

“Prophetic Dangers”

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Ezekiel 38:1-9; 18-23

Have you ever gone down an Internet rabbit hole? You know, when you start looking for one thing, and then, like Alice chasing the rabbit, you end up somewhere deep and weird, which you didn't expect? That happened to me this week. I had heard reports that some Christians were relying on Biblical prophecies to explain the war with Iran. So, I started to take a look. And then, one thing led to another.

It began when I read about some disturbing emails from members of the American military. On the weekend the bombing of Iran commenced, soldiers from more than 30 different bases had sent emails to a group called the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

MRFF slide

The emails were complaints that their commanding officers had been celebrating the religious significance of the bombings in Iran. Specifically, commanders had told their troops that the bombing of Iran was necessary to fulfill some of the prophecies contained in the Bible. One commander told his troops , and I quote, that President Trump was

Quote about Trump slide

“anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth,”

Over 200 emails were received complaining that their commanders saw the attack on Iran as being part of God's plan for bringing about the end times, as described in the Book of Revelation and other prophecies.

I found this news very troubling. But I was also confused. I am familiar with the book of Revelation. It is the last book in the Bible, a Christian prophecy of the end times. It does describe a massive war between God's angels and the forces of evil at the end of the world. The Kingdom of Babylon will be attacked and defeated. Babylon was in what is now Iraq, not Iran. What's more, most biblical scholars believe the word Babylon really refers to the Roman Empire, which was persecuting Christians at the time Revelation was written. So, how could

bombing Iran be considered part of the end times? And why would Christians want to hasten the arrival of the end of the world?

So, I started googling Persia and Biblical prophecy. It didn't take long to find sermons and podcasts that made the connection. These perspectives did not come from biblical scholars. They were provided by American evangelical ministers, some of whom have church services on YouTube that are seen by people all over the world. Other people discussed the connection between Iran and prophecy on their podcasts, and in their books. Christian prophecy is a very popular topic among right wing Christians. So, I settled in and listened to how they thought the bombing of Iran was related to Biblical prophecy.

They pointed to the text we heard today, from the prophecy of Ezekiel. It appears in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was written during the 70-year exile of the Hebrew people in Babylon, after the temple was destroyed almost 600 years before Christ was born. Ezekiel has a number of vivid visions.

Ezekiel in the Valley of dry bones

The most famous is the one where he sees a valley of bones, the people of Israel who have died in war (Ezekiel 37). God commands the bones to come back to life. They grow muscles and tendons, and finally, the breath of God is re-introduced into them so they live again.

This is God's striking vision of how the people of Israel will come alive again.

They will return to Israel to rebuild the temple and live in peace once more. God will forgive them for worshipping foreign gods, and they will live in right relation with God forever more. Jerusalem and the entire country will enter a time of peace, when there will be no need for walls or battlements. Peace with reign.

But not forever. Ezekiel's prophecy foresees a time when a massive army will gather to attack Israel. This army will be led by the nation of Magog, a country that lies in the North. It will be joined by other nations, one from Africa known as Cush, and also the Persians. God will make them band together to destroy peaceful Israel. This attacking force will be defeated by God through an earthquake, turning on each other and fiery stones from heaven (Ezekiel 38:19-23)

According to the podcasters and prophecy pundits, we are living in the time before this great war begins. Part of the prophecy has already come true - the scattered tribes of the Jewish people have returned to the land of Israel. This began in 1948, when the state of Israel was created. However, the next part of the prophecy lies in the future. Israel will have to experience a period of peace before this climatic battle can begin. As we all know, Israel has not experienced much peace since its formation. It has been at war with its neighbours many times since 1948, sometimes by choice, but not always. So, these pastors posit that the war predicted in Ezekiel must lie in the future.

But, what would it take to create a peaceful time in Israel? One answer they offer is that Israel would need to take back all the land it has lost - which would include the Gaza Strip and the

West Bank. American evangelical groups have funded Israeli efforts to settle the West Bank with Jewish farmers.

Huckabee

America's current ambassador to Israel, former minister Mike Huckabee, has stated that according to the Bible, Israel has the right to this Palestinian territory. Indeed, Israel has the right to most of the land in the Middle East.

In addition to a larger territory, there is another way to create a peaceful time for Israel, according to these evangelicals. To live in peace, Israel must defeat its enemies. That provides a justification for attacking Iran. They must lose their ability to threaten Israel directly, or through its proxies, Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. If Israel's enemies were defeated, a time of peace could occur that would set the stage for the war described in today's scripture reading. That would set the stage for the endgames to begin.

