

14:16-19 tells us that there will be nations that will not come up to Jerusalem to worship, and that they will suffer drought and plague as a consequence. In other words, the process of subduing opposition will take time; it will not happen overnight. Micah 7:15,16 puts it in these words: "According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I shew unto him marvellous things. The nations shall see and be confounded at all their might". In other words, there will be a period of forty years during which the nations will be convinced of the authority and power of the new rulership in Jerusalem.

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### Britain in prophecy

There was a time, not so long ago, that I travelled regularly to Churchill, Manitoba, as Port Warden on behalf of the Canadian Department of Transport to oversee the loading of prairie grain on foreign ships for overseas destinations. In the seventeen years of my annual excursions, never once did I see a vessel registered in a British port. The majority of ships had Greek masters, mates and engineers, and Filipino crew. A good number flew under the Greek flag, but most were Cypriot, Panamanian, or occasionally Liberian or some other flag of convenience. Thirty thousand tons of Canadian wheat was not considered a good financial venture for the European ship owner. The "merchants of Tarshish" are now multi-flagged.

A new international maritime structure is in place. Like cars, ships are leased; Ports of Registry are often enough one-room offices on, for example, some island in the Pacific, with certification being done by the big shipping insurance brokers, such as Lloyds of London or the American Bureau of Shipping (ABS). Chartering is done through ship-brokers, and the financiers are faceless entities in New York, London or Frankfurt. Often enough there are several nationalities named on the cargo manifest, which may easily change as the cargo changes hands, while the ships are at sea. The modern equivalent—international shipping—to the Phoenician identity of the "ships of Tarshish" is far closer to the original than it has ever been.

There is very little doubt that the Biblical "ships of Tarshish" worked out of the Phoeni-

cian coastal ports of the East Mediterranean. These independent city-states, such as Tyre, Sidon, Berytus (Modern Beirut), Aradus (Arvad), Byblos and Ugarit were churning out ships and seamen in the days of the patriarchs. By the time of Solomon they were the pre-eminent merchants of the eastern Mediterranean. Later they became trading partners with the Etruscans of Italy to gain hegemony over the whole inland sea, both exploiting the coal, iron, silver and tin mines of Italy and Spain and forming a trading empire from Tyre to Gibraltar.

Before the days of Nebuchadnezzar they were building colonies on every major island in the Mediterranean and branching out into Spain (Cadiz is of Akkadian origin) and along the North African Coast, Carthage eventually becoming the capital when Tyre was destroyed by Alexander's Macedonians. These ports of call were necessary. The Phoenician fleets consisted mostly of small vessels that rarely left the sight of land, coasting by day and anchoring by night. Eventually their ships increased in size, and trading posts became colonies of a mercantile empire that may have stretched as far as modern Nigeria, and down the east coast of Africa to Zanzibar.

There is a useful parallel between 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles regarding the early days of Phoenician maritime supremacy. We are told in 1 Kings 10:22 that "the king had at sea a *navy of Tarshish* with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tarshish, bringing gold . . .". It is plain from the context that this fleet was based at the north end of the Red Sea (*cf.* 9:26,27). On the other hand, 2 Chronicles 9:21 tells us that "the king's ships *went to Tarshish* with the servants of Hiram: every three years once came the *ships of Tarshish* bringing gold".

The slight differences only emphasise that, regardless of where they traded, the home port—Port of Registry—was Tarshish. But there is no indication at all of where Solomon's ships went; the cargo suggests Yemen or Ethiopia and parts of Africa further south, see Isaiah 60:6-9. Three years might indicate a round trip from Ezion-geber to Tyre and back again.\* We can be sure that Solomon's interest lay in trading with Arabic rather than Mediterranean merchants. Frank-

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\* Herodotus records that in the seventh century B.C. Phoenician sailors took three years to journey from Egypt via the Red Sea and round Africa to Tyre.—*T.B.*

incense was a tropical resin, as witnessed by the gifts of the Queen of Sheba. Does it not then seem likely that Hiram built Phoenician-type trading vessels for Solomon on the Red Sea coast, and leased them to him? Archaeologists have determined that Yemen was a highly developed farming and horticultural region in those days.

