The Challenge of Arabia

(The Spiritual Background to the Gulf War)

Introduction

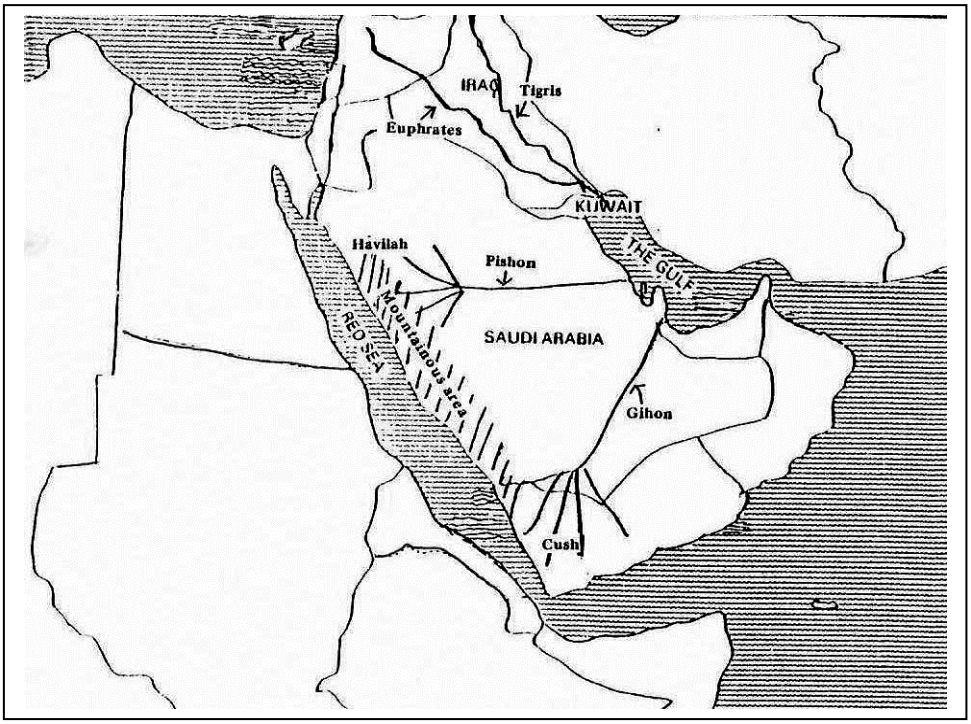
A million armed men are fighting in the Gulf War. The world looks on, fascinated by the incredible technology, fearful at the implications of the damage to the ecological systems in the Gulf and grieved at the loss of life to innocent civilians. Christians wonder at the spiritual implications of the war. How does it relate to end-time prophecies? Are we embarking on a medieval crusade against Islam? Is the war a just war or is it being fought for economic reasons? What about the Palestinians? This paper tries to address the spiritual background to the Gulf War, especially as it relates to the Arabian Peninsula. I will try to explain what has happened spiritually in the past, what is happening today and what should be the response of Christians in the future.

The Origins of War in the Gulf – The Garden in Eden

Spiritually speaking, war did not start on 16th January '91. Spiritual war in the Gulf began in the Garden of Eden. The Arabian Peninsula has not always been devoid of vegetation. Five thousand years ago it was covered with lush vegetation – grasslands. Genesis 2 says,

"The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden.... Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; from there it divided and became four heads (rivers).The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; pearls and onyx stone are there. And the name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates."

Where is the Garden of Eden? Probably at the bottom of the Gulf! The original meaning of Eden is a large flat place – a plain. There was a river flowing through it which had four tributaries – two are easily recognised – the Tigris and Euphrates. What of the other two?



The Arabian Peninsula slopes eastward towards the Gulf, so all drainage is towards the Gulf. The mountainous areas are in the West. This is still the area of rainfall. Several thousand years ago rainfall would have been far greater. Landstat photographs taken by satellite clearly show that

there were two river systems flowing west to east across the Arabian Peninsula – one flowing into the Gulf about where Dhahran is today and the other flowing in south east of Qatar. These river systems are not easily discernable especially not at ground level because they are covered by the Dahna Sands and partly by the Empty Quarter sand dunes. But satellite photography can resolve geographic features up to 50 m. below a sand covering. These river systems (now underground) still flow and supply water to Riyadh and other cities.

