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together" (verse 6).

Because they were relatives, Abraham wanted to avoid strife and proposed that they separate. Abraham told Lot to choose which direction he wanted to go, and Abraham would go the opposite (verses 8-9).

Lot chose the well-watered plain of Jordan and eventually began living in the city of Sodom (verses 10-11). Unfortunately, the men of this city were "exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD," and living there soon proved to be a terrible mistake (verse 13).

#### Lot's woes in Sodom

Over time, the sins of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah became very great, and God decided to destroy these cities. Prior to doing so, Abraham bargained with God about not destroying Sodom if there were righteous people living there (Genesis 18:22-32). Very likely Abraham was thinking of his nephew Lot and his family, who lived there.

But it seems that Lot was the only righteous man in the city, and the angels sent by God helped Lot, his wife and two of his daughters escape just before the city was destroyed (Genesis 19; 2 Peter 2:7).

As the family was fleeing Sodom, Lot's wife looked back—apparently longing to return to Sodom—and became a pillar of salt.

#### Lot fathers two nations

Having seen the judgment God brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah for their sinful conduct, Lot became afraid to live even in the small city of Zoar. So he and his two daughters began living in a cave in the mountains (Genesis 19:30).

Fearing that there were no men for them to marry and that their father's lineage would cease to exist, Lot's daughters decided to get their father drunk and have sexual relations with him in the hope of having children (verses 31-36).

#### WHO WERE THE CANAANITES?

The Canaanites were the peoples who settled in the area along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean after the Flood. According to the Bible, they descended from Noah's grandson Canaan (Genesis 10:15-19). Tragically, Noah's grandson demonstrated a lack of morality and was cursed (Genesis 9:22, 25). Because of the increasing wickedness of Canaan's descendants, God promised these lands to the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 15:16-21).

By the time Abraham came into the land, the people had divided into several tribes—the Amorites, Canaanites, Hivites, Jebusites and Perizzites. Since this land was heavily inhabited by Canaanites, it was referred to as "the land of Canaan" (Genesis 12:5).

From the time Abraham sojourned in the land to the time the nation of Israel came into the land after the Exodus, the Canaanites who occupied it posed a continual challenge. As we will see, some of the descendants of the ancient Canaanites continue to exist today within the Muslim world.

m **13** 



Route taken by Abraham and his family after they left Ur and sojourned in the land of Canaan

Both daughters became pregnant. "The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. And the younger, she also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi; he is the father of the people of *Ammon* to this day" (verses 37-38).

Lot thus became the father of two nations: Moab and Ammon.



#### Israelite interactions with Moab and Ammon during the Exodus

While we are getting ahead of the story of what happened to Abraham, we'll go ahead and note some of the interactions between the descendants of Lot (specifically Moab and Ammon) and the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob (the Israelites).

As these different branches of Abraham's descendants and extended family developed, the Israelites were absent from the land of Canaan for many years. This period began when Joseph brought his father and brothers to Egypt to

survive a famine. The family survived, grew very populous and eventually became enslaved to the Egyptians.

After God miraculously freed them from slavery (Exodus 2-14), the Israelites embarked on their exodus to Canaan.

As the Israelites progressed toward the Promised Land, God told them to be respectful of their extended family dwelling in the nations of Moab and Ammon. As Moses related to the people, "And the LORD said to me, 'Do not harass *Moab* or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession' . . .

"And when you approach the territory of the people of *Ammon*, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:9, 19, English Standard Version).

Even though the Israelites honored this instruction (Judges 11:15-18), the Moabites became fearful of this large number of immigrants coming toward them from the south.

King Balak of Moab decided to take protective measures for his nation. He hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. But God would not allow Balaam to do so. The history of this encounter is recorded in Numbers 22-24.

It is noteworthy that because the Moabites and Ammonites did not meet the Israelites with "bread and water on the road" when they "came out of Egypt," God said they could not "enter the assembly of the LORD forever" (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

God clearly expected Abraham's extended family members to treat each other with respect.

#### Moabite and Ammonite interactions during the times of Israel's judges and kings

Despite God's desire for these related peoples to get along, the relationships between Israel and Moab didn't always align with this expectation.

During the time of Israel's judges, King Eglon of Moab formed a coalition with the people of Ammon and Amalek (a descendant of Esau, Genesis 36:12) to subjugate the Israelites and exact tribute. This oppressive situation continued for 18 years until God raised up Ehud, who led the Israelites in a successful revolt (Judges 3).

An intriguing instance of collaboration between Israel and Moab is recounted in the book of Ruth. Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and their two sons sought refuge in Moab amid a famine in Judah. Sadly, Elimelech and his two sons died, leaving Naomi a widow in a foreign land.

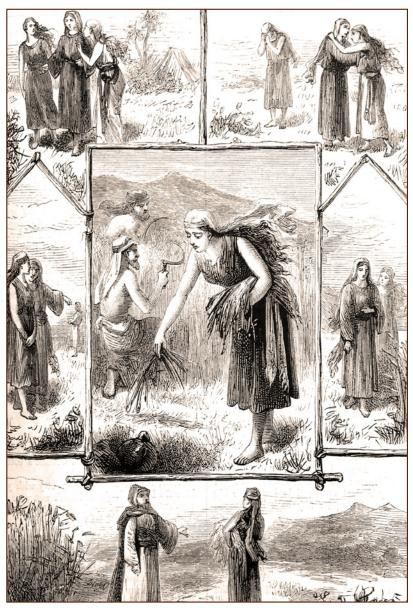


Illustration above depicts the story of Ruth, a Moabite and the widow of one of Naomi's sons.

Illustration: iStockphoto.com/Clu

When Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, Ruth, a Moabite and the widow of one of Naomi's sons, went with her and began to worship the God of Israel, rather than Chemosh, the god of the Moabites (Ruth 1:16; 1 Kings 11:33).

Ruth's decision eventually led to her marrying Boaz (an Israelite) and becoming part of the lineage that included King David and Jesus (Matthew 1:5-6, 16).

During King Saul's reign over Israel, he successfully fought against Moab and Ammon (1 Samuel 14:47). Yet David, while fleeing from Saul, obtained temporary asylum for his parents with the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3-4).

Later, when David became king of Israel, he subdued the Moabites and the Ammonites (2 Samuel 8:2; 11-12).

The times of cooperation and respect between Israel and the Moabites and Ammonites were rare. These descendants of Abraham and Lot harbored mutual distrust, leading to intermittent conflict and wars.

#### Ishmael, father of the Arabs

Among the blessings God promised Abraham for his obedience in moving to Canaan was that his descendants would become "a great nation" and be given the land (Genesis 12:1-2, 7). After Abraham separated from Lot because the area could not support them living together, God expounded on His promise.

"And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: 'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (Genesis 13:14-16).

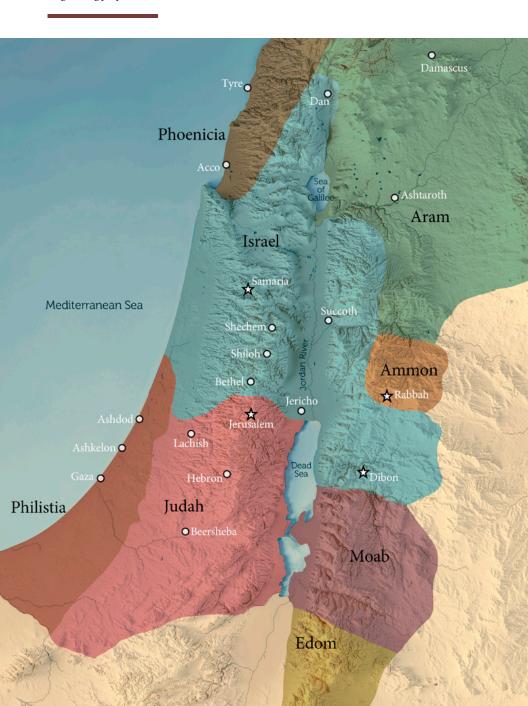
These words from God must have surely been pleasing to Abraham. There was just one very big problem. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had not been able to have children.

Abraham brought up the fact that he was childless and that one of his servants was his heir. God then explained to Abraham how His promise that Abraham would have a seemingly uncountable number of descendants would be fulfilled.

God told Abraham, "One who will come from your own body shall be your heir" and again stated that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:4-5).

In one of the great testaments to Abraham's faith, Scripture notes, "And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He [God] accounted it to him for righteousness" (verse 6; also note Romans 4:20-22).

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah and neighboring peoples.



God then gave Abraham additional details regarding his offspring: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13; see the online blog post "Abraham's Descendants to Be Enslaved").

#### A surrogate mother

After waiting 10 long years from the time God had promised Abraham innumerable descendants, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, became impatient to have a child.

Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child through Hagar, her maid. Abraham agreed.

"Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:3-4).

This may have been a common practice in that culture, but it did not adhere to God's design for marriage and soon proved to be a tragic mistake. It created tension within Abraham's family and left an indelible mark on generations to come.

When Hagar realized that she was pregnant with Abraham's child, a shift in the family dynamics quickly ensued. Sarah, Hagar's "mistress became despised in her eyes" (verse 4). Sarah became angry, and "when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she [Hagar] fled from her presence" (verse 6).

#### The-God-Who-Sees names and blesses Hagar's child

As Hagar was fleeing from Sarah, "the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness" and told her to return to her mistress (verses 7-9). He also gave her encouraging news regarding the child she would bear.

"Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.' And the Angel of the LORD said to her: 'Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction.

"He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.'

"Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, 'Have I also here seen Him who sees me?'" (Genesis 16:10-13).

#### The blessings and prophecies of Ishmael

Although Ishmael was not destined to be the heir of Abraham, God still cared for Ishmael (Genesis 21:10-21).

Ishmael's name means "God hears," and Hagar's response to the message she had received—calling God "the-God-Who-Sees"—reflects the fact that God was fully aware of the situation.

Furthermore, God promised that Ishmael would have many descendants. These descendants are widely recognized as Arabs. In time, Ishmael became the father of 12 sons (Genesis 17:20; 25:13-16). The Islamic prophet Muhammad traced his lineage back to Kedar, one of the sons of Ishmael.

The future of the Arab peoples was predicted in Genesis 16:12: "He shall be a wild [*pere*, literally, an onager or wild donkey] man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

Ishmael was likened to a wild donkey because "this animal is a fit symbol of the wild, free, untamable Bedouin of the desert. He is to live in contention, and yet to dwell independently, among all his brethren" (*Barnes' Notes*). Job 39:5-8 provides a description of this untamed animal.

The prophecy of Genesis 16:12—"his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him"—predicted that there would be many violent struggles and contentions. The Arabs throughout history have been a proud people, well-known for their congenial hospitality, but often fighting to continue to exist despite encroaching empires and kingdoms.

As we will see in chapter 2, this struggle has been a tragic part of Muslim history and the bloodshed that has plagued the Middle East for centuries.

#### Abraham's relationship with Ishmael

After Hagar returned to her mistress, she gave birth to Ishmael, and the two of them remained with Abraham and Sarah for approximately 16 years (compare Genesis 16:16 and 21:5, 8-10).

Abraham loved Ishmael. When God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision and explained that Sarah would bear a child in her old age, the patriarch replied, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" (Genesis 17:18).

Abraham might have come to believe that Ishmael was his promised heir. God quickly countered this reasoning:

"No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.

"And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year" (verses 19-21).



#### Ishmael and Hagar separate from Abraham and Sarah

As foretold by God, Sarah miraculously conceived and bore a son named Isaac. Their son's name—Isaac—meant laughter, and this miracle child brought great joy to Abraham and Sarah. On the day he was weaned they made a great feast (Genesis 21:1-8).

The joyous occasion quickly soured when "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing" (verse 9).

Whatever the reason or reasons for Ishmael's "scoffing," his action caused Sarah to immediately demand of her husband, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac" (verse 10).

This demand "was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son [Ishmael]," but God told Abraham to listen to Sarah and carry out her demand



Illustration by 19th-century artist Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld depicts Hagar and Ishmael being sent away by Abraham at the demand of Sarah.

(verses 11-12). God then reminded Abraham that He would make Ishmael's descendants a great nation (verse 13).

Abraham believed God and obeyed. In the morning he sent Hagar and Ishmael away with some bread and a skin of water (verse 14).

After wandering in the wilderness, Hagar thought they both would soon die of thirst. On this occasion, God told Hagar that He had heard the voice of her son (verse 17). God then supplied them with water and was "with the lad" as he grew and lived in the wilderness (verse 20).

The hard feelings that had existed between Sarah and Hagar had come to a head. And sadly, these contentious feelings of resentment and anger have continued through the ages between many of the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Jacob, one of the sons of Isaac.

#### The birth of Isaac

Having reviewed the history of Ishmael and noting the reasons Ishmael and his descendants resented Isaac, we are now ready to consider the history of Isaac and his sons, Esau and Jacob.

Previously we noted that Abraham may have thought that Ishmael would be his heir (Genesis 17:18). After all, Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (Genesis 16:16), and as the years went by, this patriarch and his wife reached the time of life when most couples can no longer have children (Genesis 17:17).

But when Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him and made several monumental announcements. The first was that he would now be called Abraham, meaning "father of many nations" (verses 1, 5).

Then God instituted circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, including Ishmael (verses 10-14, 23).

After that, Abraham was told that his wife should now be called Sarah because she would become a "mother of nations" and that "kings of peoples" would come from her (verses 15-16).

When Abraham heard the reason for his wife's new name, he found it difficult to believe. He "fell on his face and laughed" (verse 17). Old folks past the age of childbearing having a child? It just seemed incredibly funny to both Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:10-12).

But God was serious. This wasn't a joke.

True to God's word, Isaac (meaning "laughter") was born "at the set time of which God had spoken to him [Abraham]" (Genesis 21:2). And, as God had instructed, Isaac was circumcised when he was eight days old (verse 4).

Then came Abraham and Sarah's feast at Isaac's weaning and the subsequent dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael from the household (verses 8-14).

#### The sacrifice of Isaac

We aren't told much about the life of Isaac as he grew up. But the Bible does record one major event: God's testing of Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac on one of the mountains in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:1-2).

This ordeal foreshadowed a crucial event in the salvation of mankind. And its location became a focal point of religious, political and prophetic significance, as we will see.

The Western Wall (foreground) is a sacred site of Judaism, while the Dome of the Rock (upper left) is a sacred site of Islam.



Abraham followed God's command. He journeyed to the area God had said and made the preparations, including binding his son Isaac on the altar. As Abraham lifted his knife to slay his son, the Angel of the Lord called out to him, telling him not to hurt Isaac (verses 6-12).

"And He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (verse 12).

Because of Abraham's willingness to obey, God expanded upon the blessings He had already promised Abraham and his descendants (verses 16-18).

There is much symbolism in this account. Abraham offering his son Isaac parallels God the Father offering His Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for mankind's sins. A lesson that we can apply in our lives today comes from the ram God provided for the offering in place of Isaac: If we trust God, He can supply our needs.

The location of this sacrifice also became significant. This mountain is where David built an altar to stop a plague. Mount Moriah also became the site of the temple Solomon built for God in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 24:18-25; 2 Chronicles 3:1).

This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., rebuilt during the time of Zerubbabel and destroyed again by the Romans in A.D. 70. Today the Western Wall of the temple's foundation (important to Judaism) and the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque (important to Islam) are all located on this site.

For further study of this location, see "Temple Mount: Its History and Future."

#### Isaac takes a wife

After the death of Sarah, who lived to be 127, Abraham instructed his chief servant to go back to his family and take a wife for Isaac (Genesis 23:1; 24:1-4).

After coming to a water well outside the city of Nahor, the servant prayed for God's guidance and blessing (Genesis 24:10-14). God answered this prayer by having Rebekah, a beautiful granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor arrive at the well and offer to draw water for the servant and all his camels, fulfilling the sign the servant had requested (Genesis 11:27; 24:15-47).

After giving Rebekah and her family multiple gifts, the servant took Rebekah, who had agreed to become Isaac's wife, and returned to Abraham.

#### Twin boys: Esau and Jacob

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah (Genesis 25:20). Unfortunately, Rebekah was barren—unable to have children (verse 21). Isaac pleaded with God that they might have children.

After almost 20 years had passed, God answered Isaac's prayer and Rebekah became pregnant with twin boys. Prior to their birth, "the children

struggled together within her" (verse 22). Not understanding what was occurring, she asked God for an explanation.

"And the LORD said to her: 'Two nations are in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (verse 23).

When the twins were born, "the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob" (verses 25-26).

#### Contention between Esau and Jacob

The struggles these twin brothers had in Rebekah's womb were a forerunner of the struggles they would have with each other as they grew up and of the contention their descendants would have with each other.

"As the boys were growing up, Esau became skilled at hunting and was a man of the outdoors, but Jacob was the quiet type who tended to stay indoors. Isaac loved Esau, because he loved to hunt, while Rebekah loved Jacob" (verses 27-28, International Standard Version).

From the time they were in the womb, they had struggled with each other. And then after they were born, having parents who favored one of them over the other likely added to their rivalry.

Two additional incidents drove the wedge of disagreement between them even deeper. First, Jacob persuaded Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of red lentil soup when Esau was very hungry (verses 29-34).

Second, Jacob, with the help of his conniving mother, Rebekah, tricked the aging Isaac into giving the birthright blessing to Jacob rather than his older brother, Esau.

