

NORTHERN STORM RISING

RON RHODES



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover by Dugan Design Group, Bloomington, Minnesota

NORTHERN STORM RISING

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rhodes, Ron.

Northern storm rising / Ron Rhodes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7369-2174-9

ISBN-10: 0-7369-2174-5

1. Bible. O.T. Ezekiel XXXVIII-XXXIX—Prophecies—Israel. 2. Bible. O.T. Ezekiel XXXVIII-XXXIX—Prophecies—Islamic countries. 3. Bible. O.T. Ezekiel XXXVIII-XXXIX—Prophecies—Russia (Federation) I. Title.

BS1545.6.P26R46 2008

236'.9—dc22

2007028424

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Printed in the United States of America

08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 / LB-NI / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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The Threat from the North

The sports arena at Southern Methodist University in Dallas erupted into spontaneous applause as Ronald Reagan walked in. I was sitting on a bleacher and had a perfect view of him. He flashed that famous smile of his and walked down the aisle, looking left and right, waving to the enthusiastic crowd, making his way to the podium. After hearing his dynamic speech, I was confident he would be elected president of the United States—and he soon was!

Reagan was a big fan of the biblical prophet Ezekiel. In fact, Ezekiel was Reagan's favorite book of prophecy. Like many other Christians, Reagan believed that the fierce Old Testament prophet foretold that God would one day gather the children of Israel who were scattered among heathen nations back to the promised land. He also believed, based on his reading of Ezekiel 38 and 39, that atheistic Russia—along with various Arab nations of the Middle East—would one day lead an invasion into Israel from the north and that God would intervene and utterly destroy this military coalition. He understood that not everything had fallen precisely into place, but he nevertheless believed the stage was being set for the fulfillment of end-time prophecies. Reagan believed he might even witness the second coming of Jesus Christ in his own lifetime.¹

I have stood at the foot of the gravesites of men like John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon who themselves had encounters with

the leaders of Russia and various Arab nations. Scripture is clear that powerful human leaders come into power for a while and then die, but in the end, our eternal God will fulfill His sovereign purposes in human history. An overwhelming northern military coalition may attack Israel, but God is always watchful—“He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4)—and He will be Israel’s defender.

Perpetual Threats and Insecurity

My family and I could have been blown to smithereens!

I will never forget it. We were vacationing in England in 2005. We spent the first week in London and the second week traveling throughout England’s gorgeous countryside.

During the first week, our primary means of transportation was London’s famous network of underground trains. With its various “tubes,” one could travel just about anywhere of significance in the London area. We could walk out the front door of the Capital Hotel, stroll down to the nearby Knightsbridge station, and go anywhere in London. Perfect! The Underground—supplemented by an occasional ride on London’s double-decker buses—made travel convenient and easy.

One morning during our second week in the English countryside, we toured a beautiful grand old castle. Before long, one of the tour guides walked up to us with a somber look on her face and told us that if we had plans to go into London that day, we should cancel those plans because the city had been locked down by the police. She informed us that a number of bombs had exploded in the Underground and on a double-decker bus.

I grieved for the people who lost their lives that day and for the hundreds who were injured, and I was thankful to God that our family was spared. We had been on those very Underground trains and double-decker buses the entire previous week! We may have passed right by some of the Islamic terrorists preparing to execute their horrific plan.

The following day, I thought of the Londoners who would continue to work in the city and use the Underground. Surely they would feel some insecurity, not knowing for sure whether they would be safe. What a tragic way to have to live.

Sometime later, during my personal time of Bible study, I contemplated how this is true for the entire nation of Israel. Israel is surrounded by Muslim nations intent on seeing the Jewish nation destroyed—pushed into the sea, never to reemerge. Iran’s current president—Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is seeking nuclear weaponry as I write—assures the world that humanity will soon live in a world free of Israel and the United States. Talk about insecurity! No wonder Israel has worked so steadfastly to build up its powerful military.

Whether we are wrestling with individual insecurity or national insecurity, the Bible comforts us that God is in control not only of our individual lives—including the timing and circumstances of our deaths—but also of human history. And through biblical prophecy, God has given us a portrait of what things will look like on this planet during the last days. If biblical prophecy teaches us anything, it is that God is in complete control of human history and its culmination.

