

SOMETHING TO WATCH....

Shortly after the Russians put the kibosh on a united Western front for the next round of sanctions on Iran for its insistence on continuing progress toward producing its own nuclear weapons: The United States began to ratchet up the pressure. Saying that she didn't "want to get into timelines", Secretary of State Rice let it be known that "The President keeps all his options on the table". That of course means the threat of an American sponsored military strike against the Iranian nuclear infrastructure.¹ At the same time American forces were not-so-subtly hinting that Russia's rejection of this next round of proposed sanctions was opening the door to an Israeli attack. Israel recently purchased 90 F-16I warplanes capable of making the round trip to Iran and back.² "We don't say yes or no to Israeli military operations", said she. "Israel is its own sovereign."³ And as to dealing with the Russian made S-300 multi-target anti-missile system reputed to be the most advanced in the world and on its way to Iran: Israel let it be known that that was of little concern to them. That system is capable of tracking as many as 100 incoming targets, - taking down a dozen at the same time. But the Israelis claimed an "electronic warfare device" that would neutralize any Iranian deployment of the weapons system as well as uncovering Russian vulnerabilities in its own defense system. Quite the game of high-stakes poker is being played.⁴

While this diplomatic game was being played, the Kuwaiti Times was reporting that 2 more American carrier groups were heading to the Gulf and the Red Sea to join 2 battle groups already in the region. This action prompted the American allied Kuwaiti government to finalize its own emergency war plans to maintain "Security, Humanitarian, and Vital Services", in the event of a regional outbreak. In addition, American and Israeli warships have been spotted plying the areas waters together.^{5 6} As the week went on DEBKA confirmed that 3 new naval task forces were arriving in the Persian Gulf region bringing the total to five naval task forces deployed. That's a lot of firepower. Analysts at the Israeli military intelligence site believe that this prepares the US to achieve several objectives. Among them are: 1) Preparation for a naval blockade of Iran – 2) Have forces in place to open the oil routes should Iran close the Strait of Hormuz – 3) Provide backup to any Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear facilities – 4) Be in place for the potential escalation of a military crisis.⁷

Now drop all of this latest activity into a region that is bristling with danger on so many fronts that war is on the verge of breaking out at any moment, - and then spreading like wildfire across the region or farther. President Musharraf of Pakistan, America's erstwhile ally in the war against terror is facing impeachment in that increasingly populist and fundamentalist Islamic country. His troubles are fueled there by runaway elements that are fomenting violence against arch-enemy and nuclear-armed India. The surge in Iraq has been a military success, but part of that is due to the cooperation of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, - made possible by the direct negotiations that the US has engaged in with Iran and Syria. Afghanistan is awaiting a surge of its own, - and increased American activity across the border into neighboring Pakistan against al-Qaida and Taliban types, has brought military success and diplomatic dangers. Hezbollah has become a legal and integral part of the Lebanese government and turned that formerly divided country solidly against Israel, with Iranian and Syrian military personnel occupying strategic high ground across from IDF positions. And then there are the ever-present Palestinians; - Fatah and Hamas. In the midst of this, Israel faces its own leadership crisis, with Prime Minister Olmert already on the way out and no clear successor in sight. But whoever fills that role, it may enable Israel to finally act to ensure its own survival; - however at great cost. The choice between war now and war later is a difficult one. Each has its price. The price of waiting may be higher. Even tens of millions of dead!⁸ Either choice could produce the chaos that would usher in a new global order, - or the Mahdi, - or the Lord Maitreya – or the coming Antichrist; - or all of these rolled into one. And now this is further complicated by a new crisis between Russian and Georgia covered in the article below.

GEORGIA ON MY MIND

OK, here's a quick primer on the war that erupted last week between Russia and the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. The Republic of Georgia became an independent nation in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. That same year, - two regions within Georgia itself, - South Ossetia and Abkhazia – made a move for their own independence. By 1994 two minor wars were fought and an arrangement was reached that had Russian troops patrolling the borders of these semi-autonomous enclaves. But Georgia never gave up their claims to these territories.⁹ Now it gets complicated. Over time with a former Israeli high in the Georgian Defense Ministry, and

drawn by the possibility of getting oil from the Caspian Sea region; - Israel began to train and equip the Georgian military with the most modern systems and techniques. Hundred of Israeli advisors were operating in the country.

