

Study 1

The Middle East Today

Focus – discussion of events of the 20th Century leading to the current situation

In this first study we will look at:

- the current status of the conflict;
- some terms currently used in the reporting of Middle East events;
- geography of the Middle East; and,
- 20th Century History of the Middle East focussing on Israel.



Current status

It is very hard to be precise about the current status of events in the Middle East because the situation is so volatile. However, there is almost constant conflict. The violence that commenced in September 2000 still continues. Israelis and Palestinians blame each other. There has been little progress in peace negotiations, despite the efforts of former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, and subsequently, Defence Secretary Colin Powell. The current US President spends little time on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

There is constant violence between Israeli troops and Palestinians, with both sides accusing each other of starting each incident.

Problems with the peace negotiations led to the resignation of former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and for him to instigate elections. This was been seen by many to be a political ploy to stop former Prime Minister Edward Netanyahu from being able to contest the election to become Prime Minister at that time. At the same time, Mr Barak wished to gain a mandate for his position in the peace negotiations. The subsequent election of Ariel Sharon led to an escalation of violence that still continues.

In effect, negotiations have reached a stalemate. Palestinians are renewing their sniping and continue to carry out various forms of terrorist activity against Israelis. Israelis respond with more sophisticated weapons. An undercurrent to all of this is the delayed unilateral declaration of the state of Palestine, despite Gaza now being in the hands of Palestinians.

What have been the events that have led to this current situation? Why is there such contention over various parcels of land, specifically, the West Bank, Gaza strip and Jerusalem? Why is there absolute hatred between Palestinians and Israelis, and between Israelis and many Arabs?

We will now look at the geographical, historical and cultural issues, mostly in the 20th century, that have led to the current situation.

Some terms

Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) – This was formed in 1964 to bring together a variety of Palestinian resistance groups that had existed previously and which had conducted guerrilla style activities against the State of Israel. Two of these groups are *Fatah* and the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*.

Fatah – This is the dominant terrorist group within the PLO. It has members on the PLO executive and generally controls the PLO's finances. It was formally established in 1965 with its leader Yasser Arafat. It joined the PLO in 1968 and became the dominant group in 1969 with Arafat being elected as the Chairman until he died in 2004. Fatah was replaced by Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian elections.

Hamas - A resistance movement created by Palestinians in 1987. The group is listed as a terrorist organization by Australia, Canada, the European Union, Israel, and the United States, and is banned in Jordan.

Intifada – This is an Arabic word meaning "uprising" and refers to the strikes, riots, demonstrations and violence carried out against Israel in the Gaza strip and the West Bank of Jordan. It is an activity embraced by a number of organisations including the PLO and the *Hamas* or Islamic Resistance Movement. The uprising was instrumental in pressuring Israel to grant self-rule to the Gaza strip and to the West Bank town of Jericho in 1993 and later extended to other towns and refugee camps in the West Bank in 1995.

Jihad – This is a religious war waged by Muslims against unbelievers.

Mossad – This is one of five Israeli intelligence organisations whose activities include intelligence gathering, espionage and covert political operations in foreign countries. It has been involved in such activities as the rescue of hostages in the hijacked airliner in Entebbe, Uganda in 1976, and the bringing to trial of various war criminals.

Hezbollah - This is an Arabic meaning "Party of God". Initially, it was a guerrilla group modelled on the Muslim fundamentalism of Iran and committed to promoting Islamic activism in Lebanon and thwarting Western influences. While it still maintains some guerrilla activities against Israel, it is now a political party striving to achieve its aims in Lebanon through political means.

Geography of the Middle East

What can be readily noticed when looking at a Map of the Middle East (see [Map 3](#) below) is the nearness of Israel's neighbours/potential enemies to its sovereign land. Frequent artillery assaults on villages in the north of Israel was the reason that Israel took the Golan Heights some years ago. Its belief in an improvement of relations with Syria, and an attempt to be conciliatory led to the partial withdrawal from that region during 2000.

What kind of relationship does Israel have with its neighbouring countries?

Jordan has become increasingly more closely involved with America, particularly with respect to trade and military exercises. King Hussein facilitated Israel's withdrawal from Hebron in 1997. Relations deteriorated when Mossad agents were captured when they tried to assassinate a *Hamas* leader in Jordan. Jordan, however, recognises the existence of Israel in that it accepted the credentials of a new Israeli ambassador in October, 1997.

Syria, once a hard-line Arab country, has changed its stance towards the West since the Gulf War. Mr Barak probably reflects at least in a superficial way, current thinking of some Israelis towards Syria when he stated that President Assad was "a great leader, a man of his word and the shaper of

modern Syria". Some current international thinking is that President Assad is not the great leader for which he was earlier recognised.

Egypt has supported the Middle East peace process through President Mubarak. Specifically, in 1998, the President met with the then Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, to discuss ways in which peace may be further pursued and President Mubarak also tried to revitalise peace discussions between Israel and Syria. There is currently significant trade between Egypt and Israel.

Lebanon has continued its conflict with Israel, largely due to the influence of the Hezbollah and the antagonism of Islamic fundamentalism to Christianity. Part of the problem has been the 1989 accord that Lebanon has a Maronite (an Eastern-rite community of the Roman Catholic Church) Christian president, a Sunni Muslim Prime Minister and a Shi'ite Muslim speaker of the National Assembly.

Saudi Arabia has often been criticised by other Arab countries for its support of the United States. As an American ally, it has little relationship with Israel and seems to avoid an overt position in relation to the Middle East peace process.

Iraq has relaxed a previous antipathy towards Israel since the Gulf War and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Iran remains the most contentious of Middle Eastern countries in its relationship to Western and Arab worlds. Iran is committed to the total destruction of Israel and, in terms of potential military involvement, Israel is very concerned about the threat Iran poses. Israel has voiced fears that Iran has the missile and nuclear technology (purchased from Russia) to wage attacks against Israel.

20th Century History of Middle East events focussing on Israel

(1897)

Theodore Herzl founded the Zionist movement in Basle, Switzerland. In a pamphlet published in 1896, *The Jewish State*, he argued that the displaced Jews throughout the world should be able to form a Jewish State in Palestine and that this was best accomplished by a council consisting of many of the world's nations.

1917

Lord Balfour, the then British Foreign Secretary, proposed that the British Government should establish in Palestine "a national home for the Jewish people". At the same time, the Declaration made the point that nothing should be done to prejudice the rights of non-Jewish communities.



Map 1: British Division 1922 - 1946

1922

The council of the League of Nations, approved a British mandate over Palestine that assisted in

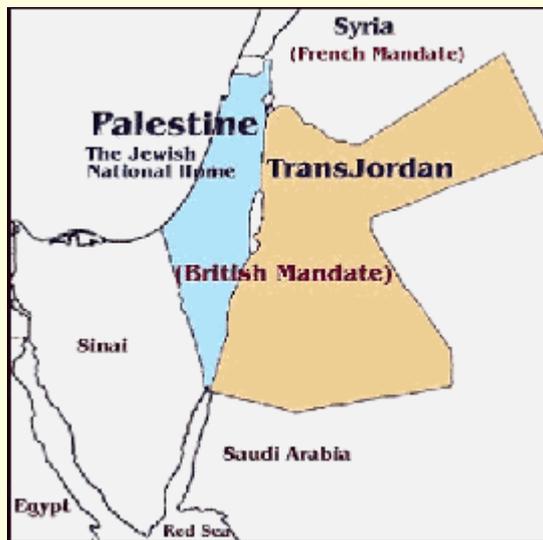
facilitating immigration for Jews wanting to take part in the development of this state. The provisions of the Balfour Declaration specifically excluded immigration to the east of the Jordan River.

