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Peddling Prophetic Snake Oil

By Gary DeMar

IN AN ARTICLE that appeared in the April 9, 2004, edition of WorldNetDaily, Hal Lindsey claims that the Bible predicts that oil will be discovered in Israel. That's the good news. Now the bad news. Israel will be invaded. "The interesting thing is," Lindsey writes, "that this invasion will be triggered by the enormous wealth that the nation accumulates in this time." Israel just can't win. The Arab countries have been swimming in oil for decades and living the luxurious life from the accumulated revenue, but as soon as Israel discovers the long-buried energy source, she's going to be invaded! Bummer.

Israel may in fact discover oil. This would not be too surprising since the region is glutted with the black gold. But can a *biblical* case be made for the prophetic significance of oil as it relates to Israel and a future end-time scenario made popular by dispensational writers? Let's follow Lindsey's line of logic chronologically through Scripture to see if he has made his case.

ISRAEL'S BIRTH DEARTH

Lindsey quotes part of Genesis 49:25 (in *italics*) which describes the blessings that will come to Joseph: "*From the God of your father who helps you, and by the Almighty who blesses you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.*" Lindsey says of this verse: "Note that it predicts his great blessing will come from '*the deep that lies beneath*' his land." By "deep," Lindsey means oil buried deep in the ground!

A careful reader would have looked up

the verses quoted by Lindsey (Acts 17:11) and noticed that he conveniently left out "breasts and of the womb." The dispensational oriented *Bible Knowledge Commentary* states that this phrase refers to "abundant offspring."¹ Henry M. Morris, a noted dispensationalist, agrees and writes that it's a promise of "an abundance of healthful progeny, of both man and animal."² Gerhard Charles Aalders, not a dispensationalist, concurs with the above authors: "Blessings of the breast and womb' certainly refer to abundance in the bearing and feeding of children, as well as for human children as for the young of the livestock."³

Earlier in Genesis we read of a promise of an increase in population that would result in Israel being as numerous "as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore" (22:17; cf. 32:12).⁴ And when was this fulfilled?:

- "And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people who cannot be numbered or counted for multitude" (1 Kings 3:8).
- "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance" (1 Kings 4:20).

If Genesis 49:25 refers to the distant future, as Lindsey speculates, then there is a problem. By the year 2020, Arnon Sofer of the University of Haifa forecasts about 6.4 million Jews will live in Israel, "based on population growth and an average 50,000 Jewish immigrants a year. He expects the Arab population to reach around 8.5 million, in addition to 1 million non-Jews of other origins."⁵ The most optimistic projections show Jews and Palestinians about even in population in 25 years.⁶ Beyond the borders of Israel, there are more than a hundred million non-Jews. It seems by present-day demographics that it's the wombs of Israel's *enemies* that have been blessed.

“THE DEEP THAT LIES BENEATH”

Lindsey believes that the phrase “the deep that lies beneath” is a reference to crude oil. As far as I can tell, he’s the first person to make this discovery. If the “deep” refers to oil, then what are the “blessings of heaven above”? He doesn’t say. You can see that Genesis 49:25 is a classic example of Hebrew parallelism. How does one of Lindsey’s fellow dispensationalists interpret the passage? “Blessings from heaven above” is a reference to “rain for crops,” while “from the deep” refers to “streams and wells for water”⁷ (Gen. 7:11; 8:2; Deut. 33:13). H. C. Leupold captures the meaning of the Hebrew imagery:

The following blessings are specialized: first “blessings of the heavens above”—those would be such blessings as the heavens hold within their grasp—rain, sunshine and pleasant breezes. Then follow “blessings of the deep,” i.e. *tehom*, the deep source of the subterranean waters, which is pictured as being “that coutheth (or croucheth) beneath” the earth. This involves the waters stored in the earth that are so essential to all vegetable growth as well as the sources of the much needed streams and of the fountains.⁸

Contextually, this interpretation makes sense since the lack of rain and dry wells, especially for people living in a region not far from desert conditions, would invariably lead to failed crops and depleted livestock. There is nothing in all of Genesis 49 that would lead the interpreter to conclude that it’s crude oil that’s buried in the deep. Lindsey is reading modern-day geo-politics and technology into the text. He did the same thing in *Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 when he came up with his famous “cobra helicopter” interpretation.

