

A Psalm 83 War?

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Does Psalm 83 predict an imminent war that is about to break out in the Middle East? Is Israel about to conquer its surrounding neighbors and occupy their lands? Some students of prophecy believe this, but is it consistent with Scripture? While it is fair to say that Psalm 83 is a prophetic Psalm with application beyond its original context as an imprecatory prayer written in the 10th Century B.C., the view that it is referring to a specific war that takes place prior to other major end time wars associated with the Antichrist stands in direct conflict with Scripture.

Those who teach that Psalm 83 is to be understood as a specific war, distinct from the Battle of Gog of Magog, or other wars of the Antichrist, base their view on a series of inferences and false assumptions. We need to understand what these assumptions are. First, proponents of this view point out that the nations listed in Psalm 83 are not listed in Ezekiel 39-39. Despite the fact that this is not entirely true (both passages include parts of Turkey and Syria for example), it is from this observation that the first assumption is made that these passages must be speaking of two separate wars. Then it is observed that the nations listed in Psalm 83 are close to Israel, forming what is called an “inner ring” of nations, whereas the nations mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39 form a larger “outer ring” of nations. Thus, it is reasoned that in the future, Israel will first utterly defeat, even annihilate and occupy, the “inner ring” nations, and then at a later time, defeat the “outer ring” of nations in war.

Before we turn to the Scriptures to examine the problems with this theory, it is important to stop and consider exactly what is being proposed by those who teach this theory. Bill Salus, the teacher most best known for popularizing this view, holds that the nations of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon will all be defeated and occupied by Israel:

“Because of this Israeli conquest over the inner circle of the core surrounding Arab populations of Palestinians, Syrians, Saudi Arabians, Egyptians, Lebanese, and Jordanians, Israel’s borders are enlarged, prosperity increases, and national stature is enhanced.” (Israelestine: The Ancient Blueprints of the Future Middle East, Bill Salus)

Other prophecy teachers seem to differ slightly from this view, teaching that these nations will all simply be “annihilated” by Israel, in what is referred to as “The War of Extermination.” In my opinion, both positions strain the bounds of believability on a few levels. The idea that Israel, a single nation with approximately 6 million Jews, will either subdue and concurrently occupy, or worse yet, “annihilate” several nations with a total population of approximately 170 million Arabs is quite a claim, making Israel responsible for the equivalent of 30 Holocausts. In my opinion, not only is this view difficult to believe, but it also casts the people of Israel in a murderous and imperialistic light far worse than what even the most obsessed anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists would ever claim.

But let us turn to the primary reason why the popular Psalm 83 War of Extermination theory stands in direct conflict with Scripture. Before we do however, it is necessary to identify which nations are mentioned in Psalm 83. The following chart lists the names of the nations and people as they appear in Psalm 83 as well as their modern equivalents:

Name in Psalm 83	Modern Equivalent
The tents of Edom	Southern Jordan
The Ishmaelites	Saudi Arabia and portions of Jordan
Moab	Central Jordan
The Hagrites;	North-East Jordan
Gebal	Lebanon
Ammon	North-West Jordan
Amalek	Southern Israel
Philistia	Gaza
The inhabitants of Tyre	Lebanon
Assyria	Turkey (South-Eastern), Syria (North-Western), Iraq (North-Eastern)
The children of Lot (Ammon, Edom)	Jordan



The Peoples of Psalm 83

Egypt?

It is important to take note of the fact that the nation of Egypt is not included among the nations listed in Psalm 83. Salus makes the claim that the Hagrites correlate to Egypt, but this is simply not accurate. When Psalm 83 was written, Egypt was a well known nation. If the Psalmist had intended Egypt to be included among his list of nations, he would simply have listed Egypt. Instead he listed “the Hagrites” along with the other nation-tribes that occupied the region that makes up modern day Jordan. When this psalm was written in the 10th century B.C., the Hagarites were a people who lived in the region of northern Jordan, east of Gilead. Of this, the Scriptures are clear:

“In the days of Saul, they (the tribe of Rueben) made war with the Hagarites, who fell by their hand: and they dwelt in their tents throughout all the east land of Gilead” (1 Chronicles 5:10.)

When do the Psalm 83 nations meet their judgment?

The simplest way to demonstrate that the nations of Psalm 83 are not destroyed in a war several years before the return of the Lord, is to examine when the Bible states that these peoples and regions will be judged and defeated. As we will see, every name, nation, or region listed in Psalm 83 is specifically mentioned numerous times throughout the prophets as being judged and defeated by Jesus, after He has returned. Let's consider just a few examples from Scripture.

Edom and Moab

The first of the conspirators in Psalm 83 is Edom. Edom refers to the region of southern Jordan and northwestern Saudi Arabia. Moab was Edom's neighbor just to the North in what is today, central Jordan (see map above). There are numerous prophetic passages that portray the ultimate judgment of these peoples and regions in the context of the return of Jesus.