After learning of Jacob's treachery, "Esau said to his father, 'Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me—me also, O my father!' And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

"Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: 'Behold, your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck.'

"So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27:38-41).

As prophesied, Esau did break away from his brother, and his descendants became the nation of Edom. The name Edom comes from the Hebrew word for red.

Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel, fathered 12 sons whose descendants became known as the 12 tribes of Israel.

Although Jacob and Esau reconciled for a while after their father's death, their descendants became bitter enemies. The marriage between Esau and a daughter of Ishmael (Genesis 28:9) linked these two branches of Abraham's descendants who were against Jacob's side of Abraham's descendants.

Jacob's descendants went to Egypt, where they were eventually enslaved, while the descendants of Lot, Ishmael and Esau remained in the land. When the Israelites returned to Canaan, the distrust resumed.

#### Esau's descendants vs. Jacob's descendants

When God delivered the ancient Israelites from bondage in Egypt, He promised that He would bring them "to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites" (Exodus 3:8).

When the Israelites approached these lands, Moses requested permission of Esau's descendants (the Edomites) to pass through their nation.

"Now Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom. 'Thus says your brother Israel: "You know all the hardship that has befallen us, how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians afflicted us and our fathers.

""When we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent the Angel and brought us up out of Egypt; now here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border. Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells; we will go along the King's Highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory."

"Then Edom said to him, 'You shall not pass through my land, lest I come out against you with the sword.'

"So the children of Israel said to him, 'We will go by the Highway, and if I or my livestock drink any of your water, then I will pay for it; let me only pass through on foot, nothing more.'

"Then he said, 'You shall not pass through.' So Edom came out against them with many men and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him" (Numbers 20:14-21).

Thus, when the Israelites returned to Canaan, they "bypassed the land of Edom" (Judges 11:18). By the time of King Saul, however, the Edomites had become full-fledged enemies of Israel. Saul fought against Moab, Ammon and Edom (1 Samuel 14:47). A long string of conflicts ensued between Israel and Edom (2 Samuel 8:14; 1 Kings 11:14-16; 2 Kings 8:20).

#### AMAI FKITE DESCENDANTS OF ESAU

Amalek, a grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:12), was one of the chief leaders in Edom (verse 16). The Amalekites were the first people the Israelites encountered after they left Egypt for Canaan. Even though these peoples were kinsmen through Isaac, the Amalekites viewed this large train of immigrants approaching their nation as a threat.

So the Amalekites made an unprovoked attack upon Israel (Exodus 17:8-16). God intervened and allowed Israel to defeat Amalek.

After having wandered in the wilderness for 40 years because of disbelieving in God's promise and ability to bring them into Canaan, the Israelites once again prepared to enter their Promised Land.

On this occasion. Moses referred back to the earlier battle with Amalek, saving, "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God.

"Therefore it shall be, when the LORD your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget" (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

The Amalekites became Israel's bitter enemies. God told King Saul: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (1 Samuel 15:2-3).

Amalek's intense hatred and cruel acts against Israel were unjustified. But due to Saul's refusal to obey God's directive, Amalek was not completely destroyed and remained a thorn in Israel's side. Amalek's descendants made recurring attempts to harass and destroy Israel. In the State of Israel today, the Amalekites have come to represent the Jews' irreconcilable enemies.

What we have seen thus far is that hard feelings, distrust and anger have existed among the peoples descended from Abraham since the earliest days. The animosity between these peoples, which began long ago, continues today in the Middle East and beyond.

#### Summary: seeds of conflict

Thus far, we have seen that the branches of Abraham's descendants had multiple reasons for jealousy and distrust of each other as they all settled in the Middle East.

The conflicts between the Lot, Ishmael and Esau branches of the family and the Israel branch of the family continued through the establishment of the ancient nation of Israel. The conflicts persisted when Israel split into two nations—Israel and Judah—and lasted throughout the existence of the kingdom of Judah even after 721 B.C., when the kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians.

After the kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity by Babylon between 604 and 586 B.C., the Israel branch of Abraham's family no longer had a nation in the Middle East.

After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, some of the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, but they didn't fully return to the status of a sovereign nation until the 20th century.

While some of the Jews remained in the Middle East, many of the other descendants of Israel had migrated to the north and west, where they established many of the major Western nations that exist today. To learn more of this fascinating history—information that helps us understand endtime Bible prophecy—see our booklet *The United States, Britain and the Commonwealth in Prophecy*.

Even though a small remnant of Jewish descendants of Abraham's family remained in the Middle East, many of them also migrated to other lands and nations established by the other descendants of Israel. Over the last two millennia, the Arabs have been the main descendants of Abraham to continue living in their ancient land.

It wasn't until 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, that the Jews once again had a homeland in the Holy Land and many Jews returned. This development helped set the stage for many end-time Bible prophecies.

But before we consider what the Bible says about this part of the world before Christ returns, we need to consider some important developments that occurred among the Arab peoples who remained in the Middle East through the last 2,000 plus years.

In the next chapter we'll begin exploring this part of the story of Abraham's descendants.

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Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with their current borders, in relationship to their immediate Middle East neighbors.

# THE RISE OF ISLAM AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

hroughout the centuries, the descendants of Ishmael, Esau and Lot largely settled in the lands surrounding the Holy Land—particularly Arabia, northern Africa, the Levant (the area along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea) and Mesopotamia.

Since most of Ishmael's offspring inhabited the vast desert region of the Arabian Peninsula, they became known as Arabs. Over the years, they developed the Arabic language, which has many linguistic similarities to Hebrew.

Though many of the Arabs were Ishmaelites, the descendants of other peoples of the region mixed with them and also became known as Arabs. As we have already noted, this included some descendants of Esau, one of whose wives was Ishmael's daughter (Genesis 36:1, 8, 19).

Among the Arab peoples are also the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, the father of the Moabites and Ammonites (modern-day Jordan).

It's also likely that some of the descendants of the various Canaanite tribes, who were in continual conflict with Israel, integrated with the Arabs.

#### The Arabs before Islam—divided and weak

Throughout ancient times, the Arabs united into various kingdoms in Arabia—including the Sabaeans, the Minaeans, the Nabataeans, the Palmyrenes, the Ghassanids and the Itureans.

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However, these were all regional kingdoms and could not unite all Arabs under their banner or challenge the more dominant empires of antiquity. They were all relatively short-lived.

Ishmael's descendants spent long periods in relative historic obscurity. Many Arabs in Arabia became nomadic Bedouins, surviving the harsh desert by raising camels and trading. For centuries, they were largely overshadowed by the far more powerful civilizations to their north, including the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian (Persian) Empire.

The Arabs were nearly all pagan polytheists, worshipping various gods associated with geographic features or heavenly bodies.

Prominent gods of the Arabic pantheon included Hubal (associated with the moon), Allat, Al-Uzza and Manat. The people feared spirits that roamed the deserts called *jinn*.

Though the hundreds of Arab tribes worshipped different gods, they shared a central sanctuary in Mecca known as the Kaaba. This structure housed 360 idols representing the gods of the various Arabian tribes. Many Arabs would make an annual pilgrimage to pay homage to their gods in this structure.

For centuries, the polytheism of the Arabs kept them divided into tribes and prevented them from coalescing into a united Arab civilization. This kept the Arabs perpetually weaker than the civilizations to their north that were united under the banner of monotheistic religions.

Before the seventh century, the notion of Ishmael's descendants uniting into a formidable force capable of dominating the Middle East and northern Africa or of threatening Western civilization would have been inconceivable.

That all changed because of one man.

#### Muhammad and the birth of Islam

Muhammad was born into the Quraysh tribe in Mecca in around A.D. 570. He was born into an era that had recently seen the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, which left western and central Europe divided between the warring kingdoms of the Frankish and Germanic tribes.

Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the center of Christendom shifted to Constantinople, located in modern-day Turkey, under the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Emperor Justinian had expanded the empire south into the Levant and northern Africa, bringing Catholic civilization to the edges of the Arabian Peninsula.

To the east of the Byzantine Empire was the vast Sasanian Empire, centered in Persia. It dominated Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf and extended into central Asia.

Muhammad's parents died when he was young, which led his uncle to adopt him as a boy. He spent his first 25 years shepherding his uncle's flocks before becoming a merchant. At 25, he married an older wealthy merchant named Khadija. This enabled him to travel in caravans throughout the Middle East, bringing him into contact with people of various cultures and exposing him to the beliefs and practices of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

This exposure led Muhammad to learn about other belief systems and consider the core reasons his people, the Arabs, remained relatively weak and fractured. Whereas the Arabs worshipped hundreds of gods that kept them divided into tribes with no central belief system, he saw how the monotheistic religions achieved unity and purpose through belief in a single God and a holy text.

