

## Japan: Rising Or Setting Sun?

by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

***Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," May 2001***

The Japanese people call their islands "the Land of the Rising Sun." They are indeed among the easternmost islands before the broad expanse of the Pacific Ocean extends for thousands of miles toward the Americas. From the mainland to the west, the place from whence the ancestors of the modern Japanese came, the sun seems to rise from these islands on its westward journey across the sky.

Were they alive today, those ancient ancestors would gaze in awe and perhaps dismay at what Japan has become. Its rugged, mountainous beauty is marred by wholesale urbanization and overcrowding. Japan supports 127 million people on about 375,000 square kilometers of land for a population density of nearly 300 people per square kilometer, the most for any major industrialized nation. Notwithstanding, its citizens boast one of the world's longest lifespans and enjoy the fruits of life in the world's third largest economy.

This land of teeming humanity and economic power must also deal with the violence of nature. Situated on the "ring of fire" that encircles the Pacific Ocean, Japan is a prime candidate for devastating earthquakes and fiery volcanic eruptions. The mountainous terrain causes flash flooding whenever heavy rains push through, and the islands' location frequently makes them vulnerable to tsunamis and hurricanes. The Japanese consider natural disasters a matter of *when* not *if*.

Historically, the Japanese government has been militaristic and imperialist, having on several occasions tried to expand its hegemony to Korea, China and Southeast Asia. World War II put an end to such ambitions, punctuated by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945. Since then, Japan's constitution, drafted under the guidance of General Douglas MacArthur, forbids its military any offensive authority. Even so, using only on average one percent of its gross domestic product, Japan arguably has the strongest armed forces in Asia.

Japan is a bundle of contradictions: beautiful but marred; rugged but vulnerable; fragile but strong; powerful but weak; capable but restrained. Is she on the rise or in decline? Will her economic power continue to fail or rebound? Will she shake off her constitutional restraints to become a military power once again? Is Japan a rising or setting sun?

### **From Ashes to Riches**

Like Germany, its Axis ally in World War II, post-war Japan overcame the destruction and humiliation of defeat and created economic prosperity from the ashes of its bombed-out factories. After the United States and China, Japan now ranks as the third largest economy on the planet and the second most technologically powerful nation. Its amazing growth can be traced to several factors: close cooperation between government and industry, a strong indigenous work ethic and employee loyalty, an ability to improve and/or miniaturize existing technologies, and a lack of need to spend revenues on defense. Add in the facts that its currency, the yen, has remained fairly strong even during downturns; it exports over \$100 billion more goods per year than it imports; and it receives nearly \$10 billion each year in economic aid, and all the ingredients are available to make a very strong economic cake.

Yet the picture is not as rosy as it may seem. Between 1960 and 1990, economic growth was spectacular, with ten percent growth in the '60s, five percent in the '70s, and 4 percent in the '80s. As the '90s began, however, growth plunged as a result of over-investment both at home and abroad along with governmental policies designed to curtail speculation in the stock and real estate markets. In 1996, growth nearly reached four percent again in reaction to low interest rates and government stimulation of the economy. But the next few years saw Japan crushed in deep recession. Banking and real estate problems again raised their heads, along with corporate and labor problems.

These problems remain. Japanese industry has lost its competitive edge as a result of the convergence of internal rising costs and more efficient external rivals. In addition, one of its positives—the yen's steady high value—is causing Japanese exports to cost more, resulting in fewer sales abroad.

The government under Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori has been unwilling to make the necessary changes to the system to halt the bleeding. It has wasted huge sums trying to bail out established industrial firms from bankruptcy rather than allowing market forces to cull the weaker corporations and reward the stronger ones. It has also begun massive public works projects, ala Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, to stimulate the economy out of recession. In both these cases, most analysts believe it is too little, too late, as well as an unwarranted waste of the nation's resources.

Most economists believe the situation will only worsen. Because of its close ties to the American economy, as long as the U.S. remains in the doldrums economically, Japan has no chance of solving its problems. Even some of the "cures" for America's woes could hurt Japan further. For instance, too large of an American interest rate cut would make Japanese exports even less competitive, driving it further into recession.

Also, private Japanese capital is leaving Japan for overseas ventures, particularly in developing areas like Eastern Europe, where the rate of return is far greater than at home, where interest rates are nearly zero. In addition, unemployment is rising, wages are decreasing, the population is aging, gross domestic product is shrinking, Japanese businesses are dumping their shares of other Japanese businesses on the stock market, and the nation's political situation is weak. One of the few positive signs for the Japanese economy is that the American economy seems to have stabilized for the moment, and many analysts forecast a slight upturn in the U.S. economy in the second half of 2001. If this does not occur, the Japanese recession could deepen considerably.

### **From Bonds to Bombers**

Economic woes do not exist in a vacuum. Japan's moribund economy is already beginning to have consequences both political and military. Declining economic clout reduces political power because the nation's leaders cannot guarantee they can back their words with action. Prime Minister Mori cannot deal with the financial crisis because he does not have the resources to apply the needed fix, which makes him appear weak, which further reduces his ability to act. It is expected that this vicious cycle will end with either his resignation or a sound defeat in the next election in July. Unless the economy makes a miraculous turnaround, his successor will face the same quandary.

In addition, over the past few years, the Japanese people have begun rethinking their country's pacifism. Many of those without memory of World War II believe Japan should be allowed to decide for itself whether to use its military to project its will. Though the United States originally pressured

the Japanese to accept the pacifist provision of its constitution, it has recently urged them to take a greater role in regional security, which would require amending the nation's constitution. This growing political movement, however, has been mired down by the greater worry over the economy.