“LET HIM DIP HIS FOOT IN OIL”

Lindsey continues by appealing to Deuter-

onomy 33:24 to support his crude oil theory: “And of Asher he said, ‘More blessed than sons is Asher; may he be favored by his brothers, *and may he dip his foot in oil.*’” Once again, Lindsey is projecting a verse meant for a contemporary context and setting into the distant future to fit a system of interpretation that requires a future context and setting. The “oil” of this verse is a reference to “olive oil.” Jack S. Deere, writing on Deuteronomy in the dispensational oriented *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, states that “to bathe one’s **feet in oil** rather than simply to anoint them would be an extravagant act. Thus the tribe of Asher would experience abundant fertility and prosperity.”⁹ Jan Ridderbos makes a similar observation: “his land will be so rich in oil that it is possible, so to speak, to wade in it. Indeed, Galilee, Asher’s territory, was rich in olive trees.”¹⁰ J. A. Thompson adds further insight to the meaning of passage:

The last phrase in verse 24, *He dips* (or, may he dip) *his feet in oil* is to be understood as a wish that Asher may enjoy prosperity. The Galilean highlands were famous for olives and both Josephus and one of the Jewish Midrashim refer to this fact. The latter contains the saying, ‘It is easier to raise a legion of olives in Galilee than to bring up a child in Palestine.’¹¹

“The land of Asher was agriculturally rich, and is still known for its olive groves.”¹² Once again, determining the context and setting are crucial in determining the meaning of a text.

Did the prophecies for Asher come to pass? Throughout the Old Testament, Asher is identified as a tribe blessed by God (1 Chron. 7:40; 12:36) and a protector of the nation (Judges 6:1-8, 35; 7:23; 1 Sam. 11:7; 1 Chron. 12:23, 36). Asher is one of the few tribes even mentioned in the New Testament. While many Israelites were “dispersed abroad” (James 1:1), a descendant

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from the tribe of Asher was awaiting the promised Messiah in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36), a wonderful fulfillment of prophecy.

THE BIBLE AND PETROLEUM

When the word “oil” appears in the Bible, it is never a reference to crude oil.¹³ Oil-based substances (bitumen) were known and used in Bible times, but they were not identified as “oil.” There were pools of an asphalt-like material often translated as “pitch” or “tar” (KJV: “slime”): “Now the valley of Siddim was full of tar pits. . .” (Gen. 11:14). The “pitch” or “tar” was used for waterproofing (Gen. 6:14; Ex. 2:3) and mortar (Gen. 11:3). If God wanted to identify a future discovery of crude oil in Genesis 49:25 and Deuteronomy 33:24, He could have chosen any of the Hebrew terms already in use to make that point.

RUSSIAN OIL

Not only does Lindsey make olive oil mean crude oil, he even finds oil where none is even mentioned. Great oil deposits are said to be found, if Lindsey and his other prophetic speculators are to be believed, in Ezekiel 38 and 39. Even a quick reading of these two chapters will show that there is no mention of oil, olive or otherwise. What are Israel’s enemies after?: “cattle and goods. . . plunder . . . silver and gold” (Ezek. 38:12-13). These were common commodities of the time and important to survival and supporting governments.

According to Lindsey, Russia will be in need of crude oil in the coming days and will invade the land of Israel to get it, even though Russia is loaded with oil. When it is pointed out to dispensationalists that a literal reading of Ezekiel 38-39 depicts an ancient battle with ancient weapons, we are sold the equivalent of snake oil. Here’s how Thomas Ice and Mark Hitchcock get around the language of the day obstacle:

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Ezekiel spoke in language that the people of his

day could understand. If he had spoken of MIG-29s, laser-fired missiles, tanks, and assault rifles, this text would have been nonsensical to everyone until the twentieth century.¹⁴

Why would the people of Ezekiel’s day have to understand a prophecy that was not meant for them? Why confuse the people it was meant for--the people of today--by describing weapons and commodities that were common to the people it wasn’t meant for? Talk about nonsensical.

