

# Where Do the Events of Ezekiel 38-39 Fit into the Prophetic Picture?

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The rise of Russia in a comparatively few years from an insignificant nation to a power feared because of her avowed purpose of global dominion, whose sway has been extended over a majority of the earth's population, whose political philosophy is rapidly dividing the world into Communist and anti-Communist camps, has given a renewed interest in and importance to the prophecy concerning Gog and Magog in the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters of Ezekiel. Consistently students of prophecy have understood that these chapters depict the invasion that sets off a global war. In the light of current events, when the populace of our nations hope for peace but expect and plan for war, it becomes a pressing question as to when the events described in those chapters will take place.

It is the purpose of this study to attempt to set forth the time at which the events in Ezekiel 38 and 39 will transpire. We shall do this by relating parallel Scriptures to this prophecy to formulate the complete picture of these events as given by revelation. We shall confine our investigation to this one question. We shall not concern ourselves with the identification of the nations described as participants, but assume the identification held by most Bible students and ably presented by Bauman (Louis S. Bauman, *Russian Events in the Light of Bible Prophecy*, pp. 17-38). In brief, the powers represented in these two chapters are: Magog, which is Russia, also referred to as Rosh; Meshech and Tubal, which are ancient tribal names, as Moscow and Tobolsk; Persia, as Iran; Cush and Put, possibly as Ethiopia and Libya in North Africa, but better as portions of Assyria; Gomer, as Germany; Togarmah, as Turkey; Sheba and Dedan, as Arab tribes or states surrounding Palestine; Tarshish, as Spain or possibly Great Britain.

Further, we shall not be primarily concerned with the events that are described in this portion, except as they will throw light on the problem of the time of the invasion. There is general agreement among Bible students concerning the outline of events. Russia is seen to make an alliance with Persia, Ethiopia, Libya, Germany, and Turkey (vv. 2, 5, 6). Because Israel seems like easy prey (v. 11), this confederation decides to invade the land for the spoil (v. 12). A protest is made at this invasion (v. 13), but it is unheeded.

The extent of this invasion must be learned from parallel passages, for Ezekiel omits the progress of the invasion, but, rather, describes the destruction of the invader on the mountains of Israel (39:2-4) as the result of divine intervention through a convulsion of nature (38:20-22). As a result five-sixths of the army is destroyed (39:2) and seven months are required in disposing of the dead (39:12), and seven years in disposing of the debris (39:9-10). The scene of this destruction is said to be on the mountains of Israel (39:2-4) and the time is in "the latter years" (38:8) and "the latter days" (38:16). This destruction is a sign to the nations (38:23) and to Israel (39:21-24).

### General Identification of the Time

It is obvious from the details given to us in the chapters under consideration that no invasion experienced in Israel's history is sufficient to be the fulfillment of this prophecy. There have been invasions in the past which wrought hardship on the land and the people, but none that

answer to the details presented here. This can refer only to some future event in Israel's experience. There are a number of considerations which support this view.

First, the context in the book makes a contribution. Chapter 37 deals with the restoration of the nation Israel to her land. This is pictured as a gradual process, for the prophet sees the process of bone being joined to bone, tied together with sinews, clothed with skin. It is a regathering in unbelief, for the prophet observes that there was no life in the assembled carcass (v. 8 ). Chapter 40 carries us on to the millennial age. Thus the movements of Gog and Magog are seen, in the context, to transpire between the time of the beginning of the restoration of Israel to the land and the millennial age.

Second, the specific statements in the passage give clues. Twice a reference is made in chapter 38 to a time element. It is said to take place "in the latter years" (v. 8 ) and "in the latter days" (v. 16 ). This has specific reference to the latter years and days of God's dealing with the nation Israel, which, since it is before the millennial age (Ezek 40), must place it during God's dealing with Israel in the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy.

Third, it will be after the beginning of the restoration, for Israel is seen to be inhabiting her own land (38:11 ). This would indicate that it takes place after the covenant made by the "prince that shall come" of Daniel 9:27.

Fourth, it will be connected with Israel's conversion, which is obviously future, for the destruction of the invader is a sign to that nation, which opens its eyes to the Lord (39:22 ). Since the final removal of the nation's blindness does not come until the second advent, this prophecy must have a definite relation to that event.

Fifth, the indication that the land will be reforested (39:10 ) confirms this conclusion, for Israel has always been dependent on other sources of supply for her lumber (cf. 1 Kings 5:1-10).