1930s

Large numbers of European Jews began to immigrate to Palestine legally and illegally, many to flee Nazi persecution. In 1936, Palestinian Arabs opposed to the Jews formed an Arab High Committee. Many discussions between Britain, Jews and Arabs followed with no satisfactory outcome. The outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 caused a lull in further discussions.

1946 and 1947

In 1946, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry recommended that 100,000 Jewish refugees from Europe be admitted to Palestine. Britain did not accept this recommendation and requested that the United Nations decide on the issue. The UN adopted a plan dividing Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states. Fighting broke out between Jewish groups favoring the plan and Arab groups opposed to it.



Map 2: British Mandate, 1946

1948

On 14 May, Israel officially became an independent state. Armies from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Transjordan (now Jordan) immediately invaded in an attempt to destroy the Jewish state. Jordan annexed the West Bank and Jerusalem.

1949

Israel defeated the Arab invaders and acquired much of Arab Palestine, including West Jerusalem.



Map 3: Israel Before and After the 1948-1949 War

1956

Israel invaded Egypt's Sinai Peninsula along with French and British forces in retaliation for Egypt's blocking of the Strait of Tiran. The troops were forced to withdraw by the United Nations.

1967

In many ways, the six-day war that erupted in June was a repeat of the war of 1948 and 1949. Syria claimed that Israel was massing troops on its border. This provided Egypt and Jordan with the excuse needed to sign a mutual defence pact. Fearing an Arab invasion, Israel attacked and defeated the forces of its Arab neighbors. Israel gained complete control of Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and the West Bank.

1973

Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. After initial setbacks, Israeli forces repulsed the invasion and captured additional Syrian territory.

1979

President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, and Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin with the arbitration of US President Jimmy Carter signed a peace treaty known as the Camp David Accords. Israel agreed to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula.

1982

Israeli forces mounted a large invasion of Lebanon in retaliation for attacks on northern Israel by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon. The PLO had to withdraw from Lebanon.

1987

Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip began a series of uprisings known as the *intifada* against Israeli rule.

1993

Israel and the PLO signed a historic peace agreement paving the way for limited Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under a new ruling body, the Palestinian Authority (PA).

1994

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho came under the administration of the PA. The leaders of Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty.

1995

Israel and the PLO signed a second peace agreement extending limited Palestinian self-rule to many Palestinian areas of the West Bank. An Israeli opposed to the peace agreements assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

1996

The election of a conservative government and continued Palestinian terrorist activity stalled further peace agreements.

2000 - 2002

Leader of Right Wing Likud Party visited Temple Mount, Jerusalem on 28th Sept. 2000. He said, "Jerusalem is a symbol that kept the Jews together for thousands of years... Jerusalem is a symbol. You don't touch it." This sparked another *intifada* by the Palestinians that has continued ever since. Considerable, and generally unproductive discussions have been held over two years between President Clinton, President Bush, Prime Minister Barak, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat. Key issues, still unresolved, are:

- the existence of the State of Israel;
- the borders of the Palestinian State;
- Jewish settlements;
- Palestinian refugees;
- armed forces;
- status of Jerusalem; and,
- water.

Of these the most important was the future of Jerusalem. Some points to consider in relation to Muslim claims over Jerusalem are:

- it has never been an imperial or provincial Capital under the Muslims;
- no Islamic school of note has ever been established there, although it is the site of Moslem holy places;
- it is insignificant next to Mecca and Medina, the twin cities where Muhammad lived;
- it is not the place to which Muslims pray, and it is not once mentioned in the Qur'an or in prayers.

In relation to Israel's claim, Yitzak Rabin said:

"We remember - and we know that Jerusalem is the very heart of the Jewish people, and the one and only united capital of the State of Israel. ... And we know that this is the place to which every Jew turns in his prayers, and of which generations dreamt and poets wrote. Thus, from our perspective, Jerusalem is ours - it was and will be ours."

In summary

In terms of modern history, it can be seen that there has been continual conflict between Jews and Arabs. Arabs have generally resisted the establishment of a separate Jewish State and have actively, but unsuccessfully, tried to obliterate Jewish people. Britain initially supported the concept of a separate State but reduced this support in the time leading to its establishment. The United States has consistently supported Israel politically and militarily although it is now expressing some concerns about its current policies.

In Study 2 we will show that the basis of this conflict extends back some 4,000 years and is carefully chronicled in the Bible's Old Testament. In Study 3 we will draw to your attention a number of prophecies that show that God is in control of Israel's destiny – that, broadly speaking, many of the events that have already taken place were prophesied many years ago. In Study 4 we will analyse some prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled and that we believe will be in the not too distant future.

Study 2

The Historical and Biblical Basis of the Conflict

Focus – Analysis of the cause of the conflict indicated in the Bible

In this second study we will look at:

the Biblical account of the origin of the conflict through

- Abraham;
- Isaac and Ishmael;
- Jacob and Esau;
- Moab and Ammon; and,
- other regions.



Map 4: Middle East Countries today

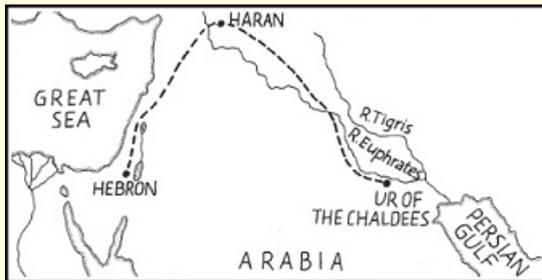
Noah and Shem

Indirectly, the scene set for the conflict begins after the great Flood. You will recall that only Noah was saved from destruction, together with his family (Genesis 9:18). That family included three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Genesis 10 contains a record of what happened to the descendants of each of the sons. Of particular interest is the son, Shem. These descendants became known as the 'Shemites', a term that was later modified to 'Semites'. A descendant of Shem was Eber. At this time (immediately after the Flood) and for some period afterwards, there was only one language. In what can be seen as one of the many occasions men disregarded God, the people decided to build a tower that demonstrated their own prowess – "so that we may make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4). God was displeased and dispersed them to all parts of the earth, and also punished them by confusing their language. The tower was called Babel (hence our very appropriate word 'babble'). The term 'Babylon' had its origins in the word 'Babel'. This area now corresponds to Iran/Iraq. Shem's descendants inhabited the area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, including the area then called Ur of the Chaldees – again, Iran and Iraq, or the area formerly known as Persia. Of considerable significance is that the word Eber, the descendant of Shem (the 'Semite'), gave rise to the word 'Hebrew'.