Numbers 24

Lets begin with Numbers 24:17-19, a prophecy that speaks of the coming King Messiah: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel.” Bible scholars believe this prophecy was among those that were looked to by the Magi in their effort to seek out the Messiah, the King of Israel, the account of which is recorded in the Gospels. But according to the prophecy, who will the King Messiah defeat when he arrives? According to the text, it is both Moab and Edom: “He shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be a possession.” The crushing of the heads of Israel's enemies here is actually an expansion of the original seed-prophecy of Genesis 3:15 wherein the Messiah is predicted to ultimately crush the head of Satan and his followers. But here, the actual names are given to identify the seed of the serpent. Thus Edom and Moab are the peoples identified.

While proponents of the Psalm 83 War theory claim that Edom and Moab will be utterly annihilated by the Israeli Defense Forces several years before the return of Jesus, the Scriptures tell us that this will be carried out by Jesus when He returns. Why would Jesus need to engage in war and judgment with a people who were annihilated only several years prior?

Isaiah 34, 66

Edom is also portrayed as being judged by Jesus in Isaiah 34 and 66. Together these two passages form a graphic prophetic picture of the judgment of Edom personally carried out by Jesus, while he is on the earth. The entire chapter of Isaiah 34 is a poetic portrayal of the people of Edom being ritually sacrificed by the Lord Himself. The Lord's wrath is executed against the people of Edom specifically because of their unjust treatment of Israel:

For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. The Lord has a sword; it is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom . . . Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. For the lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. (vv. 5–9)

The context is the Day of the Lord, the Day of His vengeance. It occurs when Jesus returns. The people of Edom are destroyed specifically as a just recompense for the "cause of Zion." Later, in Isaiah 63, the same event is described again in very graphic detail:

Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save." Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress? "I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on

my garments, and stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come.” (vv. 1–4)

In this highly dramatic passage, Isaiah the prophet is looking south-eastward from Jerusalem. In his mind’s eye, he sees a majestic and determined figure—it is Jesus the Messiah—marching victoriously toward His throne in Jerusalem, out of Edom and Bozrah. Bozrah was the capital city of ancient Edom. Today it is very close to Petra. Once more, the timing is the Day of the Lord’s vengeance, and Jesus Himself is clearly on the ground, personally executing the justice of the Lord.

If anyone would still question whether or not Isaiah 63 and 34 are speaking of the return of Jesus, all doubt is put to rest when we see that the quintessential passage concerning the return of Jesus—Revelation 19—finds the theme of Jesus treading “the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” directly from Isaiah 63. The two passages are both speaking of the return of Jesus as He executes vengeance against His enemies. The armies of the Beast in Revelation 19 are identified as Edom in Isaiah 63. In both passages, Jesus crushes his enemies like grapes.

Obadiah

In the Book of the Prophet Obadiah, once more the same reality is described in great detail. The entire theme of this short prophecy is the ultimate victory of “the Mountain of Zion” over “the Mountain of Edom.” Mountains are a commonly used biblical motif for kingdoms. The prophecy is ultimately about the Kingdom of Israel triumphing over the Kingdom of Edom. Calvary Chapel founder Chuck Smith rightly states that the final fulfillment of this prophecy and the judgment of Edom will occur during “the day of the Lord when God blesses Israel once again when the deliverer is in Zion and the Lord reigns.” The “Day of the Lord” context is also seen in the final verse of the prophecy, which states that in that “Saviors (or, salvation) shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s” (Obadiah 1:21). So the ultimate victory of Israel over Edom will be seen when the Kingdom belongs to the Lord Jesus who will be present and ruling from Jerusalem.

We could look at several other passages as well. In Isaiah 25, Amos 2 and Zephaniah 2:9, Moab is portrayed as being judged specifically in the context of the return of the Jesus.

Again we must ask; If Edom and Moab are utterly conquered, “annihilated”, or even “exterminated” by the Israeli Defense Forces several years prior to the return of Jesus, how is it that the Messiah is consistently and repeatedly portrayed over and over again, throughout the prophets, as carrying out these things personally when He returns? But it is not merely Edom and Moab that this can be said of. This same pattern occurs with every name or place mentioned in Psalm 83. In Zephaniah 2, for example, we find the Day of the Lord judgment of the Philistines and Assyria. In Joel 3, Philistia, as well as Lebanon (Tyre and Gebal) are judged at the Day of the Lord. In Ezekiel 30, several nations, including Arabia are specified as being judged in the Day of the Lord. In the end, every last people, nation or region listed in Psalm 83 are described, often in great detail, within the prophets as being judged in the Day of the Lord, at the return of Jesus. Any effort to argue that these peoples, nations or regions are going to be utterly annihilated before the return of Jesus stands in stark conflict with the Biblical prophets.

In conclusion, the Psalm 83 theory wrongly interpret the prophets, setting the Church up for confusion through unbiblical and false expectations. But the most worrisome error of the Psalm 83 War theory is that it takes the righteous judgments of Jesus, and reallocates them to mere men. As a strong supporter of the Israeli Defense Forces, I say that the aforementioned righteous judgments described in the prophets belong to the Lord Jesus alone. No man or no army will ever be able to claim the victory of the Lord for themselves. The Lord alone will be exalted in that day (Isaiah 2:17).