Being married to a wealthy wife gave Muhammad time to ponder these philosophical and religious issues.

#### THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

These five pillars represent the five basic practices expected of all Muslims.

- 1. The declaration of faith. The Muslim faith is summarized in this basic profession (called *the shahada*): "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger."
- Daily prayers. Muslims are expected to recite prayers, called salat, five times a day. This is to be done on one's knees facing toward the city of Mecca.
- **3. Alms.** Muslims are expected to share their wealth with less fortunate Muslims through alms, also called *zakat*.
- **4. Fasting during Ramadan.** During the sacred month of Ramadan, Muslims are expected to fast during the daylight hours, from dawn to dusk.
- Pilgrimage to Mecca. At least once in their life, able-bodied Muslims are expected to take a pilgrimage, called the hajj, to the holy sites of Mecca.

He began taking journeys to a secluded mountain and cave outside Mecca to think and meditate. During these times of seclusion, beginning when he was 40 years old, Muhammad claimed to have seen visions and revelations from the angel Gabriel. He would claim to receive angelic revelations for the remainder of his life.

He began sharing the messages that he maintained he had received during these visions with his family and friends, persuading some that he was a prophet of God. Since Muhammad was illiterate, these verbal messages were later recorded by his followers and compiled into the book known as the Koran (also spelled Quran), from the Arabic word meaning "the thing that is recited."

His followers arranged Muhammad's messages in order from shortest to longest and divided them into chapters, called suras.

Through these messages, Muhammad taught that there was only one true God, and his name was Allah. This simple message, summarized in the Arabic phrase la 'ilaha illa Allah ("there is no god but Allah"), ultimately inspired a new world religion that would change history.

That religion became known as *Islam* (Arabic for "submission" or "surrender"). Adherents to this faith became known as Muslims (Arabic for "one who submits").

#### Muhammad's teachings

Muhammad taught that Allah was the same God worshipped by the Jews and Christians. However, he asserted that those religions had corrupted Allah's name and teachings over time.

Muhammad portrayed himself as Allah's final prophet—the last in a string of prophets going back to Abraham and including Jesus of Nazareth. He criticized his people for their polytheism, idolatry and superstitions.

His teachings included stories and concepts drawn from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, though modified to place the Arabs at the center of those narratives. Muhammad taught that the Old and New Testaments were also revelations of Allah but that the Jews and Christians had corrupted them. He claimed his revelations corrected those errors.

Muhammad, acknowledging the descent of his people from Ishmael, taught that Ishmael, rather than Isaac, was the true son of promise. He claimed Abraham and Ishmael had traveled to Mecca and together built (or rebuilt) the Kaaba—establishing Mecca as the center of Allah's true religion.

Muhammad taught that Jesus was a Muslim prophet of Allah, but was not the Son of God and did not die for sins. Instead, Muhammad claimed that Jesus was saved from the Jews by Allah taking Him to heaven.

#### Muhammad embraces the sword

While Muhammad gradually gained a small following in his hometown of Mecca, his condemnation of idolatry made him increasingly unpopular with the establishment in Mecca.

In A.D. 622, Muhammad and his small band of followers fled north to Yathrib (later renamed Medina) for fear of his life. This journey became known as the *Hegira* (Arabic for "migration" or "journey"). To this day, the *Hijrah* marks year one on the Muslim calendar—the beginning of the Muslim era.

Medina's people rapidly accepted Muhammad's teachings, and he became the city's political, judicial and spiritual leader. Muhammad was credited with bringing peace, unity and strength to Medina.

Though most of the Arabs in the city converted to Islam, Muhammad encountered religious opposition from Medina's Jewish community. Since they rejected his teachings and the idea that he was God's prophet, the Jews and Muhammad clashed.

Most of Medina's Jews were eventually expelled or forced to convert on threat

## ISLAM: A RELIGION OF PEACE AND VIOLENCE?

Muhammad's focus was on uniting his Arab kinsmen under the banner of one God (*Allah*) and one religion (*Islam*). His approach to achieving that goal was not always by peaceful persuasion.

Though his earlier Meccan ministry was largely peaceful, his messages became increasingly violent after he relocated to Medina. Muhammad would go on to spread his faith through the sword, and he waged several violent battles against both Arabs and Jews.

Due to this shift, the Koran contains earlier passages emphasizing peace and later passages emphasizing bloodshed against non-Muslims. To this day, moderate Muslims tend to emphasize his earlier messages, while radical Muslims tend to emphasize his violent messages, believing the later passages abrogate the earlier ones.

This precedent of violence, coupled with Koranic verses sanctioning bloodshed against non-Muslims, led Islam down a path that has often included horrific brutality.

In the Koran and in Muslim culture, this belief in waging "holy war" to advance Islam and destroy its perceived enemies became known as *jihad* (Arabic for "striving"). This is why parts of the Muslim community have been prone to

of death. This hostility would characterize relations between the Iews and Muslims for over a thousand years and continues into modern times.

Only eight years after fleeing his home, Muhammad returned, leading a powerful army to conquer Mecca.

He quickly entered the Kaaba, cleared it of its hundreds of idols and dedicated it instead to Allah. Under his rule, nearly all of Mecca converted to Islam. By controlling Arabia's two most violent radicalization and terrorism throughout history.

Modern acts of war and terror including the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001; ISIS's brutality against its enemies; and the Hamas attack against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023—were all carried out and justified by the Islamic idea of jihad.

significant urban centers, Muhammad quickly conquered and converted most of the Arabian tribes.

By his death in 632, Muhammad had united virtually the entire Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam. By gathering the Arabs under one religious banner, Muhammad played an essential role in fulfilling the prophecy that Ishmael's descendants would be a "great nation" (Genesis 17:20) and be able to fulfill key end-time prophecies.

#### Islam takes the world by storm

Upon his death, Muhammad's father-in-law Abu Bakr (632-634) emerged as his successor. After solidifying Islam's hold over the Arabian tribes through a series of wars, Abu Bakr and his successor Umar I (634-644) took Islam down a path that would forever change history and the world. Instead of remaining just the national religion of the Arab peoples, Islam burst out of Arabia and continued to expand—by the sword.

Over the next 100 years, through a series of bloody battles and military campaigns, the Arabs conquered and converted nations, civilizations and tribes all the way to the doorstep of Europe.

Between 634-642, the Muslims attacked the Byzantine provinces in the Middle East and North Africa, bringing Jerusalem, Syria and Egypt under Muslim domination. The loss of these lands marked the genesis of the historical tension between Catholic and Muslim civilizations. (Four centuries later, Catholic Europe would wage a series of unsuccessful wars known as the Crusades, attempting to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims.)

The Muslim forces also invaded the Sasanian Empire of Persia, bringing Mesopotamia and Persia under Muslim rule (633-651).

By 709, just 77 years after Muhammad's death, Muslims controlled North Africa all the way to the Atlantic Ocean—simultaneously expanding further east into south-central Asia. These wars of the seventh and eighth centuries explain why the modern nations in and around the Middle East are Islamic to this day—including Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

Through this forceful expansion, numerous descendants of ancient peoples with historical animosity toward Israel—such as the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites and Philistines—united with the descendants of Islam.

#### The forces of Islam set their sights on Europe

After conquering North Africa, the Muslim forces turned their eyes northward to Europe. In 711 they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and in a few short years conquered the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain). The Muslim forces seemed unstoppable, and it seemed European civilization would soon fall to Islam.

With their sights set on western and central Europe, the Muslims invaded Gaul (France) in October 732. Europe was divided into many regional kingdoms, and defeat seemed likely. However, as we will see, it would have been a conflict with biblical prophecy for Europe to become a part of Islamic civilization.

In one of history's most significant battles, the Muslim armies were thoroughly defeated by the Frankish forces under Charles Martel (Charles "the Hammer") at the Battle of Tours on Oct. 10, 732.

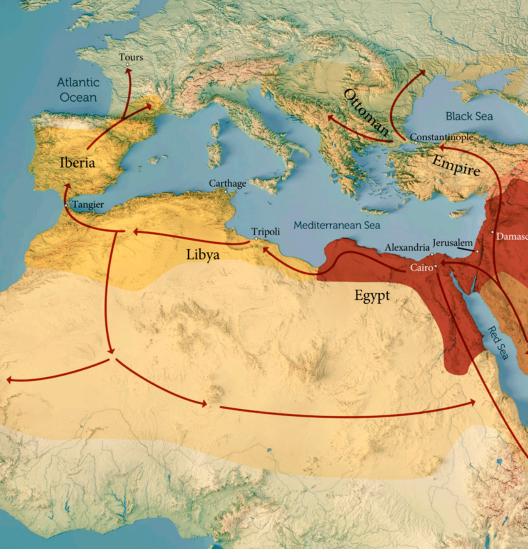
Charles' decisive victory halted the Muslim advance, safeguarding Western civilization and preserving Catholicism in Europe. Most of Europe remained religiously Catholic and never fell under the banner of Islam.