In the north of Saudi Arabia, there are still gold mining operations between Medina and Hail. It was in this area that King Solomon had his gold mines. It seems probable that northern Saudi Arabia was the land of Havilah and the Pishon drained this area.

Cush in Scripture is often associated with the south west corner of Arabia (Yemen). So in all probability the Gihon drained this area – the water running into the Gulf.

Sonar surveys for oil have revealed buildings and ruins deep below the present surface of the Gulf. The deepest part of the Gulf is only 150 meters deep. Thousands of years ago the sea level was much lower than it is today. So these rivers probably combined to form one large river that flowed out into the India Ocean beyond the Straights of Hormuz. So where was Eden? Probably it was in the lower part of the Gulf.

If this is so, then the great spiritual crisis of the Fall of Man occurred in the Gulf! This is where spiritual warfare began. Certainly the seeds of the present Gulf War were sown in the rebellion of man against God's law in Eden. In a sense the Gulf War started then!

The Rise of City-states after the Flood

In the Bible, the first cities were born out of rebellion against God. Cain was the first one to build a city – Enoch (Gen. 4: 17). God had told Cain: ***"You shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth"***. God said that He would protect him from the violence of others by the "mark of Cain". Yet even in the light of God's mercy to him, Cain rebels against God and goes and builds the first city so he could stay in one place and be protected by a city wall. So this first city was born out of a spirit of rebellion, murder and a lack of trust in God.

In a sense, cities are a human attempt for the security of Paradise but without God. City life is an attempt to produce a condition that will ameliorate the consequences of the Fall. This is why city life is so attractive – no sweating in the fields – no dependence on the weather for crops. God said: ***"By the sweat of your brow you will earn your bread"***. (Gen. 3: 19)

So early Middle Eastern cities were built to make life as easy as possible, building relationships without having to deal with sin! After the flood the pattern continued. Nimrod was the first to build an empire capital – Babylon. He was also responsible for the building of Nineveh. Scripture says (Gen. 10: 9, 10) that Nimrod was a mighty hunter, yet he appears to have used his aggression against man. Nimrod means a rebel. 'City-states' implies administration, order, government and it also implies exploitation, taxes etc. Later on in the history of Babylon, Hammurabi in his code, tried to limit the abuses and violation of the original rights of human beings that were common in his city.

Babylon is the symbol of all that is worst in city life. It is mentioned over 250 times in the Bible and it stands opposite Jerusalem in symbolic terms. It is a symbol of rebellion against God. With the rise of Babylon the seeds of the occult are infiltrating human societies. Whenever men get together and develop relationships, as happens in cities, this generates the keen interest of the "principalities and powers". The glue that keeps together the solidarity of cities, city-states and countries are these supernatural powers. So it was in Babylon that they started to build the Tower of Babel – reaching up into heaven. Perhaps they were trying to touch supernatural powers and manipulate those powers without reference to God.

In a song addressed to the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14: 4-21, they begin by singing to the human being, but part way through the song the focus shifts to the power behind the throne – Satan himself. This is the inevitable consequence of rebellion – Satanic manipulation.

However, Babylon (as well as all cities) is a human counterfeit. There has always been in the mind and heart of God a ***"city whose builder and maker is God."*** It is interesting that throughout these river systems, gold, pearls and precious stones would have been carried into Eden. Symbolically, these are the building materials of the New Jerusalem, with its walls of precious stones, gates of pearls and streets of gold. The New Jerusalem is God's society – built according to God's intention for man – human relationships developed without sin in harmony and beauty, glued together by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So Babylon symbolises the miserable satanic counterfeit – made only out of mud and slime – a pathetic attempt to reproduce an imitation of God's great City – God's great purpose. But God puts up with human cities until He can instil His vision of the true city into men and women.