CRUDE OIL IN JOB

As I point out in *End Times Fiction*, God could have easily described a future end-time technological society if He had needed to. Consider the following: “glowing metal” (Ezek. 1:4, 27), “burnished bronze” (1:7), “wings . . . spread out” (1:11, 23-24), “like burning coals of fire” (1:13), “like torches darting back and forth” (1:13), “like bolts of lightning” (1:14), “wheels within wheels” (1:16-17), “rising wheels” (1:19), and “the gleam of crystal” (1:22).¹⁵ Some have interpreted these visual oddities as “possible UFO sightings, . . . as describing the arrival of an extraterrestrial spaceship.”¹⁶ While this is nonsense, the point is, the descriptive vocabulary was available in Ezekiel’s day to describe modern technology *if that was God’s purpose*.

Given the way dispensationalists continually read the Bible through modern glasses and refuse to acknowledge the time texts and the contemporary context of so many passages, the Bible can be made to say almost anything. Consider this verse: “He reveals mysteries from the darkness, and brings the deep darkness into light” (Job 12:22). The use of oil as a fuel to run automobiles, buses, trucks, and other motorized vehicles would have been a “mystery” to the people of Job’s day. Drilling into the earth to get it out would have been inconceivable. Of course, because oil is deep in the ground, it’s in perpetual “darkness”—the darkest of

the dark since oil itself is dark. But the oil drillers bring the darkness into light. Once oil is struck, it gushes into the brightness of day. Job was prophesying about the discovery of oil! It says so right in the Bible!

CONCLUSION

Dispensationalists like Hal Lindsey insist that they interpret the Bible literally, and everyone else is an allegorizer. Tim LaHaye tries to sell this point to his uninformed readers in his Introduction to Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice’s *The Truth About Left Behind*, a new book that spends a lot of time responding (inadequately) to my book *End Times Fiction*.

Jerry [Jenkins] and I have unashamedly taken the position that all prophecy should be interpreted literally whenever possible. We have been guided throughout by the golden rule of interpretation:

*When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.*¹⁷

If only it were so. Lindsey, who follows the same “golden rule,” is certainly not applying the principle in Genesis 49:25, Deuteronomy 33:24, and Ezekiel 38-39, and neither are LaHaye, Ice, and Hitchcock in their interpretation of Ezekiel 38-39 where ancient weapons are really descriptions of Russian MIG fighters. Like snake-oil salesmen, these modern-day prophetic hucksters are selling false remedies to a gullible audience willing to believe anything their prophetic heroes say about their product. They are desperate to believe any end-time fictional tale.

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Notes

1. Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books/Scripture Press, 1985), 99.

2. Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), 660.

3. Gerhard Charles Aalders, *Genesis: Bible Student’s Commentary*, trans. William Heynen, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 2:287.

4. “As numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars of heaven” are hyperbolies (Gen. 41:49).

5. Phil Brennan, “Israel’s Population Bomb in Reverse,” www.newsmax.com (October 19, 2002).

6. Ben Wattenberg, “Israel Needn’t Worry About a Population Implosion” (May 18, 2002). www.tzemachdavid.org/Facts/demography.shtml

7. Ross, “Genesis,” 99.

8. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, [1942], 1976), 2:1196.

9. Jacks S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 322.

10. Jan Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy: The Bible Student’s Commentary*, trans. Ed M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 311.

11. J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 316.

12. Cyril J. Barber, “Tribe of Asher,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2:212).

13. See entry of “Oil” in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 603-604.

14. Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 47.

15. Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 14-15. I make this point in *End Times Fiction*, but Hitchcock and Ice do not answer it.

16. George Constable, ed., *Mysteries of the Unknown: The UFO Phenomenon* (Richmond, VA: Time-Life Books, 1987), 13, 14.

17. Tim LaHaye, “Introduction,” Hitchcock and Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind*, 7.

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