

# Ezekiel

## Week 20

### *The Defeat of Gog*

#### *Chapter 38-39*

#### **Introduction**

Chs 38–39 Answers this question: Will God’s “servant David,” the one King of one nation, actually rule forever and put into effect an everlasting covenant (37:22–26), or will sinister forces combine to destroy His reign of peace? In order to allay fears for all time, God shows Ezekiel the very end of time. A literalistic interpretation of such prophecies, which identifies the foes with individual nations on the historical scene, is not only highly speculative but also does violence to biblical imagery.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The Identity of Gog**

The biblical Gog is no mere historical figure, but rather a fear-inducing figure of cosmic proportions; and to make matters worse, he is not alone. He is the commander-in-chief (*nēšîr rōʿš*) of a coalition of forces gathered from the ends of the earth. He himself is from the land of Magog, and he rules over Meshech-Tubal. His allies include Persia, Cush, and Put (38:5), along with Gomer and Beth Togarmah (38:6). It is no coincidence that together these make up a total of seven nations, and it is significant that they are gathered from the uttermost parts of the world known to the prophet. Meshech-Tubal, Gomer, and Beth Togarmah come from the north, Put (northwest Egypt) and Cush (southern Egypt) from the south and west, while Persia is to the east of Judah.<sup>2</sup>

One interesting interpretation identifies Gog as a cryptogram for Babel or Babylon. This identification bears some consideration, especially since Babylon was omitted from the nations mentioned in the messages of judgment of 25:1–32:32. It is strange that Ezekiel would omit the one nation that had to be judged to secure the release of the Hebrew captives. Jeremiah’s prophecy against Babylon, for example, devoted more attention to its destruction than any other foreign nation condemned in his prophecies against the nations. He was convinced that God would use Babylon to chasten Judah and encouraged submission and cooperation (Jer 37:1–10; 39:11–14; 40:1–12). Yet he devoted two lengthy chapters totalling 110 verses (50:1–51:64) to a description of the total, massive destruction of Babylon. This prophecy of the fall of Babylon was not fulfilled when it fell to the Medo-Persians in 539 b.c. (Dan 5:1ff.). Why then did Ezekiel omit any hint of the destruction of Babylon in his messages against foreign nations in 25:1–32:32? The answer may lie here in chaps. 38 and 39. These chapters may be a cryptic catalog of the details of the fall of Babylon (see “Messages against the Nations” chart, p. 244).

Using Gog as a symbol of Babylon would fit the apocalyptic nature of these chapters. If such is the case, Babylon itself is being used to represent the nations of the world aligned against God’s people in the end times (cf. Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:1–18; 18:2–24). Ezekiel was

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<sup>1</sup> Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1372). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 448). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

concerned not about the destruction of sixth century b.c. Babylon but of the Babylon of the last days, whose destruction would be necessary to facilitate the messianic restoration of Israel that he envisioned in 33:1–37:28. The establishment of the messianic kingdom is the theme of this entire section on restoration. In order for that restoration to take place, Babylon would have to be overthrown. This means Ezekiel 38–39 would be an appropriate prelude to visions of the messianic kingdom. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this is exactly what follows in chaps. 40–48.

If this identification is correct, Gog was a symbol of the forces of Antichrist foreseen by Ezekiel. If the word Gog is from the Sumerian *gug* (meaning “darkness”), that would be additional support for treating him as a symbol of “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30), an appropriate designation that fits the character of the ruler of end-time Babylon. Babylon’s control of Israel began in 605 b.c. when Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and forced Jehoiakim to submit as his vassal. Babylon was overthrown exactly seventy years later in one night at the hands of the Medo-Persians (see Dan 5; Isa 41:2; 44:28; 45:1–7). But this would not be the end of Babylon. The kingdom that began under Nimrod (Gen 10:8–10) as a byword for godless government would resurface in the last days under the direction of the wicked prince Gog, and it would be defeated. His defeat would be incontrovertible evidence that the Messiah’s reign of peace and security for his people had begun.

One additional clue to this cryptographic identity of Gog as “Mystery Babylon” (Rev 17:5) lies with the role of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon’s rise to power. His father, Nabopolassar, engineered the overthrow of Assyria to establish Babylon as the dominant world power of that time. He did so by forming an alliance with the Median king Cyaxares. With the help of the Medes and Scythians he captured Nineveh in 612 b.c. The alliance that made this great military feat possible was sealed by the marriage of Nabopolassar’s son, crown prince Nebuchadnezzar, to Amytis, the daughter of Cyaxares. This gave Nebuchadnezzar a direct link to the very provinces identified as allies of Gog: Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, and Togarmah (38:6).

