

The Kings of the East: The Oriental Confederacy

by John F. Walvoord

The Bible foretells the rise of the Orient as a major factor in the final world conflict, with the kings of the east leading a massive army of two hundred million men against the land of Israel.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1

Topics: "End Time Prophecy", "Eschatology"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the significant political and military awakening of the Orient in the twentieth century, highlighting the emergence of major Asian nations like Red China, India, and Japan as key players in the international arena. He delves into biblical references that suggest the involvement of the Orient in end-time events, such as the prophecy of the regathering of Israel from the land of Sinim in Isaiah 49:12 and the visit of the Magi from the east to worship the Christ child in Matthew 2:1-2. Walvoord also explores Daniel's prophecy of a military invasion from the Far East in Daniel 11, as well as the depiction of a great army from the Orient in Revelation 9 and 16, emphasizing the role of the kings of the east in the final world conflict at Armageddon.

Transcript

One of the significant developments of the twentieth century is the political and military awakening of the Orient. The great nations of Asia east of the Euphrates River, slumbering for centuries, are now beginning to stir and to become a major factor in the international situation. The geographic immensity and the millions of humanity involved make it inevitable that any future development embracing the entire world must take the Orient into consideration.

In our twentieth century the major nations of Asia have thrown off the yoke of political overlordship of western civilization. Red China with its population approaching one billion is flexing its muscles not only against the United States of America, but even against its associate in communism, Russia. India, now independent of Great Britain, is likewise beginning to feel its strength. Japan is experiencing a great industrial revolution where the comforts and manufacturing techniques of western civilization are now an integral part of Japanese life. Lesser nations also are beginning to assert themselves, hoping for a large role in world affairs. Most of this has taken place in the last twenty-five years and developments continue to be rapid. Even if there were no Scripture bearing on the place of the Orient in end-time events, it would

be only natural to expect them to be part of the world-wide scene.

The great nations of Eastern Asia have had no important part in the history of Israel. Far removed in geography and interests, there is no record of any past war between Israel and the nations beyond the Euphrates. Alexander the Great penetrated as far as India with his armies, but he left no permanent imprint upon the oriental world. The future, however, in view of modern rapid communications and transportation and the world-wide character of any military effort in the missile age, will be a different story.

The western world was rudely awakened to the power of the Orient by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. During the months that followed, the Japanese army, navy, and air force dominated the Asiatic scene. It was only when the full force of American military power was brought into play that Japan went down along with its ally, Germany. The downfall of Japan, however, was followed by the emergence of Red China and independent India. The conflict between the United States and Viet Nam, although not large in extent, symbolizes that Asia is the number one problem of the world today.

In World War II the Japanese Yamamoto was quoted as boasting, "I shall not be content merely to occupy Guam, the Philippines, Hawaii, and San Francisco. I shall look forward to dictating peace to the United States in the White House at Washington." Although today this is an idle boast, Red China and Russia are still dreaming of world conquest by means of communistic philosophy. No one takes lightly the possibility of a world-wide conflict sparked by the belligerence of Red China and other communistic nations. In this confused situation that has so many omens of future disaster for western civilization, a student of the Scriptures may well ask whether prophecy has any sure word concerning the role of Asia among the nations of the world in the end time.

China In Prophecy

Scriptures rarely go outside the confines of the ancient Roman Empire in predicting future events. An exception to this is the statement found in Isaiah 49:12 relating to the ultimate regathering of the nation Israel, "Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim." Although it is not possible to be dogmatic as to the precise reference of "the land of Sinim," conservative scholarship has generally agreed that the most probable explanation is that this refers to the ancient land of China.

It is known that China for centuries was a great nation and had its own culture and extensive history long before Christ was born in Bethlehem. It is possible to trace some commercial relationships with China in ancient days as far as the Mediterranean and there is also evidence that some of the history of the Old Testament was known in China. Even if the Chinese had not penetrated as far west as the Mediterranean, the world-wide scattering of the people of Israel would inevitably have brought some of them to the great land of China. Under these circumstances, the prophecy assumes a logical and natural interpretation, namely, that in the end time some of the Jews who will be regathered will come not only from the north and the west, the more important directions of concentration of Jewish population, but also from the east. Although this prophecy is not related to events which concern the nations, it does indicate that the Scriptures recognize the existence of the Far East in relation to the Holy Land.

The Magi From The East

One of the most familiar Biblical references to the Far East is related to the visit of the Magi as they brought gifts to the Christ child. According to Matthew 2:1, 2, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of

Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

It has been commonly held from the times of the early church fathers that these strange visitors came from the area east of the Euphrates and probably from ancient Persia. The Persian origin of the Magi was suggested by such men as Clement of Alexandria, Diodorus of Tarsus, Chrysostom, and Cyril of Alexandria. Somehow the Messianic hope had been transmitted in some form even to this distant land. The star appearing over Bethlehem prompted their journey and inquiry concerning the birth of the King of the Jews. The fact that they wanted to worship Him and recognized Him as the King of the Jews reveals that the basic facts concerning the Old Testament were more widely known than is commonly realized. As in the case of the reference to the land of Sinim, the story in the New Testament gives added support to the conclusion that the Bible includes the Orient in its world-wide view.

