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BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

Vol. #770907

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What
the
World
needs
NOW

Photo by Isranet

What the World Needs Now

Surprisingly, it is

Israel.



Photo by Israelnet

No one can deny the incredible tensions that exist in Israel today as people the world over focus their attention on that tiny strip of land. Could it be that God wants to use those very tensions in Israel, and the attention of the nations, as a beacon of truth to reach a postmodern generation? Further, could this even be another fulfillment of Genesis 28:14? *“Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

The visible truth of what God is doing in modern Israel is one way all the nations of the earth can be blessed through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Allow me to set the background, and then discuss this idea.

under 40% and will likely fall below 30% before 2050.” A recent *USA Today* article contains the following quote from George Weigel, a Catholic columnist and the US biographer of Pope John Paul II: “Western Europe, the cradle of modern Christianity, has become a ‘post-Christian society’ in

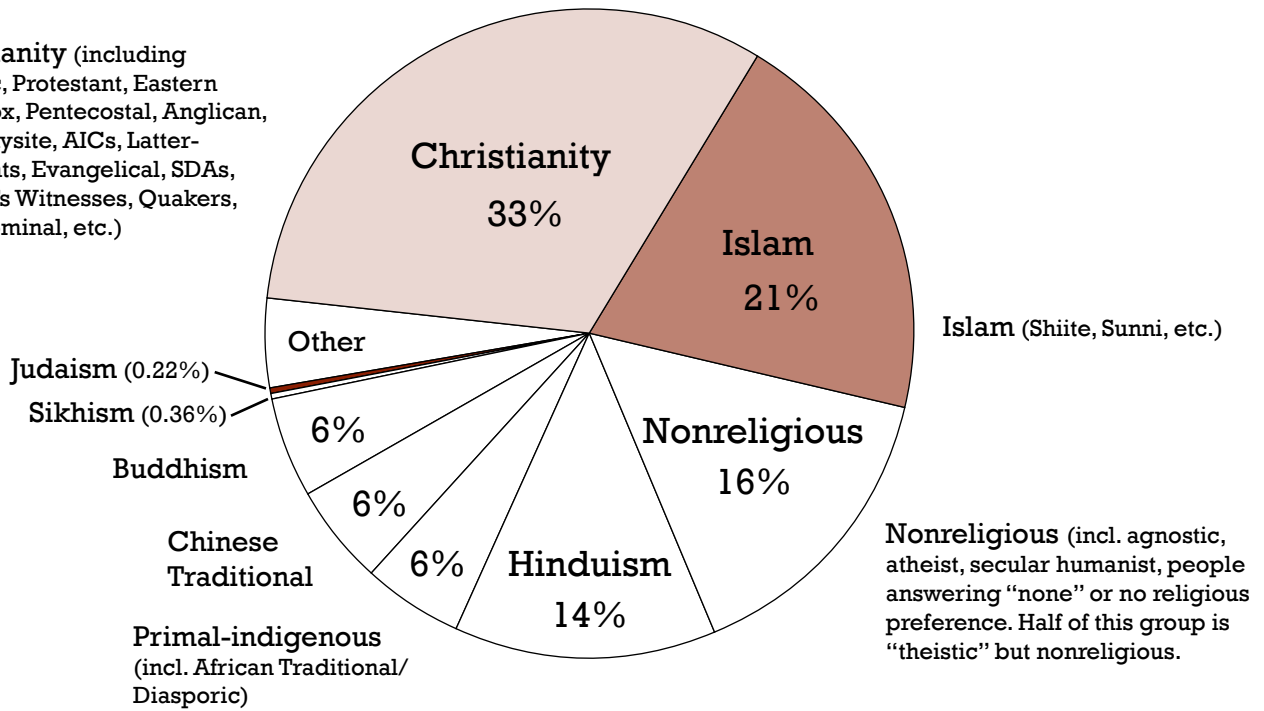
Christianity Declining in the West

Although Christianity remains the largest of the major world religions—with over 2.1 billion professed adherents—and the fastest growing in worldwide total adherents, the statistics for Europe and North America are depressing. Christianity in the West may be dying. Many once mighty cathedrals in Europe sit empty. According to Dr. Todd M. Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, “Whereas in 1900, over 80% of all Christians lived in Europe and Northern America, by 2005, this proportion had fallen to