Historians credit Charles Martel with saving European civilization. This victory allowed his grandson Charlemagne to unite western Europe under the Germanic Franks. Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Dec. 25, 800—reviving the Western Roman Empire 324 years after its fall in 476.

This was the fifth of 10 revivals of the Roman Empire prophesied in the Bible (Daniel 7:7, 24; learn more about this in our articles "Daniel 7: Four Beasts and the Little Horn" and "What Is Babylon?").

In order for this and other prophecies to be fulfilled, Europe could not fall to Islamic civilization.

Islamic civilization would predominantly populate the region south of Europe into the end times.

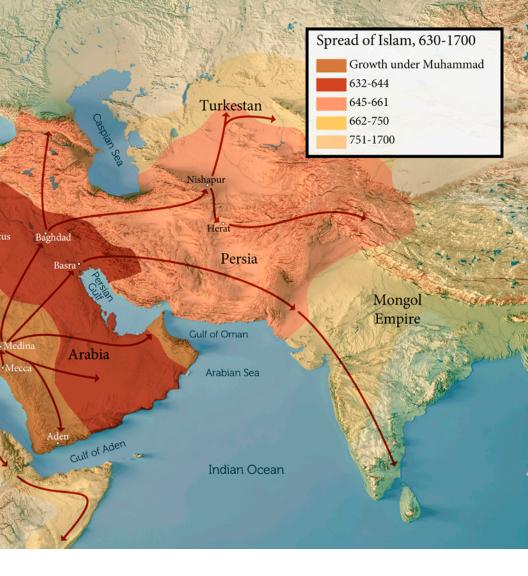


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#### The rise of the Ottoman Turks

More than seven centuries later, the forces of Islam would again try to expand into Europe and threaten Western civilization—this time from the east.

The Turks, a Central Asian people who had converted to Islam, had largely settled in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and began threatening Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (which came to be known as the Byzantine Empire). Though the Turks first appeared in history in the central Asian steppes during the early centuries of the common era, it seems many of them may have originated from tribes descending from Esau.



One Turkish clan, the Seljuks, emerged as the most powerful Turkish group and coalesced under the leadership of Osman I in the 13th century. The Seljuk Turks became known as the Ottomans.

In 1453, under the leadership of Mehmed the Conqueror, the Ottomans captured Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire and once again establishing Islamic civilization on the doorstep of Europe.

The ancient city, founded over 1,100 years earlier by Constantine the Great, became the capital of the Ottoman Empire and was renamed Istanbul. As a

symbol of its triumph over the Orthodox Christianity of Byzantium, the then 900-year-old Hagia Sophia Cathedral was stripped of its Catholic symbols and converted into a mosque.

As an interesting historical sidenote, with the Ottomans now controlling the gates of Asia, Europeans began searching for alternative routes to India and East Asia to avoid passing through hostile Muslim lands.

This motivated the Spanish, who had just expelled the Muslim Moors from their land, to commission a young Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) to find a new route to Asia via the Atlantic Ocean.

His journey to the New World opened the doors to European expansion and colonization of the Americas—which would eventually lead to greater fulfillment of the birthright blessings that had been promised to Joseph (Genesis 48:19).

From Istanbul, the Ottomans continued their expansion northward into Eastern Europe throughout the late 15th and early 16th centuries—eventually

bringing Greece and the Balkans under their dominion, reaching as far north as Hungary.

The Ottomans simultaneously expanded south and east into Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia.

The Ottomans tried to expand into central Europe by conquering Vienna, Austria, but were twice defeated and turned back by Europeans.

Though they tried, the forces of Islam were never able to conquer and integrate most of Europe into Islamic civilization. This should not surprise us, since the Bible indicates



Europe and the Middle East would remain two separate and often conflicting civilizations into the end time.

#### The decline of Islamic influence

Over the next three centuries, the Ottoman Empire gradually declined and lost its territory in Eastern Europe through a series of wars with Europeans and Russians. As a result of siding with the Central Powers during World War I, the 400-year-old Ottoman Empire ended after the war and its former Middle East territories were partitioned among the victors.

Many of the former Ottoman territories were carved into the nation-states of today's Middle East, including Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Palestine (later the State of Israel). Because these modern states were created without regard to tribal divisions and the Sunni-Shia divide (see the sidebar "Understanding the Sunni-Shia Divide"), many continue to be plagued by war and terrorism to this day.



This fact was violently brought to the surface again when the fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni government in Iraq led to bloody Sunni-Shia fighting and the rise of the Sunni Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Interestingly, the Ottomans did not totally enforce Islam on everyone under their dominion and allowed Orthodox Christianity to continue. This permitted European culture to survive in Eastern Europe, but left a culture in this region that is very different from that of western and central Europe. The aftermath of Ottoman rule has been religious and ethnic conflict, border and land disputes, and economic struggles.

Despite Islam's attempts to subjugate western and central Europe, it was never able to do so and has largely remained dominant in the lands south and east of the Mediterranean Sea.

As we have seen, the tension and rivalry between European and Islamic civilizations have deep roots that go back more than 1,000 years. This rivalry continues, and the belief that Islam must ultimately triumph over the world is still deeply embedded in Muslim thought.

#### **Ancient tensions continue today**

Today, Islam represents the world's second-largest religion, accounting for around 24 percent of the world's population.

After the Ottomans were driven back from Vienna, Islamic civilization did not pose a serious threat to Europe for centuries.

With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the 1,200-year period of Muslim growth and expansion seemingly ended. Islamic civilization returned to its historic homelands and was largely consumed with internal struggles and conflicts over the next seven decades.

It wouldn't pose a serious threat to the West for nearly 100 years, when a group of Islamic extremists from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network launched the deadly Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., which killed nearly 3,000 people in one day.

With those attacks, the sons of Ishmael continued their age-old struggle with the sons of Isaac. This tension between these two branches of Abraham's offspring dominates headlines and global concerns today.

As we will see in the next chapter, end-time prophecy reveals that this conflict will continue, as will the historical tension between Islamic and European civilizations. This ancient animosity will ultimately help plunge the entire world into war.

The deep biblical and historical roots we have just covered help us understand our modern world and what lies ahead.

## ISLAM AND THE HOLY LAND

Jerusalem is considered the third-holiest city in Islam.

Since Muhammad's history was largely confined to Arabia, particularly the cities of Mecca and Medina, how did Jerusalem become significant to Muslims?

Muhammad believed that his work was a continuation of the work of the prophets of Judaism and Christianity. The Koran refers to Jews and Christians as "people of the book." Though he thought their holy books contained many errors, he accepted the basics of what they taught.

Since Jerusalem played a key role in biblical history, it was also significant to him and his followers. Muhammad first taught his followers to pray toward Jerusalem. However, after the *hijrah*, he began teaching his followers to pray toward Mecca instead.

However, the primary connection Muslims make between their faith and Jerusalem is a story found in the Koran's 17th sura (or chapter). In this section, Muhammad was taken on a night journey from "the Sacred Mosque to the farthest Mosque" (Al Aqsa in Arabic). From there, Muslims believe Muhammad was taken on a tour of heaven.

Though the Koran doesn't specify where the "farthest Mosque" was located, after Muhammad's death it became Muslim tradition that this Mosque was located on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (*Al Quds* in Arabic). The *Hadith*, a collection of teachings attributed to Muhammad after his death, is the basis for this connection.

In 637, Muslims captured Jerusalem from the Byzantines and incorporated it into their empire. Upon entering the city, the Muslims visited the Temple Mount, only to find the Christian occupants had made it a trash dump. The Muslims built a small mosque on the south part of the complex (later rebuilt and known today as the Al Agsa Mosque).

Several decades later they built the much more impressive Dome of the Rock over an outcrop of rock they believed was the site from which Muhammad ascended to heaven on his night journey. This location is also regarded by many Jews as the location where the Holy of Holies stood during the times of the biblical first and second temples.

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Historian Karen Armstrong summed up the Dome's significance: "The Dome of the Rock also had a message for the Jews. It occupied the site of their Temple . . . Now the sons of Ishmael had established themselves on this sacred site" (*Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, p. 240).

The Dome of the Rock was a symbol of Islam's triumph over Judaism and Christianity.

Jerusalem remained under Muslim control for over four centuries before it was captured by the Catholic Crusaders in 1099. The city was reconquered by Muslim and Catholic forces multiple times.

Throughout these centuries of Muslim rule, many Arabs settled in the Holy Land and became known as Palestinians. The radical elements among the Palestinians, particularly Hamas, demonstrate violent tactics eerily similar to the ancient Amalekites and Edomites (both descendants of Esau).