Abraham – the foundation

Part of the dispersal involved the descendants of Shem, Eber, and later Terah (who had three sons, Abram, Nahor and Haran), living in Ur of the Chaldees. So, even though the Semites/Hebrews eventually settled in the land now known as Israel and the surrounding regions, they initially started just north of the tip of the Persian Gulf (see Map 5).

The way they began to migrate is clearly indicated in Genesis 12. God called Abram (the name by which he was then known) to travel from Ur of the Chaldees into the land later known as Canaan. Here we see the directness of God. He chose His people and placed them in the land in which He wanted them to live. It is important to note at this stage that this is a reference to the whole of the Semitic people that included the Jews and Arabs.



Map 5: Abram's journey

Abram was given a promise before he left. God said:

- He would make Abram and his descendants a great nation;
- He would bless them;
- He would bless those who blessed Abram's descendants and curse those who cursed them; and,
- that all people of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.
(Genesis 12:2-3)

Abram travelled with Lot – his nephew. (Lot was the son of Haran.) Some time after they arrived in Canaan there was contention between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen. Abram gave Lot the choice of land in which he could take his cattle. Lot chose the best-looking pastures. These were in the land of Jordan, to the east of the Jordan River. The land included the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was after Lot left that God reiterated His promise to Abram. He said that:

- all the land he saw would be his; and,
- he would have numerous offspring.
(Genesis 13:14-17)

(God changed Abram's name to Abraham. The former meant 'High father' and the latter means 'Father of many nations'. It is obvious from this that God saw the latter as being of greater significance for the future population of the earth. We should also recognise that James (2:23) referred to Abraham as the 'Friend of God'.)

History has shown that Abraham's descendants included the Jews and the Arabs.

The division of the Semitic peoples

Abraham was over 80 years old and he still had no 'offspring'. He was conscious of God's promise so he took the matter up with God (Genesis 15:2-6). God again stated His promise. Unfortunately, Sarah (Abraham's wife) was unable to bear children. She suggested that Abraham have a child by her maidservant, Hagar. Abraham thought that this might be the way in which God was going to keep His promise.

When Hagar became pregnant, she began to despise Sarah. Sarah, in turn blamed Abraham for the tension: "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now she knows she is pregnant, she despises me." (Genesis 16:5) Hagar tried to escape from Sarah but God's angel intervened and told her to return. "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count" (Genesis 16: 10). The angel also said:

- Hagar would have a son who would be named Ishmael;
 - he would be wild and antagonise everyone; and,
 - he would be hostile to his brothers.
- (Genesis 16: 11-12)

Abraham was 86 at the time. Thirteen years later, God indicated that he would have a son by Sarah. Abraham laughed at this because he was in his hundredth year and Sarah was 90. He said "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"(17:18)

God's response is very pointed and enlightening:

- Sarah would have a son whose name would be Isaac;
 - God's covenant would be established with Isaac and with his descendants;
 - Ishmael would be blessed with many descendants and he would have twelve sons; but,
 - nevertheless, His covenant would be with Isaac.
- (Genesis 17:19-21)

Ishmael did have twelve sons. They populated the area of the northern Arabian Peninsula and south of the Dead Sea, the region that now corresponds to western Jordan.

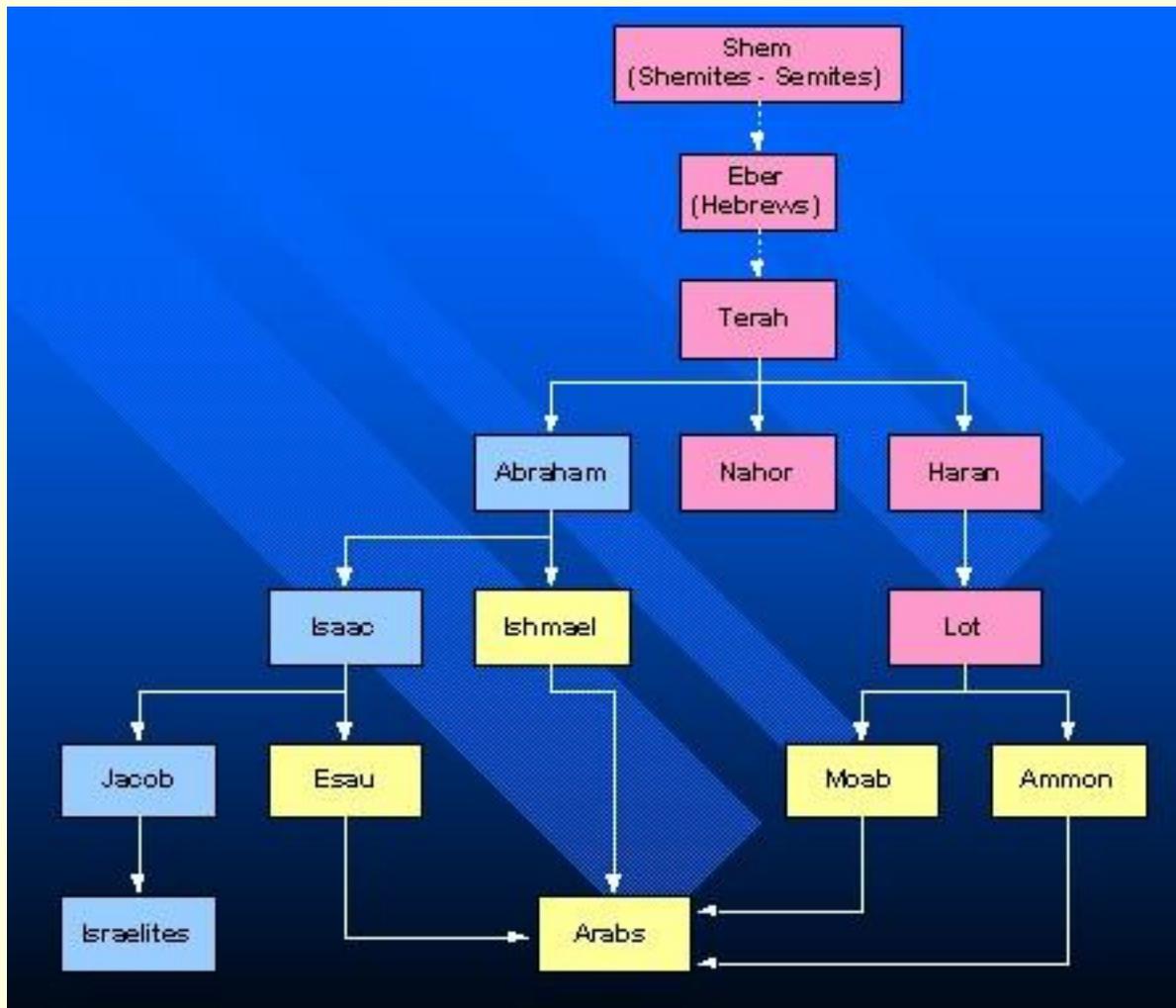
Isaac

God had made it clear that Isaac was to be chosen to carry on the line of God's promises. Isaac prayed to God because his wife, Rebekah, was also unable to have children. She became pregnant and the babies struggled within her. She prayed to God who told her that:

- there would be two nations in her womb;
 - the two would be separated- one would be stronger than the other; and,
 - the older would serve the younger.
- (Genesis 25:23)

This is quite a remarkable prophecy because, as it happens, Rebekah had twins, Esau and Jacob – born in that order. As they grew up, Esau, who had the normal birthright being the firstborn, sold this birthright to Jacob when he desperately wanted food. The Genesis account records that Esau "despised his birthright." (25:34) God's prophecy was fulfilled; Esau, the older, served the younger.