Daniel's Prophecy Of A Military Invasion From The Far East

In Daniel's prophecy of "the time of the end" beginning in Daniel 11:35, a king is pictured in the Mediterranean area who engages in a military conflict with the king of the south, the king of the north, and a military force from the east. Although identification of this king is difficult, the most plausible explanation is that he is the head of the revived Roman Empire who at this point has assumed the role of a world dictator. In the period just prior to the second coming of Christ in the latter part of the great tribulation, major portions of the world will rebel against him. This explains the military conflict with armies pushing against him from the south, the north, and from the east.

In the prophecy it is stated in Daniel 11:44, "But tidings out of the east and out of the north shall trouble him: therefore he shall go forth with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many." Although the information given is meager, in the light of the context it appears that these tidings concern a military invasion from the Orient. This is probably the first word of trouble in the Orient in relation to his world-wide empire and comes as an added blow to insurrection in the north and the south. It appears that he is victorious in his preliminary battles with the north and the south, as it states in Daniel 11:44, "therefore he shall go forth with great fury to destroy, and utterly to make away many." But that the conflict is not completely resolved, is borne out by the fact that at the time of the second coming of Christ a great war is under way in which the armies are deployed over much of the Holy Land with the valley of Armageddon as its focal point. The statement in Daniel, however, introduces a subject concerning which there is additional revelation given in the New Testament that lends support to the concept that the Orient will have a place in the great world conflict of the end time.

The Great Army From The Orient

Two important passages in Revelation, namely, 9:13-21 and 16:12-16 contribute to the conclusion that one of the large armies employed in the final world conflict will be a military force of great power which comes from the Orient. The first intimation of this is found in Revelation 9 where it is recorded that John

heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, Saying to the sixth angel which had the trumpet, Loose the four angels which are bound in the great river Euphrates, And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men. And the number of the army of the horsemen were two hundred thousand thousand: and I heard the number of them (verses 13-16).

The passage goes on to describe the character of this army and the conclusion that one-third of the men were killed in the resulting military struggle.

Although all of the details are not entirely clear, the most reasonable explanation of this prophecy, related as it is to the great river Euphrates which forms the eastern boundary of the ancient Roman Empire, is that the army comes from the Orient and crosses the Euphrates River in order to participate in the struggle that is going on in the land of Israel. The information that it is prepared for "an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men" means simply that it is an army especially prepared for the day of battle which follows.

A most staggering statistic is the fact that the number of the horsemen is declared to be two hundred thousand thousand or two hundred million. Never in the history of the human race until now has there been an army of this size. The total number of men under arms in World War II on both sides of the conflict together never was more than fifty million. Accordingly, it has been the custom for expositors to spiritualize the number or to regard the army as demonic rather than human. The statistics of two hundred million horsemen must have been especially astounding to the Apostle John for at that time the total world population did not exceed this number. With the twentieth century and its attendant population explosion, however, the number of an army of two hundred million men becomes increasingly a possibility and with modern transportation and means of supply, for the first time in history such an army is plausible. It is at least of more than passing interest that Red China alone claims to have a man and woman militia engaging in serious training numbering two hundred million (Time, May 21, 1965, page 35), precisely the figure mentioned in Revelation 9:16.

Although their militia includes the home guard which under present circumstances would not be thrown into a battle such as the one in Revelation, it at least introduces the possibility that the number should be taken literally. If so, this is an imposing statistic of the power and influence of the Orient in the final world war. The deadly character of the army is revealed in their slaughter of one third, a figure mentioned in Revelation 9:15 and again in Revelation 9:18. Although it may not be intended to consider this as one third of the entire world's population, the implication is that many millions of people are involved.

The Kings Of The East

A later development in prophetic fulfillment is portrayed in the sixth vial described in Revelation 16:12-16. There it is recorded, "And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared" (Revelation 16:12). Revelation 16:14 reveals that this movement is part of a world-wide gathering of "the kings of the earth and of the whole world" in order that they might participate in "the battle of that great day of God Almighty." The focal point of the gathering is mentioned as Armageddon in Revelation 16:16.

Many interpretations have arisen concerning the meaning of the phrase "the kings of the east." These interpretations may be divided into two classes, those that take this phrase literally, and those who find in it a nonliteral meaning. If the nonliteral interpretation be followed there is no end to the possible interpretation. The kings of the east have been connected with almost every important set of characters in the world. The bewildering array of conflicting opinions is its own refutation.