Worldwide Percentage of Adherents by Religion

Christianity (including Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anglican, Monophysite, AICs, Latter-day Saints, Evangelical, SDAs, Jehovah's Witnesses, Quakers, AOG, nominal, etc.)



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which the ruling class and cultural leaders are anti-religious or 'Christophobic.'" According to the 2005 European Spiritual Estimate, only 4.2% of Europeans would identify themselves as "born again" or personally committed, faith-based Christians.

The situation in North America is somewhat better, but still depressing. According to Canada's General Social Survey 2001 data, attendance at religious services has fallen dramatically across the country over the past 15 years. Nationally, only one-fifth (20%) of individuals aged 15 and over attended religious services on a weekly basis in 2001, compared with 28% in 1986. In 2001, 4 in 10 adults (43%) reported that they had not attended religious services during the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with only 26% in 1986.

Overall emphasis on "spirituality" has not declined in the West; in fact, it has arguably increased.

Further, the American Religious Identification Survey by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York has this to say about the United States: "The proportion of the [American] population that can be classified as Christian has declined from 86% in 1990 to 77% in 2001. 76.5% (159 million) of Americans identify themselves as Christian." This is a major slide from 86.2% in 1990. Identification with Christianity has suffered a loss of 9.7 percentage points

in 11 years—about 0.9 percentage points per year. This decline is identical to that observed in Canada between 1981 and 2002. By about the year 2042, non-Christians will outnumber Christians in the United States.

"Spirituality" Growing

So what is happening? The overall emphasis on "spirituality" has not declined in the West; in fact, it has arguably increased. Eastern religions, New Age Spirituality, Scientology, and Islam, to name only a few, are growing rapidly.

In part one of his wonderful book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Dr. Viktor Frankl records his observations and reflections on survival during his imprisonment in Auschwitz and other concentration camps for five years. Dr. Frankl comes to the conclusion that a purpose beyond one's current condition is necessary for personal survival. The purpose doesn't need to be noble, spiritual, or altruistic, but it does need to provide focus for living that transcends immediate circumstance. I would suggest that the growth in over all spirituality, matched with the decline of "faith-based Christianity" in the West simply indicates that Dr. Frankl is correct; people are searching for meaning. The decline in Christianity in the West must indicate that the Church is seen as having lost its relevance to modern reality. At the same time, Christianity is exploding in Africa and Asia. Is the message different? Or, are there certain underlying fundamental assumptions that the West has forgotten that remain valid in the

East, and thus allow Christianity to remain valid? These lost societal assumptions and how to revive them in a postmodern society are the heart of this article.

Prerequisites to Faith

A number of Christian authors have attempted to identify the basic preconditions to Christian belief. Two who have impacted me in this area are Dr. Don Bierle in his book *Surprised by Faith* and Linda Rios Brook in her book *Jesus for Adults*. These two volumes led me to the first two of three key preconditions that I think we must reestablish before Christianity can again be seen as a serious answer by a 21st-century Westerner searching for meaning in life. As some of the readers of our teaching letters are Jewish, I would share an additional thought. I believe these same conditions would be prerequisite to a modern seeker adopting Orthodox Judaism. I am a Christian, so I'll continue using Christianity as the base for this article, but I welcome any comments or reactions from Jewish readers as well.

The two foundational prerequisites that were clear to me in Bierle's and Brook's writings are (1) the presumption of a force beyond ourselves and (2) the presumption that there is something wrong with me that I want to change.