The problems continued for Esau. Due to some deceit on the part of Jacob, Isaac blessed Jacob more than he did Esau. Isaac's blessing of Jacob was - "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you". Of Esau, Isaac said, "You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless you will throw his yoke from off your neck". Genesis records that Esau held a grudge against Jacob. It is interesting to note that Esau married a daughter of Ishmael. We have the line of blessing from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob, whereas the line of *less* blessing went from Abraham through Ishmael to Esau's descendants and through his daughter Mahalath.



Line of Israel and Arab peoples

Esau's descendants

Genesis 26 has a detailed description of Esau and his descendants. The fact that there is such detail indicates the importance God, through His inspired word, places on the beginnings of Arab nations. Esau went to Edom. Map 6 (below) indicates that Edom was to the east of the Jordan and what is now regarded as Jordanian or Arab territory.

Moab and Ammon

Two other regions on the East side of Jordan need to be mentioned. Moab and Ammon were descendants of Lot. These descendants moved into the area near the Dead Sea. (Archaeological evidence suggests that the two notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are now buried under the Dead Sea at the southern end.) It might be noted that they were Semitic in that they were descendants of Terah. At the same time they chose to live in

what was then a very fertile area of the Jordan valley. They were excluded from the congregation of Israel because they didn't help Israel in their flight from Egypt, and they hired Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel (which God turned into a blessing) (Deuteronomy 23:3-7). In the same chapter, it should be noted that God's instructions were that the Israelites should not hate an Edomite "because he is your brother". God always recognised the value of Arab peoples.

Further developments

Jacob had descendants who became known as the twelve tribes. Map 6 also shows the settlement of the tribes in the promised land.



Map 6: Israel at the time of Jacob and the twelve tribes

It might be noticed that there is a ring of Arab peoples to the east of the Jordan River – Edom (Esau) in the south, with Moab and Ammon further north.

People of other countries – Lebanon, Syria and Egypt – and, in Northern Africa – Libya and Ethiopia – migrated at various times south of the Mesopotamian region. They are now generally known as Arab peoples where their language has Aramaic origins. Many of these countries have demonstrated their antagonism to Israel over the years. Lebanon, for example, was often referred to in the Bible by its chief cities of Tyre and Sidon. People from these cities were frequently involved in persecuting the Jews and were eventually destroyed because of this. Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs persecuted the Israelites before they came into the Promised Land. Syria is a Greek term adapted from Assyrian. At the time of its greatness, the Assyrian empire, that included the area of Mesopotamia through to the Mediterranean Sea, was a constant antagonist of Israel, as can be seen, for example, in the captivity.

Punishment for these antagonistic countries was prophesied in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 26 and 28, Tyre and Sidon are singled out. God, through the prophet, said, "No longer will the people of Israel

have malicious neighbours who are painful briars and sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Lord." (28:24)

Reference is also made to a number of countries in two other chapters - Ezekiel 35 and Psalm 83. Ezekiel 35 (1-13) refers to punishment for Mount Seir, or Edom, or modern day Jordan. God said that He would be against Mt Seir and make it a desolate waste because:

- it had been hostile to Israel for a long time; and,
- it had persecuted the Israelites.

He also indicated that their history of violence would continue to stay with them.

In Psalm 83 there is a prophecy that clearly indicates that over a long period of time what we now know as Arab nations have plotted against Israel – and questioned its right to exist. The Psalmist says:

- these nations would form an alliance to destroy Israel; and,
- the nations would include the Ishmaelites, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, the people of Tyre, and Assyria.
(Psalm 83:1-8)

The nations surrounding Israel – Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians – have all persecuted Israel and sought its territory. And all of this was prophesied 3000 years ago!

In summary

Some essential points that emerge from this Biblical history are:

- God called Abraham from the original Semite (Shemite) region to inhabit a land all of which was promised to him forever.
- Other Semites (and also descendants of Ham) migrated south to regions such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon (Phoenicia) and were independent of Abraham's extended family. These people were linked by ethnicity and language.
- Abraham's descendants, Ishmael and then Esau, became the Edomites and were born and bred in conflict that had occasional reconciliation but was usually based on hatred, a hatred that continued through the years.
- Over many years of Biblical history most all of the Arab nations surrounding Israel, including modern day Palestinians, have been in conflict with Israel.
- The conflicts were born out of jealousies, deceit and hatred, often on both sides.

Relevance

In Study 3 we will examine some more detailed prophecies, some of which relate to the 20th century. While we are looking at these, let us always keep in focus the fact that while the Middle East may be a long way from where we live, the events that take place there are very relevant to us because they will affect **all** nations. If we believe in the truth of the Bible, we can be assured of a lasting peace – national and personal – eventually, even though there will be continued conflict in the meantime.

Study 3

Prophecies Leading to Modern Times

Focus – Discussion of prophecies describing events of the 20th century

In the third study we will look at:

- God's declarations on Israel's future, dependent on their continued worship of Him;
- Israel's scattering to all parts of the world because of their disobedience;
- their continuance as God's chosen people; and, their return after being scattered.

The Twelve tribes and the 'Nation' of Israel

Once Jacob and Esau had gone their separate ways, the focus was now on the way Jacob's twelve sons and their descendants developed.

Biblical history shows that they initially settled in Canaan. When famine occurred they moved to Egypt and became slaves to the Egyptians. Eventually Moses was appointed by God to bring them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. It wasn't until they had become a nation through the offspring of Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) that God started to deal with them nationally through the proclamation of laws.

About Deuteronomy

The book concerns the discourses given by Moses late in his life at the time immediately before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. The theme running throughout is that God will continue to honour His covenant. Moses calls the people to obedience and reminds them that God brought them out of Egypt, guided them and provided for them whilst they journeyed in the desert.

Blessings and punishments

God gave the people His detailed law through Moses and He expected them to keep it. They had gone through a period of 40 years in the wilderness, which in itself was a punishment for their complaining and disobedience once they had left Egypt.

Just before they entered into the Promised Land, God spelt out very specifically what would happen if they obeyed Him while they were in the Land, and what would happen if they didn't. Moses, the bearer of this prophecy, said,

- if they fully obeyed God and carefully followed all his commandments, He would set them high above all the nations of the earth.
(Deuteronomy 28:1-2)

Equally, God indicated that they would be punished if they didn't obey His commandments. It should be noted that the most basic of all commandments, and the first, was that they should "Love the Lord their God; him only should you serve". In other words, they had to recognise that they shouldn't worship other gods.

History shows, as indicated through many parts of the Old Testament writings, that very frequently, they had so much to do with the pagan nations around them that they often worshipped the gods of

those nations. They were disobedient. God promised them punishment. They would "come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him" (Deuteronomy 28: 20).

