

EZEKIEL 38 AND 39
Part I
by Thomas Ice

The battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is one of the most debated items in the area of biblical prophecy. Commentator Ralph Alexander said, "One of the perennial enigmas of Biblical prophecy has been the Gog and Magog event described in Ezekiel 38 and 39."¹ Almost every aspect of this ancient prophecy has been disputed, including whether it was fulfilled in the past or is still a future prophecy. Who are the peoples involved and do they relate to modern nations? How should we understand the weapons that are described? If a future event, when does it take place on the prophetic timeline? This is why I want to attempt an in-depth analysis of this important passage.

REAL OR ONLY IMAGINED?

One of the first things to handle when dealing with this or any Biblical prophecy is whether or not the God and Ezekiel intended to communicate a message that would be fulfilled in history. Since I believe that all Biblical prophecy intends historical fulfillment, there is nothing in this passage that would suggest differently. However, there is a school of interpretation, primarily among liberal scholars, that does not believe that the Ezekiel passage (or most prophetic Scripture) was meant to give a prophecy that would be fulfilled in history. This view is often known as idealism. The *idealist* does not believe either that the Bible indicates the timing of events or that we can determine their timing in advance. Therefore, idealists see prophetic passages as a teacher of great truths about God to be applied to our present lives. Idealists believe that the Bible uses prophetic passages to present principles between "a message that is universal and abiding. That message is not bound to any particular time or place even though these terms and expressions represent scenes taken from countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and other places in the Middle East."²

One who advocates a non-historical, idealist approach to Bible prophecy is Brent Sandy in his *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*.³ Typical of those under the spell of today's postmodern influence, Sandy exalts the interpretative process at the expense of arriving at a definite theology. Sandy's doublespeak is evident in the following:

The limitations of prophecy as a source of information for the future were demonstrated with examples from various prophetic parts of Scripture. It became evident that the predicative element of prophecy is more translucent than transparent. Prophecy is always accurate in what it intends to reveal, but rarely does it reveal information so that we may know the future in advance. Figures of speech function to describe not the details of what is going to happen but the seriousness of what is going to happen.⁴

So typical of those evangelicals who want to assign to biblical prophecy some special category or literary genre they call "apocalyptic," Sandy says, "interpreters must withhold judgment on many particulars of prophecy, unambiguous prophetic themes abound throughout Scripture, centering on the second coming of Jesus the Messiah."⁵ Sandy concludes, "if my conclusions about the language of prophecy and apocalyptic are correct, all systems of eschatology are subject to reconsideration."⁶ It should not be surprising, since Sandy is beholden to a postmodern mindset that he believes that the

correct understanding of the Bible's eschatological message will be composed of a blend of all the different prophetic views.⁷

One thing is clear about Sandy and the emerging evangelical "scholarly" view is that prophecy should not be taken literally, as has been done by dispensationalists. And they say we know this, primarily, because the prophetic portions of the Bible are apocalyptic, which were not intended to be taken literally. They may not be able to tell you what these sections of Scripture actually mean, but this one thing they know: prophecy should not be interpreted literally (that is according to the historical, grammatical approach) and prophecy is primarily about ideas and principles, not future historical events. "The 'mythical' understanding of these nations and the prophecy that involves them fails to convey to us," notes Jon Ruthven, "the sense of a concrete, literal event that seems justified by what is described in Ezekiel—especially to chapters 38–39."⁸

VARIOUS TIMING VIEWS

Prophecy expert, Mark Hitchcock notes: "By far, the most controversial issue in Ezekiel 38–39 is the setting or timing of the invasion. The specific time of the invasion in Ezekiel 38 is difficult to determine."⁹ There is no doubt that this is the greatest problem to overcome in our understanding of this passage. In fact, the various positions are labeled according to one's view concerning when these events will be fulfilled.