In 1948 the Jewish people were permitted to return and the State of Israel was established.

With the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland, a quagmire was created that continues unsolved to this day: How can the divided children of Abraham coexist in the same relatively tiny piece of land?

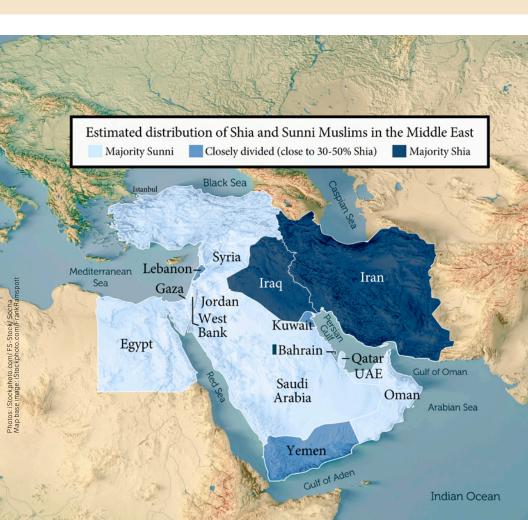




### UNDERSTANDING THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE

To understand the Muslim world of the Middle East, it is important to understand the Sunni-Shia divide. Though both forms of Islam follow Muhammad and study the Koran, they diverge in some major ways.

The fundamental root of the split arose from the fact that Muhammad never designated a successor or a method for selecting one. After his death in 632, Muhammad's followers established a new office called *the caliph* (from the Arabic word *khalifah*, meaning *successor*).



At that time, Muhammad's close friend and father-in-law. Abu Bakr, was able to secure the new office and became the first caliph. Abu Bakr played an enormous role in the development of Islam—consolidating Islamic rule over the Arabian tribes, compiling the Koran and beginning the period of Muslim conquest outside Arabia.

However, his legitimacy was not universally accepted. A minority faction rejected Abu Bakr's legitimacy and believed Muhammad had designated that his successors were to come from his direct bloodline. They believed that Muhammad had appointed his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib (Ali), as the rightful caliph, and that future caliphs should descend from this line. Ali's followers referred to this line as the imam (Arabic for "one who leads the way").

This disagreement led to the formation of two factions within Islam:

Sunni. The majority of Muslims came to accept Abu Bakr, believing that the caliphs should be selected by consensus and that the caliphate did not necessarily have to be held by a direct descendant of Muhammad. This majority view became known as Sunni (Arabic for "tradition").

Shia. A minority of Muslims asserted that Muhammad's descendants through the lineage of Ali were the legitimate leaders of the Islamic community. This faction became known as Shia (Arabic for "the faction" or "the party of Ali").

In 680, the divisions between these two factions became more pronounced when one of Ali's sons, Husayn, was killed by followers of the majority faction. Every year, Shiites commemorate his death as a martyr of Shia Islam. This event solidified the hatred and separation of the two factions.

Over time, other differences emerged in how the two factions practiced Islam, mainly regarding beliefs in the afterlife, how prayer is approached and the practice of self-flagellation. Another major difference is the belief in the coming of a future mahdi (a messiah-like figure who will come and establish a golden age of Islam before the world ends).

Belief in the coming of a future mahdi is central to Shia Islam. Shiites believe that the 12th imam, Muhammad ibn Hasan al-mahdi, was hidden by Allah (becoming "the hidden one") and will reappear as the mahdi in the end time. While the idea of a

future mahdi is present in Sunni Islam, it is not associated with the 12th imam or emphasized to the extent it is by the Shia.

Today, nearly 90 percent of the Muslim world is Sunni. Sunnis represent the majority populations of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Jordan, Afghanistan, Turkey and nearly all African Muslim nations.

The Muslim nations with majority Shiite populations include Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan.

Many of the tensions within the Muslim world in the past few decades can be understood only by understanding the Sunni-Shia divide. These tensions include:

- The rise of ISIS. After the fall of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who was a Sunni, a new Shia-led government was established. This led to ongoing tensions between the two sects. Eventually, militants from the Sunni population formed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with the goal of establishing a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic state in Iraq and surrounding lands. ISIS perpetrated acts of severe brutality against Shia Muslims and was attacked by a coalition of nations that took away the territories it had ruled.
- The tension between Iran and other Sunni nations. Iran is governed by a fundamentalist Shia theocracy that seeks dominance in the Muslim world. In recent years, Iran has challenged strong Sunni nations like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and has funded insurgencies and terrorists throughout the region.
- Civil wars. There are many ongoing civil wars within nations rooted in this sectarian division. In Syria, Sunni rebels have fought an ongoing civil war to overthrow the ruling Alawite (a Shia sect) government. In Yemen, the Houthis (adherents of a Shia sect) are fighting against Yemen's Sunni-led government. In Lebanon, the Shia militant group Hezbollah operates independently of the moderate coalition government and continually threatens Israel's northern border. In nearly every Sunni-Shia conflict in the region, the Shia faction receives funding and weapons from Iran.

It is impossible to fully understand the ongoing divisions and conflicts in the Muslim world without an understanding of the Sunni-Shia divide.

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# THE MIDDLE EAST IN **END-TIME PROPHECY**

ible prophecy tells us that the historic hostilities between the two branches of Abraham's family will finally come to an end—but not in the way geopolitical analysts would likely predict. Before Christ's return and before these animosities come to an end, the Bible describes an end-time "king of the South" (Daniel 11:40). Indications are that the Arab/Muslim world will unite in an effort to destroy the offspring of Abraham's grandson Jacob.

Psalm 83 also foretells a powerful coalition of mostly Arab and Muslim nations, a vast confederacy determined to exterminate Israel from the earth.

"They have said, 'Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more.' For they have consulted together with one consent; they form a confederacy against You" (Psalm 83:4-5).

Verses 6-8 identify the nations that will unite against Israel. The names point clearly to Arabic and Muslim nations of the Middle East, among others.

This prophecy reveals that a lasting peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis will not be achieved in our time. Instead, Israel and the Muslim world will continue to be adversaries for the foreseeable future.

Whatever damage this coalition may inflict upon Israel, they will not succeed in conquering the Jewish state. That will be accomplished by a different power. So now let's trace the prophecies of a future superpower based in Europe.

#### The Middle East vs. the Roman Empire

At this point, in order to see what the future holds for the Middle East, we must turn our attention to Europe. Why? Because prophecy shows that in the future, the Middle East will be fighting against a *revived* Roman Empire.

In Daniel chapters 2 and 7, God foretold that, starting with the Babylonian Empire in Daniel's day, there would be four successive, major empires dominant in the world. (The Babylonian Empire was based in what is now Iraq.)

The second was the Persian Empire (based in modern Iran). Next came the Greek Empire. Then came the mighty Roman Empire, which was centered in Europe. See our online article "Daniel 7: Four Beasts and the Little Horn" for the details.

The Bible prophesies that the Roman Empire will again be dominant at the time of the end. But how can that be, since the Roman Empire *fell* more than 1,500 years ago in A.D. 476?

God showed that this empire would be revived—brought back to life—not just once, but *10 times!* These 10 revivals are represented by 10 horns in Daniel 7:7. The first three horns—revivals—existed with some overlap in history. The last seven are more consecutive in their rise and fall. (See the chart "Roman Empire and Its 10 Revivals.")

At this time, *nine* revivals of the Roman Empire have already occurred. The final revival is yet to come, and when it does it will become a *major* force in future events.

The Roman Empire, with its revivals, has always been centered in *Europe*. And the Bible prophesies that in the end a confederation of 10 "kings"—rulers of nations or groups of nations—will come to power, perhaps emerging from a reconfigured European Union (Daniel 2:41-44; Revelation 17:12-13).

This power, also referred to as the *beast* in verses 12 and 13, will even fight against Christ when He returns to rule the world (verse 14; for more about this, see "Who Is the Beast?"). Before that, however, it will be engaged in a massive conflict in the Middle East.

#### The king of the South and the king of the North

This takes us to Daniel 11, which is an incredibly detailed prophecy that foretold the conflict over the Holy Land from the time of Alexander the Great to the end time. First it predicted the specifics of the struggles between the Ptolemies in the south and the Seleucids to the north.

Historically, the king of the South was the dynastic leader of the Ptolemies, the Egyptian branch of the Greek Empire. For over a century, the king of the South struggled for supremacy against the king of the North—the Syria-based Seleucids, another branch of the Greek Empire. This took place in the third

### **ROMAN EMPIRE AND ITS 10 REVIVALS**

"The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all other kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, trample it and break it in pieces. The ten horns are ten kings who shall arise from this kingdom" (Daniel 7:23-24).

The 10 horns are 10 revivals or resurrections that would arise from this empire after its initial death.

The Roman Empire started about 31 B.C. It fell in A.D. 476.