A number of punishments were indicated in this chapter. At various times in their history they have been fulfilled. Of specific note is that relating to the latter part of the chapter:

- the Lord would scatter them among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other; and,
- among those nations they would find no repose, no resting place.
(Deuteronomy 28: 58, 64, 65)

This prophecy has been most telling. Scriptures show that on **two** occasions the Jews were scattered because of their refusal to obey God. In the **first instance** they were taken into captivity into Babylon about 600 BC and returned after 70 years. This demonstrates that God keeps His promises. They were punished for sin and scattered. God still recognised them as His people and brought them out of captivity. He gave them another chance.

There is a good example of this in Ezekiel 11. Ezekiel prophesied at the time of Israel's captivity that God would:

- gather them from the nations and bring them back from the countries where they had been scattered; and,
- He would give them back the land of Israel.
(Ezekiel 11:17)

There was a reason why God would do this and it wasn't because the people were being righteous again. God said "They will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. **They will be my people and I will be their God.**"(11:20)

God remembered His promises. The Israelites, even in their sinfulness were still God's people. There is a reassuring principle here. We might want to follow God's paths but sometimes stray. We might be punished but God still accepts us as long as we try to follow His ways.

About Ezekiel

This book records the activity of the prophet Ezekiel who lived in Babylon during the Jewish exile. His message was directed to fellow captives and to Jews still present in Palestine He proclaimed good news to the exiles that Israel, after being chastened, would be restored and God's kingdom would rise. This was partly fulfilled in 537 BC. The complete fulfilment is yet to take place and will result in a future kingdom that will last forever and God's people will never again be cast out.

This theme is reiterated in the prophecy of Jeremiah. God said:

- He would save them out of a distant place, and their descendants from the land of their exile;
- that Jacob would again have peace and security; and,
- He would be with them and save them.
(Jeremiah 30: 10-11)

The other issue of this chapter again indicates God's reason. The Israelites are His people. They are punished for their sins. ("Because of your great guilt and many sins I have done these things to you.", v. 15) But, typically, God promises blessings again for them - "so you will be my people and I will be your God." (v.22)

A similar theme is continued in Jeremiah 31:10. "He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd."

There is a very effective image here. Jesus, the great Shepherd, will watch over his flock at a time that Israel has been regathered to their home place of Israel and Jerusalem. This is an image consistent with other parts of Scripture that indicates the return of Jesus to Jerusalem.

The Israelites were certainly then brought back to Israel from captivity in Babylon.

About Jeremiah

Jeremiah was contemporary with Ezekiel and warned the people of the impending military force of Babylon that would destroy Jerusalem and enslave the Jews. He urged Jerusalem to turn from its wicked ways, but there was no response. He further warned of the false prophets who were leading the people astray with deceptive doctrines and falsehoods. He urged the Israelites to submit to the Babylonian authority as the instrument of God's judgment. They did not heed his warnings and the people were carried away to Babylon. He predicted that the captives would return after 70 years to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.

The **second** time the prophecy was fulfilled was in AD 70. A prophecy doesn't always need to be fulfilled once only. There are many examples in Scripture where prophecies have been fulfilled on two or more occasions. The scattering and regathering is a classic case. Apart from the Babylonian captivity, the next major scattering was the destructive work in Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus himself prophesied about this. He said that when Jerusalem is encircled by armies:

- desolation is near;
- this is the time of promised punishment;
- Jews will be taken as prisoners to all nations; and,
- Jerusalem will be overrun "until the times of Gentiles are fulfilled."
(Luke 21:20-24)

This scattering and gathering is a continual witness to God and His continued involvement with His people. In Isaiah 43:5-10 it is recorded that God told the Israelites:

- not to be afraid because He was with them;
- He would bring them from the east, west, north and south; and,
- "from the ends of the earth".

And the reason? "**You are my witnesses** declares the Lord and my **servant whom I have chosen.**"

Israel is a continuing witness to God's existence and to the fact that He keeps His promises. Right throughout history – from the time of the Babylonian exile and return, to AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem, through the Spanish inquisition, through to Russian pogroms and the World War 2 holocaust, God has punished His people - but a remnant has been saved to ensure that eventually they will find their peace in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones

Reference: Ezekiel 37:1-14



One of Ezekiel's prophecies concerned a vision of a valley of dry bones. Each part of the prophecy is explicit. It is important that when we read Scripture we recognise that each word is significant.

The vision was not very complex; it is found in Ezekiel 37:4-6.

- Ezekiel saw a valley full of very dry bones.
- God said that he would breathe into the bones so they came to life.
- The bones would be covered with tendons and flesh and skin.
- The reason that God would do this was that the people would know that He was the Lord.

The prophecy is explained in verses 11-14. The prophecy indicates that there would be a national revival of Israel

Vision	Meaning
bones	house of Israel
dried bones	hope gone, cut off
bones come together	Jews return to Israel
breath in them	God's spirit in his people

"I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it." (v.14)

The prophecy is straightforward. In this instance the prophecy cannot have been fulfilled. You might ask, "but didn't this happen when the Israelites were brought back to Israel after they had been in captivity in Babylon?" The answer to this question is found later in the chapter in another vision concerning the joining together of two sticks. (Ezekiel 37:15-28)

God said

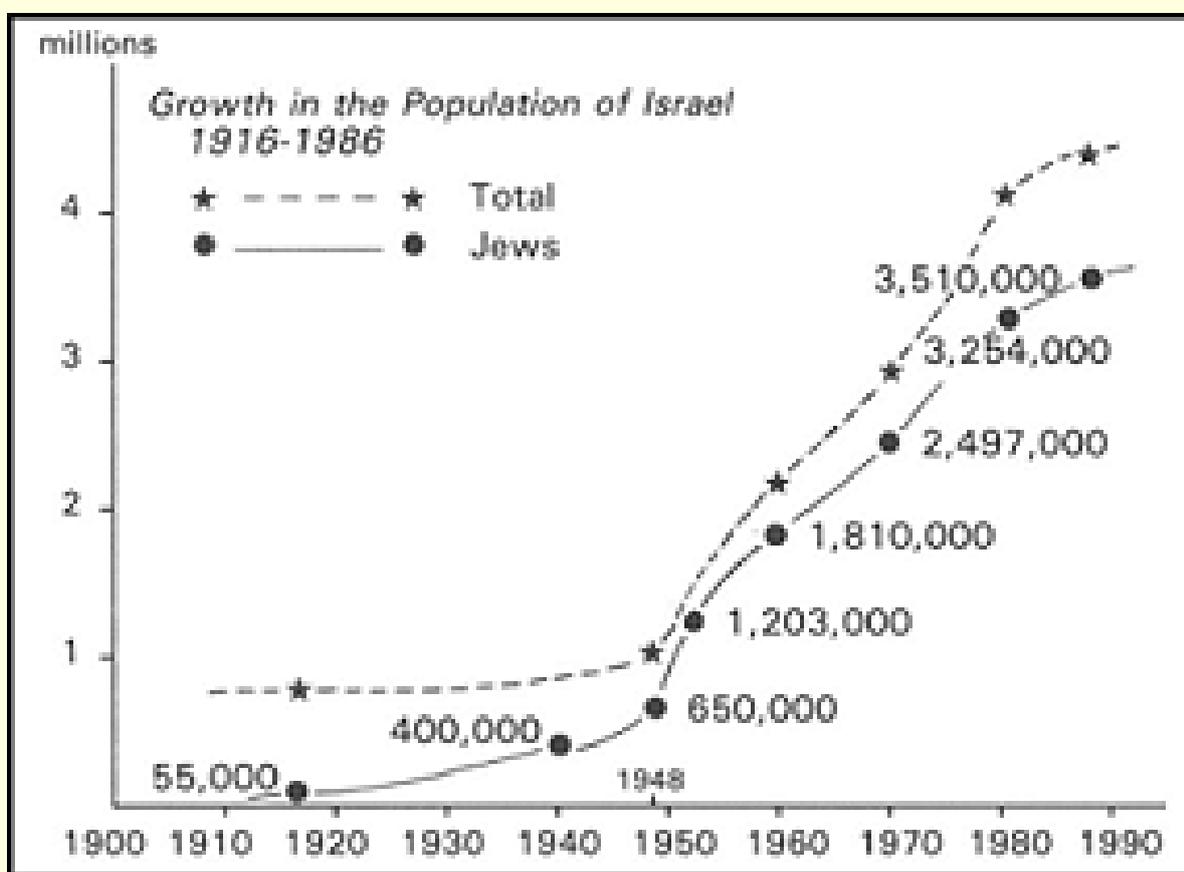
- He would take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone;
- He would gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land;
- He would make them one nation in the land;
- He would place one king over all of them that they would never again be divided into two kingdoms;
- David would be their king and they would have one shepherd;
- David would be prince for ever; and,
- the nations would know that He would make Israel holy, when His sanctuary would be among them forever.