It is concluded, then, from the passage itself, that the events herein described must take place in the future, at a time when God is again dealing with Israel as a nation.

### **The Time in Relation to Specific Events**

The invasion described by Ezekiel has been related to nearly every major prophetic event as to its time. It is our purpose now to examine some of these positions in order to determine as carefully as possible just when this event will transpire.

*The invasion takes place prior to the rapture of the church.* Such is the exposition taken by David L. Cooper, who says: "...It is utterly impossible for one to locate the fulfillment of this prediction after the Millennial Age. It cannot be placed in the beginning of the Millennium, nor at the end of the tribulation. It must, therefore, be located before the tribulation because there is no other place for it to occur since the three other suggested dates are impossible.... There will be a time between now and the beginning of the tribulation when the Jews will be dwelling in the Land in unwallied cities and will be at rest" (David L. Cooper, *When Gog's Armies Meet the Almighty*, pp. 80-81).

We feel that this is an impossible thesis from several considerations: First, the New Testament teaching of the imminence of the rapture makes it impossible that an event such as this must first be fulfilled.

Second, the context of the prophecy itself states that this will take place "in the latter years" (v. 8 ) and "in the latter days" (v. 16 ). Since this prophecy is addressed to Israel, it must be their

years and days being referred to in the prophecy. Because Israel and the church are two distinct groups with which God is dealing, it is impossible to make Israel's latter years apply to the latter years of the church, as it would do if this is fulfilled prior to the rapture.

Third, as far as we can determine, Israel will not gain any title to the land, nor have the right to return to it, until the "prince that shall come" makes a covenant with her (Dan 9:27). Israel is said to be out of the land and Jerusalem trodden down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:24). It would be necessary, according to this theory, to maintain either that the covenant which gives Israel a false peace was made prior to the rapture or that the times of the Gentiles end at the rapture. Such is not the presentation of the Word.

*The invasion takes place at the end of the tribulation.* Louis S. Bauman, after quoting Daniel 11:44–45, writes: "...Who is the foe he so furiously meets and so ferociously destroys? It cannot be Israel, for Israel is not to be destroyed and utterly swept away. Moreover, God would never 'call a sword' to destroy and 'utterly sweep away' Israel. The foe is evidently to come 'out of the east and out of the north'—a description not of the little strip of land known as Palestine, but a vast confederacy of nations 'out of the east and out of the north.' If Israel is not the foe whose activities will suddenly infuriate the Antichrist, then, pray, who may that foe be? The revelation of God reveals only one possibility—*Gog and his allied hordes*, for they are they who are to if all upon the mountains of Israel' (Ezek 39:4), and to be utterly swept away into 'the realms of Pluto'" (Bauman, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-75). There are many Bible students who join Bauman in this interpretation of the time element. However, there seem to be difficulties in this position which makes it impossible to accept it.

First, the passage in Ezekiel does not mention a battle. The destruction there is at the hand of the Lord through the convulsion of nature (38:20–23 ). Even though the sword of verse 21 should be proved to be a nation, yet the Lord is seen to be the agent in this destruction rather than a destruction through a war. In the conflagration of Armageddon there is a great battle fought in which the King of kings emerges as the victor.

Second, in Ezekiel the invasion is by the king of the north with his allies, which are limited in number. In Zechariah 14 and Revelation 19 all the nations of the earth are seen to be gathered together for the conflagration.

Third, in Ezekiel the destruction takes place on the mountains of Israel (39:2–4 ). The events of Armageddon are said to take place at Jerusalem (Zech 12:2; 14:2 ), at the valley of Jehoshaphat (Joel 3:12) and Edom (Isa 63:1).

Fourth, in Ezekiel Israel is said to be dwelling in her land in peace and safety (38:11 ). We know from Revelation 12:14–17 that Israel is not going to dwell in the land in peace and safety during the latter half of the seventieth week, but will be the special target of Satan's attack.

Thus we conclude that the invasion cannot be connected with the events of Zechariah 14 and Revelation 19.