Among those who believe that the Gog-led invasion is historical, some believe that it has already occurred. For example, preterist Gary says, "The battle in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is clearly an ancient one . . ."¹⁰ When does he believe that this battle took place? Amazingly, DeMar and only a handful of commentators insist that Ezekiel 38 and 39 was fulfilled by the events described in Esther 9, occurring in about 473 B.C. in the days of Queen Esther of Persia.¹¹ The other views that take this invasion as a historical event place its occurrence in a time future to our day.

Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their best-selling novel *Left Behind*,¹² place this invasion of Israel right before the rapture of the church. The strength of this position is that it accounts for the burning of the weapons of war for seven years as mentioned in Ezekiel 39:9. However, Tim LaHaye has told me personally that even though they represented a pre-rapture position on Ezekiel 38 and 39 in their novel, he tends to place it after the rapture but before the tribulation.

The next view, which is the one I hold at this time, is that it will happen after the rapture but before the tribulation. It will be during the interval of days, weeks, months or years between the rapture and the start of the seven-year tribulation.¹³ This view also accounts for the seven years of Ezekiel 39:9. I have always thought that one of the strengths of this view is the way in which it could set the stage for the Biblical scenario of the tribulation. If the tribulation is closely preceded by a failed regional invasion of Israel, in other words Russia and her Muslim allies, then this would remove much of the Russian and Muslim influence currently in the world today and allow a Euro-centric orientation to arise. So the tribulation is preceded by a failed regional attack on Israel and this is why the tribulation ends with all the peoples of the world attacking Israel at Armageddon. It could also set the stage for the rebuilding of the Temple as a result of Islamic humiliation.

Perhaps the most widely held view put forth within dispensational literature is that this invasion will take place around the middle of the seven-year tribulation. This view often identifies Ezekiel 38 and 39 with an invasion of the king of the north in Daniel

11:40. Another major argument is based upon the statement that Israel will be “living securely, all of them” (Ezek. 38:8), which is the result of the false peace brought by the anti-Christ in the first half of the tribulation. This view has a lot in its favor.

A significant number of Bible teachers believe that the Gog and Magog event is synonymous with what the Book of Revelation calls the Campaign of Armageddon (Rev. 16:16).¹⁴ Since Armageddon is a huge invasion of Israel around the time of the second coming and the invasion of Israel described in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is said to be in “the latter years” (Ezek. 38:8) and “in the last days” (Ezek. 38:16), then they must be the same event. A similar, but slightly different view is that the invasion occurs after the second coming of Christ, during the interlude between the tribulation and the start of the millennium. The main argument for this view is that Israel would be dwelling in peace (Ezek. 38:8).

The last major view is that the battle of Ezekiel 38 and 39 will occur at the end of the millennium. The basis for this view is significant since Revelation 20:7–9 speaks of a conflict at the end of the millennium when Satan is released. Verse 8 says, “(Satan) will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corner of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war . . .” The strength of this view is obvious, Gog and Magog are specifically mentioned in the text.

In our next installment I will begin a systematic study of Ezekiel 38 and 39 as we examine the issue that will help us understand our Lord’s intended meaning of this great prophecy. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Ralph H. Alexander, “A Fresh Look At Ezekiel 38 and 39,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 17 (Summer, 1974), p. 157.

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary, Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 43.

³ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

⁴ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 197.

⁵ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 203.

⁶ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 206.

⁷ Sandy, *Plowshares*, p. 250, f.n. 14.

⁸ Jon Mark Ruthven, *The Prophecy That Is Shaping History: New Research on Ezekiel’s Vision of the End* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2003), p. 30.

⁹ Mark Hitchcock, *Iran The Coming Crisis: Radical Islam, Oil, And The Nuclear Threat* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2006), p. 178.

¹⁰ Gary DeMar, “Ezekiel’s Magog Invasion: Future or Fulfilled?” *Biblical Worldview Magazine*, vol. 22 (December, 2006), p. 5.

¹¹ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), pp. 12–15.

¹² Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), pp. 9–15.

¹³ Arnold Fruchtenbaum defends this view in *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), pp. 106–25.

¹⁴ This view is held by Dave Hunt, *How Close Are We?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992).