Horn		Fulfillment
These first three revivals were subdued in the presence of the papacy (the "little," separate horn in Daniel 7:8, 24).	1st horn/ revival	The Vandals (about A.D. 429-533).
	2nd horn/ revival	The Heruli (about 476-493).
	3rd horn/ revival	The Ostrogoths (about 493-554).
The last seven revivals have an association or cooperative relationship with the papacy or the official state religion, an arrangement that helped to unify the empire. These seven revivals are depicted by a beast with seven heads in Revelation 17:1-6.	4th horn/ revival	Began in 554 with the "Imperial Restoration" of the Roman Empire by Emperor Justinian, who again declared Christianity to be the official state religion.
	5th horn/ revival	Began in 774. The Frankish king Charlemagne was crowned by the pope in 800 as emperor of the Roman Empire.
	6th horn/ revival	German King Otto the Great was crowned by the pope in 962 as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.
	7th horn/ revival	Charles V was crowned king of Germany in 1520, then crowned by the pope as Holy Roman emperor in 1530.
	8th horn/ revival	In 1804, at Notre Dame in Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte placed a laurel crown of the Roman emperors on his head, then took the Crown of Charlemagne from the pope and crowned himself emperor.
	9th horn/ revival	Began with Italy's reunification under Garibaldi in 1870, culminated in the 1936 Rome-Berlin Axis between Hitler and Mussolini, and ended with the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945.
	10th horn/ revival	Yet to come, the revival of the Holy Roman Empire as a confederation of 10 rulers or kingdoms.

and second centuries B.C., after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. (Daniel 11:3-4).

But in the end time, the "king of the North" will be the final, revived Roman Empire. The term "king of the North" is derived from its general location in reference to Jerusalem. Similarly, the "king of the South" will most likely be a Muslim power generally centered south of Jerusalem.

There is so much historical detail in this chapter—now fulfilled prophecy foretold *centuries* in advance—that we encourage you to read some of the fascinating details in our article "Daniel 11: The Most Detailed Prophecy in the Bible."

Let's now pick up the historical thread in Daniel 11:40. The time frame is obviously *end-time*: "At the *time of the end* the king of the South shall attack him [the king of the North, the final revival of the Roman Empire]; and the king of the North shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter the countries, overwhelm them, and pass through."

Again, this is clearly a reference to modern times. At the time of the end—leading up to Christ's return—military conflict will involve advanced weaponry that Daniel described using the terminology of his day.

In this prophecy, the "king of the South" (presumably a Muslim leader) attacks the end-time European power, perhaps over oil, shipping lanes, tariffs, expansion threats, terrorism or "holy war." The king of the North will strike back with superior technology and military power to protect its interests, overpowering multiple countries.

Interestingly, the prophecy reveals that three nations will avoid being overthrown by the king of the North—"Edom, Moab, and the prominent people of Ammon" (verse 41). This corresponds to the modern nation of Jordan and possibly Turkey. This may show the end-time Muslim union will be weak, likely including nations like Turkey and Jordan that have historically been on better terms with the West than other Muslim nations.

Instead of overthrowing and occupying these nations, the king of the North will focus his attention on the Holy Land, Egypt and northern Africa.

This end-time war will be the culmination of hundreds of years of tension between European and Muslim civilizations, which we explored in the preceding chapter. (See "The King of the North" and "The King of the South" for additional explanation.)

#### Jerusalem: Focal point of conflict and dominion

Continuing in Daniel 11, verse 41 says the king of the North will enter "the Glorious Land"—a reference to the original Promised Land, but known today



General location of the countries that may be represented by the "king of the North," "king of the South" and "kings from the east" as mentioned in Daniel 11 and Revelation 9:16; 16:12.

as Israel and Palestine. The 12 tribes of Israel entered this land in the late 15th century B.C. In the 10th century B.C., King David established Jerusalem as the capital.

But within a few centuries, due to flagrant sins against God, the Israelites of the northern kingdom were conquered and deported (2 Kings 17:7-23). God had repeatedly warned them that breaking His commandments would lead to captivity. Later, people of the southern kingdom of Judah were also conquered because of their sins, and many were taken captive to Babylon. However, God promised the southern tribes that they could return after 70 years and inhabit Jerusalem again, which some of them did.



Map base image: iStockphoto.com/FrankRamspoti

Later the Greeks took control of Jerusalem, and after that, the Romans. In the fourth century A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion, and the Roman Catholic Church claimed Jerusalem.

In the seventh century, Arabs and other Muslims took control. And so, Jews, Christians and Muslims all have claimed ownership rights to Jerusalem over the millennia.

Before and after the formation of the modern-day State of Israel (mostly from the tribe of Judah) in 1948, this relatively small area has been among the most hotly contested pieces of real estate in the entire world. And currently Israel's capital, Jerusalem, is inhabited by Christians, Jews and Muslims. Each would like to have sovereign control of this ancient city.

Prophecy tells us that before the final end-time events, efforts to take control of Jerusalem will greatly intensify.

Notice what God says in Zechariah 12:3, "And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it."

Since prophecy shows that the daily sacrifices will be taken away and "the abomination of desolation" will be set up, sacrifices must, at some point, be restarted in Jerusalem (Daniel 12:11; Matthew 24:15).

Christ foretold in His Olivet Prophecy, "But when you see Jerusalem *surrounded* by armies, then know that its *desolation* is near" (Luke 21:20).

Christ then said, "There will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (verses 23-24).

Revelation 11:2 tells us that these gentiles will "tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months." At the conclusion of this 3½-year period, the end of this age will occur and Christ will return to the earth.

But who are the gentiles who conquer Jerusalem and occupy it during this final time period?

As we saw in Daniel 11:40-41, this invading power is the "king of the North," the revived Roman Empire also referred to as the "beast" in the book of Revelation.

For further study, see "Times of the Gentiles."

#### A 200-million-man army

But after this European "beast" power takes the Holy Land, the story continues. Daniel 11:44 says, "But news from the east and the north shall trouble him; therefore he shall go out with great fury to destroy and annihilate many."

These forces from the east and the north are also described as a 200-million-man army in Revelation 9:16. As part of Revelation's sixth trumpet plague, a third of mankind will be killed as this massive army marches toward the Middle East (verse 18).

This is a reference to the large and populous nations of Asia. This will likely include Russia and China, which are geographically located to the north and east of Jerusalem. This seems to be a loose coalition that will be assembled to challenge the European "beast" power.

Learn more about the seven trumpet plagues in our online article "How 7 Trumpets of Revelation Will Affect Humanity."

#### Armageddon and the final battle

During the seventh trumpet—at the very end of this present age the Middle East will be the final locale of warfare engulfing the entire world.

Revelation 16:14 says that the kings "of the whole world" will be gathered to the Middle East for a final battle. This would include the remaining forces of the Arab/Islamic nations along with the forces of the "beast" and the army from Asia.

Verse 16 foretells that all these armies will be gathered "to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon." This is the hill or mountain of Megiddo, about 80 miles north of Jerusalem by road, overlooking a large open plain, the Jezreel Valley.

Megiddo (from which we get Armageddon in Revelation 16:16) overlooks the Valley of Jezreel, also known as the Plain of Esdraelon, where armies will gather before going to Jerusalem to fight against the returning Christ.



But contrary to popular assumptions, the world's final battle will *not* take place here. Instead Armageddon will be a staging area, where these armies will gather to fight the returning Jesus Christ—an enemy they will see as more threatening than each other.

Jesus Christ will visibly return to Jerusalem and descend on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4).

The warring nations of the world will make the misguided choice to march south toward Jerusalem to battle against Jesus Christ and His saints.

The final battle will be centered in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (also known as the Kidron Valley), lying between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives.

This aerial shot of Jerusalem shows the Mount of Olives, where Jesus Christ will return to earth, and the Kidron Valley (also known as the Valley of Jehoshaphat), where He will fight against those who oppose Him.



As the prophecy in Joel 3:1-2 says, "For behold, in those days and at that time, when I bring back the captives of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of My people, My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations; they have also divided up My land."

More detail is provided in Zechariah 14:2-4: "For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem . . . Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west."

This battle between Jesus Christ and the world's armies will be swift and decisive.

Verses 12-13 describe the power Christ will use to vanquish His opposition: "And this shall be the plague with which the LORD will strike all the people who fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh shall dissolve while they stand on their feet, their eyes shall dissolve in their sockets, and their tongues shall dissolve in their mouths."

This, then, is how the aggressive forces of the Middle East—and the entire world—will finally be stopped. In a display of unmistakable power, Jesus will literally cause His opponents to melt where they stand. This will send an essential message to the entire world that a new authority has arrived and that all resistance will be futile.

If He didn't intervene and violently stop these forces from fighting each other, all humanity would be destroyed (Matthew 24:22).