*The invasion takes place at the beginning of the millennium.* This view is presented by Arno C. Gaebelin, who says: "At what time does this invasion take place? We find the answer in the text. The statement is made in verse eight that Gog and Magog and the other nations with them invade the land 'that is brought back from the sword, and is gathered out of many people;' they come 'against the mountains of Israel....' In verse eleven the evil purpose of the invader is made

known.... From all this we learn that the invasion takes place at the time when the Lord has brought back His people and resumed His relationship with the remnant of Israel. The invasion will happen some time after the beastly empire with its beasthead...and the false prophet, the personal Antichrist...have been dealt with in judgment.... Micah tells us: 'And this man (Christ) shall be the peace when the Assyrian shall come into the land' (verse 5 ). All this confirms the story of Ezekiel xxxviii ” (Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Prophet Ezekiel*, pp. 252-55).

While the Scriptures cited may seem to prove the thesis stated above, we believe that there are arguments which prove this is an impossible explanation.

First, Ezekiel tells us that the land will be defiled by reason of the dead bodies for seven months (39:12 ). Such a picture seems impossible in view of the cleansing to be effected by the return of the Messiah.

Second, in Jeremiah 25:32–33 it is stated that the Lord will destroy all the wicked of the earth at His return. This is further amplified in Revelation 19:15–18. It seems impossible to think of such a horde as described in Ezekiel escaping the destruction at His coming to rise up against Him shortly.

Third, in Matthew 25:31–46 all Gentiles are brought before the Judge to determine who will enter the millennium. Since no unsaved person, whether Jew or Gentile, will enter that kingdom, it is impossible to think of such an apostasy of saved persons who would fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel.

Fourth, Isaiah 9:4–5 predicts the destruction of all weapons of war after the millennium begins. Where would the armies of the king of the north secure their armament in the light of Isaiah's prediction?

Fifth, Isaiah 2:1–4 states that wars will cease with the advent of Christ and the institution of the millennium.

Sixth, according to Revelation 20:1–3, Satan will be bound at the beginning of the millennium and thus would not be operative to generate such a movement against Israel.

Seventh, the proponents of this theory have failed to see that God is beginning to deal with the nation Israel at the beginning of the seventieth week after the translation of the church. That nation is being brought back into her land (Ezek 38:11; 37:1–28 ) although in unbelief, and to prepare that nation through discipline for the coming Messiah. Thus Micah may rightly say that “this man [Christ] shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land” (5:5 ), even though these events take place before the second advent of Christ. Micah's prophecy does not make the visible presence of Christ necessary, but does promise His protection.

*The invasion takes place at the end of the millennium.* Those who hold to this position contend that the Gog and Magog of Ezekiel and that of Revelation 20:8 are the same. This seems to be an impossibility from the following considerations:

First, Ezekiel mentions only a northern coalition as being engaged in the invasion. In Revelation all the nations of the earth are gathered together.

Second, in Ezekiel there is no specific mention made of the instrumentality of Satan, nor of his being bound a thousand years prior to this invasion, while both things are emphasized in the Revelation account.

Third, the context in Ezekiel shows that this invasion is before the institution of the millennium. In Revelation the millennium has been in existence for a thousand years.

Fourth, in Ezekiel the bodies of the slain require the labor of seven months to dispose of the dead (39:12). In Revelation 20:9 the slain are said to be “devoured” by fire, so that no disposal is necessary.

Fifth, in Ezekiel the invasion is seen to be followed by the millennium (ch. 40–48). In Revelation this movement is followed by the new heaven and the new earth. Certainly the new earth could not conceivably be corrupted by unburied corpses for seven months. Thus, these considerations make it impossible to accept this theory as to the time of the invasion.

*The invasion takes place at the middle of the seventieth week.* We should like to present several considerations which may indicate that it is the invasion of the land of Palestine by the king of the north which sets off the Satanic attack against the people with whom God is dealing, the nation Israel, as recorded in Revelation 12:14–17.

First, the invasion takes place at a time when Israel is dwelling in her own land (Ezek 38:8). There is no indication that Israel will be entitled to occupy her own land until the time of the covenant by the “prince that shall come” of Daniel 9:27. Evidently that one, because of the authority invested in him as the head of the revived Roman Empire, seeks to settle the Arab-Israeli dispute by giving Israel the right to occupy the land. The invasion will come sometime after this covenant is confirmed.