It is very clear from this that the time of the gathering of the Israelites into their own land would be associated with a number of other events. None of these events took place when the Israelites returned from Babylon.

The scattering that took place in AD 70 was a culmination of dispersal that had taken place over many years. They remained scattered for almost 2000 years. We demonstrated in Part 1 that the events of the re-gathering began in 1897 with Theodore Herzl and continued for 50 years culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel – one land, one people!

Other evidence

While we have described the events of the 20th century that led to the establishment of the State of Israel, what is stunning evidence of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 can be found in the chart below. You will notice that there was a dramatic rise in the population, from 1948 to 1980. And, they came from many, many countries – literally the four corners of the earth from where they were scattered. This is remarkable. After almost 2000 years of exile the prophecy has been fulfilled. Other nations who have been in a similar predicament have lost their identity. Not the Israelites. They continue as a living testimony to God's existence.



You will notice, however, that not all of the Ezekiel 37 prophecy has been fulfilled - Israel has returned to their land as predicted. They are on the whole not committed to God. God's spirit does not yet dwell in them. They are still insecure. They do not have one king. They are not ruled by David, and God's sanctuary does not yet dwell in their midst. But how can David be their King? The words of Luke 1 are very clear on this.

"... the Lord will give him (Jesus) the throne of his father David." (v. 32)

And, of course, Jesus was described as the good shepherd. There can be no doubt that at some time in the future, Jesus will be king over Israel.

In summary

Some important points emerging from this study are:

- The Israelites were established as God's people in the land of Canaan and the Arabs were settled to the northeast, east and south of Jordan.
- God indicated that if/when the Israelites sinned, they would be punished through being scattered everywhere.
- They were scattered but God demonstrated that He would keep His promise by bringing them back from their dispersion.
- This happened on one occasion when they were brought back to Israel from Babylon.
- The longer-term fulfilment of the prophecy of the re-gathering took place mostly over the period from 1948 – 1990.

The current situation is that the Israeli people are now back in their land where, whether they accept it or not, they will eventually be ruled over by Jesus. We can't just be selective in what prophecies we believe will be fulfilled. If one part of the prophecy has eventuated, the rest must follow. Does the Bible prophesy these events that will lead to this happening? And what of the issue we started discussing – the Palestinian question? Does the Bible say anything about this? It certainly does. We will examine these issues in Study 4.

Study 4

Prophecies of the Future

Focus – OT and NT prophecies on coming battles, Christ's return and the Kingdom

In the fourth study we will look at:

- the looming battle in Israel;
- peace treaties between Israel and other countries as a prelude to the great battle;
- focus on Jerusalem, the city of the great King;
- Arab nations, and others, worshipping in Jerusalem;
- the return to the earth of Jesus Christ; and,
- the importance of all this to us.