Now consider the growing rivalry between the US and its new allies in the region – (Georgia and Ukraine), - on the one hand and an energy hungry Russia on the other. Tensions mounted as discussions progressed to make the American allies on Russia's border a part of NATO. Then there was the relatively new oil pipeline passing through Georgia on its way to Turkey and the West. It was the only one from the oil rich region of the Caucasus not wholly under Russian control. With all that tension in the region, British intelligence was predicting a war would break out there sometime this year.

So that is just what we got. American educated Georgian President Saakashvili kick started his country's economy, modernized its military and resisted Russian dominance in the region. Russia's then President Putin ratcheted up support for Georgia's breakaway provinces and offering citizenship and arms. Russia was at least partly motivated by its resolve to stop NATO expansion into the region. American and Britain are in the game, - to a large degree, - to break Moscow's control of the oil found there. Then on August 8th, President Saakashvili decided to take back South Ossetia, moving troops in to take the provincial capital. Russia responded with a massive offensive that drove into Georgia proper, bombing the city of Gori and bases around the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Fighting broke out on the front with Abkhazia. Russian forces nearly cut Georgia in half. Bombing targeted Israeli experts working on upgrading Georgian jets.^{10 11 12} And with war threatening the lives and livelihood of Georgian Jews, Israel is preparing an 'emergency aliyah', - or an expedited effort to bring them back to a welcoming Israeli homeland.¹³

What's it all mean? To begin with the words of Scripture nearly leap out as the fulfillment of God's promise comes ever closer. God promised: **“Therefore behold the days are coming...For I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers. Behold, I will send for many fishermen,” says the LORD, “and they shall fish them; and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks.”** (Jeremiah 16:14-16) This is just another example. Then there is just what this means for the geopolitical balance of world politics. Historian Robert Kagan told NPR's *All Things Considered* that he believed that this was an event fully as significant as the fall of the Soviet Union. He sees a return by Russia to a 19th century style of power politics. As such, the Russian actions, - made in part to re-establish their position as a world power, - will have a chilling effect on the other states in the region;¹⁴ - states that are clearly prophesied by Ezekiel to join an End Times invasion of Israel. We may be witnessing the cobbling together of that Gog / Magog Alliance. But the West is not without culpability in the crisis. It was Georgia, - arguably a willing client state of both the US and Israel that began the current round of hostilities when they entered South Ossetia, - [a region wanting to unite with their ethnic counterparts in Russian controlled North Ossetia] – that began a military assault that struck both military and civilian targets.¹⁵ Still from the Russian viewpoint this is nothing less than a grab at total control of the energy resources that are restoring Russia's Great Power Status. Here it is in a nutshell. If Russia can get control of the provinces and force Saakashvili from office, it would go a long way toward destroying democracy in the region. [Ukraine understands this and is standing firm with Georgia, - rather dangerously perhaps.] Success in that area would effectively result in Moscow's complete control of the region's energy. It would mean untrammelled Russian hegemony over the entire area; - The Soviet / Czarist power restored.

So what we are seeing, may be the beginning of a proxy war. And any miscalculation in this dance of the powers could result in an escalation to even nuclear levels, - something neither side can ever be prepared for. And all of this is not unrelated to the ongoing struggle being played out in Iraq and Afghanistan and building in Iran; - and the chess game being played over NATO positioning of missile defense assets and the nuclear gamesmanship being exercised by both Russia and the US. We must pray that this will not be the catalyst of some unfolding horror on a global scale. Remember the summer of 1914. No one wanted *that* European crisis to turn into a World War either.¹⁶

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS – PART IV

So the prophets revealed with perfect accuracy and extreme detail many of the particulars of Christ's first coming. Daniel revealed the day and Luke's gospel confirmed it. Today we'll look at how the currents of history came together to work God's perfect will.