Abraham, Ishmael and the Arabs

In Scripture, immediately after the disaster of the Tower of Babel comes God's call to Abraham to leave his Gulf city, Ur, ***"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place he was to receive for an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going ... for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder was God."*** (Heb 11: 8, 10)

Abraham, through Ishmael, is the father of the Arabs. We need to understand the relationship Ishmael bears to the Abrahamic covenant and the place he occupies in God's plans for the nations as outlined in the book of Genesis.

Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, seems to have occupied a prominent place in Abraham's household and she appears to have had an inward participation in the faith of the God of Abraham. She was probably added to the family of faith during Abraham's stay in Egypt and she occupied the same position toward the female servants that Eliezar of Damascus did for the male servants. It is when she was driven into the desert by the jealous harshness of Sarah that we have the first revelation of God concerning her seed:

"Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the desert ... and He said, 'Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she said. 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress, Sarah'. Then the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress and submit yourself to her authority.' Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.' The angel of the Lord further said to her, 'Behold you are with child and you shall bear a son and you shall call his name Ishmael (God will hear) because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. And he will be a wild ass of a man, his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him and he will live in defiance of all his brothers.' Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her 'Thou art a God who sees me', for she said 'Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?' " (Gen. 16: 7 - 13)

It is plain from the context that here the Angel of the Lord and the Lord Himself are identical. It was the Angel of the Lord (YHWE), the Angel of the Covenant of the Christ of the Old Testament. Why should the very first appearance of this "Angel" be to Hagar? In his commentary Lange suggests that *"the Angel of the Lord, as the Christ who was to come through Isaac, had a peculiar reason for assisting Hagar, since she, for the sake of the future Christ, is in involved in this sorrow."* In any case, the special revelation and the special promise were not given only to Hagar but to her seed as well. Christ, if we may so express it, outlines the future history and character of the Ishmaelites as well as their strength and glory. He also gives them a great spiritual promise in the God-given name 'Ishmael' – Elohim will hear. Without this, the theophany loses its true character.

The fulfilment of the promise that Ishmael's seed should greatly multiply has clearly been fulfilled. Arabia, whose population consists mainly of Ishmaelites, has been a living fountain of men. Where there has been such a clear fulfilment of the promise of natural increase, are there no grounds to believe that God will hear and also give great spiritual blessing?

Thirteen years after the first promise to Ishmael we hear the promise renewed just after the instruction about circumcision, the sign of the Covenant of Faith. ***"And Abraham said to God,***

'Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!' But God said, 'Sarah your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac and I will establish My Covenant with him for a covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you.' " (Gen. 17:18-20)

What is the significance of Abraham's prayer for Ishmael? Is it probable he is merely asking for temporal prosperity and length of life? The prayer was made just after the Abrahamic Covenant had been made. (Gen. 17: 7) Why did Abraham pray that Ishmael would live before God? His prayer arises out of his anxiety in case Ishmael should not have any part in the blessings of the Covenant. The fact that God's answer contains no denial of Abraham's prayer is in favour of this interpretation. In the prayer, Abraham expresses his anticipation of an indefinite spiritual neglect of Ishmael that was so painful to his parental heart. He asks for Ishmael a life in God's presence in the highest sense. If this is not so, what does the circumcision of Ishmael mean? The seal of circumcision or ratifying of the Covenant of God with Abraham through Isaac's seed, embraces not only the seed of Isaac but all those who, in a wider sense, are sharers in the Covenant – Ishmael and his descendants. However much the Arabs have departed from the faith of Abraham, they have, for nearly four millennia, remained faithful to the sign of the Old Covenant by the rite of circumcision.

For the third time we read of a special revelation to prove God's love and concern for the son of a bond slave. In the pathetic story of Hagar's expulsion, Ishmael is the central figure. His mocking was its cause. (Gen. 21:8-21) When the water is gone from the bottle and Hagar turns away from seeing the death of the boy, it was not her weeping, but the prayer of Ishmael that brought deliverance from heaven. ***"And the Angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What is the matter with you Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw the well of water ... and God was with the lad."***

This story shows the repentance of Ishmael. God heard his voice. God forgave his sinful mocking. God confirmed His promise. God saved his life. God was with the lad. Many years after he seems to have visited his father, Abraham, and been reconciled with his brother, for we read that when the patriarch died at a good old age, ***"Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelan."*** No mention is made here of the sons of Keturah. Twice in the Bible the generations of Ishmael are given in full order to build together the prophecies of Genesis with the Messianic promises for the seed of Isaac.