Let's briefly look at each of these and then explore a third prerequisite in more detail. First, let's look at **the presumption of a force beyond ourselves**. Throughout history, all ancient religions and philosophies assumed some force beyond the physical realm, typically defined as God or gods. From the early Mesopotamians to the ancient Greeks, from the Norse Gods to the pagan gods and legends of the Aztecs, Mayans, and Pacific Islands, ancient faith systems believed in and taught about creation and the God or gods who created the world as we know it. Plato, Aristotle, and the other ancient philosophers all assumed there was some god or force beyond themselves, and any

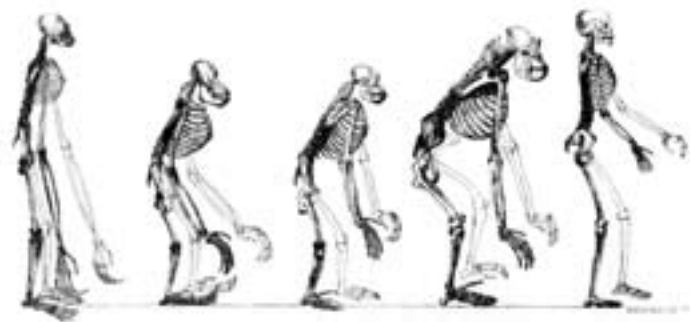


spiritual discussion within those societies was predicated on such a belief.

However, in 1859, this shared assumption began to dissolve in the West. In that year, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species*, and for the first time, serious scientists began to teach that there was no creator and no necessary force beyond themselves. As with most new ideas, evolution without creation took many years to gain general public acceptance. In the United States in 1925, the famous Scopes trial in Tennessee won the legal right to teach evolution in the public schools. By the 1950s, evolution was taught everywhere, and today evolution without creation is assumed as scientific and factual by the vast majority in Western society, including many in the Church. Ironically, science itself has begun to discover that evolution without some form of creation cannot occur. In scientific circles, it is discussed as "Intelligent Design," and many leading-edge, secular scientists are coming to this point of view. I believe that eventually this will restore us to a shared belief of a creative force beyond the physical, but given the lag between scientific discovery and general cultural acceptance, this may take another 100 years. However, God in His wisdom has given us guidance and a tool to use to begin this discussion with a postmodern generation. The tool is the Bible, and the discussion begins in Genesis.

