

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## Who Are Gog and Magog in Ezekiel?

ECKHARD J. SCHNABEL

In the book of Revelation, “Gog and Magog” describes “the nations in the four corners of the earth” (Rev. 20:8), the forces of evil that attack the people and the city of God. It is an attack that ends in total defeat as “fire came down from heaven and devoured them.” The expression “Gog and Magog” comes from Ezekiel 38–39 where we read of “Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal” (38:2) and of his allies “Persia, Ethiopia, and Put are with them, all of them with buckler and helmet; Gomer and all its troops; Beth-Togarmah from the remotest parts of the north with all its troops” (38:5–6).

The *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* begins an entry on “Gog and Magog” with the explanation that “Gog is the leader of a future coalition that will attack Israel, an event described in Ezekiel 38.”<sup>1</sup> Interpreters throughout the ages have identified Gog and Magog with very different peoples and places: (1) the invading Goths in the fourth and fifth centuries; (2) the invading Huns in the fifth and sixth centuries; (3) Hungarian raiders in the tenth century; (4) the pope and the papacy in the fourteenth century (John Wycliffe), (5) Hitler’s Germany and Russia in the twentieth century; or (6) more generally as heretics.<sup>2</sup> The *Scofield Reference Bible* identified Gog with Russia, which was a popular identification among “prophecy writers” in the twentieth century, particularly after Russia became a Communist country.<sup>3</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union, different interpretations were offered. Some suggest a version of the older identification with Communist Russia: the invading coalition that is thought to invade Israel is identified by some with the Islamic republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and the Ukraine, all former Soviet satellite states.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Daniel Hays, J. Scott Duvall, and C. Marvin Pate, *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 236, 91, 99, 182, 257, 308, 311.

<sup>3</sup> See Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 59–71 (chap. 5 is entitled “Russia Is a Gog”). Walvoord maintains that the nation described in Ezekiel 38–39 is “most likely Russia or another state of the former Soviet Union” (John F. Walvoord, *The Final Drama: Fourteen Keys to Understanding the Prophetic Scriptures* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998], 123). Also see Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson, eds., *The Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2007), 190–93; Joel C. Rosenberg, *Epicenter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006), 81–87.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Hitchcock, *After the Empire: The Fall of the Soviet Union and Bible Prophecy* (Oklahoma City: Hearthstone, 1992), 13–26.

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These various and very different interpretations have one element in common: they all depend on contemporary political and military threats. These identifications can be justified only temporarily and then must be modified to match the ever-changing regional or global political climate changes. What do we learn about Gog and Magog from Ezekiel's prophecy?

## Gog and Magog

The location of Ezekiel's Gog is uncertain. Even the interpretation of the name is difficult. Suggestions for the derivation and meaning of the name "Gog" include the following: (1) a mythological "locust giant" (see Amos 7:1, where the Greek translation reads *Gōg*); (2) a personification of darkness (from the Sumerian word *gug*, "darkness"); (3) from the place Gaga mentioned in the Amarna Letters; (4) from Gaga, a deity mentioned in Ugaritic literature.<sup>5</sup> (5) More plausible is the connection with Gyges, the name of a king of Lydia who ruled from 668 to 644 b.c.<sup>6</sup> Since this king had died by the time Ezekiel wrote down his prophecy, this identification is unlikely. Some have suggested that Gog/Gyges is not a personal name but the name of a royal dynasty, and that Ezekiel refers to Gyges' great-grandson Alyattes who revived Lydia as a dominant power in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). There is no hint that the kings of Lydia ever posed a threat to Judah. To assume that Ezekiel prophesied events in the twenty-first century creates the problem that the long prophecy in Ezekiel 38–39 would be irrelevant for his audience, which is unlikely. Ezekiel's prophecies concerning Tyre and Babylon all refer to contemporary nations in the sixth and fifth century b.c.

The homeland of Gog is identified as "the land of Magog" (Ezek. 38:1; also 39:6). The location of Magog is uncertain. The suggestion that is the most plausible explains Magog as a contraction of the expression *mat Gugi* ("land of God"), interpreted as a reference to the region of Lydia in western Asia Minor. In Genesis 10:2 (1 Chron. 1:5), Magog is described as the second son of Japheth together with Gomer, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. In other words, it is identified with persons rather than with geographical territories. This use of Magog as a personal name is taken up by later traditions, such as the passage in Revelation 20:8 where "Gog and Magog" appear as a fixed pair of personal names involved in the final battle of history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2:433n31. For the comments that follow in the text above, see *ibid.*, 433–36, 439–40.