As a student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1980s, I was privileged to study under Dr. John F. Walvoord, my primary professor in prophecy courses. This was a fascinating time for me. I know that Dr. Walvoord, in his old age, was truly holding out for the rapture, but the Lord had other plans. Dr. Walvoord is now in the direct presence of the Lord in heaven, and this book is written in his memory.

Those who have followed my career know that my primary writings—more than 40 books—have dealt with Christian apologetics. So why am I writing a book on biblical prophecy? I have several reasons:

- A large percentage of the Bible is prophetic. Explaining the correct meaning of prophetic passages is an important task.

- Incorrect views on biblical prophecy abound, and as an apologist, I write to defend what I believe to be the correct view.*
- Biblical prophecy motivates Christians to live righteously and in purity (see, for example, 1 Timothy 6:14; Titus 2:11-14). Understanding prophecy is beneficial to our spiritual lives.
- Events transpiring on the world scene today may be setting the stage for the specific fulfillment of prophecies uttered thousands of years ago by the Hebrew prophets. I will always continue to warn people against the folly of date-setting (Acts 1:7), but I will also urge people to be thoughtful observers of the times (see Matthew 16:1-3; Luke 21:29-33) who seek to understand how certain current events may relate to the fulfillment of end-time prophecies. For example, the current events in Russia, Iran, and other Muslim nations may be setting the stage for an eventual invasion into Israel by a northern military coalition, as predicted by the prophet Ezekiel 2600 years ago.

Understanding Our Terms

My primary goal in this book will be to discuss Ezekiel's prophecy of an end-times military coalition that will one day invade Israel, but I will also need to mention the rapture, the tribulation, the Antichrist, Armageddon, the second coming, and the millennial kingdom. I have learned never to assume that all my readers know what such Christian terms mean. I will use these terms throughout the rest of this book, so I will briefly define them at the outset. I hope those who are already

* For example, preterism espouses the idea that most if not all Bible prophecy was fulfilled by the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. For an extensive listing of articles that critique this unbiblical position, see "The Problem with Preterism" at my website: www.ronrhodes.org. One preterist makes a bizarre case for the idea that the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39 was fulfilled in the events of Esther 9. Such a view ignores the biblical teaching that the invasion takes place in the "latter years" and "last days" (Ezekiel 38:8,16) by a specific coalition of nations nowhere even remotely found in the book of Esther (see Ezekiel 38:1-6).

familiar with these terms will indulge me. A little review never hurt anyone!

The Rapture

The rapture is that glorious event in which the dead in Christ will be resurrected and living Christians will be instantly translated into their resurrection bodies—and both groups will be caught up to meet Christ in the air and taken back to heaven (John 14:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). This means one generation of Christians will never pass through death's door. They will be alive on earth one moment; the next moment they will be instantly translated into their resurrection bodies and caught up to meet Christ in the air. What a moment that will be!

Christians seem to love to debate end-time issues. Perhaps the hottest debate relates to when the rapture occurs. Four primary views are popular:

- Partial rapturism is the view that only spiritual Christians will be raptured when Christ returns. Carnal Christians will be left behind. Throughout the tribulation period, as more Christians become spiritual, they too will be raptured. Such raptures may continue to occur throughout the tribulation period. (This is not a widely held view today.)
- Pretribulationism is the view that Christ will rapture the entire church before any part of the tribulation begins. This means the church will not go through the judgments prophesied in the book of Revelation (chapters 4–18).
- Posttribulationism is the view that Christ will rapture the church after the tribulation at His second coming. This means the church will go through the time of judgment prophesied in the book of Revelation, but believers will be kept safe through the judgments.

- Midtribulationism is the view that Christ will rapture the church in the middle of the tribulation period. The two witnesses of Revelation 11, who are caught up to heaven, are believed to be representative of the church.

Most Christians today are either “pretribs” or “posttribs.” I believe the pretrib position—the majority evangelical view—is most consistent with the biblical testimony. For one thing, Revelation 3:10 indicates that believers will be kept from the actual hour of testing that is coming on the whole world. Further, no Old Testament passage on the tribulation mentions the church (Deuteronomy 4:29-30; Jeremiah 30:4-11; Daniel 8:24-27; 12:1-2), and no New Testament passage on the tribulation mentions the church (Matthew 13:30,39-42,48-50; 24:15-31; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:4-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-11; Revelation 4-18).