Second, the invasion takes place when Israel is dwelling in peace in the land (Ezek 38:11). Those who believe that this invasion takes place at the beginning of the millennium interpret this peace as the peace promised by the Messiah. There is nothing in the text here to indicate that this is the true Messianic peace. It rather seems to be the false peace that has been guaranteed Israel by the covenant, which is called “your agreement with hell” in Isaiah 28:18. Israel, as yet, is in unbelief for the nation will not be a believing nation until after the second advent of Christ. This regathering is described in Ezekiel 37 and the lifeless condition of the nation is clearly indicated in verse 8. Thus we conclude from these considerations that Israel is being brought back into the land with a view to her discipline for preparation for her Messiah. Israel could not be said to be at peace at the end of the tribulation period, for the land has been destroyed by invasion (Zech 14:1–3) and the people scattered (Zech 13:8–9). Yet, the nation could be dwelling in relative peace in the land in the first half of the week. Cooper says: “It is altogether possible that the first judgments of the tribulation may not affect Palestine so as to destroy the beauty and prosperity of the land” (David L. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 84).

Third, Ezekiel uses two expressions which may give an indication as to the time of this invasion. In verse 8 the invasion is said to be in the “latter years” and in verse 16 in the “latter days” of Israel’s history. This, of course, can have no reference to the “latter days” of the church age, for God is dealing with Israel in His divine economy at this time.

There are several similar expressions used which may need clarification at this point. The term *last day* is an expression which is related to the resurrection and judgment program (John 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:48). The term *last days* is related to the time of Israel’s salvation, glorification, and blessing in the kingdom age (Isa 2:2–4; Micah 4:1–7). The term *latter days* or *latter years* is related to the time prior to the “last days” or the millennial age, which would be the tribulation period. In Deuteronomy 4:27 Moses predicts a scattering because of unfaithfulness but promises a restoration. In verse 30 he says: “When thou art in tribulation, and

all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days....” Here the “latter days” are linked with tribulation. In Daniel 2:28 the prophet reveals “what shall be in the latter days” and then carries the king down to the final form of Gentile world power in the seventieth week. Again in Daniel 8:19, 23 in discussing the “indignation” the prophet speaks of the “latter time of their kingdom.” Also in Daniel 10:14 the term *latter days* is used in reference to the events preceding the millennial age.

It is concluded, then, since Ezekiel uses these expressions, that the events described by that prophet must take place within the seventieth week. Daniel 11:40 seems to have reference to the same period, for the prophet places these events “at the time of the end.” This expression seems to separate the event from “the end” itself.

Fourth, many of our commentators interpret Daniel 11:41 with reference to the occupation of the land of Palestine by the Beast. The event which causes the Beast to move in is the invasion of Palestine from the north by the king of the north (Dan 11:40). The covenant by this power in Daniel 9:27 has evidently guaranteed Israel an inviolate right to the land. Some event must be necessary to cause the Beast to abrogate his covenant. Since the covenant is said to be broken in the middle of the week (Dan 9:27) and the invasion from the north is seen to be the cause of the breaking of the covenant (Dan 11:41), we may conclude that this invasion takes place in the middle of the week.

Fifth, it is recognized that the events of the last half of the week are occasioned by the casting of Satan out of heaven (Rev 12:7–13). Evidently Satan’s first act in opposition to Israel is to move the king of the north to undertake this invasion. This is the beginning of a great campaign which begins in the middle of the week, and is continued until the destruction of Gentile powers at the return of the Lord. We might note here that the word translated “battle” in Revelation 16:14, according to Thayer’s lexicon, would better be translated “campaign,” for this signifies the movements of armies and is in contrast to an isolated battle. Our observation, then, is that God views all these movements of the armies as one great campaign which will be terminated by their destruction at the return of Christ. The campaign, if our interpretation be correct, was waged over a three-and-a-half-year period.

Sixth, in Isaiah 30:31–33; 31:8–9 ; and Micah 5:5 this invader from the north is called “the Assyrian.” As Assyria was a rod in the hand of the Lord previously, to punish Israel for her iniquity, so the Lord will take up a rod again for the same purpose, and this coming scourge will bear the same name because of the identity of His mission, to chasten Israel. Isaiah 28:18 speaks of the “covenant with death” and the “agreement with hell” for which God will punish Israel. This must refer to the covenant of Daniel 9:27, when Israel seeks peace from the hands of men rather than from the hand of the Lord. For this covenant, Isaiah says they will be punished “when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.” This scourge could hardly be the occupation by the Beast, for he was a party to the covenant, but must refer to the invasion by the “Assyrian” who will be used by the Lord to chasten Israel. The destruction of the Assyrian in the passages referred to seems to parallel the destruction of the armies of Gog in Ezekiel 38–39 , and they are considered parallel references. God could not punish Israel for this false covenant until after the covenant had been made. This seems to give further cause to believe that the invasion takes place in the middle of the week.

