

Ezekiel's Magog Invasion Future or Fulfilled?

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CHUCK MISSLER WRITES IN HIS BOOK *Prophecy 20/20* that “the apparent use of nuclear weapons has made this passage [Ezekiel 38 and 39] appear remarkably timely, and some suspect that it may be on our horizon.”¹ Prophecy writers for nearly 2000 years have made similar claims, of course without the reference to “nuclear weapons.” They claimed to hold the prophetic key to interpretation based on who the leading political power was in their day. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Gog referred to the Goths and Moors. In the seventh century, it was the Huns. By the eighth century, the Islamic empire was making a name for itself, so it was a logical candidate. By the tenth century, the Hungarians briefly replaced Islam. But by the sixteenth century, the Turks and Saracens seemed to fit the Gog and Magog profile with the Papacy thrown in for added prophetic juice. In the seventeenth century, Spain and Rome were the end-time bad guys.² In the nineteenth century, Napoleon was Gog leading the forces of Magog-France.³ For most of the twentieth century, Communist Russia was the logical pick with its military aspirations, its atheistic founding, and its designation of being “far north” of Israel. A study of history will show that when the headlines change, the interpretation of the Bible changes, especially when it comes to the Magog battle. The interpretive history of Ezekiel 38 and 39 is prime evidence that modern-day prophecy writers are not “profiling the future through the lens of Scripture” but through the ever-changing headlines of the evening news.⁴



THE PROPHET EZEKIEL BY MICHELANGELO, THE SISTINE CHAPEL 1508–1512

A lot has to be read into the Bible in order to make Ezekiel 38 and 39 fit modern-day military realities that include jet planes, “missiles,” and “atomic and explosive” weaponry. Anyone reading these two chapters for the first time will come away impressed with the notion that the events describe what we today would consider a battle fought a long time ago with weapons that fit the times. Those who claim to interpret the Bible literally have a problem on their hands.

If someone like Tim LaHaye is true to his claim of literalism, then the Russian attack he and Jerry Jenkins describe in *Left Behind* should be a literal representation of the actual battle events as they are depicted in Ezekiel 38 and 39. There should be a one-to-one correspondence between Ezekiel's description of the battle and what they describe will take place. This conclusion is based on LaHaye's own interpretive methodology:

The best guide to Bible study is “The Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation.” To depart from this rule opens the student to all forms of confusion and sometimes even heresy. When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every

word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.⁵

LaHaye insists that the interpreter is to “take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.” We learn from LaHaye

that the prophecies found in Ezekiel 38 and 39 “are among the most specific and easy to understand in the prophetic

word.”⁶ If this is true, then why do LaHaye and others who follow his interpretive methodology

force a less than literal interpretation on Ezekiel’s two-chapter prophecy?

The same question can be asked of other prophecy writers. As Joel Miller argues, “A better hermeneutic than ‘The Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation’ is ‘Scripture Interprets Scripture Better than do Newspapers.’”⁷

An Ancient Battle with Ancient Weapons

The battle in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is clearly an ancient one or at least one fought with ancient weapons. *All* the soldiers are riding horses (38:4, 15; 39:20). These horse soldiers are “wielding swords” (38:4), carrying “bows and arrows, war clubs and spears” (39:3, 9). The weapons are made of wood (39:10), and it is these abandoned weapons that serve as fuel for “seven years” (39:9). But LaHaye describes a highly technological future when the antichrist rises to power to rule the world. “A wave of technological innovation is sweeping the planet.... The future wave has already begun. We cannot stop it.... [T]he Antichrist will use some of this technology to control the world.”⁸ How does this assessment of the immediate future square with the seven-year tribulation period when Israelites “take wood from the field” and “gather firewood from the forests”? (39:10). There is nothing in the context that would lead the reader to conclude that horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears mean anything other than horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears. And what is the Russian air force after? Gold, silver, cattle, and goods (38:12–13). In what modern war can anyone remember armies going after cattle? How much cattle does Israel have? Certainly not enough to feed the Russians.

What happened to LaHaye’s “golden rule of biblical interpretation”? He told us that not to follow this rule would lead to “all forms of confusion and sometimes even heresy.” To help readers of the *Left Behind* series “gain a clearer understanding of end-time prophecy,”⁹ LaHaye and Jenkins have written the non-fiction prophecy guide *Are We Living in the End Times?* This book includes excerpts from the *Left Behind* series. The fictional account is given non-fiction analysis from the authors. In many cases, however, the



analysis is incomplete. For example, in the twelve-page discussion of the battle described in Ezekiel 38 and 39, Jenkins and LaHaye never tell us how they were able to turn horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears into “war planes,” “intercontinental ballistic missiles,” “nuclear-equipped MiG fighter-bombers,”¹⁰ and “chunks of burning, twisted, molten steel smashing to the ground”¹¹ while maintaining a “literal interpretation” where “every word” is to be taken “at its primary, literal meaning.”