On this point, Prime Minister Mori's government does not want to fight a two-front war. It has thus stalled passage of legislation through the parliament that would initiate the overseas deployment of Japanese troops and materiel. Mori cannot afford another hit in the public opinion polls by seeming so distracted by this constitutional matter that he cannot focus on the economy. He must at least appear to be spending his time on what is most important to the Japanese people: their financial well-being.

The economic crisis has also put key military programs in jeopardy. These programs include the acquisition of equipment vital to sustained offshore deployments. If the Japanese economic plight continues, the government may not be able to procure large aircraft-capable warships, Aegis-equipped destroyers, advanced jet fighters, and sundry equipment to mobilize a rapid-reaction force. These are all necessary if Japan is to participate in regional security exercises.

Internal security is another potential headache. Though Japan is often considered by outsiders to be monolithic and stable, underlying tensions could be exacerbated by prolonged economic decline. The ruling Liberal Party has seen its majority steadily eroded over the past few elections. Small, unconventional parties have made gains, and independent candidates have enjoyed noteworthy success, especially in local elections. The hard times have also made the Japanese Communist Party more popular.

Japanese terrorist organizations cannot be ignored either, and they will only become more attractive to radical minds as discontent increases. The Japanese Red Army, dangerous and effective, still exists, though it has not committed any recent attacks. Also active is the "religious" sect called *Aum Shinrikyo*, better known in English as the "Supreme Truth" cult, which killed 12 people in the deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March 1995.

In a nutshell, economically, politically and militarily, Japan has little to feel good about. All indications are that it will be a long, hard and dirty climb out of the hole the nation finds itself in.

## **Origins and Destiny**

Where will Japan go from this juncture? What is prophesied of the people of this distant island nation?

The Japanese people are difficult to find within the pages of the Bible. As the church traditionally understands racial origins, their Oriental features place them within the family of Japheth. The "best guess" of those who study the origins and migrations of biblical peoples trace the Japanese to Javan (Genesis 10:2, 4), primarily on linguistic grounds.\* Moses adds, "From these the coastland peoples of the Gentiles were separated into their lands, everyone according to his own language, according to their families, into their nations" (verse 5). It is not clear if this explanatory material refers to "the sons of Javan" in verse 4 or to the whole line of Japheth.

In other biblical passages, Javan is clearly Greece (Daniel 8:21; 10:20; 11:2; Zechariah 9:13). Situated on the Mediterranean Sea, Greece would be a natural trading partner of Tyre (Ezekiel 27:13, 19). However, notice Isaiah 66:18-19, speaking of a time just after Christ's return (described in verses 15-16):

It shall be that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see My glory. I will set a sign among them; and those among them who escape I will send to the nations: to Tarshish and Pul and Lud, who draw the bow, and Tubal and *Javan, to the coastlands afar off who have not heard My fame nor seen My glory*. And they shall declare My glory among the Gentiles.

This could not refer to the Grecian peoples of the Mediterranean region because Greece is a "Christian" nation. Indeed, the New Testament was written, preserved and distributed in its language! Certainly, the Bible—not to mention the preaching of the apostle Paul—is a significant enough witness to qualify as having heard God's fame and seen His glory. Christianity, however, has had little success in "the coastlands afar off" of Asia.

This leads biblical ethnologists to believe that Javan split in early times into a "Western" and an "Eastern" branch, part of which now resides in "the Land of the Rising Sun." It is likely that the descendants of Japheth, being the progeny of a Caucasian father and a Mongoloid mother, had combinations of these features and separated by racial and/or language type around the time of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

Other than this theory, we know nothing for certain about Japan's origins, and we know even less about its role in the end time. Revelation 9:13-19 prophesies of a 200 million-man army that originates somewhere beyond the Euphrates, and this vast host slays one-third of humanity. Many have drawn parallels between this prophecy and that of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38-39. The latter prophecy, though, fits better at the end of the Millennium, when Satan inspires vast numbers to descend upon "the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (Revelation 20:7-9). However, the 200 million-man army may be an end-time precursor of the late-Millennial army.

If this were the case, it would be difficult to imagine Japan not being involved with this vast horde out of Asia. As mentioned earlier, Japan is the second most technologically advanced nation in the world, and such a huge army would need Japanese technical know-how. Japan has already begun partnering with other Asian nations to secure Asia from Chinese hegemony, so it is not farfetched to imagine a pan-Asian confederacy coalescing in response to the power of the Beast when it rises to dominance.

Whatever happens, the Japanese are a resourceful and persevering people. It is difficult to keep them down for long. Dark days may still lie ahead in the short term, but as Solomon notes, "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose" (Ecclesiastes 1:5). Whenever the sun sets, we know that after the dark of night, the sun will rise again.

\*Another hypothesis derives the Japanese from Ashkenaz, son of Gomer, son of Japheth (Genesis 10:3). Like Javan, Ashkenaz is little mentioned in God's Word apart from genealogical references (Jeremiah 51:27). The ancient Ashkenazi, who called themselves "Nisaei," lived in what became known as Scythia, which they named "Land of the Rising Sun." Herodotus describes these original Scythians as having a rounded face and chin, a flat nose, and little or no body hair; speaking a

peculiar language; and wearing a distinctive dress. They also drank a libation called *asky*, which linguistically resembles *saki* (see Harman Hoeh, *Compendium of World History*, vol. I, pp. 340-346).