Seventh, in Revelation 7:4–17 we have a description of a multitude of Jews and of Gentiles who are saved during the tribulation period. One wonders, in the face of the intense persecution

against any believer, how any come to a knowledge of God in that time. In Ezekiel 38:23 we find that the destruction of the armies of Gog is used as a sign to the nations and in 39:21 reference is made to this same fact again. In 39:22 the same event is a great sign to Israel. Since the Book of Revelation pictures many people saved during the tribulation, and not just at the end of it, and since this event of Ezekiel's prophecy is used as a sign to bring many to the Lord, this event must have taken place before the end of the tribulation, and rather at some time within that period. We believe that this destruction, so obviously by the hand of the Lord, is an event used by Him to remove some of the blindness to bring many to a knowledge of the Lord.

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Eighth, in Revelation 13:7 the Beast is pictured as having a world-wide power. This is true at the time of his manifestation as a world ruler in the middle of the tribulation. The question arises: "How could the Beast have world-wide power if the power of the northern confederation has not been broken?" The fact that the Beast is in authority over the earth at the middle of the week lends support to the thesis that the king of the north has been destroyed. The result of this destruction would produce chaos in world conditions which would bring the nations together, as we see in Psalm 2, at which time the government is formed over which the Beast is the head. Since there could be no unity of nations as long as the king of the north is operative, this unity must be brought about after his destruction.

Ninth, in Revelation 19:20 we are told that the Lord will deal specifically with the Beast and the false prophet at His coming. All through the Old Testament and continuing through the New there appear three personages who will play a part in the final drama of the "times of the Gentiles," namely, the Beast, the false prophet, and the king of the north or the Assyrian. Each of these must be dealt with before the Lord can manifest His world-wide authority. There must be a reason why Revelation 19:20 records only the destruction of the two mentioned. It cannot be, as previously shown, that the third continues until after the millennium begins. It cannot be that the third escapes judgment. It must be, as is our contention, that he and his armies have already been dealt with on a previous occasion.

Tenth, the chronology of several important passages dealing with these events seems to support the thesis. In Isaiah 30 and 31 we have a description of the destruction of the king of the north. This is followed in chapters 33 and 34 with the destruction of all the nations, and then follows a description of the millennium in chapter 35. In the Book of Joel we find the same chronology. In chapter 2 there is the description of the invasion by the northern army (v. 20), followed by a description of the destruction of the nations in chapter 3, and then the millennium is described in 3:17–21.

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In both of these passages the chronology is the same. The armies of the north are destroyed at a separate time, in a distinct movement, prior to the destruction of the armies of the nations, which will be followed by the millennium. We believe the suggested answer to the time of the events in Ezekiel 38 and 39 as contained in this paper is the only answer consistent with the chronology of these extended passages.

## **Conclusion**

Consideration of the objections to making the events take place either at the end or beginning of the millennium, or at the end of the tribulation, or prior to the rapture, and our reasons for locating this prophecy in the middle of the week seem sufficient to establish the thesis that

Ezekiel 38 and 39 will be fulfilled in the middle of the tribulation period. Such a view would lead us to this chronology of events, briefly stated: (1) Israel makes a false covenant with the Beast and occupies her land in a false security (Dan 9:27; Ezek 38:8, 11). (2) Because of a desire for spoil at the expense of an easy prey, the king of the north, satanically motivated, invades Palestine (Ezek 38:11; Joel 2:1–21; Isa 10:12; 30:31–33 ; 31:8–9 ). (3) The Beast breaks his covenant with Israel and moves into the land (Dan 11:41–45). (4) The king of the north is destroyed on the mountains of Israel (Ezek 39:1–4). (5) The land of Palestine is occupied by the armies of the Beast (Dan 11:45). (6) At this time the great coalition of nations takes place that forms one government under the Beast (Ps 2:1–3; Rev 13:7). (7) The kings of the East are brought in against the armies of the Beast (Rev 16:12), evidently as a result of the dissolution of the government of Gog. (8) When the nations of the earth are gathered together around Jerusalem (Zech 14:1–3) and the Valley of Jehoshaphat (Joel 3:2), the Lord returns to destroy all Gentile world powers so that He might rule the nations Himself. This is further described in Zechariah 12:1–9; 14:1–4 ; Isaiah 33:1—34:17 ; 63:1–6 ; 66:15–16 ; Jeremiah 25:27–33; Revelation 20:7–10.