This way of reading scripture and current events raises many questions. The first is: why would American Christians welcome a future war in the Middle East as described in Ezekiel?

To the prophecy promoters, there is a simple answer: the Rapture. This refers to the belief that when the endtimes begin, truly devout Christians will be taken off the Earth. They will literally fly up into heaven, where they will be blessed and safe. This idea of the rapture comes from the first of the Apostle Paul's letters, to the Thessalonians. After the good Christians are gone, only Christian sinners, Jews and people of other faiths will be left behind. They will be the ones who live through the endgame wars and disasters.

These kinds of speculations are very popular. One of the podcasts I watched on Youtube had received 700,000 views in just eight days.

Operation Epic Fury slide

The ministers I watched had almost half a million views for their sermons, with over 1 million subscribers. These are not fringe views.

Evangelical ministers have been promoting this way of reading the Bible and current events for many decades now, and these ideas go back to the 19th century.

But do they affect American foreign policy? Yes, they do. Evangelical Christians voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump each time he reached the White House. The current administration has many officials who attend Bible studies weekly with Ralph Drollinger, an evangelical minister who promotes the idea that the entire Bible is literally true and inerrant, that is, it cannot contain mistakes.

Ralph Drollinger

He meets each week with Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of War, and other cabinet members to teach them how to use the Bible to shape foreign policy. Drollinger is part of a massive worldwide ministry that aims its message at all levels of government.

In Washington, he has quoted a line from Genesis 12:3 - that God will bless any nation that blesses Israel, and it will curse any nation that curses Israel. America must be on the side of the state of Israel or else God will punish America.

“Since God is not through with Israel, and since God has a huge future plan for Israel, it stands to reason—based on the healthy fear all should possess relative to Genesis 12:3—that all individuals and all nations should be sure to stand on the side of Israel. Amen!”

Drollinger has taught the Cabinet and congress members that the Muslim religion is inspired by the devil. His message is being taken seriously by Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of War, and by many commanders in the armed forces. Hegseth’s statements that Iran should be obliterated by airpower is consistent with the idea that Iran is inherently evil, and must be destroyed so that Israel can play its part in ushering in the endtimes. All people who hope for regime change in Iran should understand that the Christian Americans behind this war do not care about Iran’s freedom. They are interested in bringing about the endtimes, when only Christians will be lifted up. Jews should also understand that this perspective also believes that only Jews who convert to Christianity will be saved.

There are many, many problems with this approach to Christianity and politics. It makes victims of the war in Iran seem expendable, just collateral damage in God’s great plan. It encourages a sense of superiority, where only some Christians really understand what is going in world events. It suggests that human beings can force God’s hand, to spark the endtimes, to accelerate their arrival. It encourages Christians to watch the carnage of the world’s wars with excitement. It suggests that the real Jesus is a warrior.

But this is a distortion of the message of the Bible and of what Christ taught. The Bible teaches that God is love. That God desires mercy more than sacrifice. This is at the heart of everything Jesus said and did.

We are currently in Lent, that time which begins with Jesus’ time in the desert. In that story, Jesus is tempted by Satan three times.

Satan and Jesus

In one of those temptations, Jesus is taken to the top of a mountain, and offered the chance to become the ruler of any kingdom he wants - even all of them.

He could be a king with wealth, power, armies, the greatest king of all. But Jesus says no. He rejects that kind of power - and we should, too.

Christians are not expected to bring about the endtimes by starting wars. Instead, we are called to work with God to create good times for all. We are expected to love not just our friends and

families, but strangers and even our enemies. We are to weep for the families whose little girls were killed by that American missile in Iran. We are to feel sick when we see missiles flying back and forth from both sides, killing thousands of people. We are called to be peacemakers, not cheer leaders for war.

How the world ends is up to God. I hope it is a long time off. I hope it doesn't look like anything what is described in these ancient prophecies. But that's not up to me, or any of us. While we are alive, I believe that we are called to share the good news of compassion, love and forgiveness, and to put it into action. Jesus died for everyone, not just the people who believed in him. God's love is for everyone, and has been expressed in religions all over the world. May we find the good in each other, and act as the body of Christ in helping the world live up to its potential as a place of justice and peace for everyone. Amen.