The Promises of the Old Testament Regarding the Arabs – The children of Ishmael

There is no land in the world and no people (with the exception of Palestine and the Jews) that bear such close relation to the Covenant and to Old Testament promises as Arabia and the Arabs. The promises of the final victory of the Kingdom of God in Arabia are many, definite and glorious. There are many promises, numerous and glorious, concerning the wilderness and desert lands. The latter would surely, for the dwellers of Palestine, have primary reference to northern Arabia. For example:

Isaiah 35:1-2, ***"The wilderness and the desert will be glad and the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it will blossom profusely and rejoice with rejoicing and shouts of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the Majesty of our God."*** [See the rest of the chapter.]

Isaiah 40:3, ***"A voice is calling 'Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God."***

Isaiah 41:18-19, ***"I will open rivers on the bare heights and springs in the midst of valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry lands fountains of water. I will put the cedar in the wilderness, the acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; I will place the juniper in the desert, together with the box tree and the cypress."***

Isaiah 43:18-19, ***"Do not call to mind the former things or ponder the things of the past. Behold, I will do something new; now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it? I will even make a road way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert."***

Isaiah 51:3, **"*He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden. And her desert like the Garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of a melody."***

These promises are written in poetic and symbolic language and are representative of many more in Scripture (Ez. 34:25; 47:8 for example). They clearly point to a great outpouring of God's Spirit on these very spiritually dry and dead lands.

There are not only these promises couched in poetic language but also specific promises relating to the peoples of Arabia. The twelve princes, sons of Ishmael, whose names are recorded in Scripture, were undoubtedly the patriarchs of so many Arab tribes. Some of the names can be distinctly traced through history and others are easily identified with the modern day tribes in Saudi Arabia. Mibsam seems to correspond with the Nejd tribe of Beni Bessan. Mishma is surely the same as the Arabic Beni Misma. Nearly all the commentators agree that Dumah is Dumat al'Jendal in Northern Saudi Arabia – one of the oldest Arab settlements. Aside from conjecture, two names stand out and are well known in history, Nebaioth and Kedar. As long ago as Pliny in the 2nd century A.D, they are mentioned together – Nabatoi et Cedrei – in his Natural History.

Now it is these very two names, whose identity no one questions, that are the centre of some glorious promises. Isaiah 60 is well known as one of the greatest Old Testament passages containing promises for the people of the Arabian Peninsula.

Isaiah 60: 6, 7 ***"A multitude of camels will cover you, young camels of Midian and Ephah*** (the Hijaz region)***; all those from Sheba*** (Yemen) ***will come, they will bring gold and frankincense and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered together unto you. The rams of Nebaioth will minister to you. They will go up with acceptance on My altar and I shall glorify My glorious house."***

These verses, read in connection with the many promises that precede them, leave no room for doubt that the sons of Ishmael have a large place in the coming glory of the Lord and the brightness of His rising. It has only been delayed by our neglect in evangelising Arabia, but the Lord will still keep His promise and Christ will see the travail of His soul among the people of Arabia. And then the other promise will be fulfilled for this part of the peninsula (significantly put in Isaiah 42) - ***"Sing to the Lord a new song, sing His praise from the end of the earth! Let the wilderness and its cities lift up their voice and the towns where Kedar inhabits. Let the inhabitants of Sela sing aloud, let them shout for joy from the tops of the mountains."***

It is all there with geographical accuracy and completely describes the present state – cities in the desert, in the Nejd, cities like Riyadh. Kedar, the bedouin people, will forsake their nomadic tents and become city dwellers, not only them but also the rock dwellers of Medain Salih (northern Hijaz).