<sup>6</sup> Date according to Walter Eder and Johannes Renger, *Chronologies of the Ancient World: Names, Dates and Dynasties*, Brill's New Pauly, Supplements 1, trans. and ed. Wouter F. M. Henkelman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Also see *Sibylline Oracles* 3:319–20, 512.

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## Gog's Allies

Ezekiel 38:2 describes Gog as “chief prince” of Meshech and Tubal. The Hebrew expression (*nesi' ro'sh*) translated as “chief prince” (KJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NET, ESV) has also been interpreted as referring to three names, which leads to the translation “the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal” (NASB, JB). The Hebrew term *ro'sh* is interpreted by the (much later) Masoretic pointing (and by the Septuagint [LXX]) in a way indicating that the term should be taken as a noun expressing ethnicity. Many prophecy writers identify “Rosh” with Russia.<sup>8</sup> This identification is based on faulty etymology: the name “Russia” derives from a northern Viking language and not from a Semitic language. It was first used for the region of what we today call the Ukraine in the ninth century a.d.<sup>9</sup> The similarities between the Hebrew term *ro'sh* and the term “Russia” are accidental (which sometimes happens with words from two unrelated languages). Since Ezekiel’s use of the term *ro'sh* and the first use of the term “Rus” for the Ukraine are fifteen hundred years apart, the identification of the Hebrew term *ro'sh* with “Russia” is anachronistic. It cannot be the basis for an interpretation of Ezekiel’s prophecy. More plausible is the suggestion to link *ro'sh* with the neo-Assyrian word *rashu* or *reshu*, terms that refer to a region far to the east (not in the north). It is a territory on the border between Babylon and Elam, which are geographically distant from Meshech and Tubal to which *ro'sh* is related in Ezekiel 38:2. It is therefore preferable to treat *ro'sh* as the common Hebrew noun it is and interpret it as providing a closer definition of *nasi'* (thus the translation “chief prince”). Ezekiel emphasizes with his use of *ro'sh* that “Gog is not just one of many Anatolian princely figures, but the leader among princes and over several tribal/national groups.”<sup>10</sup>

Meshech is attested in neo-Assyrian sources as *Mushki* ruled by King Mitas of Phrygia in western Asia Minor, probably King Midas of Sardis.<sup>11</sup> Tubal was known to the Assyrians as *Bit Buritash*, a kingdom in the interior of central Asia Minor. Ezekiel describes an alliance of God (Lydia), located farthest west, with Meshech on Lydia’s eastern border

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KJV King James Version  
RSV Revised Standard Version  
NRSV New Revised Standard Version Bible  
NIV New International Version  
NET New English Translation  
ESV English Standard Version  
NASB New American Standard Bible  
JB Jerusalem Bible

<sup>8</sup> For example, LaHaye and Hindson, *Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary*, 190.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier: Invading Hordes from the Russian Steppes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1982), 20–21.

<sup>10</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 2:435.

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 3.94 describes Meshech as part of the nineteenth satrapy of king Darius.

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and Tubal, which is east of Meshech. Why did Ezekiel refer to these peoples in Asia Minor? These were not peoples with whom Judea had direct contact. The answer may be related to the fact that “the peoples in the distant north were shrouded in mystery. The reports of these mysterious people groups that filtered down spoke of wild peoples, brutal and barbaric. This combination of mystery and brutality made Gog and his confederates perfect symbols of the archetypal enemy, rising against God and his people.”<sup>12</sup>

Ezekiel mentions five additional allies of God and his forces (Ezek. 38:5–6): Persia (Paras),<sup>13</sup> Ethiopia (Cush), Put (Libya in northern Africa), Gomer (a wild tribe living north of the Black Sea), and Beth-Togarmah (on the border of Tubal in central Asia Minor, in the region of the later kingdom of Cappadocia, in the modern Turkish province of Sivas). This list indicates that Ezekiel envisions a great conspiracy against Israel over which Yahweh has total control.

## Gog's Invasion

Ezekiel describes the timing of the invasion by Gog: “After many days you shall be mustered; in the latter years you shall go against a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which had long lain waste; its people were brought out from the nations and now are living in safety, all of them” (Ezek. 38:8).

Two conditions need to be met before this event happens. First, Israel will have recovered from the destruction of a previous invading army. This destruction is a reference to the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar that devastated Judea and brought Ezekiel and other Judeans into exile in Babylonia in 587 b.c. Second, Israel's population will have gathered from many nations. Ezekiel prophesies that this invasion of hostile forces will occur “in the latter days” (Ezek. 38:16), a reference to the “many days” of Ezekiel 38:8. The Hebrew expression translated “in the latter days” (*be'acharit hayyamim*) does not refer to the last days before the end of history, but to the distant future, to be reckoned from Ezekiel's time. The prophet's later contemporaries would most naturally have seen this prophecy as predicting Israel's return from exile between 539 and 516 b.c.,<sup>14</sup> a time that is indeed

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<sup>12</sup> Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 2:436.