THE EVIDENCE OF PROPHECY AND SCRIPTURE

Yet everything in history was leading up to this moment; the fulfillment. Steve Brown of Key Life Ministries points out the historical pattern. It can be found in the cultural mores of every people. The sacrificial system is found

among primitive people, anywhere on the globe, at some point in their history. We see it in the ancient pagan cultures that developed around the Mediterranean. We find it in the New World cultures of the Aztecs and the Mayans. We see it in Africa and Asia. It is all tied up in the religious notions of all peoples, everywhere. It is as if God prepared the very thought forms of every nation to understand this. It is a universal notion. Without blood there is no getting right with 'the gods', with God. The God of Abraham revealed the sacrificial system through the Passover. It was the blood of the lamb without blemish that protected the Israelites from the plagues in Egypt. So it was that all peoples could appreciate the notion of sacrifice. It was around 1800 BC, that God, chose a group of ignorant desert wanderers, the Hebrews, and began to reveal to them the most highly developed system of "ethical monotheism the world has ever known". There is no explanation for this in purely naturalistic terms. Anthropology is at a loss. The Hebrews, (and Hebrew means wanderer), were not a very sophisticated people in any other sense. Yet the supposed civilized nations around them, definitely their marked superiors in cultural and military matters, were woefully backward when it came to the development of a system of ethics. They were worshiping multiple gods and still sacrificing their children, or passing them through the fire, as the Jews were developing a scriptural and cultural heritage that pointed them to the One God of the universe.

For centuries, as the world wallowed in the practices of paganism, the Jewish nation awaited a Messiah, who, Scripture promised, would provide them with a spiritual deliverance. This emphasis on the spiritual rather than the material was in marked contrast to the notions of the dominant cultures of the age. Notice the distinction too between the sacred significance with which the Israelites held their religious practices and the pagan practices of the nations around them. In the ancient world paganism was rife with the association of rampant sensuality, with the supposedly sacred. (Actually this is still present today in some forms of Hinduism, neo-paganism, Satanism and the New Age, - to name a few.) There were many examples of religiously sanctioned, wine driven orgies. The existence of the temple-prostitute-priestess was common practice across the pagan world. However, the development of the Jewish nation was different not just in degree but also in kind.

Now along about 700 BC the Greco-Roman civilization began to develop. Through Alexander, and later the Romans, it came to dominate the known world. Its' influence dominated the fields of art, architecture, writing and philosophy. With the conquering of the Holy Land by Rome, the notions of what became known as Greek philosophy was imported to that region too. Through military might and that ubiquitous philosophy that accompanied it, the world was united. And with the subjugation of Israel, the Romans had brought forth the intersection of those two themes of history. So it seems not by accident did the Messiah arrive at this time.¹⁷

This then was Jesus' world. It was a world of a captive Judaism. Any real understanding of the person of Jesus must necessarily start from the fact that he was a Jew. Further, we know that he was a teacher in the rabbinical tradition. As such he used the technique, common to that profession, of question and answer to drive home many of his most controversial points. There are many examples of this in the Gospels. In Matthew 22 for example, he discusses whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome. (This was a hot and sensitive subject given the political realities of that day.) In Mark 10:17-22 he talks about what is necessary to inherit eternal life. The other technique we see so often applied is the use of the parable. These are found throughout the Evangelists' accounts. These two can best be understood in the context of their Jewish-ness. Many of them refer specifically to the religious history of the Jewish nation, especially in regards to their repeated rejection of the prophets. This theme is one justification for the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan.

Besides the office of Rabbi, Jesus also fulfilled the role and duties of a prophet. Christ spoke as one with authority. He claimed to speak for God. It is recorded in the Gospels that many times he began a saying with the words, "Truly I say to you." After reading the words of Isaiah 61:1-2 referring to the promised Messiah, he claimed the anointing of the authority of the Spirit of the Lord by saying, "**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**" (Luke 4:21) With that claimed authority, during the Sermon on the Mount he called for an intensification of the commandments of the Law. "**You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement.**" (Matt. 5:21-22) He continues in verses 27 and 28, "**You have heard it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**" In Matthew 5:17 he makes an audacious claim. "**Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**" Just three verses later he tells his listeners that in order to be saved, their righteousness must surpass "**...that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.**"¹⁸

But his audacity does not stop there. Significantly, Jesus goes on to claim much more. As documented in all of the Gospels, Christ goes on to assert not only Messiahship, but actual equality with God by being the beloved Son of

God. Before we look at exactly what Jesus said, we must understand the momentousness of that claim to an observant, believing Jew of the first century. The pride of the Jewish nation is their unique relationship with and understanding of the One True God. His claim of equality with God spoke directly to the most central belief of Judaism. It spoke to the unity of God. The Scripture known as the Shema is the most important expression of that unity. Found in Deuteronomy 6:4 it states, “**Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One.**” This was the scripture ingrained in every Jewish believer since childhood. So even indirect claims that he shared in the essence of the godhead must have been greeted with some confusion among his followers and outright consternation on the part of the religious elite. Christ too, accepted the truth of the Shema. In Mark 12:29 we hear him respond to a question on which is the most important commandment. “**The most important one,**” answered Jesus, “**is ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One’.**” Now in the Hebrew the word used for ‘One’ in this case is echad. The word echad is used to describe a plural one-ness. It is the same word used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the union of husband and wife as constituting one flesh. In Mark 12:30 Jesus finishes his statement on the greatest commandment. “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**” Geisler and Bocchino in their work, *Unshakeable Foundations*, render that passage from Deuteronomy with more of the sense that it would have had in the original language. It would read, “Yaweh, our God, Yaweh is a plurality within an indivisible unity.” The authors point out how, “The law of God is based upon the nature of God.” They go on to elaborate. The law is not a collection of arbitrary commands but is rather, “primarily concerned with relational harmony...the plurality of God and the unity of God are both the standard and primary example of this truth.” When Jesus uses this language from Deuteronomy to answer the question, he is not so subtly pointing to that plurality. When taken in context with his other statements on his identity, he is arguing for the plurality that would include himself as a member of the godhead. The Gospel of John records for us another of those occasions when Jesus makes such a claim. Jesus is speaking with the Pharisees regarding his identity. They had asked him to answer directly if he is the Messiah. After chiding them for their unbelief and again pointing to his miracles as proof of his office, he speaks of those that believe in him. “**My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my hand. I and the Father are one.**” Here again is that claim of One-ness in essence, while at the same time maintaining the distinctness of his personality. (John 10:29-30)^{19 20}

Now to those familiar with the promises of Scripture, these reminders may have been just enough to see the validity in Christ’s claim to be the Messiah. Inherent in the Scriptures is the notion that the Anointed One would somehow be an expression of the Divine Personality. Isaiah 7:14 tells us that he would be called Immanuel, meaning ‘God with us’. And just a couple of chapters later in Isaiah 9:6 we are told that his titles will include, “**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, [and] Prince of Peace.**” So any claim that he is the Messiah is tantamount to a claim to be God Himself. These assertions were of monumental significance. Yet as we have seen, it was a question on the minds of the Pharisees, with a predisposition to disbelieve. It was also on the mind of Jesus’ followers. Even with the incredible miracles they were seeing, drawing the inference that a man was somehow divine was not an easy step. These were Jews steeped in the Shema. “**Hear O Israel...the Lord is One.**” And this was a claim of such uniqueness and importance that even John the Baptist was led to question what he believed to be true. John, who had identified the approaching Christ as the ‘Lamb of God’, who had baptized Jesus, to his own consternation, and had testified that he had seen, “**the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him**”, even he had questions. (John 1:29-34) Alone with his thoughts in the seclusion of his prison cell, this same John sent his disciples to inquire of Jesus, “**Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?**” Jesus’ answer is interesting in that he laid out the nature of the evidence to be considered when considering the validity of his claim to be the Anointed One. “**Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.**” Jesus was pointing to the evidence all had seen. John was undoubtedly familiar with the prophecies of Isaiah and Daniel. Jesus was saying, ‘open your eyes and see what I am doing’. This was his evidence for being the Messiah.

Still, some will argue that Christ was just a *good man, a great teacher*; - that He never claimed to be the Messiah or the Son of God. This was just made up by his followers at a later date as a means of asserting power. This is just wrong-headed and against the evidence, - as we shall see next time.

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