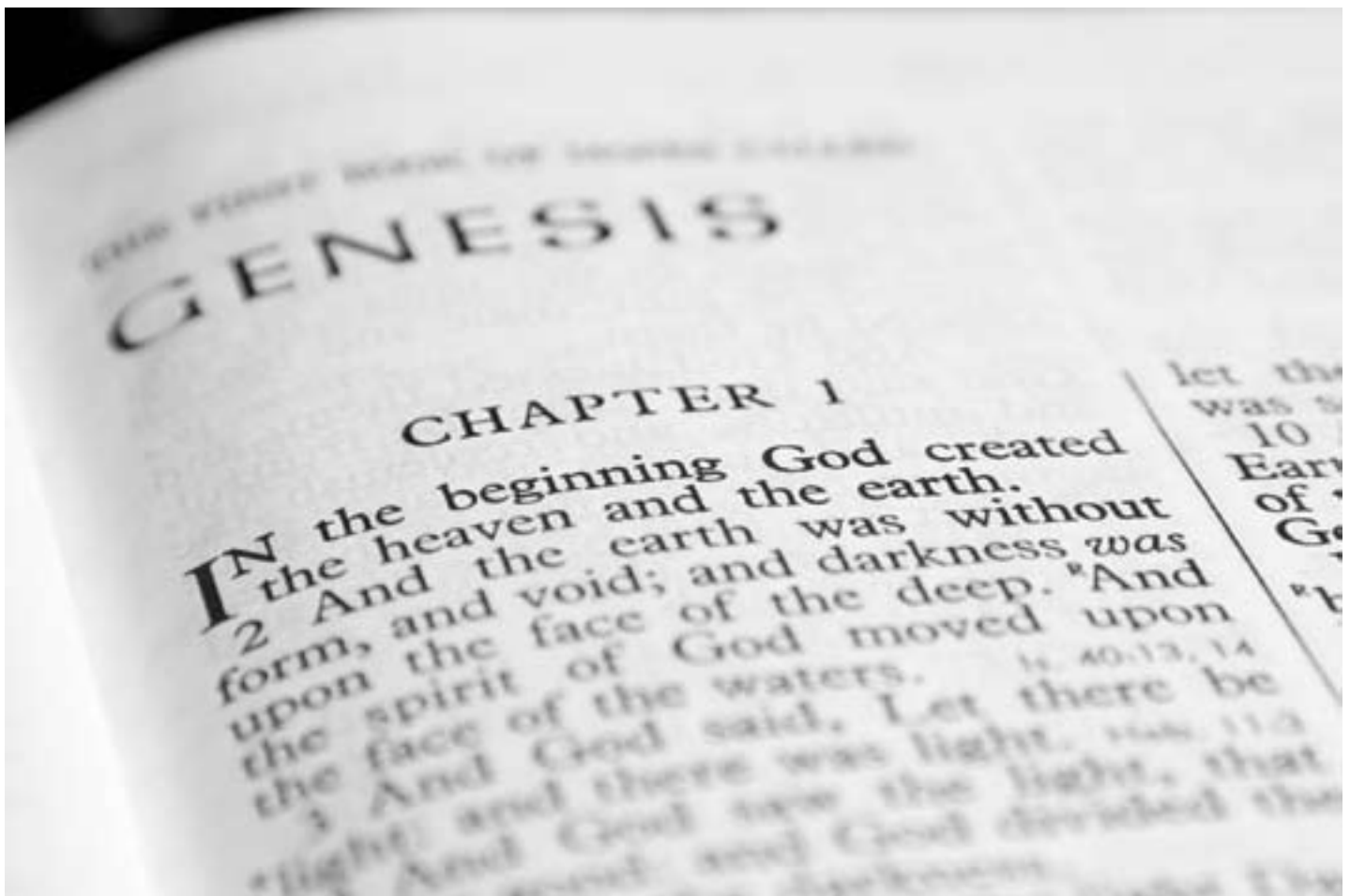
The second presumption necessary to faith is that **something is wrong with me**. Again, all ancient religions, including the most pagan, assumed that there was something wrong with the human condition, and that access to the gods provided the opportunity to get help. Often, the extreme struggle to meet basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter and to protect one's own family provided irrefutable evidence that there was a problem and that help beyond one's own limited resources was needed. Almost by definition, religion was thought of as the solution as the ancients sought help from the creator to solve their problems. Within this framework, almost

Ancient faith systems believed in and taught about creation and the God or gods who created the world.



Skeletons of the

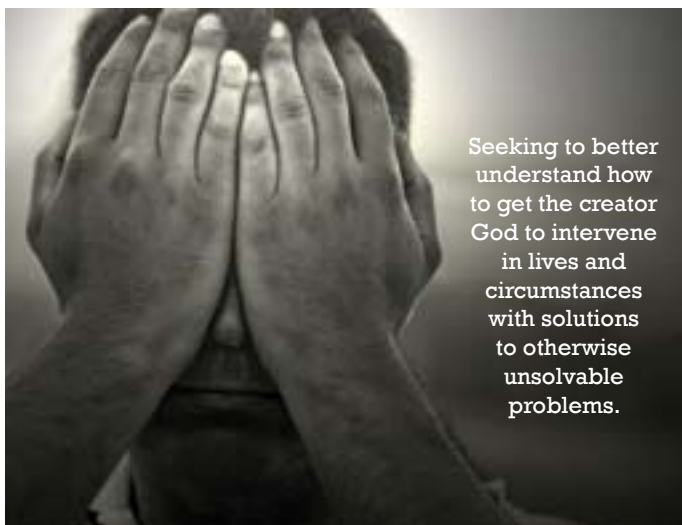
Gibbon Orang Chimpanzee Gorilla Man



all people recognized that the problem went beyond the physical world and extended to the heart of man himself. People were unable to manage their own behavior to act in ways generally recognized as good, both individually and for their family groups. Even when they were satisfied with their own actions, they were keenly aware of the risk and attack they faced from the “evil” actions of others.