<sup>13</sup> The identification of Paras is disputed. A connection with Persia seems mistaken. Old Testament scholars suggest “a reference to some commercial or military power with strong links to Tyre and Egypt, but which is to date unattested in extrabiblical records, or an alternative, perhaps Egyptian, spelling for Pathros, ‘Southland’ ” (Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 2:439–40).

<sup>14</sup> In 539 B.C. the Persians defeated Babylonia, and King Cyrus gave permission to the Jews to return to Judea. In 520 B.C., a large number of Jewish exiles returned during the reign of Darius I, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua. In 516 B.C., the rebuilt (second) temple was dedicated.

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“many days” after Ezekiel’s deportation into exile. After the return from exile, Ezekiel’s prophecy would be related to another attack on Jerusalem.

## Gog’s Defeat

The utter and total defeat of Gog and his allies, whose troops are buried in mass graves (Ezek. 38:14–39:20), suggests that these enemies from the distant regions of the earth will never again threaten God’s people. The stage is set for Yahweh’s return to Israel and to his temple (Ezek. 43:1–7).

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## The Fulfillment of the Gog Prophecy

Josephus interpreted Ezekiel’s writings as a reference to the Scythians who invaded the Middle East around 630 b.c.<sup>15</sup> Later Jewish texts connect Ezekiel’s prophecy with the Messiah who will help Israel vanquish Gog and his allies—interpreted not as nations in Asia Minor and adjacent areas but as the nations generally—“at the end of the days.”<sup>16</sup> Some have connected Ezekiel’s Gog prophecy with the events during the time of Esther (during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus, probably Xerxes I who ruled from 486 to 465 b.c. when Israel’s enemies wanted to plunder the Jews, only to be slaughtered).<sup>17</sup> Others see Ezekiel’s Gog prophecy fulfilled during the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 b.c.) when the Jews in Judea were persecuted but eventually won an astounding victory under Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers. While not entirely impossible, if we do not press the details of Ezekiel’s Gog prophecy, these interpretations fail to account for the apparent connection of the victory over Gog with Yahweh’s total defeat of the forces that threaten Israel in connection with the building of a new temple (Ezekiel 40–48).

Prophecy writers who demand a literal fulfillment believe that Ezekiel’s Gog prophecy has not been fulfilled because none of these historical events had all the details of Ezekiel’s prophecy. They expect a yet future fulfillment, debating whether it will occur before, during, or after “the Tribulation” or at the end of the millennium.<sup>18</sup> If a literal interpretation is demanded, it must be admitted that a literal fulfillment has become impossible. In Ezekiel’s prophecy, Gog and his allies fight on horses with swords, shields, and helmets (Ezek. 38:4–5, 15, 21; 39:20). In “literalist” interpretations of the Gog prophecy which anticipate a future invasion of Gog and Magog by a northern alliance,

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<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.123.

<sup>16</sup> *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Exodus 40:11; also see 3 *Enoch* 45:5 (fifth/sixth century A.D.).

<sup>17</sup> Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 12–15.

<sup>18</sup> LaHaye and Hindson, *Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary*, 191–92.

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horses become horsepower, arrows become guided missiles or atomic weapons.<sup>19</sup> One cannot have it both ways: either the fulfillment of Gog's invasion is "literal" in the literal sense of Ezekiel's description, complete with horses and swords and shields, or it is not intended to be taken literally. In this case, a fulfillment of the prophecy has to be sought in a historical period before the invention of gunpowder. Or, Ezekiel conveys a symbolic vision of God's ultimate victory over the enemies of his people.

It seems plausible, therefore, to interpret the Gog prophecy as Ezekiel's vision of the radicalized conflict between Yahweh and the nations in which Yahweh wins the final victory over the cosmic forces of chaos (represented by Gog and his allies).<sup>20</sup>

## Summary

The prophet Ezekiel prophesies that in the more distant future, seen from his "place" in history in the sixth century b.c., the conflict between the God of Israel and the evil in the world will come to a climax in which the nations who seek to harm God's people will be utterly and completely destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> More recent end-time writers (such as Rosenberg, *Epicenter*) identify Gog and his allies with an alliance of Islamic nations who invade Israel, introducing a religious element that is entirely absent from Ezekiel's prophecy.

<sup>20</sup> Thus Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, 2:429.

<sup>21</sup> Schnabel, E. J. (2011). *40 Questions about the End Times*. (B. L. Merkle, Ed.) (pp. 219–224). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional.