

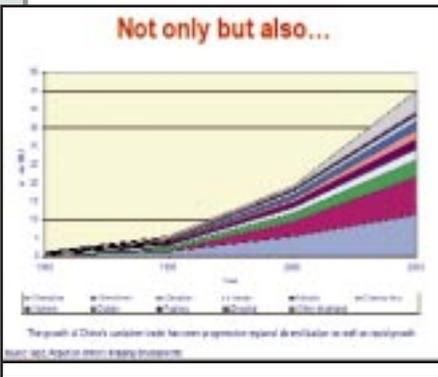


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Ship-Shape for the Endtimes



The term “ship-shape” originated in the 1600s and was defined as being orderly or organized. To be “ship-shape” was to be ready and fitted for a journey. In this sense, the world is rapidly becoming “ship-shape” for the last days. But you may be surprised to learn that the shape of the times also has to do with ships ... yes, sea-faring vessels. It is an interesting development of our day that is prophetically significant.



In the big league and growing strongly

Major Chinese liner shipping companies

Line	Revenue (USD)	TEU	Revenue (USD)	TEU
MSK	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
OOCL	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
CMA CGM	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
MSC	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
Evergreen	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
Yang Ming	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
China Shipping	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000
CSCL	1,000,000,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000	1,000,000

Source: www.cma-cgm.com

Revelation 18 contains the account of one of the last epic events on earth before the Millennium begins: the sudden destruction of Babylon the Great. “In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!” Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: ‘Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth!’ In one hour she has been brought to ruin” (Revelation 18:17-19).

This account is somewhat puzzling. It is the end of days — sup-

posedly a modern time — and a world-impacting destruction is taking place where seemingly only people engaged in seafaring trade are weeping and mourning. We envision sea captains and those who make their living from trade standing far off throwing dust on their heads. This is strange. What about the rest of the people of the world? Why are ships mentioned so prominently?

Ships are mentioned one additional time in the book of Revelation, at the time of the second trumpet: “The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed” (Revelation



Shipping today is a hotbed of activity and change. In fact, global shipping has been completely transformed over the last half century. It represents another one of those fast-moving, exponential, timepieces of the endtimes that has recently emerged.

8:8–9). We will come back to this prophecy later. Both references to the prominence of ships in Revelation revolve around the Great Tribulation. While that time is yet future, it is already possible to see its shadows reflected in worldwide trends. As we will see, so it is with ships. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that future events spoken of in Revelation are fast approaching upon reviewing the developments within the world's marine industry.

Shipping in Biblical Times

Shipping developments in the world today are unprecedented and fascinating. But before we peer into this global industry, let's first examine what the Bible says about ships. The Bible mentions a number of different vessels; for example, smaller boats of the size that might ply the Sea of Galilee, or papyrus boats. The Old Testament mentions another type of vessel, which translated from Hebrew roughly means "transporter of Tarshish." Many Bible versions simply translate this phrase as "ship"; however, in so doing, we lose something in the translation. The ships of Tarshish were the transport ships of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea area and possibly the Indian oceans. One could consider this term as a class of ship

such as we use today to classify the Panamax (ocean-going vessels sized to pass through the Panama Canal)¹ or Great Lakes freighter (the ship size that can navigate the North American Great Lakes, the Welland Canal and the St Lawrence River). There are a number of other classes.

The ships of Tarshish were the trading ships of ancient times. For example, King Solomon had "a fleet of trading ships (navy of Tarshish) at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons" (1 Kings 10:22). But in the New Testament the word "Tarshish" is never associated with the word "ship." Of course, by this time, the world trading empire of Tyre (which was associated with Tarshish) had long since disappeared. Besides, Greece was a seafaring nation. Therefore, a trading ship would not be referred to as a "ship of Tarshish." To the Greeks a ship was a trading ship. The key to see is that ships are generally associated with the idea of trade — in other words, the import and export of merchandise. We should consider the two times ships are mentioned in Revelation as a reference to this type of sea vessel — the trading ship. Clearly, trade is a big pre-

occupation in the world that the book of Revelation describes at this time. But is that time near?

Endtime Shipping Trends

The world of ocean-going cargo ships seems so mundane ... so slow and old. It may seem natural to assume that things were always as they are today, especially as it may apply to ships — the second oldest form of transport in history. That perception couldn't be farther from the truth. Shipping today is a hotbed of activity and change. In fact, global shipping has been completely transformed over the last half century. It represents another one of those fast-moving, exponential, timepieces of the endtimes that has recently emerged.

The volume of marine shipping has exploded in recent times, at least doubling every decade since 1945. Yes, this is a characteristic of a quickly globalizing world. But the globalization of the world's economies couldn't have happened so quickly if not for the advancements taking place in marine cargo shipping.

Here, a number of crucial developments have occurred. For one, the size of ships has become larger. As well, computerization has greatly improved the efficiency of shipping. But by far the greatest de-



Chinese and other Asian-sourced goods are flooding North American stores and other world markets. As a result, the capacity of the nation's ports are being stretched and serious bottlenecks are occurring.

velopment has been containerization, a trend that has revolutionized cargo shipping.

As recent as 50 years ago, most docks would load ships with nets that dangled from the end of grappling hooks. It was a sweaty business, requiring heavy labor and a lot of manpower. It could take as much as two weeks to unload a ship. The shipping of merchandise around the world was slow, cumbersome and relatively expensive. But that world has quickly disappeared.

The shirtless longshoremen of Singapore are long gone. Instead, shipping ports are characterized by high-rise cranes that move containers. These containers are standardized "boxes" that are typically 20 or 40 feet long. You see them stacked on truck trailers, railcars and ships. This form of cargo shipping was invented only recently — in the 1950s.

Today, approximately 90 percent of cargo moves by containers stacked on transport ships. Now, most ships can be unloaded overnight. The time and cost to ship cargo overseas is now only a fraction of what it once was. Over 200 million containers per year are now moved between ports. The capacity of the world's container fleets has doubled during the past seven years. As a result, world trade has boomed in recent decades, growing

two to three times faster than world economic growth. Nations are now more linked and unified through trade than ever before.

Why are these trends significant? They have made possible the types of conditions the Bible describes in the endtimes. More than ever before, conditions in world trade fit the description of the end-time events depicted in Revelation 18, where ship captains are shown as the cornerstone of a worldwide trading colossus. And more than 90 percent of booming world trade is still carried in the hulls and on the decks of ships — the modern-day world equivalent of the "ships of Tarshish." Ships remain the backbone of world commerce despite the advancements of modern transportation.

The Significance of World Trade — The Shipping News

A business newspaper recently reported: "Cargo entering the U.S. in September and October overwhelmed ports, railways and trucks, gumming up real-time inventory deliveries in what marks the heaviest peak-shipping season ever, industry officials say."² What is going on here?

North America's ports are experiencing record inbound volumes. As it happens, world shipping is soaring presently. That's not the first time that boom conditions have oc-

curred in global marine traffic. However, it can be said that current conditions are part of a rapid progression that has transformed world trade and contributed to a globalized world in recent decades. With the boom of Asian economies, goods trade trends have accelerated even more sharply. For example, China's share of world trade has risen by five times in the space of 10 years. Chinese and other Asian-sourced goods are flooding North American stores and other world markets. As a result, the capacity of the nation's ports are being stretched and serious bottlenecks are occurring. Several port facilities in the US and Canada are embarking upon enormous expansion projects.

Asian ports are quickly emerging as the largest ports in the world. The world's six largest shipping ports are all located in Pacific Asia as are 12 of the world's Top 20. Although all short-term trends in most industries are highly cyclical (therefore we shouldn't place too much significance upon them) the longer-term trends are significant. Asia is definitely emerging upon the world stage as a sizable economic power ... and very quickly. Today, approximately 55 percent of world container traffic is routed to or from Asian ports.³ China is building the largest container ships in the world, some with capacities



The Bible says the spirit of Tyre, that ancient city with a name synonymous with Tarshish, shipping, trade and idolatry, will reappear on the world's stage.

that will approach 10,000 20-foot equivalent containers. The emergence of Asia is not accidental nor simply an interim trend that will soon reverse. The Bible does say that the kings of the East will become a force to be reckoned with during the endtimes. According to Revelation 16:12, a way will be prepared for them to cross the Euphrates. After slumbering for at least two centuries, China and a cohort of other Asian nations have stirred and are now making their presence felt around the world. It is another epochal development that has burst upon the world in the last half century or so. Japan was the first of the Asian nations to be roused, beginning its rise only in the late 1950s.

Another aspect of world shipping may play a significant endtime role. Consider again that more than 200 million containers move from port to port every year. They can conceal large items yet only a small fraction are inspected. In the case of the US, only 2 percent of all cargo that reaches its shores is subject to inspection. While many countries around the world have tightened up security restrictions and anti-terrorist procedures at border crossings and airports, the standard shipping container remains an open highway. And, likely, this will not change soon. World trade would slow to a crawl if authorities had to inspect every container. Few

countries would be willing to sacrifice their economic well-being to do so. Certainly, consumers who shop at Wal-Mart (which alone accounts for over 10 percent of trade with China) would weep and wail if supplies of cheap goods were limited in availability. Suffice it to say that world prosperity is dependent upon container traffic.⁴

Kenneth Rogoff, former head of the International Monetary Fund, wrote: "The global economy has become so dependent on the free flow of goods as people cross borders that even a little additional security can have a greater impact than most might expect."⁵ He strikes on a point of great vulnerability. While we cannot predict what events may transpire in the future, we can see that the world's shipping industry stands to play an important role. At a minimum, we can recognize an acceleration phase in world globalization and its dependence upon ships. Moreover, the world has now become critically reliant upon ship-borne trade, an industry, which itself is highly vulnerable to disruption.

What's Shaping Up for the Future?

The Bible says the spirit of Tyre, that ancient city with a name synonymous with Tarshish, shipping, trade and idolatry, will reappear on the world's stage. "At the end of seventy years, the LORD will

deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth" (Isaiah 23:16–17). Tyre has never re-emerged upon the world scene in any literal sense. The Bible is likely referring to the spirit behind Tyre — a greed-infused emphasis upon materialism and commerce as the *raison d'être* for mankind's existence. In fact, Ezekiel identifies this very spirit as being Satan himself. (See Ezekiel 28:12–19.) Assuming that this interpretation is correct, we can anticipate that the "spirit of Tyre" will be a mark of the endtime world. The very same spirit is in clear evidence in Revelation 18, which describes a worldwide colossus dependent upon trading ships.

Is that time in the near future? According to the evidence of trends for just this past half century — even just the past few decades — we would be unwise to not recognize the signs of the times. Even shipping trends and developments cry out their message. It would not be sensationalistic to conclude that the time described in Revelation 18 is already in clear view. World trading activity has literally boomed unlike any other period in history. And, moreover, the world trading system is dependent upon ships as ever, despite the emergence of other advanced forms of transport.

A large part — a third — of the world's trade network is destroyed

A similar lesson is found in the story of Jonah. Like him, we have all been given a mission greater or smaller. Yet, the call of the world can seem more alluring. We might then choose the path that leads to the starry lights of Tarshish — the commercial culture of our time that seems so prosperous and secure.

at the time of the second trumpet (Revelation 8:9). Later, the entire trading system — at least its central hub, Babylon the Great — will be destroyed in one hour. That same time may be depicted in this Old Testament prophecy: “The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled), for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan, for all the towering mountains and all the high hills, for every lofty tower and every fortified wall, for every trading ship [ship of Tarshish] and every stately vessel. The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear” (Isaiah 2:12–18). But before this can happen, a worldwide trading and shipping colossus must emerge. We can see that happening before our very eyes today.

Points to Ponder

Why does the Bible prophesy that Babylon the Great, an entity that is identified as being intensely trade oriented, will come to destruction? Is there something inherently sinful about engaging in trade or shipping? No. It is the spirit of Tyre behind it that God finds offensive. It speaks of an

earth-bound materialism, a man-made existence apart from Him.

While ships are specifically identified as playing a role in endtime prophecy, they also provide some rich object lessons for Christians. Someone once wrote: “A Christian is to the world as is a ship to the water. Woe to the ship if the water should get inside of it.”

A similar lesson is found in the story of Jonah. Like him, we have all been given a mission greater or smaller. Yet, the call of the world can seem more alluring. We might then choose the path that leads to the starry lights of Tarshish — the commercial culture of our time that seems so prosperous and secure.

Jonah jumped on a ship to Tarshish traveling the opposite direction of Nineveh. He chose personal indulgence over the path of obedience. However, his choice led to insecurity, volatility and danger. It is perhaps for a similar reason that many of our vessels face gale winds in our lives. Though children of God, we may be traveling in the wrong direction.

It is better to be about the Lord's business and to walk in the path He has set before us. Events in our lives may not transpire in the ways we might anticipate. We may be exposed to the sweltering heat of the desert, as was Jonah. But at least we have the privilege of participating in God's cosmic plans and entering

His eternal kingdom. In Jonah's case, his mission couldn't have been more important. Assyria, the world's second greatest empire, was being warned. Jonah's mission deferred God's final judgment upon this nation because they listened to Jonah's warnings, repented and received a reprieve. Unfortunately, Nineveh returned to its former ways before long, which resulted in the disappearance of this great kingdom from the world stage virtually overnight. In fact, it is the only Old Testament nation powers that no longer exist today.

As we can see from evidence all around us — even from shipping trends — the world is hurtling towards its destiny. The signs are all around us. Will God tarry in His judgments? The world has already been given its “sign of Jonah” (Matthew 16:4; Luke 11:29). (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ships classified as “Panamax” are of the maximum dimensions that will fit through the locks of the Panama Canal, each of which is 1000 ft long by 110 ft wide and 85 ft deep.
- 2 *Market News International*, Gary Rosenberger. November 12, 2004.
- 3 ISL Publications, Executive Summary – SSMR Market Analysis # 6.
- 4 Container traffic statistics are usually quoted in “twenty-foot equivalent units” or TEUs.
- 5 Kenneth Rogoff, “The Cost of Living Dangerously,” *Foreign Policy* magazine, November/December 2004.