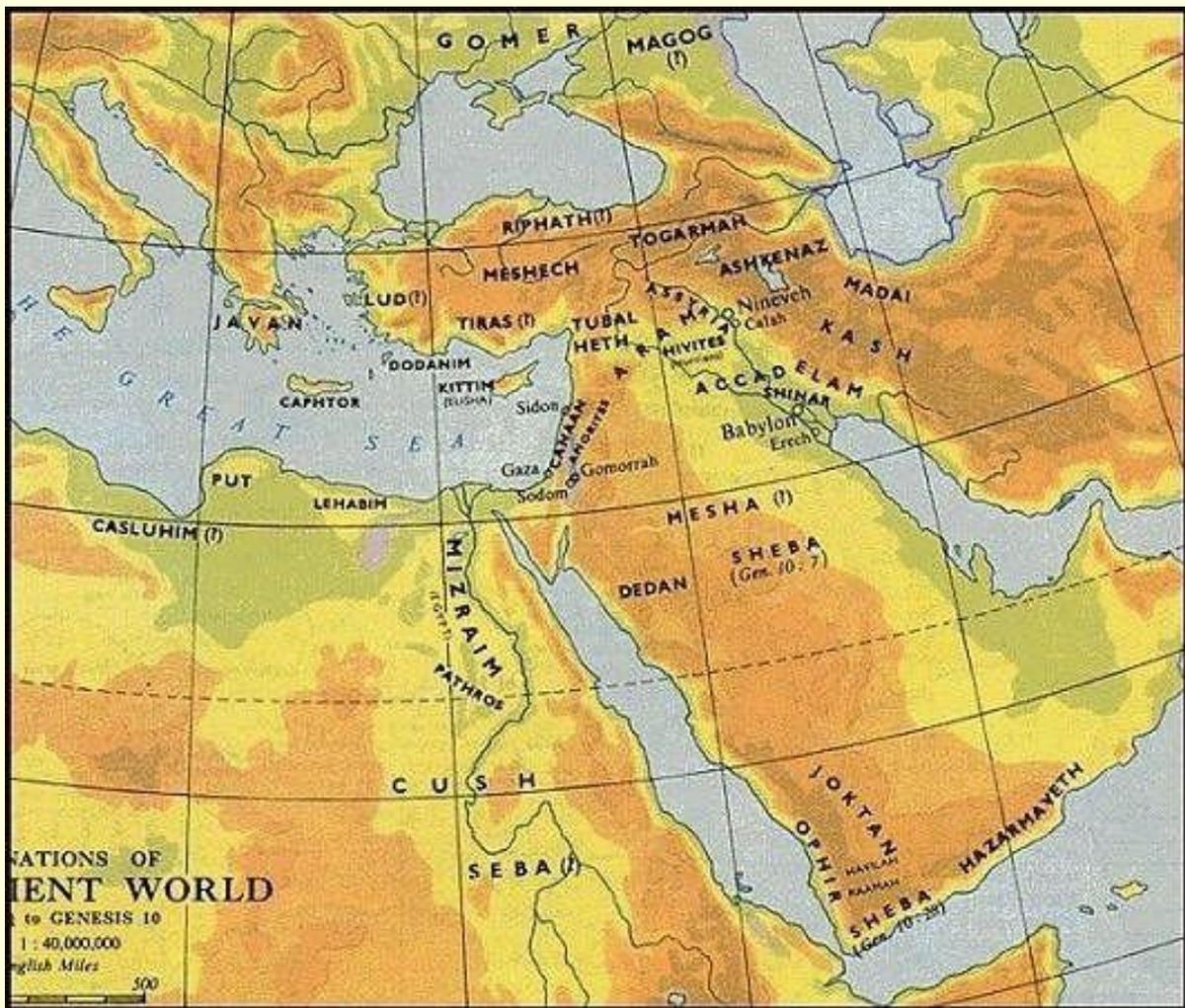
Gog and Magog

At the end of Study 3 we drew attention to the partial fulfilment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 37. The prophecy continues in Chapter 38 as another, separate vision.

The first few verses speak of Gog of the land of Magog, chief prince of Meschech and Tubal, Persia, Cush and Put, Gomer and Togarmah. These are ancient names for countries that can be identified in Map 7. There is a divergence of opinion about the precise location of some of these regions. Some scholars suggest the following:

Magog Southern Russia	Togarmah Iraq
Gomer Ukraine	Meschech Turkey
Put Libya	Tubal Turkey
Cush Ethiopia	Assyria Iraq and Syria
Persia Iran	

The term 'Gog' is the leader of the land of Magog. The precise location of Magog is uncertain, as Map 7 indicates, but many scholars accept it as the region that is now southern Russia. This suggests that Gog is the 'leader' or dominant force, or superior authority, in southern Russia and implies that Russia as a whole is involved in the same sense that, for example, the United Kingdom is a superior authority to England in national matters.



Map 7: The Ancient World

Despite some uncertainty about precise locations, what is quite clear is that the nations mentioned are generally to the north of Israel. Not only are the countries named involved but, as Ezekiel puts it, they are from the "far north" and are accompanied by many nations. In addition, they are supported by two nations to the south, their modern names being Libya and Ethiopia. The northern countries will also be joined by Persia – the modern Iran.

Where does all this lead? God indicates through the prophet Ezekiel that in the latter days there will be a major push against Israel from the countries identified. At that time God will become angry. He will execute judgement against Gog, the leader, and the confederacy of nations.

"I will show my greatness and holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord." (38:23)

When we continue to read further in Ezekiel 39 we find that the whole point of this support for Israel is that the name of God might be glorified. God is omnipotent. He is righteous. He takes this action not because of the righteousness and piety of Israel; He does it because He has decreed that they are His people and He has promised to make them great. Again, it should be pointed out that the only part of the prophecies of Ezekiel 37, 38 and 39 that have been fulfilled are those applying to the gathering of the people of Israel from where they were scattered. Other parts of the Bible indicate that these events will take place in the last days.

Peace and safety

Another interesting aspect of the prophecy is that the momentous events of the invasion of the

northern confederacy will take place at a time that the Israelis are feeling secure, that is, when they have operating peace treaties. This is the basis of substantial activity in the Middle East at the present time. A peace process has been operating since the time that US President Jimmy Carter worked with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin in the first Camp David Peace Accords in 1993. Since that time, despite the current conflict, as we saw in Study 1, the PLO and Israel have reached agreement on a number of issues, including self rule for some 'Palestinian' cities. However, currently, the situation has certainly not reached the 'peace' objective.

What we see is a working out of a peace process. We can observe now that Israel is getting to the stage where its only major conflict with its neighbours is with the Palestinians. Whether this will be the "peace and safety" cry of Thessalonians remains to be seen. There is little doubt that before the invasion events of Ezekiel 38 take place, Israel will be at peace.

Not just Ezekiel

There are other prophecies in both the Old and New Testaments that provide information about the 'latter days'. Another major prophecy is in Zechariah.

About Zechariah

Zechariah was a younger contemporary of Haggai and prophesied a little after Ezekiel. He also encouraged the people to rebuild the Temple after they had returned from captivity in Babylon. Like Daniel and Revelation, this book contains Apocalyptic visions. It contains detailed references to the coming Messiah. The book concludes with descriptions of the enemies of Jerusalem being judged and of the future glory of God's kingdom.

Zechariah had a number of God inspired visions. Towards the end of his prophecy he had a vision relating to the latter days. Chapters 12 and 14 are particularly relevant. These visions were specific to Jerusalem. An interesting point is whether these references are to Jerusalem as a city, or Jerusalem as representative of the people of Israel. Probably both are intended as there is no doubt that the Jews themselves regard Jerusalem as the epitome of Israel. It was the city of Jesus' crucifixion. As Zechariah points out (and as pointed out in many Bible passages) it is the ultimate city of the great King.

Zechariah reiterates the theme of Ezekiel:

- Jerusalem will be "immovable" despite nations' attempts to destroy it; and,
- nations who try to defeat will themselves come to grief.
(Zechariah 12:3)

Additional information and sequencing is given in Chapter 14:

- God will gather all nations at Jerusalem to fight against it;
- the Lord will go out and fight against those nations;
- on that day the Lord's feet will stand on the Mount of Olives;
- living water will flow out of Jerusalem;
- the Lord will be king over the whole earth;
- there will be one Lord, and his name the only name; and,
- the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty.
(Zechariah 14:2-9,16)

Who is 'The Lord'?

In these prophecies the terms of God and Jesus are

interchangeable. God is the supreme being and Jesus is His Son. Jesus was the manifestation of God. The New Testament refers specifically to Jesus returning to the earth whereas the Old refers to the Messiah, or anointed. As the manifestation of God, it is Jesus who will return to Zion and carry out his Father's wishes. God determines the plan and His Son implements it.

And then there is the prophet Joel. Joel prophesied about God entering into judgement against the nations who "scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land." God spoke of the time when nations would come against Israel. "Beat your plowshares into swords and you pruning hooks into spears, **Let the weak say 'I am strong!'**" In a real sense this is happening now. The Palestinians are the weak, claiming to be strong. But Joel continues "But the Lord will be a refuge for His people, a stronghold for the people of Israel." He finishes "Then you will know that I the Lord your God, dwell in Zion my holy hill." (Joel 3:2,10,17)

Jesus himself spoke of the same time. Again, in Luke 21 it is recorded that Jesus said:

- nations will be distraught;
 - people will be distraught;
 - at that time the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory; and,
 - at that time redemption is near.
- (Luke 21:25-28)

In the New Testament there is an important passage in Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians. He made a number of points:

- the day of judgement will come without warning; and,
 - when people say "peace and safety" - there will be sudden destruction.
- (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3)

More about other nations

The concept of Israel being God's chosen people and being the centre for God's kingdom, and that other nations will eventually accept this position is in many places in scripture. Two other passages should be considered.