"And I will lead the blind by a way that they do not know, in paths they do not know I will guide them. I will make darkness into light before them and rugged places into plains. These are the things I will do, and I will not leave them undone." (Isaiah 42: 16)

The only proper name, the only geographic centre of the entire chapter, is Kedar. In two other prophecies (Is. 21:13-17 and Jer. 49:28-33) that have no Messianic character, Kedar is referred to as synonymous with the bedouin of Arabia.

Another group of promises for Arabia clusters round the names of Seba and Sheba.

"All they from Sheba will come; they will bring gold and frankincense and will bear the good news of the praises of the Lord." (Is. 60: 6)

"The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. ... Long may He live, may the gold of Sheba be given to Him." (Psalm 72:10, 15)

The Messianic character of this Psalm is generally acknowledged. Where are Seba and Sheba? Three Shebas are referred to in the genealogies of the Bible:

1. A son of Raamah, son of Cush
2. A son of Joktan, grandson of Ishmael
3. A son of Jokshan, son of Kebirah

But all of these find their dwelling place in what is now south-west Arabia – Yemen. The Jokanite Sheba is the Kingdom of the Himyarites in Yemen. The ancient Kingdom of Sheba embraced the greater part of what is now called Yemen. Its chief cities and probably successive capitals were Seba, Sana'a and Zaphur. Seba, the oldest capital, is identified with present Marib east of Sana'a.

An alternative site for Seba could be in Bahrain. The Cushite Sheba settled somewhere on the shore of the Gulf. On the island of Awal (one of the Bahraini islands) are the ruins of the ancient city called Seba.

Historically Yemen was always a rich land and a great source of incense. We are only beginning to know a little of the opulence and glory of the ancient Himyarite Kingdom of Yemen. Certainly today there is great wealth in the Gulf region.

Isaac Da Costa, a great Dutch poet who was of Jewish descent, gathered in his poem, HAGAR some of these great Biblical promises concerning the sons of Ishmael.

Hagar

Mother of Ishmael!
The Word that God hath spoken
Never hath failed the least, nor was His promise broken
Whether in judgement threatened or in blessing given;
Whether for time and earth or for eternal heaven.

The patriarch prayed to God, while bowing in the dust,
"Oh that before Thee Ishmael might live!"– His prayer, His trust.
Nor was that prayer despised, that promise left alone
Without fulfilment. For the days shall come
When Ishmael shall bow his haughty chieftain head
Before that Greatest Chief of Isaac's royal seed.
Thou, favoured Solomon, has first fulfilment seen
Of Hagar's promise, when came suppliant Sheba's queen.
Next Araby the blest brought Bethlehem's newborn King
Her myrrh and spices, gold and offering.
Again at Pentecost they came, first fruits of harvest vast;
When to adore the name of Jesus, at the last
To Zion's glorious hill the nation's joy to share
The scattered flocks of Kedar are all gathered there,
Nebaioth, Hefa, Midian...

Mother of Ishmael!
I see thee yet once more,
Thee, under burning skies and on a wave-less shore!
Thou comfortless, soul storm-tossed, tempest shaken,
Heart full of anguish and of hope forsaken,
Thou, too, didst find at last God's glory all thy stay!

He came – He spake to thee. He made thy night His day.
As then, so now. Return to Sarah's tent
And Abraham's God, and better covenant,
And sing with Mary, through her Saviour free,
"God of my life, Thou hast looked down on me".

But Arabia, for all this great wealth of promises, is not a field for feeble faith. Yet, because of these promises, we can learn to look at this barren land with the same reckless, uncalculating, defiant confidence as Abraham. ***"Without being weakened in faith, he considered his own body now as good as dead, but grew strong through faith, giving glory to God."***

The promises are great because the obstacles are great: that the glory of the plan as well as the glory of the work may be of God alone. Arabia needs men and women who will believe as seeing the Invisible. One lonely worker wrote, *"Yes, it is lives poured out that these people need – a sowing in tears – in a measure that perhaps no other lands require. They need a Calvary before they get their Pentecost."*

Thanks be to God for a Field like this. In the light of eternity we could ask no greater blessedness then the chance it gives for fellowship with His Son.