The first mention of Tarshish comes in Genesis 10:4, repeated in 1 Chronicles 1:7, where Tarshish is one of the sons of Javan. If the latter can be identified as the Ionian Greeks, Elishah as the Aeolian Greeks, Kittim as Cyprus and Dodanim as Rhodes, then Tarshish would lie on the "isles" (Gen. 10:5) and coastlands of the eastern Mediterranean. Isaiah 60:9 and 66:19 would fit in well with the above, as would Ezekiel 27:12,25, where Tarshish is associated with Tyre, as it is also in Isaiah 23:1-14. Jonah 1:3 indicates a destination in the same vicinity, if not just a trip up the coast.

On the other hand, 1 Kings 10:22; 22:48; 2 Chronicles 9:21 and Psalm 48:7 definitely point to trade out of Ezion-geber, with Psalm 48 echoing Exodus 14:21, which speaks of the strong east wind that opened up the Red Sea for Moses and the children of Israel, and giving a possible cause for the wreckage of Jehoshaphat's "ships of Tharshish" (1 Kgs. 22:48). It might be noted that the Septuagint rendering of 1 Kings 10:22 limits Solomon's building programme at Ezion-geber to one ship. It is also worth noting that in the Old Testament Tarshish is the sole Port of Registry mentioned.

The "ships of Chittim [Cyprus]" of Daniel 11:30 were military transports bringing Roman troops to protect Egypt in the days of Antiochus IV of Syria. It is not unlikely that they were vessels chartered from the Greeks (Nicosia in Cyprus is still a favourite Greek Port of Registry) by Rome, as were ships of Adramittium and Alexandria in Paul's day (Acts 27:2,6; 28:11). "Ships of Tarshish" no longer existed in New Testament times; the Punic wars, in which Rome destroyed Carthage, had seen to that. The Greeks were again captives of the Mediterranean.

Perhaps the most serious problem with our interpretation of prophecy is the tendency to hang on to what we would like to believe, going to the Bible for proof rather than for information. Having sailed under the Red Ensign for many years, there was never any problem in my mind, bearing in mind the 'rule Britannia' philosophy so prevalent in our English-speaking community then, with Britain having an affinity with Tar-

shish. That philosophy now belongs in the same repository as Morse Code, the sextant and semaphore flags. They are antiques, the stuff of dreams.

It is strange but true that the British merchant navy followed a curiously similar path to the "ships of Tarshish" of Bible times. Isaiah 60:9 is often quoted to demonstrate British command of the seas. In actual fact it was British troops that prevented the "ships of Tarshish" from landing Israelis at Haifa and on the beaches at Tel Aviv prior to 1948. It could very well be that Ernest Bevin's failure to facilitate the return of the Jews in recognition of the Balfour Declaration led to the demise of the British merchant service.

Like the Phoenicians, colonisation (in India, South Africa, Canada and Australia) by the British was brought about by the need to establish, serve and protect trading investments, and the trade routes between them and the United Kingdom. The 'ships of Britain' were there for British interests. They were designed to operate out of river ports, where shallow waters, tides and land communications limited the tonnage of the vessels. When shipping evolved into larger, faster container ships and very large bulk carriers, not only British general cargo ships but also British ports and ship-building centres became redundant. The fast transocean passenger traffic became obsolete, replaced by international air transport at about the same time. British shipping, following the rest of the world's marine industries, turned obsolete tonnage into razor blades and Morris Minis, and registered new, specialist tonnage in Hamilton, Bermuda, the Isle of Man and Gibraltar. Without a merchant navy, the need for a large fighting force diminished, especially when naval vessels are such easy targets for planes and missiles.

In the long run the "ships of Tarshish" became in the Scriptures a generic term for Mediterranean shipping. Wherever Tarshish was—in Ethiopia, in Lebanon, in Southern Spain or Carthage—whether Tarshish might be Tyre-ish or Tartessus-ish or Tarsus-ish, is irrelevant. Whether the Romans leased Phoenician ships for troop transport or the Greeks hired Phoenician crews on their galleys to defeat the Persians is unimportant.