In Isaiah 60, the prophet indicates that at the time that God's glory will shine through the earth, the nations surrounding Israel will also "see the light". Isaiah says:

- darkness will cover the earth and the people;
 - but God's glory will appear in Israel; and,
 - nations will come to see the light of Israel.
- (Isaiah 60:2-3)

The prophet then goes on to name many of the Arab nations in close proximity to Israel as coming to Israel bearing gifts. The end of the prophecy announces:

- the Lord will be the everlasting light of Israel;
 - Israel's troubles will end;
 - the people of Israel will be righteous;
 - they will possess the land for ever; and,
 - God will act swiftly.
- (Isaiah 60:20-22)

About Isaiah

Isaiah ministered in the southern kingdom of Judah. He prophesied before Jeremiah. He dealt with the coming judgment on Judah due to its idolatry and apostasy. He urged the kings and the people to put their trust in God rather than in alliances with other nations. He spoke of the future Messiah who would come to redeem the nation and restore the Kingdom.

In Jeremiah 3, the prophet also puts the concept of return and the kingdom in the same passage:

- the Israelites will be brought to Zion;
- when the numbers have dramatically increased in the land Jerusalem will be called 'The Throne of the Lord'; and,
- all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honour the name of the Lord.
(Jeremiah 3:14-17)

What about Jerusalem?

One of the main sticking points in negotiations with the Palestinians is the rightful ownership of Jerusalem. Will this city be divided again? (It was unified as the result of the six day war in 1967.) Palestinians (and other religions) claim holy sites in that city, and there is no doubt that it is paramount to Israel.

We refer again to Zechariah. **At no time in relation to the events he describes is there a suggestion that Jerusalem is partly 'owned' by anyone but Israelis.** At the time of the end, the return of Christ, Jerusalem is in the hands of the Israelites and nations come down to destroy it.

In the present round of peace negotiations, and in any future negotiations, there may be agreements to share Jerusalem. However, at the time of the momentous 'last events', Jerusalem is Israeli, and this is one of the reasons that the northern federation of armies will come against it.

What about the Palestinians?

The Palestinians are certainly of Arab origin. One Bible prophecy – Obadiah – has very specific detail about Edom, that is, the descendants of Esau and Ishmael who settled on that land to the east and south of the river Jordan. While we cannot say with certainty that the people from this area are the modern day Palestinians, we can say that the prophecy is about Arab people who pursue constant conflict with Israel. God, through the prophet says:

- He will make them small among the nations;
- they will be utterly despised;
- because of the violence against their brother Jacob, they will be covered with shame; and,
- they will be destroyed forever.
(Obadiah 1,2,7,10)

Christ's return!

Implications in the above are that Christ is going to return. This is one of the most explicit aspects of the New Testament. There are over 240 statements of, or allusions to, his return in the New Testament indicating that this was a readily accepted fact held by the first century Christians. Zechariah talked about his feet being on the Mount of Olives. Jesus himself indicated his return. Forty days after his resurrection he was with his disciples and was taken away from them into heaven. Angels standing nearby said

"This same Jesus whom has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul was convincing them of the resurrection of Jesus and of the later resurrection of the dead. He said that Jesus himself was the firstfruits of the resurrection, "then when

he comes, those who belong to him" (1 Corinthians 15:23). There was no doubt in Paul's mind that Jesus was going to return and raise from the dead those who have died in Christ.

The return is a consistent theme throughout scripture. What were Jesus' last words as recorded in the Revelation? **"Yes, I am coming soon!"** John, the recorder of Jesus' Revelation responded "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

Israeli people still part of God's plan:

This focus on Israel and the Israeli people still raises many questions. Did not the Jews as a whole fail to recognise Jesus as the Messiah and actually crucify him? As a whole, don't they still fail to recognise Jesus? Are they not 'irreligious'? They don't seem to accept God now and seem to place more faith in their own abilities when it comes to war. If they still do not really accept God, has not God ignored them?

There are three answers to these questions. Firstly, the prophecies, particularly of the return, demonstrate that God is working out His plan with Israel **and** the nations. Secondly, God has always kept His promises so if He has promised that Israel will be blessed forever, He will keep that promise. Thirdly, He has never forsaken His people. Yes, He has punished them but their ultimate future has never been in question. Even though they rejected His Son, He has not permanently rejected them. The Apostle Paul explains this in his letter to the Romans:

- they didn't stumble beyond recovery;
- because of their transgression, salvation came to the Gentiles; to make Israel envious;
- Israel received a hardening in part until the "full number of the Gentiles has come in"; and,
- all Israel will be saved because of God's covenant with them.
(Romans 11:11, 26-27)

Paul goes on to say that just as the Roman Christians were at one time disobedient and have received mercy from God so also will the Israelites receive His mercy. So despite their seeming (as a nation) indifference to God, they will eventually realise His continued commitment to them.

Personal relevance

You will recall the questions asked at the beginning of Part 2. You will realise by now that the Old and New Testaments are equally valid. This is attested to by the number of times that New Testament writers quoted from the Old. The most important passage that demonstrates the relevance of these Israel and the Middle East issues to **us** is given by Paul in his letter to the Christians of Galatia. This letter was designed to help the Christians realise that they were no longer required to follow the law given to Moses. (The Christians in Galatia comprised Jewish and Gentile converts.) In Chapter 3, Paul quotes the promise made to Abraham. He wrote that God had "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham. 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham." (Galatians 3:8-9)

Paul argues further.

- the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed; and,
- the Scripture does not say 'seeds', plural but 'seed' singular – Jesus Christ.
(Galatians 3:16)

And for the Galatian Christians, and for us?

"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise." (v. 29)

Paul makes it very clear. The gospel was preached to Abraham. It concerned the blessing to the Israeli people who would have the land as an everlasting possession. A seed was promised to

Abraham. That seed or offspring was Jesus Christ who enables salvation through faith. Those who become Christ's receive the promises – an eternal blessing and inheritance of the land. (Incidentally, Paul indicates in Galatians that one becomes a Christian through baptism – Galatians 3:27.)

In summary

We'll try to put all the pieces relating to the future Middle East conflict together. We would stress, however, that this may not necessarily be the sequence in which the events take place.

- The return of the Jews to Israel was prophesied and has happened.
- There will be a time when Israel will be in peace and safety with its neighbours. Some of this has happened.
- At a time of peace, a federation of nations from the north will come down to Israel and wreak havoc in the land.
- God will intervene and destroy these nations.
- Jesus will return and will stand in Jerusalem.
- Israel will eventually recognise the authority of Jesus.
- Nations will eventually also recognise this authority.
- The promises made to Abraham of eternal blessing will be kept for the Israelis.
- These promises can be fulfilled in those who become Christians because Christ was the offspring of Abraham.
- The resurrection and judgement will take place at Christ's return.

Your challenge

The future of nations is outlined in the Scriptures. There will be peace, but not without war first. The earth will survive and flourish. Many people will survive. Where do you stand?

Acknowledgements

Part 1 – **Terms** – broadly abridged from

Encarta Encyclopaedia, 1999
Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1999
Wikipedia 2012

Map 3 Encarta Encyclopaedia, 1999

Part 2 – **Map 6** New International Study Bible, The Zondervan Corporation, 1985

Part 3 – **Map 7** Illustrated Bible Geography and Atlas, Collins, 1960.
