

## **ARMCHAIR CHATS WITH THE EDITOR**

### **By David Morsey**

The following article was written in August of 1982 shortly after the invasion of Lebanon by Israel. The author had been 20 miles from the border when this event happened and decided to share some perspectives with the readers. At that time, there were a great many self-styled "prophets" wringing their hands and making their doomsday predictions and generally bringing anxiety to the Christian public. The author saw it as a temporary skirmish with no cause for special alarm and spoke of the matter in this light.

Whereas the situation varies considerably today and obviously has far more peril in it, what was said in 1982 in a general statement about the prophetic issues involved, was relevant enough to today's crisis to reproduce the article verbatim in the current Messenger. The conditions in the Middle East today, in terms of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, appear to be, on the surface, the fulfillment of certain aspects of the prophetic Scriptures relative to the Middle East. Certainly there is a buildup of factors which ultimately will yield what is described in prophecy as the culmination of God's purposes for the earth. But the present situation has very little in it of the so-called "last days." A major factor is that the alignments of nations do not yet fit the picture. None of the conditions of Ezekiel 38, for instance, apply here. Ezekiel 38 is probably a picture of Armageddon (comp. Revelation 20:1-7). Of course, it is hard to say what might happen. Things change very rapidly. But the article in the August Messenger of 1982 seemed relevant and we decided to reprint it here without editing anything. We did a number of articles on the subject of the Middle East back in the 80's and may try to reproduce them.

*We hear so much about the Middle East these days, both in the news and from the pulpit, that it's hard to put it all together. And there are so many conflicting reports and views that it's hard to know what, or who to believe. Can we discuss it?*

Certainly. But the subject is pretty large. Where do you want to start?

*Well, first of all, just how much should a Christian know, and how much can one know for sure?*

Obviously these are two different questions. As to how much a Christian should know, it depends upon one's purpose for knowing.

If one is in a position of leadership, it is quite important to know as much as one can. If it is just a matter of interest in keeping up with world affairs, then it depends on time and priorities. It is difficult enough for the State Department to keep up with events. The average citizen is pretty well swamped. Properly speaking, one should read from a number of different sources to get various sides of the question. But this takes time and could interfere with more important concerns.

*But aren't Christians supposed to be informed so they can watch for the coming of Christ?*

Well, in the first place, the coming of Christ for His Bride, the Church, is not particularly tied to world events. And, in the second place the interpretation of prophetic passages in terms of world affairs has been equally unreliable in every age since the apostles. If you don't believe that, try reading the books that came out around World War II. (Remember Hitler and Mussolini—both candidates for the anti-Christ.) The truth of the matter is that the coming of Christ for His Church does not depend on the progress of world events. It can be at any time.

*But doesn't Jesus tell His disciples, "When you see these things begin to come to pass, look up, for your redemption draweth nigh?"* That's in Matthew 24 and refers, primarily, to the events surrounding the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. In the first place, if we bring the Church as such—the "bride", or "body" of Christ—into it, we confuse the issue. In the second place, the events Christ describes have been taking place for centuries. In fact, there have been many anti-Christ's or false Messiahs. Jesus was not referring to false "Jesuses" but false Messiahs. There have been many false Messiahs throughout history, but not many serious false "Jesuses." Some of the false Messiahs were authentic enough to deceive many Jewish scholars, even. Those who have been imposters of Jesus have been only fringe types. Paul says, in II Thessalonians, that the real anti-Christ will be revealed only after the Holy Spirit ("hindering Spirit") is taken out of the way. Of course, if the Holy Spirit leaves, so also will His Church.

Now, the things I have said are certainly not the final word on the subject, but I am illustrating the point that following the news is no guarantee that we are in a position to put together the many diverse pieces of the "prophecy puzzle." In the matter of Christ's coming for the Church, He can come at any time, no matter what the condition of world affairs. In the matter of restoration of Israel, there is a certain sequence of events to be observed. Now, whether or not these events will take place prior to the rapture of the Church is a matter of speculation. The fact of the matter is that the errors in speculation, made by self-styled "prophets" over the centuries do not give much confidence in predictions. The "track record" is not reassuring.