Thus, discussions about true religion often began with the common framework of seeking to better understand how to get the creator God to intervene in lives and circum-

stances with solutions to otherwise unsolvable problems. In Judaism and Christianity, we call these problems sin. At the same time that Darwin began to erase the concept of a creator, philosophy did likewise with the concept of sin. In 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche, the son of a Lutheran pastor, published his first book *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. Here, Nietzsche introduced the idea that man is only responsible for himself, and there is no god at all. The catch phrase used by his followers is “God is dead,” and the movement became known as existentialism. Again, paralleling the acceptance of evolution, existentialism really gained public acceptance in the 1950s following the horrors of World War II under the teaching of French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.



Seeking to better understand how to get the creator God to intervene in lives and circumstances with solutions to otherwise unsolvable problems.

These changes to the general philosophic paradigm of mankind, combined with post-world war prosperity, have together entrenched the belief that man is basically good. Western society, both in Europe and North America, has lived in the most comfortable, secure, and prosperous time and place in human history. The forces that shape culture—from books, to music, to movies—have adopted the existentialist belief that if it feels good to me, then it is right. We have lost that basic sense that change is needed. No one is interested in a discussion about a creator who will bring change to your life if your life is comfortable and you don't want it changed. Individuals have been deluded into thinking that they have the right to do whatever they might choose as long as it feels good to them, and there is no external moral standard for comparison. Scripture, however, provides us the best place to go in these discussions.



King Saul followed his own ways rather than God.

The vast bulk of the *Tanach* (Older Testament) is filled with historical summaries of what happens when people follow their own hearts versus what happens if they follow the God that created them.

Finally, I would propose that there is a third necessary foundation to meaningful discussion about faith. First, we need agreement that there is a creator or some form of intelligence and power beyond ourselves. Second, we need agreement that there is something wrong in my situation that needs to be changed, and that I need help to change it. But third, **we need evidence that this creative force can and will intervene in the lives of people and nations to bring about that needed change.** In the past, when the West was a majority Christian culture, multiple personal examples of God's power and action were anecdotally available through the witness or testimony of friends, neighbors, and family. To disbelieve that there was a God who could and did act on behalf of His people was uncommon rather than the societal norm it is today. Today, most commonly, such discussions happen only with two individuals comparing experience and belief. With the foundational assumption that my truth is as good as your truth, no progress can occur in such a discussion without some clear external example to which both parties can appeal.



Two individuals comparing experience and belief.

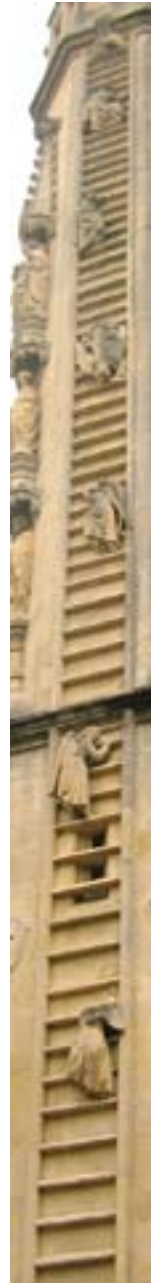
Israel, a Powerful Example

Thus, for these reasons, among many others, I believe that the Lord has given us Israel, both ancient and modern. We have a clear, external historical example documented in Scripture to which we can appeal. However, even more importantly to a postmodern generation, we have an example appearing in daily headlines that can be compared to the promises of Scripture. Thus, modern God's actions in modern Israel become a base for truthful dialogue that there is a God who can and does intervene—today—to bring about His promises. A full understanding of these facts breaks through all three of the fundamental misconceptions of postmodern society. In other words, understanding, talking, and teaching the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in modern Israel is the most powerful tool God has given us to reach a postmodern generation. It is one, if not the only, way to break through the shells of evolution, existentialism, and apathy to say, "God is alive, and He is doing powerful stuff today. If He can do that with Israel, He can do that in your life too!"

