

The excavated temple was seventy feet wide and eighty-six feet long. It was multi-story and had two towers at the entrance in which were steps leading up to the upper stories. The walls were seventeen feet thick at the base, and Stager thinks that higher up there would have been two walls with rooms between the inner and outer walls. Such rooms were a feature of Solomon's temple (1 Kgs. 6:5-10). The nature of the building was such that it could aptly be described as "the [strong]hold of the house of El-berith" (Judg. 9:46).

In front of the temple there stood an altar of earth and stone, and a large standing stone, with two more, one each side of the temple entrance. Judges 9:6 records that the men of Shechem made Abimelech king "by the oak of the pillar that was in Shechem", and this pillar may well have been the large pillar in front of the temple. Shechem has particular associations with oak trees; one is referred to in Genesis 12:6 (RV) in relation to Abraham's first entry into the Land, and Genesis 35:4 refers to "the oak which was by Shechem" in Jacob's time.

Joshua 24 recounts a gathering of the people of Israel at Shechem following the conquest of the Land, and the covenant they made to obey God, following which, "Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a

great stone, and set it up there under *the* oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD" (v. 26). In those days a stone would be set up as a witness to something, but the practice was later eschewed because such pillars were also associated with idol worship. It seems, given the references to "the oak", that there was one oak involved, and that this same oak was "the oak of the pillar" of Judges 9:6, the pillar perhaps being the stone set up by Joshua.

There is, of course, a great deal of difference between the Shechem of Joshua 24 and the Shechem of Judges 9. In Joshua 24 it is the place where "the sanctuary of the LORD" (presumably the tabernacle) was set up; in Judges 9 it is the centre of Baal worship. We know from Judges 2 that Israel remained faithful to God only while those who had entered the Land with Joshua remained alive; after that they went astray and served the various local Baals (vv. 7,10-13). There was a considerable period of time between Joshua 24 and Judges 9, during which it appears that at the place by the oak where the tabernacle was sited, and the stone of witness set up, a temple to Baal was set up, the temple which has been excavated. The name of the particular Baal worshipped here, Baal-berith, 'Lord of the covenant', may have been given because of the covenant of Joshua 24.

Russian oil

Nigel Bernard

IN LUKE 21 we read the following words of Christ: "And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; when they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand" (vv. 29-31). The fig tree represents Israel, and the other trees represent other nations. One of the remarkable features of the time of the end is the way that not only Israel but also other nations in the Middle East have developed.

One of the key factors which has led to these other "trees" developing at just the right time is the presence of oil in these countries. However, not only did the presence of oil in the Middle East enable nations to develop, it also provided a way of gathering other nations to the area.

Brother John Carter, in 1953, wrote the following:

"The greatly increased dependence of the world on this source of power, and the rapid and recent development of the Middle East as a major source of supply, particularly for Europe, are two facts of great significance in our time. Undoubtedly oil plays a great part in bringing the Middle East into the centre of world affairs and making it the magnet for greedy and ambitious powers".¹

In an earlier article written in 1951 Brother Carter wrote:

"It is possible that oil and the desire for oil will play a major part in the events to come;

1. Carter, J. (1953), "Oil and the Middle East", *The Christadelphian*, Mar., p. 86.

and the way in which oil ensures the continued presence of British and Americans in the Middle East is of the greatest significance".² These words are no less true today. The presence of oil attracts the nations generally, providing one of the means by which they are being gathered prior to Armageddon:

"For, behold, in those days, and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for My people and for My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted My land" (Joel 3:1,2).

In particular, the British and the Americans have been drawn into the Middle East, providing a basis for the link between Tarshish and the young lions on the one hand and the Arabian Sheba and Dedan on the other (Ezek. 38:13).

Saudi Arabia (Dedan) has the largest oil reserves in the world. Recent terrorist attacks against Westerners in this country have contributed, together with other factors, to increasing pressure on oil prices. The aim of the terrorists appears to be to drive out Westerners, but it may be that such events will further draw countries such as Britain and America into the area. However, although attention may be focused on the Middle East with regard to oil, there is another country in particular which is quietly developing as an oil producer. This country is Russia.

Russia has large reserves of oil. Much of this is found in western Siberia. Of this area the writer Tim Appenzeller states: "The real challenge to the Middle East's dominance comes from . . . western Siberia. Once the bulwark of the Soviet oil industry, Siberia declined in the early 1990s as its wells and infrastructure fell into disrepair. Many analysts believed Siberia's oil was played out. Now it's making a comeback".³ The reason why this area is making a comeback is because the private companies that bought the fields at

comparatively cheap prices following the fall of the Soviet Union have been using state-of-the-art methods to find and extract the oil.

The Russian oil industry, however, is hampered by the difficulty of getting oil to its borders to be exported. This is not helped by conflict between the oil companies and the Russian Government over who owns the pipelines. It is also the case that these companies are unable to take full advantage of the gas fields which they own because of the influence of Gazprom, the Russian state-run gas monopoly. As the *Economist* recently commented: ". . . as Gazprom keeps its monopoly of gas exports and pipelines, that discourages Russia's oil firms, some of which own huge gas fields, from developing them. Siberia is ablaze with the surplus gas from oil wells just burning off into the sky, adding to Russia's pollution problem".⁴

Despite these problems it is expected that Russia's oil production will continue to rise. As one analyst has written: "Russia in particular is expected to exert an influence over the supply of world oil in the near future. Its production is rising rapidly, by a consistent 10 per cent annually".⁵ Such is the potential in the Russian oil industry that Appenzeller says that "Russia's output is drawing uneasy glances from OPEC".⁶

As we watch the various trees of the nations developing, the Russian tree is of particular importance because of its future role in the invasion of Israel. The continued exploitation of its oil fields may well prove to be a significant factor in its development into a power that will come to dominate, for a short time, the Middle East.

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2. Carter, J. (1951), "Oil and the Middle East", *The Christadelphian*, Jan., p. 26.
 3. Appenzeller, T. (2004), "The end of cheap oil", *National Geographic*, Jun., p. 97.
 4. "Taming the monster", *Economist*, 2004, 12 Jun., p. 73.
 5. "New producers gain a foothold", *PM Communications Reporting*, 2004, 9 May, p. 4.
 6. *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

Israel – latest statistics

Figures released by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics in April 2004 reveal that the population of Israel is now 6,780,000, of which 5,180,000 are Jews—eighty-one per cent. Of these, 1.2 million either were born in the former Soviet Union or their fathers were. Sixty-six per cent of the country's Jews were born in Israel, as opposed to thirty-five per cent in 1948 when the state was founded. During the previous year 144,000 babies were born and 21,000 people immigrated into the country, over half from the countries of the former Soviet Union. The largest city is Jerusalem, with 692,000 residents, though it must be remembered that suburbs of Tel Aviv are outside its city boundaries.