*Then, are you saying that Christians should not study prophecy, or keep up with world affairs?*

By no means. They can study all they wish. I am only saying that the uncertainties in both the matter of prophecy and the observing of world affairs make them subjects which should be handled with extreme caution. Because of their complexity, they cannot possibly be "required reading" for all believers. Furthermore, any pronouncements about either subject should be made and received with equal caution. No matter how "spiritual" one's claims, or how "glorious" the alleged revelations, all such revelations and insights in the passing parade of prophets and pundits have been made with equal fervor, and equal fallibility (not to say fallacy).

*Well then, are you saying that people shouldn't make predictions?*

Not at all. I am only saying that those who make predictions ought to use more reserve and humility. And above all should not deceive the people with claims to special "revelations." In many cases, the impression is left that to doubt the

particular “prophet,” is to doubt the possibility of revelations, or the power of the Holy Spirit. Anyone is entitled to speculations, of course, but it must always be carefully noted that such speculations, and interpretations of Scripture as well, are subject to human fallibility.

The tendency today to seize upon current conflicts and tie them into prophecy is risky. It not only paves the way for disillusionment, but also tends to take the focus away from the more vital issues of the life with Christ, and involves people in the game-playing of putting the puzzle together. It further tends to minimize the need for facing life’s problems by the assumption that they will soon all be solved by the return of Christ.

None of the above comments is intended to take away from the glory of Christ’s coming, but to inject a note of caution in the approach to the extremely complex issues of the nature of His coming. Far too much presumption and misconception (to say nothing of absolutism and arrogance) have accompanied the sacred responsibility of being a spokesman for God, and an interpreter of His Word.

*So you are saying if I understand you, that the study of prophecy is all right but that it is not a priority, and should be approached with caution.*

You have understood me correctly. That’s what I’ve been saying. If the message is important, God makes it clear. The fact that there is so much controversy in the Church over the issues of prophecy shows that God has not made it clear, and hence does not see it as a priority item. In fact, He specifically told the apostles in response to their direct question,—“*It is not for you to know the times or seasons, which the Father has in His own hand*” (Acts 1:7).

The study of prophecy is legitimate, where it contributes, not to the satisfying of curiosity, but the strengthening of faith. When so handled, it will be a source of blessing—not anxiety and controversy. Any message from a shepherd of God, which does not lead to blessing and peace is suspect.

*But what about the matter of keeping up with world affairs?*

That’s quite a different matter. We have shown that, given the complexity and uncertainty of prophetic matters, the study of prophecy is not a priority. By the same token, keeping up with world affairs is not a priority item. There is certainly nothing wrong with study, to be confident you are getting the truth. If there is so much controversy in matters that are supposed to come from God, how much more uncertainty is there in matters of human origin? What source can you trust? Whom can you believe?

*Well then, we might as well never read a newspaper, or magazine.*

That’s a bit extreme. I’m not saying you can’t ever know the truth, but rather that you can’t ever be that sure that you are getting all the facts.

*But there are quite a few periodicals that claim to have access to the inside story, and are giving unbiased accounts.*

In the first place, there is, of course, a great difference between the claim and the reality. In the second place, no one is really all that unbiased, especially in secular issues, where one is not relying on the Spirit of God for help. It is interesting how much discrepancy there is in the many "inside stories," of the same event, or issue.

*Then it's futile to try to keep up with the news, isn't it?*

Not really, but it can't be done by a glance at the daily newspaper. You have to examine a number of different sources, and even then you have to be reserved in your judgment. There seems to be an inverse ratio between the degree of knowledge one has, and the certainty of their views. In other words, the less one knows, the more certain one is that he is right, and the more eager to express his views. In general, one can know a certain amount about what's going on in the world, and, in the multitude of voices, sift out some elements of truth, but, as in the issues of prophecy, it's a matter of being cautious and reserved.