Ezekiel was most concerned about the final form of the Babylonian Empire, “Mystery Babylon,” which he called “Gog.” Using subtle cryptic clues, he identified Gog as the future Babylon that would appear in the last days to oppose God and his people. The anti-God kingdom Ezekiel saw is similar to the picture in Rev 16:13–14 of “Mystery Babylon” gathering all nations against God and his people.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Invasion**

In the progression of Ezekiel’s prophetic messages the reader is surprised at first by this announcement of a coming battle. One of the occurring themes of the previous chapters is that following the Lord’s restoration and reformation of Israel they will “no longer” be victims of the nations or any other calamities but will live securely in their land “forever” (cf. 34:25–29; 36:12–15, 30; 37:25–28). When one realizes that the land the Lord will bring Gog’s army against is Israel’s (vv. 8–9), there is considerable confusion. The solution must

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<sup>3</sup> Cooper, L. E. (1994). *Ezekiel* (Vol. 17, pp. 331–333). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

be that a major purpose for the invasion will be to demonstrate just how secure Israel will be in their land.<sup>4</sup>

This description of the state of God's people underlines the motives of the evil alliance. They find no justification for their assault in Israel's behavior. Israel is at rest, trusting in the Lord, not in alliances with foreign nations. In that trust she is prospering, experiencing the blessings of covenant faithfulness. Yet trust in the Lord does not eliminate the possibility of conflict. The ungodly, who dwell in "the far north" (38:6, 15; 39:2), will cast greedy eyes in Israel's direction, encouraged by the traders from east and west (38:13), and will advance against them like an overshadowing cloud (38:9, 16).<sup>5</sup>

The army would be allied with Persia (Iran), Cush (Ethiopia), Put (Lybia), Gomer (Armenia), and Togarmah (also Armenia). These nations would be called to battle "after many days" and "in future years" against Israel (v. 8). Use of phrases such as "the Day of the Lord," "in that day," "in the latter days," "in future years" were all typical of eschatological passages. These prophetic idioms, "after many days" and "in future years," were used nowhere else in Ezekiel and clearly mark this passage as an eschatological reference to end-time events. The future is suggested again in the expression in v. 16, "in days to come," which is more literally "in the latter days."<sup>6</sup>

The point of Ezekiel 38–39 is not that at some distant point in future history these *particular* nations will oppose Israel, while others (America? Britain?) will rally to her aid. Rather, these seven nations from the ends of the earth, from all four points of the compass, represent symbolically a supreme attempt by the united forces of evil to crush the peace of God's people. This, not coincidentally, is the interpretation given to "Gog and Magog" in Revelation 20:8: They represent "the nations in the four corners of the earth," whom Satan gathers for the final battle against God's people, the city he loves. Their defeat in Revelation is the prerequisite for the establishment of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city of Revelation 21, which itself has many points of contact with Ezekiel's visionary temple in Ezekiel 40–48.<sup>7</sup>

### **God's Wrath Against Gog**

When God allows Gog to come against Israel, several events will take place. First, the hot, fiery anger of God will be released (v. 18). Second, there will be an earthquake of major force (vv. 19–20). An earthquake sometimes was a sign of a theophany, but the "day of the Lord" was also a theophany. Third, the sword will be summoned against Gog. The attack is a picture of confusion and demoralization in which the army of Gog attacks itself (v. 21). Fourth, other signs of divine judgment follow, including rain, hailstones, blood, and burning sulfur that will descend on Gog and the many nations who fight with him (v. 22). These are obvious signs of a supernatural divine judgment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cooper. 334

<sup>5</sup> Duguid. 449

<sup>6</sup> Cooper. 334-335

<sup>7</sup> Duguid. 453-454

<sup>8</sup> Cooper. 340

## **The Final Battle and the Defeat of Gog**

The oracle is undated and leaves no clues as to any historical occasion that might have elicited it. Closely related is the question of the positioning of the sermon at just this point in the book, especially because initially it appears to interrupt the sequence of chapters 33–37 and 40–48. Those earlier chapters promise the advent of the new David, Jesus Christ, and the regeneration of God’s people (e.g., 34:23–25; 36:25–28; 37:22–28). The later chapters (40–48) give us an eschatological picture of a golden age of everlasting peace, security, and proper worship in the transformed promised land—the new heavens and new earth—parallel to the portrait of the eternal state in Revelation 21–22.

But here in Ezekiel 38–39 we have a description of a fearsome, climactic battle between the forces of evil and the people of God, who have already been redeemed and restored (e.g., “gathered” in 38:8; “peaceful ... resettled ... regathered” in 38:11–12). If we read Ezekiel 33–48 as presenting a chronological end-time sequence, this means that after the first advent of Jesus Christ (as prophesied in chapters 33–37), those who believe in him will be raised to new spiritual life already now. Thus the resurrection in Ezek 37:1–14 corresponds to dying and rising with Christ in Baptism (Rom 6:1–4) and to the “first resurrection” in Rev 20:5–6. Baptized believers in Christ have already undergone this spiritual “first resurrection,” though we still await the bodily resurrection at the return of Christ.

Yet during this N[ew] T[estament] era, the powers of darkness are still present on earth and they continue to wage war against the church. Eventually they will mount a final attack against God’s redeemed in Christ, but they will be overthrown (Ezekiel 38–39) before the dawning of the eternal state (Ezekiel 40–48).... This chronological sequence fits the common biblical picture that persecution shall increase in intensity during the present church age and reach its peak before the parousia [coming, presence] of Christ. That biblical picture is presented by Christ himself in Matthew 24 and is the gist of the entire book of Revelation. Thus both Ezekiel 38–39 and Rev 20:7–9, which alludes to these Ezekiel chapters by way of “Gog and Magog” (Rev 20:8), describe the warfare that Satan and his minions now wage against the church, with a final all-out battle coming before the end.

Therefore Ezekiel 33–48 supports the traditional understanding of biblical eschatology. In particular, chapters 38–39 offer no support for any of the complicated dispensational schemes involving a seven-year tribulation and a rapture of believers to be followed by an earthly reign of Christ on the present earth for a literal millennium.

*Horace D. Hummel, Ezekiel 21–48, CC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 1099–1103.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Engelbrecht. 1375