Chuck Missler attempts to get around the literal description of ancient war implements by claiming that the various Hebrew words used to describe them are “simply 2,500-year-old language

that could be describing a mechanized force.”¹² The word translated “horse,” “actually means *leaper*” that “can also mean bird, or even chariot-rider.” He tells us that the Hebrew word translated “sword” “has become a generic term for any weapon or destroying instrument.” In a similar way, “arrow” means “piercer” and “is occasionally used for thunderbolt” and could be “translated today as a missile.” “Bow’ is what launches the [missile].”¹³ Is Missler trying to tell us that when Ezekiel wrote “bow” and “arrow” he really meant a launching pad for a missile? To follow his interpretive methodology requires us to believe that the meaning of the Bible has been inaccessible to the people of God for nearly 2500 years. Notice that he says that these weapon descriptions “could be describing.” In order for Missler’s interpretation to work, these things “must mean” what he claims so that the events described by Ezekiel have no application to his own day. Missler breaks all the rules of exegesis in his interpretation of Ezekiel 38 and 39. In fact, he breaks his own interpretive rules:

The initial step in any textual analysis is *exegesis*: determining what the text actually says. This embraces such issues as translation, lexicography, and grammar. Fortunately, relatively few controversies we will encounter depend upon exegetical issues.¹⁴

There isn’t a lexicographer who would follow Missler’s exegetical methodology. It is so counter to every principle of Bible interpretation ever developed.



Ezekiel's Magog Invasion... continued

Contrary to Missler, all controversies “depend upon exegetical issues.”

Horses or Horsepower?

Any commentator writing prior to the invention of modern weaponry could interpret the descriptive battle of Ezekiel 38 and 39 literally since wars were still fought with clubs, spears, and bows and arrows. In order to account for an invasion that would use super-modern weapons like jets and “atomic and explosive” devices, the battle of “Gog and Magog” must be interpreted symbolically, a methodology that LaHaye, in principle, would seem to reject because of his adherence to a literal hermeneutic. Such an approach has always been a problem for modern interpreters. Some prophecy writers took the literal approach based on the way Russia used its cavalry in World War I.¹⁵ “[I]n terms of the use of horses, the Russians were said to be accumulating huge numbers of them in preparation for an invasion.¹⁶ Others, however, have suggested that Ezekiel’s description of military equipment should all be taken figuratively. For example,” quoting William L. Hull, “‘horses’ are a way of talking about the troops being ‘carried,’ irrespective of physical means, while the other equipment represents the only way in his time Ezekiel could communicate the powerful and well-equipped nature of the invaders.”¹⁷

Those who see this as an end-time battle in our future argue that Ezekiel could only describe such events in terms that he and his contemporary readers could understand. Mark Hitchcock takes this position:

Ezekiel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, spoke in language that the people of that day could

understand. If he had spoken of planes, missiles, tanks, and rifles, this text would have been nonsensical to everyone until the twentieth century.

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This “modernizing” of the weapons is not spiritualizing the text but rather understanding God’s



JOASH SHOOTING THE ARROW OF DELIVERANCE BY WILLIAM DYCE, 1844

Word in its historical context in light of the original audience.¹⁸

Thomas Ice and Hitchcock wrote something similar in their book *The Truth Behind Left Behind*.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Ezekiel spoke in language that the people of his day could understand. If he had spoken of MIG-29s, laser-fired missiles, tanks, and assault rifles, this text would have been nonsensical to everyone until the twentieth century.¹⁹

What happened to the “golden rule of interpretation”? Why would the people in Ezekiel’s day need to understand a prophecy if it wasn’t meant for them? Why would the Holy Spirit confuse the people of Ezekiel’s day and beyond for

2500 years and then confuse the generation it was meant for by describing a modern-day battle fought with ancient weapons? How do Hitchcock, Ice, and LaHaye *know* that this is what the Holy Spirit *really* means when the text is clear enough without any modern-day embellishment?

Consider how they argue against a literal interpretation: “The focus clearly is not the specific weapons that will be used by these invaders.”²⁰ The weapons may not be the passage’s “focus,” but they can’t be dismissed as inconsequential to the narrative. The weapons are part of the story from beginning to end, and if taken literally would negate the distant future scenario outlined by the authors. To show their inconsistency, Hitchcock and Ice criticize C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays for interpreting the list of nations as symbolic.²¹ “If this is true,” they write, “then why does Ezekiel take the time to specifically mention ten proper names?

Why be so exact? Why not just say that ‘a vast group of nations will invade’ if that’s what you mean?”²² I couldn’t agree more. Why is the text so exact in identifying what weapons are being used? Why not just say “a vast group of terrible and fierce weapons will be used”? The answer is obvious: The weapons are ancient because the battle is ancient. Those who first read the prophecy understood it, and we who read it today should also understand it the way it was given to Ezekiel.

LaHaye accuses critics of dispensationalism of “allegorizing” prophecy²³ when he and others do a complete rewrite of Ezekiel 38–39 to make it fit a contemporary setting. There is nothing in these two chapters that should lead any interpreter to consider that the weapons are anything but literal old-world fighting implements. 