*So you don't really encourage too much focus on prophecy and world affairs.*

That is true, but only because I don't like to see the sheep burdened and anxious, unnecessarily. I have been a student of the Bible for about 40 years, having taken my first course in New Testament Greek in 1942. About the same time I became involved in the study of world affairs. I was president of the International Relations Club in college, and also wrote a column on international relations for the newspaper. I have taught both Greek and the social sciences, including World History and International Relations for many years and at different levels, including graduate school. I am currently a member of the American Political Science Association, so I have been deeply involved in the pursuit of knowledge in both the Bible and world affairs for four decades. So, you see, I'm not speaking out of ignorance, nor with a bias against education and knowledge. I am, in fact, currently offering courses in the Social Sciences as well as in Greek and Theology at our Harvester Training Institute.

It is my very familiarity with the subjects we are talking about that leads me to the conclusions I have shared with you. Remember, there is nothing wrong with pursuing prophecy and world affairs, but only with being too much absorbed by them, and putting too much dependence on the reliability of human efforts to find the truth. Once you get outside the plain teachings of the simple truths of the Bible, you are in a vast and turbulent sea of human misconceptions, misinformation and misleading. So watch your step, and ask the Lord to help you know and understand what He wants you to know and understand.

*Maybe now my question about the Middle East is not all that important.*

On the contrary, it is very important. If you don't get help from a shepherd, where will you get it? There is certainly a natural and legitimate desire to know what is going on. My major points were that it is difficult to find reliable sources, and the task of finding truth can be formidable.

*But many claim that they don't need to study much because the Lord gives them the truth.*

The fascinating thing about such claims is that there are so many different points of view, all supposedly from the Lord. It would seem we have a “multi-headed” Christ.

*I see the point., But now, without being disrespectful, on what basis can I trust what you say?*

An excellent question, and one I am glad to answer. You can't trust what any human being would say, except as that one gives evidence of being adequately equipped (“thoroughly furnished,” as Paul said), and as one can sense something of the Spirit of Christ coming through. I think that certainly the same criteria must be applied to my teaching as to any other: If you can't sense the Spirit coming through my ministry, then you shouldn't be listening to it.

*Does that mean that everything you say is from the Lord?*

By no means. That would be the height of presumption. The things that I say, relative to world affairs, ought to make sense, but are certainly not inspired. I have done my best to be equipped and informed to handle the matters of the contemporary world, but where I am dealing with matters outside the Bible, the human element must always be considered. The best we can hope for is reliability.

As far as the matters of the Bible are concerned, we have a different situation. Once again, I have done my best to be equipped and informed, but there is also the help of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, nothing that I say is of consequence. With the Holy Spirit, and my own diligence, what I say ought to be reliable, though not inspired in the sense the Bible is inspired. If the Spirit is with me, it should come through in the ministry. The sheep should hear the voice of the Shepherd coming through the fallible human vessel.

*Alright, that makes sense. But now, having settled the matters of communication, what about the Middle East?*

I will be glad to share my views with you as an informed observer, if you will understand that I am not claiming to be the final word in the matter. But, I see that my time is running out, so we will just be able to get a good start, and perhaps continue the discussion next time.

First of all, what I have to say is the result of reading from a number of sources, travels in the Middle East, and a rather extensive study of the Bible. Now, what do you want to know?

*Well, first of all, is there anything we can know for sure about the situation?*

Yes, there are some things that are obvious. These are the things we should start with. I will list these things for you, and then we can take them up in detail later.

1. The Arabs and the Israeli both claim the right to Palestine—both on right of inheritance.
2. The Arabs; no matter what they say, cannot recognize the right of Israel to

exist, without denying the basic teaching of the Koran.