Now, let's look at modern history and a few Scripture passages that can be used in such a discussion. I began this article with a quote from Genesis 28. Let's return there: *"And behold, the LORD stood above it [the ladder in Jacob's dream] and said: 'I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you'"* (vv. 13–15).

In these verses, God repeats to Jacob the promise He had made earlier to Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 15 and 26), that He would give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Today, we know those descendants as the Jewish people. Never before in history has a displaced people group returned to their land after a dispersion of nearly 2,000 years. Yet today, we see exactly this in modern Israel.

"God is alive, and He is doing powerful stuff today. If He can do that with Israel, He can do that in your life too!"





www.TheGalileeExperience.com/Larissa Lando

In Isaiah, we read: *“It shall come to pass in that day that the LORD shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush, from Elam and Shinar, from Hamath and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth”* (11:11–12). Again, we see God doing exactly what He promised; outcasts are returning to Israel from literally the four corners of the earth.

In Jeremiah, we read: *“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.’ Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon*

and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is His name): ‘If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the LORD, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.’ Thus says the LORD: ‘If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the LORD’” (31:31–37).

Here, we read of God’s unbreakable promises to Israel, and in today’s headlines, we see the beginning of their fulfillment. Each day, we can study Scripture side by side with the newspaper and see the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Unfortunately, some of what we see happening is not pleasant. Ezekiel writes: *“Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal, and prophesy against him, and say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I am against you, O Gog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal. I will turn you around, put hooks into your jaws, and lead you out, with all your army, horses, and horsemen, all splendidly clothed, a great company with bucklers and shields, all of them handling swords. Persia, Ethiopia, and Libya are with them, all of them with shield and helmet; Gomer and all its troops; the house of Togarmah from the far north and all its troops—many people are with you’”* (38:1–6).

650 New Olim from France

RUSSIA'S NEW ARMS
DEAL WITH IRAN

200 North American Olim
Arrive in Israel

Iranian President Announce
Countdown for the Destruction
of Israel

Does Damascus Want War?

Coming—Great War to
Wipe Out Israel

ALIYAH FROM N. AMERICA
WILL BE UNPRECEDENTED

Iran Picks 600 Israeli
Targets to Hit

ISRAELIS PREPPED FOR WAR

More Signs of War
with Syria on the Way

These and ensuing verses in chapters 38 and 39 tell of a coming major war in the Middle East, involving an alliance of nations that includes part of the former Soviet Union (Magog and Meshech) and Iran (ancient Persia). Similarly, daily headlines in our newspapers talk of a growing alliance between Russia, Belarus, and Iran. Could this be the assembling of the forces of the war of Gog and Magog? At a minimum, this is an opportunity to reach out and connect the Bible with reality for the unchurched.



Iranian President Ahmadinejad
and Russian President Putin
— a growing alliance

Finally, there are some wonderful, hopeful promises to which we can look forward. As a Christian who already learns a great deal from Jewish sages and teachers about the 39 books of Scripture we hold in common, I look forward to the day when we will see Zechariah 8:20–23 fulfilled: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Peoples shall yet come, inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, “Let us continue to go and pray before the LORD, and seek the LORD of hosts. I myself will go also.” Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD.’ Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.””

Perhaps we are seeing a small preview of even this prophecy as thousands of Christians journey to Israel every year and come home with a new and deeper understanding of the Bible; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the natural family of Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth, whom Christians call Lord and Savior.

By Jim Solberg
National Director
United States

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