The kings of the east have been identified with the Dacians who conquered Rome and the Euphrates is then taken to represent the Danube. Others relate the kings of the east to the Parthians who contended against Rome at the Euphrates. Some have referred it to the people of Israel returning to their ancient land

or identified it with the kingdom of God or Christianity. Some think it refers to the ten kings of Revelation 17:12; others have related it to the Apostles or to the four angels of Revelation 9:14, 15. Still other explanations have been given such as relating it to Vitranga, or Constantine the Great, or to Gog and Magog, or Turkey, and still other interpretations too numerous to mention. A method of interpretation yielding so many different results is obviously wrong in principle.

The most simple and suitable explanation is to take the passage literally. The Euphrates River then becomes the geographic boundary of the ancient Roman Empire. The kings of the east are kings from the east or "of the sunrising," that is, monarchs who originated in the Orient. The battle which ensues is therefore a genuine military conflict.

The Drying Up Of The Euphrates River

The interpretation of this difficult passage, if taken literally, provides an important segment of information concerning the final world conflict. The prophecy begins with a reference to the Euphrates River and the declaration that "the water thereof was dried up." Just what is meant?

From the standpoint of Scripture, the Euphrates River is one of the important rivers of the world. The first reference is found in Genesis 2:10-14 where it is included as one of the four rivers having its source in the garden of Eden. The Euphrates River is mentioned a total of nineteen times in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament. In Genesis 15:18 it is cited as the eastern boundary of the land promised to Israel. An army, therefore, which crosses the Euphrates River from the east to the west by this act invades the Promised Land.

The Euphrates River is important in some of the major events of the Bible. Although not mentioned by name in Daniel 5, it was the diversion of the Euphrates River from its normal course through the midst of Babylon that left the river channel dry and permitted the armies of Darius the Mede to take the city by storm on the memorable night of Belshazzar's feast (Daniel 5). Therefore the drying up of the Euphrates contributed to the downfall of Babylon. There seems to be a connotation in that the drying of the Euphrates River in Revelation 16:12 will lead to the downfall of the revived Roman Empire which spiritually and politically is also identified with Babylon.

The drying up of the Euphrates, however, is probably best interpreted as a literal but miraculous drying up of the Euphrates River thereby permitting easy access of the military hordes from the Orient to cross its dry river bed. The Euphrates River has long been an important geographic barrier and in the ancient world was second to none in importance. Its total length was some seventeen hundred miles, and it was the main river of southwestern Asia dividing the land geographically much as the Mississippi River divides North America. Not only from the standpoint of prophecy, but historically, geographically, and biblically the Euphrates River is the most important in the ancient world. To take it literally is therefore not a strange or an unnatural conclusion.

The drying up of the Euphrates is pictured as an act of God. This has inspired all sorts of nonliteral interpretations as symbolizing some great victory of God. In the past this has been suggestive of the declining power of Turkey, or as anticipating a future decline in the Roman Catholic Church. Although Turkey has receded in power, there is no evidence that this applies to Rome or any other ecclesiastical organization. It is rather a physical act permitting the army to cross the Euphrates much as was enacted in God drying up the waters of the Red Sea and of the Jordan to permit the passage of the children of Israel without difficulty. Inasmuch as such a literal interpretation makes a great deal of sense and there is no

agreement as to the spiritualized meaning of the passage, the literal interpretation is obviously to be preferred.

If the drying of the Euphrates River is to be taken literally, then what can be understood by the reference to "the kings of the east"? Here again the literal view is to be preferred. Inasmuch as it would be most natural in a world war culminating in the Middle East to have the Orient represented, the interpretation that views the kings of the east as the political and military leaders of Asiatic forces east of the Euphrates is a satisfactory solution.

There has been some tendency to take the expression "the kings of the east"--literally, "the kings of the sunrise"--as referring specifically to Japan where the rising sun is a symbol of its political power. However, it is more natural to consider the term "rising sun" as a synonym for east, and therefore the army would include all the nations of the Orient. If the army is literally two hundred million, it would hardly be possible for Japan alone to staff, maintain, and move such a gigantic force without help from China, India, and other great nations of the Orient.

Conclusion

The ultimate explanation is therefore relatively a simple one. By an act of God the Euphrates River is dried up. This makes easy the descent of the tremendous army of two hundred million men upon the land of Israel to participate in the final world conflict. If such an army is to be raised up, it would be natural to conclude that it would come from Asia, the great population center of the world. Although they seem to come in opposition to the Roman ruler and his power, it is clear that this invasion springs from unbelief and these armies like the others gathered "to the battle of that great day of God Almighty" forget their individual conflicts to oppose the coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory from heaven.

The fact that the rise of Asia has occurred in our twentieth century with so many rapid and unexpected developments is another evidence that the world is moving toward its final climax and the end of the times of the Gentiles. In Asia, as in other parts of the world, the stage is being set for the final drama in which the kings of the east will have their important part.

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