

The peace and destruction of Damascus

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The recently announced peace talks between Israel and Syria may relate to prophecies about Israel's 'dwelling safely' and to Syria's invasion and destruction at the hand of the Gogian host.

DAMASCUS, the capital of Syria, is well known for claiming the title "the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world",¹ and from a Biblical perspective this is interesting, since Isaiah 17:1 declares that Damascus should be "taken away from being a city" to be "a ruinous heap". Some have suggested that Isaiah 17 was fulfilled in the event recorded in 2 Kings 16:9, which refers to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, going up against the city in response to the appeal of King Ahaz of Judah.

However, this Assyrian invasion left Damascus intact and fully operational as a city. Furthermore, neither Scripture nor secular history records any occasion when Damascus was destroyed and rendered uninhabited. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the prophecy of Isaiah 17 has yet to be fulfilled. Indeed, this suggestion has long been held in the Brotherhood. Brother Thomas wrote that, in his opinion, Isaiah 17 speaks of the destruction of Damascus that would occur prior to the Gogian host's assault on Israel. This assault is spoken of in verses 12-14:

"Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. And behold at eventide trouble; and before the morning he is not. This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us".

Brother Thomas argued that the northern host that comes to take a spoil, as detailed in Ezekiel 38, will destroy Damascus as it travels south through Syria and into Israel, before being itself destroyed: "The rush of the roaring hosts of the

nations is to Jerusalem under the King of the North, who at that time is lord of Syria and Damascus, holding all that country against his enemies".²

Israel-Syria peace talks

On 21 May 2008 an announcement was published simultaneously in Jerusalem, Damascus and Ankara regarding the initiation of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, under the mediatorship of Turkey.³ It is profitable to note two areas where these peace talks may be preparing the way for the fulfilment of Isaiah 17 and Ezekiel 38.

1 Israeli confidence in Syrian peace. Aside from troubled Lebanon, Syria is the only remaining state contiguous with Israel that has not signed a peace treaty with the Jewish state.⁴ Technically the two nations are still at war. However, for Ezekiel 38:11 to be fulfilled and for the Gogian host to be able to say, "I will go up to the land of unwallled villages", we would expect to see Israel at peace with Syria, feeling secure and unthreatened within its borders. Therefore it is fascinating to observe that Israel has offered to return the plateau of the Golan Heights⁵ to Syria as part of a potential peace deal.⁶ The Golan is an elevated position that is currently crucial to Israel's northern defences and is also a main source of potable water for the Israelis. The return of the Golan to Syria would be a clear sign of an Israel confident that it 'dwells safely', because Syrian ownership of

1. <http://www.olddamascus.com/home.htm>.
2. Thomas, J. (1892), "The Breaking of the Russo-Assyrian Clay", *The Christadelphian*, Jan., p. 4. See also *The Ministry of the Prophets—Isaiah*, second edition, 1923, p. 320.
3. <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2008/Syria+and+Israel+start+peace+talks+21-May-2008.htm>.
4. Egypt made peace in 1979 and Jordan followed in 1994.
5. The Golan heights were taken by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.
6. <http://english.aljazeera.net> and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7362937.stm, 23 April.

View eastwards across the southern end of the Sea of Galilee. Israeli kibbutzim occupy the middle ground, overlooked by the Golan Heights in the left background.

Picture: Tony Benson



Israeli settlements in the Golan Heights, July 1989. (Source: CIA)

the Golan would literally mean that Israel and Syria would have nothing to separate them except the Sea of Galilee. In great contrast to today's heavily guarded border, Israel would instead be "dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates".

- 2 **Syria to break ties with Iran.** For Damascus to be destroyed by the Gogian host, as Isaiah 17 requires, it is evident that Syria cannot be in league with the northern invader and its allies at the time of the invasion. Ezekiel 38:5 details that Persia (Iran) will be one of the Gogian allies, and yet currently Syria has a close allegiance with Iran. It follows that we would expect Syria to end its current support of the Iranian régime. We see a potential development relating to this prophecy as we note that, in return for the Golan Heights, Israel would require cessation of Syrian support for Iran. The Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni, said that Israel wanted to live in peace with its neighbours, but Syria needed to "distance itself completely" from "problematic ties" with Iran.⁷

In addition, the United States also appears to be offering an olive branch to Syria in return for an end to Syrian-Iranian ties. "Syria is ready to break off its close links with Iran if America gives it financial and military backing", according to Alon Liel, a former director of Israel's foreign ministry. Mr Liel stated that the prospect of an Israeli peace agreement with Syria was growing

7. Aljazeera.net, 22 May 2008.

through the possibility of US support that would “break the Syrian isolation internationally”.⁸ A Syrian-US deal would mean that the Iranians would lose one of their last remaining allies in the Middle East. Furthermore, without Syrian cooperation, Iran would be unlikely to be able to continue its support for Hizbullah⁹ (an armed group based in Lebanon), meaning that Iran could be left isolated from all its Arab allies. Perhaps, then, the alliances spoken of in Ezekiel 38 will become stronger as the Persian power seeks to recoup its lost influence in the Arab world by forging stronger ties with its northern neighbour, the Russian Gogian power.

The undeterred work for peace and safety

The first meeting of the newly created ‘Union for the Mediterranean’ was held in Paris on 12-13 July, and Middle East peace was taken as the summit topic. After the summit, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said there would be “obstacles, problems, disagreements but we have never been as close to the possibility of coming to an agreement as we are today”. However, the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, put things in perspective: “it could take between six months and two years to reach a peace agreement with Israel—even if both sides agreed to hold face-to-face talks”.¹⁰

Syrian obduracy is not Mr Olmert’s only problem; returning the Golan Heights to Syria would be deeply unpopular with many Israelis. Indeed,

some commentators have speculated that ongoing allegations of corruption and fraud against Mr Olmert may have originated from parties who are opposed to a ‘land for peace’ deal with Syria. As a result of his falling domestic popularity, it is very possible that Mr Olmert will soon be forced to resign. If this occurs we watch closely for his successor’s stance on peace with Syria.

Yet however insurmountable and intractable the obstacles to Israeli-Syrian peace may seem, they will be overcome. The very fact that discussions of “Peace and safety” (1 Thess. 5:3) continue to remain the principal feature of Israel’s relationship with its neighbours is further evidence of God’s hand still working with His people in fulfilment of His prophetic word.

The movements of the nations speak powerfully to us, declaring the nearness of our Lord’s return. We remember that our master’s call to judgement may well come long before the Gogian host descends upon Damascus and Jerusalem. Let us therefore be prepared for the imminent return of our Lord: “At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 17:7).

8. [Telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 6 Jul. 2008.

9. Note also “Israeli-Hezbollah prisoner exchanges”, *Jerusalem Post*, 15 Jul. 2008.

10. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7505172.stm, 14 Jul. 2008.