Revelation 19:15 further describes this act and the reason for it: "Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."

Before Jesus establishes His benevolent government, which will bring peace and justice to a war-torn world, He will display His power and authority in the most graphic and decisive manner possible.

But this is not the end of the story. After Christ's return, the branches of Abraham's family will finally begin to live in peace and learn to get along with each other. As we will see in our concluding chapter, this will be one of many changes that will come after Jesus Christ returns and establishes the Kingdom of God on earth.

# THE BRIGHT FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

f we did not have the Bible, the picture of the Middle East's future would be grim. But God has revealed a much brighter future for the Middle East.

### Jesus Christ is coming to save—and rule—the world

God knows that in the end time, humans will develop and use weapons of mass destruction to such an extent that they will come close to erasing all life on earth. Jesus said, "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22). But Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and He will return just in time to save life on earth.

The name *Jesus* refers to His role as Savior and *Christ* means "anointed" (Messiah in Hebrew). He is anointed to rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Ironically, all three major religions that claim a stake in Jerusalem have varying beliefs regarding the Messiah.

In a 2010 survey, about half of mainstream American Christians said they believed Jesus Christ would return in the next 40 years.

Judaism views Jesus as a man who falsely claimed to be the Messiah. Adherents of this religion are still awaiting the Messiah's coming.

Islam believes Jesus was a human prophet who was not crucified or resurrected, and therefore was not humanity's savior. Muslims believe He will return in order to point all humans to Muhammad and Islam.

Humanity is in for a big shock. Revelation 12:9 says Satan the devil has *deceived* the whole world. That encompasses all ethnic groups and religions. Hence when Christ returns, the armies of the nations will *fight* against Him! But Christ will vanquish all His remaining enemies at His return.

And Satan, the instigator of all war, evil and misery, will be removed from the world, unable to deceive and oppress humans during Christ's reign on earth.

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while" (Revelation 20:1-3).

Notice the reference to 1,000 years. This is the initial period Christ will reign on earth, with Satan gone from the scene. Because 1,000 years is a millennium, we refer to this special future period as "the Millennium."

After the Millennium, Satan will be "released for a little while." Revelation 20:7-10 foretells that he will resume his destructive efforts as soon as he is released. After the "little while" of freedom, he and the demons will be banished for the rest of eternity.

#### Blessings of Abraham shared with all

Before proceeding with the wonderful future the Bible predicts for the Middle East and the entire world, we need to return to a key promise God made to Abraham.

When God told Abraham to leave his country and go to a land He would show him, one of the promises God offered to Abraham was: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

There are multiple ways this far-reaching promise was to be fulfilled. First, it was through Abraham's descendants that Jesus was born. Through His life and sacrifice for our sins, He became the Savior of all mankind.

Another way all mankind is going to be blessed through Abraham is that Jesus will intervene to prevent the destruction of the human race. He will return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, provide true and complete education on how God wants to be worshipped and make eternal life available to everyone who chooses to live God's way.

Let's now examine these amazing blessings in greater detail.

#### Jerusalem will become the capital of the world

Christ chose Jerusalem long ago as His city of future residence. He appeared to Abraham as "Melchizedek king of Salem," the "priest of God Most High"

(Genesis 14:18). Salem developed into the city later called Jerusalem.

Hebrews 7:1-3 makes clear that Melchizedek was the One who later came as Iesus Christ: "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually" (verse 3).

After Israel settled in the Promised Land, God chose Jerusalem to be its capital, where the throne of David was established (1 Kings 11:13, 36). Jerusalem is where Christ chose to fulfill His great sacrifice, and where He rose from the dead three days later (Matthew 16:21). Jerusalem is where His Church began (Luke 24:47).

Jesus Christ will return to receive David's throne (Luke 1:32) and rule as King from Jerusalem. God says, "I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy," and "the LORD will again comfort Zion, and will again choose Jerusalem" (Zechariah 1:16-17).

In fact, when Christ returns to earth, He will descend to the same place from which He *left* the earth in A.D. 31—Jerusalem, or more precisely, the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-12).

#### The Middle East will be united and at peace

During the Millennium all the descendants of Abraham—Arabs and Israelites—along with all other nations, will have the opportunity to learn God's truth and receive His gift of salvation and eternal life.

The modern-day descendants of Egypt, Assyria and Israel will be joined, not only in religion and cooperation, but even in an open road system between them.

"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, 'Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance" (Isaiah 19:23-25).

This prophecy represents the unity and peace that will exist between the three civilizations that have historically been at odds with each other—the Arab world, Israel and Europe.

Another wonderful picture of that future day is found in Isaiah 2:3: "Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

This is talking about a reeducation program that will be implemented. Other nations—presumably starting with those nearest in the Middle Eastwill acknowledge Christ as the world's King and will see that the tribes of Israel are being greatly blessed. They, too, will want God's favor and blessings, and will desire to learn His laws.

One subject that will *not* be taught is *war*. "He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).

Aggressive violence and destruction are of Satan's attitude and way of life, and they will be prohibited in God's realm. "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

#### God will enter a covenant with the Middle East

After Christ returns, He will again enter into an agreement (covenant) with Israel. It will be based upon the *original* covenant—including the same commandments, statutes and other terms God requires—but *upgraded* or made "new" by a new promise on God's part.

What makes this covenant so much better is the conferring of God's own Spirit, which imparts the heart and mind of God and a down payment of immortal, spirit life into humans. Notice the descriptions in Jeremiah 31:31-33 and Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:24-28.

Ezekiel 39:29 is another millennial prophecy: "And I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel."

Other nations will then have the same opportunity to enter God's covenant and receive His Spirit. Notice Joel 2:28: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on *all* flesh."

#### The Middle East will become like the Garden of Eden

The earth will be in desperate shambles when Christ returns (Revelation chapters 8–9 and 15–16). But He will immediately begin restoration on a global scale.

Notice this prophecy: "For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden" (Isaiah 51:3).

Starting from the Middle East and then spreading beyond, landscapes will become like the paradise of the original Garden of Eden (Ezekiel 36:35). Lebanon will be transformed into a fruitful field (Isaiah 29:17).

Millennial prophecies describe today's wilderness areas becoming fruitful fields with pools of water and rivers appearing in desolate heights (Isaiah 32:15; 33:21; 35:6-7; 41:18). Crops will be so abundant that harvesting will be nearly continual (Isaiah 30:23; Amos 9:13; Joel 2:23-24; Zechariah 8:12).

All of this will come from God, as people turn to Him and remain obedient to His laws. This was God's original promise to Israel, and He will uphold it not only for Israel in the Millennium, but for *all* nations (Leviticus 26:3-6; Deuteronomy 28:1, 4-12).

For further study on the changes that will occur in the Middle East and throughout the world during the Millennium, read our free booklet *The World* to Come: What It Will Be Like.

#### What the story of the Middle East means for us

As we conclude our exploration of the Middle East in Bible prophecy, it becomes evident that the story transcends the historical narrative of Abraham and his descendants. This part of the world serves as the stage from which God initiates His work with humanity at large.

The Middle East, with its intricate history, is not merely a geographical setting but a chosen ground where God is unfolding His divine plan for all peoples. The Bible reveals God as the loving Father of every nationality and ethnic group. He desires for all people to become part of His eternal family.

This divine narrative intersects with the turbulent present and offers a glimpse into the future when Jesus Christ returns to the Middle East, bringing peace and reconciliation to those who submit to His rule and live by His laws.

As we stand at the crossroads of unprecedented conflict in the Middle East, aligning our lives with God's commands becomes paramount. The call is not to succumb to the prevailing mindset of enmity but, as followers of God, to heed Christ's admonition against being weighed down by worldly pursuits.

Our Savior's plea to us is to watch, pray and be counted worthy to escape the impending trials that will come upon the earth (Luke 21:34, 36).

As we contemplate these profound truths, let's reflect on the broader implications of the story of the Middle East, recognizing God's desire for each of us. By aligning our lives with His commands, we can have the opportunity to assist Christ in bringing peace to the Middle East and fulfilling the greater purpose God has for each of us.

For further insights, resources and support, we invite you to explore our LifeHopeandTruth.com website. Let us know how we can assist you on this transformative journey.

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Today's news and tomorrow's predictions are often filled with bad news. But Bible prophecy reveals a better time is coming. And it shows what we should be doing in the meantime. Understanding prophecy can help you recognize

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#### The World to Come: What It Will Be Like



The Bible reveals that Jesus Christ is returning to establish His Kingdom here on earth. His rule will begin a complete transformation of our world. This booklet will guide you through the Scriptures to discover what this new world will

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# The Book of Revelation: The Storm Before the Calm



From vivid images of carnage to sublime visions of beauty, the book of Revelation explains what will happen before and after Jesus Christ's return to earth. What does it mean for our lives—now and in the future?

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