3. The interest of the Palestinians in the “West bank” is for no other reason than to keep a toe hold on the land, and therefore maintain the claim that Israel is an intruder. The area under consideration is a barren region that the Palestinians never developed as long as they had it.
4. Ultimately God has guaranteed the land to Israel.
5. Currently, while Israel is back in the land, it does not recognize God as responsible for this. Aside from the observance of religious traditions, as a cultural matter, the Israeli pay very little attention to God.
6. Since they do not recognize God’s assistance, they may be in the land prematurely. There could be a considerable sequence of events, before the conditions exist that the prophets describe as recovery. The descriptions by the prophets of the restoration of the land to Israel, all include a spiritual recovery in connection with the recovery of the land. From my own observations in Jerusalem, spiritual recovery would seem to be a long way off. There were no signs whatsoever.
7. Probably Israel will retain the land since there is not enough strength in any single Arab state to challenge her right to exist, and not enough unity in the Arab world to mount a joint effort.
8. The POL (Palestine Liberation Organization) has no diplomatic standing whatsoever. It is not a state and does not officially represent the Palestinians. It is an independent organization operating on principles of force, to achieve a power base with which to drive out Israel, and assume control of the Palestinian state that would be set up.
9. For all the cries of “foul,” Israel did the Middle East (if not the world) a favor by pulling the stinger from the PLO.
10. The reason I call this a fact we know for sure, is that none of the Arab countries want anything to do with them. And, of course, none went to their aid , except Syria, who wanted to protect its own interests. That fact is certain, because Syria now wants nothing to do with the PLO.
11. The statistics used by the media to portray the massive slaughterings by Israel, were furnished by the PLO. Later figures were much modified. Of course, the PLO had set up its defenses among residents of Beirut, and thus were hiding behind women and children.
12. Israel does not want to occupy Lebanon, or govern it. She only wants to guarantee her own security—an understandable point, since she is surrounded by 750,000,000 Moslems who want to “push her into the sea.” Remember—NO ARAB STATE ACCEPTS THE RIGHT OF ISRAEL TO PALESTINE. (If they did, they would be at odds with the Koran.)

*I would like a lot more discussion of those points. Maybe we can pursue them next time. But can you give me a quick word about where we are in terms of Bible prophecy?*

Well, I would certainly be a fool to try to handle the subject “with a quick word.” I’ll have to defer the matter until next time. I will say this much, however. The only certainty we have in connecting present events to Biblical prophecy is that Israel is “back in the land.” As to the alignment of nations, and the effort to identify the Western world with prophetic statements, it must all be speculation at this point. That is, of course, anyone’s right, but one may be risking one’s credibility at best, and misleading the sheep at worst.

Where we can take the prophetic statements literally, with reference to specific nations, we have much to consider with a measure of safety. And this we will do in subsequent discussions. Much confusion and error exist today, in the effort to identify the Western world symbolically with Middle Eastern prophecies. It is strange that the prophets should be so clear in predicting, by name or by very specific identifications, nations of the Middle East, and yet be so obscure and secretive about the Western world. The thing that has given credibility to the Bible is the precision of its predictions. Anyone can make predictions that are too obscure to pin down. But this we must take up later.

*But what about now? What shall we do?*

First, don’t be alarmed by doomsayers. Their track record is not that good.

Second, don’t be misled by “inside stories,” or “revelations” about the future. There are too many claimants to both, with too many diverse views.

Third, don’t feel guilty about not “keeping up” with world affairs. Even the State Department can’t get its stories straight.

Fourth, trust in the overall power and purpose of God. In the end, it will all work out according to His infinite wisdom and grace, no matter how it may now appear to finite human minds. It will also go according to His plan whether you keep up with it, or not.

Fifth, focus on Christ. Whatever happens, here or hereafter, Christ is our Light and Life. All else is temporary, transient, and illusory. Earthly things are never what they seem. Only Christ and His kingdom in the Spirit is real and eternal.

We’ll talk again, soon. Meanwhile, if you have any questions, send them in.

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