Scripture does say some Christians will be alive during the tribulation period (for example, Revelation 6:9-11). But pretribs believe these people become Christians sometime after the rapture. Perhaps they will become convinced of the truth of Christianity after witnessing millions of Christians supernaturally vanish off the planet at the rapture. Or perhaps they become Christians as a result of the ministry of the 144,000 Jewish Christians introduced in Revelation 7 (who themselves apparently come to faith in Christ after the rapture). Many may also become Christians as a result of the miraculous ministry of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, prophets who apparently have the same powers as Moses and Elijah.

In any event, Scripture assures us that the church is not appointed to wrath (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:9). This means the church cannot go through the “great day of their wrath” in the tribulation period (Revelation 6:17).

Throughout Scripture, God protects His people before judgment falls (see 2 Peter 2:5-9). Enoch was transferred to heaven before the judgment of the flood. Noah and his family were in the ark before the judgment of the flood. Lot was taken out of Sodom before judgment

was poured out on Sodom and Gomorrah. The firstborn among the Hebrews in Egypt were sheltered by the blood of the Paschal Lamb before judgment fell. The spies were safely out of Jericho and Rahab was secured before judgment fell on Jericho. So too will the church be safely raptured before judgment falls in the tribulation period.

The Tribulation

Scripture reveals that the tribulation will be a definite time of great travail at the end of the age (Matthew 24:29-35). It will be of such severity that no period in history, past or future, will equal it (Matthew 24:21). It is called the time of Jacob's trouble, for it is a judgment on Messiah-rejecting Israel (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 12:1-4). The nations will also be judged for their sin and rejection of Christ (Isaiah 26:21; Revelation 6:15-17). The period will last seven years (Daniel 9:24,27).

Scripture is graphically clear that this period will be characterized by wrath (Zephaniah 1:15,18), judgment (Revelation 14:7), indignation (Isaiah 26:20-21), trial (Revelation 3:10), trouble (Jeremiah 30:7), destruction (Joel 1:15), darkness (Amos 5:18), desolation (Daniel 9:27), overturning (Isaiah 24:1-4), and punishment (Isaiah 24:20-21). The term *tribulation* is therefore quite appropriate. No passage in Scripture alleviates the degree of severity of this time to come.

The tribulation is the focus of Revelation 4–18, where we read about the seal judgments, the trumpet judgments, and the bowl judgments that will be poured out on humankind in steadily increasing intensity. The suffering will be immense; the death toll immeasurable.

The Antichrist

The apostle Paul warned of a “man of lawlessness,” the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3,8-9). This individual will perform counterfeit signs and wonders and deceive many people during the future tribulation period (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). The apostle John describes this anti-God individual in the book of Revelation as “the beast”

(Revelation 13:1-10). This demon-inspired individual will rise to political prominence in the tribulation period, seek to dominate the world, attempt to destroy the Jews, persecute all true believers, set himself up as God in a rebuilt Jewish temple, and set up his own kingdom (Revelation 13). He will speak arrogant and boastful words, glorifying himself (2 Thessalonians 2:4). However, he is destined for the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20).

Armageddon

Human suffering will steadily escalate during the tribulation period. First, the seal judgments will bring bloodshed, famine, death, economic upheaval, a great earthquake, and cosmic disturbances (Revelation 6). Then come the trumpet judgments, involving hail and fire mixed with blood, the sea turning to blood, water turning bitter, further cosmic disturbances, affliction by demonic scorpions, and the death of a third of humankind (Revelation 8:6–9:21). Then come the bowl judgments, involving horribly painful sores on human beings, more bodies of water turning to blood, the death of all sea creatures, people being scorched by the sun, total darkness engulfing the land, a devastating earthquake, and much more (Revelation 16). Worse comes to worst, however, when these already traumatized human beings find themselves engaged in a catastrophic series of battles called Armageddon.

The word *Armageddon* literally means “Mount of Megiddo” and refers to a location about 60 miles north of Jerusalem. This is the location of Barak’s battle with the Canaanites (Judges 4) and Gideon’s battle with the Midianites (Judges 7). This will be the site for the final horrific battles of humankind just prior to the second coming (Revelation 16:16).

Napoleon once commented that this site is perhaps the greatest battlefield he had ever witnessed. Of course, the battles Napoleon fought will dim in comparison to Armageddon. So horrible will Armageddon be that virtually no one would survive if Christ didn’t return (Matthew 24:22).

The Second Coming

At the second coming, Jesus Christ—the King of kings and Lord of lords—will return to earth in glory at the end of the present age and set up His kingdom. The very same Jesus who ascended into heaven will come again at the second coming (Acts 1:9-11).

The second coming will involve a visible, physical, bodily return of the glorified Jesus. One key Greek word used in the New Testament to describe the second coming of Christ is *apokalupsis*. This word carries the basic meaning of “revelation,” “visible disclosure,” “unveiling,” and “removing the cover from something that is hidden.” The word is used of Christ’s second coming in 1 Peter 4:13: “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”

Another New Testament Greek word used of Christ’s second coming is *epiphaneia*, which carries the basic meaning of “to appear” or “to shine forth.” In Titus 2:13 Paul speaks of “looking for the blessed hope and the *appearing* of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” In 1 Timothy 6:14 Paul urges Timothy to “keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the *appearing* of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The second coming will be a universal experience in the sense that every eye will witness the event. Revelation 1:7 (NIV) says, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.” Moreover, the second coming will bring magnificent signs in the heavens (Matthew 24:29-30). Christ will come as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and many crowns will be on His head—crowns that represent absolute sovereignty. His eyes will be like blazing fire (Revelation 19:11-16).

The Millennial Kingdom

Following Jesus’ second coming, He will personally set up His kingdom on earth. This is known as the millennial kingdom. This

is another one of those doctrines that Christians seemingly love to debate, and there are three theological views.

Premillennialism teaches that following the second coming, Christ will institute a kingdom of perfect peace and righteousness on earth that will last for 1000 years. After this reign of true peace, the eternal state begins (Revelation 20:1-7; see also Isaiah 65:17-25; Ezekiel 37:21-28; Zechariah 8:1-17). I subscribe to this view because it recognizes that just as the Old Testament messianic prophecies were literally fulfilled in the first coming of Christ, so the prophecies of Christ's second coming and millennial kingdom will be literally fulfilled.

Amillennialism, a spiritualized view, teaches that when Christ comes, eternity will begin with no prior literal 1000-year (millennial) reign on earth. Amillennialists generally interpret the 1000-year reign of Christ metaphorically as Christ's present (spiritual) rule from heaven.

The postmillennial view, another spiritualized view, teaches that through the church's progressive influence, the world will be "Christianized" before Christ returns. Immediately following this return, eternity will begin (without a thousand-year kingdom). Of course, a practical problem for postmillennialism is that the world seems to be getting worse instead of increasingly Christian.

A literal and plain reading of Scripture leads effortlessly to premillennialism. Here is a basic rule of thumb for interpreting the Bible: When the plain sense of Scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense. I see no reason to spiritualize Bible prophecies about the millennium. The Bible plainly teaches a literal 1000-year kingdom over which Christ will rule on the earth (Revelation 20:4,6).

Beware the Unimaginable

Do you remember what you were doing on September 11, 2001? I suspect you do. I was in Southern California with my wife when our phone rang not long after seven a.m. That wasn't a good sign because people rarely call us that early. I picked up the phone, and a friend asked, "Have you turned on your television this morning?"

“No, what’s going on?” I replied.

She told me what happened, and I immediately turned on the television and watched in horror an event that ended more than 3000 lives. I later pondered the terrible grief of the spouses, the children, the relatives, and the friends of the people who died as the Twin Towers collapsed. I have been in those buildings in New York City. What a horror it must have been. The unimaginable happened.

The unimaginable can happen again—not only to the United States but also to other nations, like Israel. The next time, however, the casualties could easily exceed 3000.

The prophet Ezekiel reveals in chapters 38 and 39 that an unimaginably huge military coalition from the north will one day launch an invasion into Israel. My purpose in this book is to explore the details of Ezekiel’s prophecy. So strap on your seat belt and get ready for an exciting journey through prophetic Scripture. Let’s explore together what God’s Word tells us about this massive end-time invasion and God’s mighty deliverance.