In Revelation 18 this point is made clear. The merchants of Tarshish of the Old Testament become the "merchants of the earth" in the New who "waxed rich through the abundance of her [Babylon's] delicacies" (v. 3), who "weep and

mourn over her” (v. 11), who “were made rich by her” (v. 15), who “were the great men of the earth” (v. 23). Verse 19 refers to “that great city, wherein were made rich all that had ships in the sea” (v. 19). Surely John had Ezekiel 38:13 in mind, where “the merchants of Tarshish”, the great marine traders of the earth, ask Gog the question, “Art thou come to take a spoil?”. There is no response, and the young lions of commerce vanish from the scene.

It is really quite academic whether Britain, the USA, NATO, Liberia, Greece or the UN are “the merchants of Tarshish”; the recipients of Ezekiel’s prophecy would identify fully with his terms of reference. 2,500 years later we must wait and see how events develop to fit the circumstances to which the prophet’s words relate. We know Ezekiel’s prophecies remain to be fulfilled. We have been warned that in our patience we possess our souls (Lk. 21:19). Guesswork will get us absolutely nowhere. Insisting on archaic fulfilment simply leads to further frustration and a humiliating admission that we were mistaken. Gog and his hosts have an appointment with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on the mountains of Israel, and the moguls of international shipping cartels can do nothing about it, except weep. Let them. We live in hope.

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### Prepared for invasion?

I thank Brother Nigel Bernard for his article of the above title (Oct. 2000, p. 386), in which he makes a valiant attempt to support Brother Thomas’s exposition of Ezekiel 38—but he seems to be struggling to uphold the standard interpretation, that of Russia invading Israel.

On a business trip to Moscow I was able to discuss with the president of Gazprom (the world’s largest gas producer) the demise of Russian military strength and the declining economy since democratisation, as a consequence of which Russia appears to be in no fit state to invade Israel. Thus, for Brother Bernard to contend that the decrease in the Russian armed forces by one third makes their military capability stronger is seemingly turning logic on its head.

While in Russia I had the opportunity to discuss with a group of linguists (including my Jewish lady interpreter) the Russian translation of Ezekiel 38. They did not consider that the

ancient names of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal correspond to the modern names of Russia, Moscow and Tobolsk—which traditionally we claim they do.

Looking specifically at Ezekiel 38:11, “I will invade a land of *unwalled villages*, I will attack this quiet folk who are all living in security, without gates and bars”,\* this does not appear to fit the situation in modern-day Israel. The expression “unwalled villages” perhaps means something like “demilitarised zones”, of which there are few such places in Israel today. Israel is far from being a land of unprotected villages, since kibbutzim have become militarised areas, protected by machine-gun watch towers and triple-razor barbed-wire fencing.

Suffice it to say that “Gog” (whoever that might be) will attack the land of Israel at the “end of days” (v. 8), seemingly after the enthronement of the Lord Jesus Christ, when the land and her people will genuinely be at rest.

The sequence of events, in broad outline, appears to be as follows:

- **Chapter 36**—The restoration and spiritual renewal of Israel
- **Chapter 37**—The valley of dry bones and the advent of King Jesus
- **Chapter 38**—The invasion by Gog and the great earthquake
- **Chapter 39**—The destruction of Gog and the establishment of the Kingdom.

If the four chapters are in chronological order, the viewpoint expressed above may be worthy of further consideration.

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### Reply

We thank Brother Davison for his comments, and agree that at present “Russia appears to be in no fit state to invade Israel” (although of course appearances can be deceptive). The article pointed this out and showed that the purpose of reducing the army’s size was not to weaken it but to strengthen both it and the country as a whole. If the aim is to strengthen an army it is not illogical to reduce the size if that will make it leaner and fitter.

Identifying the northern invader in Ezekiel 38 does not depend on the ancient names of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal being preserved into present-

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\* Quotations are based on the Russian translation referred to above.