



WILL RUSSIA INVADE ISRAEL?

By Ralph Woodrow

In 1968 a Christian group sent a registered airmail letter to Russian Premier Aleksei Kosygin (who succeeded Nikita Khrushchev). “This is a *warning!*” the letter begins. “The God of the universe is nearly finished with taking your abuse. You and your comrades are destined *soon* to lead your nation into total disaster as reward for the evil you have perpetuated.” This warning was followed by verses and admonitions from Ezekiel 38 and 39.

Thousands of copies of this letter were printed in booklet form and distributed. Somewhere I still have a copy. What was supposed to happen “soon,” did not happen. Over 50 years have now passed. When Christians make claims and set dates about things that do not happen, it not only discredits them personally, it discredits things they stand for that are good and true.

From my teenage years I still have a book titled *When God Fights Russia*. It also cites Ezekiel 38. The author, Evangelist Velmer Gardner, wrote that Russia was going to come down to battle against Israel and “that day is *almost here.*” This was written in 1950.

Whenever there is a war or trouble involving the State of Israel, there are those who suppose Bible prophecy is being fulfilled. Speculation abounds. Bible prophecies that found fulfillment long ago, are given a futurist, present-day meaning. It even impacts the political views of some.

Let me say it up front: I do not believe Ezekiel 38 has anything to do with Russia invading the modern State of Israel. I will explain what I consider to be solid biblical reasons for this. But in so doing, it is not my purpose to belittle Christians who may see it some other way.

Ezekiel spoke of soldiers riding on horses, using weapons made of wood, and fighting with bows and arrows. As I see it, this describes an ANCIENT battle. But before we take a closer look, we will consider why some believe this is a prophecy about modern times.

First: The prophecy says this invasion would happen in the “latter years” or “latter days” (Ezek. 38:8, 16). The Hebrew word here translated “latter” (*Strong’s Concordance*, #319) simply means “later on.” It designated something to happen in the

future—future from when it was written. But **when** in the future is undefined.

Moses told Israel, “I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the *latter days*; because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger” (Deut. 31:29). Those “latter days” came some years later: “And it came to pass...they corrupted themselves...in following other gods...and the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel” (Judges 2:19, 20).

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about an image which symbolized certain events that would happen in the “latter days” (Dan. 2:28, 29). The image represented four successive world empires—all of which came into existence prior to Christ’s birth at Bethlehem. So, again, the expression “latter days” simply meant “later” from their point in time.

The temple which the Israelites built upon their return from the Babylonian Captivity was called the “**latter** temple,” as compared to the “**former**” temple before the Captivity (Hag. 2:9). Those who prophesied before the Captivity were referred to as “the **former** prophets” and the days before the captivity were spoken of as “the **former** days” (Zech 1:4; 7:7, 12; 8:11) implying that the days after the Captivity—in comparison—were the later or latter days. And there are other examples in Scripture.

According to the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the expressions used by Ezekiel simply mean “in the after (wards) of days,” “in the following days,” “in the course of time,” “in the future.”

Second: Another reason some believe Ezekiel’s battle is yet future, is because he described Israel as a people “brought out of the **nations**” (Ezek. 38:8). The argument goes something like this: At one time the Israelites were brought out of Egypt; later they were brought out of Babylon; but here they are brought forth out of the nations (plural). After the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D., they were scattered to the nations, becoming a nation again in 1948. Does this not require a modern-day fulfillment?

We are prone today to think of “nations” as large countries like the United States, Canada, Mexico, China, Brazil, Australia, India, etc. But in Scripture, even small groups or tribes of people were termed “nations”—more like what might call states or even counties. For one example, within the comparatively small land area of Canaan, there were “seven nations” (Acts 13:19).

The fact is: At the time of the Babylonian Captivity, Israelites were scattered to many “nations”—not just the city of Babylon. This is clearly stated right in the book of Ezekiel. “Israel...shall be carried away into captivity...when I scatter them among the **nations** and disperse them throughout the countries,” including Babylon, where their leader would be taken (Ezek. 12:10-15; 6:6-9). There can be no doubt that Israel was scattered among nations at the time of the Babylonian Captivity.

But there was also the promise that they would be gathered again from the nations—not in 1948 A.D.—but following the seventy-year captivity. “For thus says the LORD: After *seventy years* are completed at Babylon, I will visit you...and cause you to return to this place...I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the **nations** and from all the places where I have driven you...and I will bring you to the place from which I caused you to be carried away captive” (Jer. 29:10-14).

In view of these verses, Ezekiel’s mention of a people “brought out of the nations” (Ezek. 38:8; 39:28), does not require a modern-day fulfillment.

What, then, are reasons for believing that the battle of Ezekiel 38 pertained to Old Testament times and not modern times?

FIRST, the invading soldiers who make up the armies would be riding on HORSES! “Then you will come from your place...you and many people with you, **ALL OF THEM RIDING ON HORSES**, a great company and a mighty army” (Ezek. 38:15).

Horses were commonly used in ancient battles. Even up to comparatively recent times, there were nations that maintained small cavalry units—but *no more*. The *World Book Encyclopedia* (article: “Cavalry”) says: “The expense of maintaining horses and the greater speed and mobility of motorized units made horse cavalry obsolete by the mid-1900’s.”

Ezekiel’s prophecy not only mentions soldiers riding on horses—as though there might be (for some reason) a *few* soldiers riding on horses—it says: “**ALL of them riding on horses**”!

This means none are flying in airplanes. None are in helicopters. None are traveling in Jeeps. None are in tanks. None are in ships. None are in submarines. None are being transported in buses or trains. **ALL** are riding on horses!

As a young man, I read in a Christian magazine that “the Russians are buying up all the horses they can get their hands on!” This was proof, supposedly, that end-time events were quickly shaping up; that Russian soldiers would *soon* invade Israel riding on horses. The writer of the article probably sincerely believed this; he just didn’t know any better. I was young. I didn’t know any better, either.

Today, a person can fly from Moscow to Israel (Tel Aviv) in about four or five hours. (A military jet would be faster.) Let’s compare this with the time it would take on a horse. The distance by road from Moscow to Jerusalem is 2,259 miles. A horse with a rider can travel about 30 miles a day. At this rate, it would take 75 days to make the trip on a horse.

To those who teach Ezekiel 38 is a prophecy about the near future, we respectfully ask: Will major armies of the would revert back to using horses?

SECOND, Israel, at the time of this invasion, would be living in *peaceful* conditions. The enemy forces are pictured as saying: “I will go up to the land of *unwalled* villages; I will go to them who are at REST, that dwell SAFELY, *all* of them dwelling *without walls*, and having neither bars nor gates” (Ezek. 38:11).

This is not a picture of modern-day Israel.

In 1983, while on a tour of Israel with a group of pastors, our Jewish guide, in his 30s, told us he had already fought in three wars!

Within the Old Testament era, there were times when Israel enjoyed periods of rest and safety (2 Chron. 14:6; 1 Kings 4:25; Jer. 32:37). But that is not the case in the State of Israel today; it is one of the most troubled spots on earth!

If these conditions were to change, such changes would have to stand the test of time—over a period of *many* years—before anyone would be saying of Israel: “I will go to them that are at *rest*, that dwell *safely*”!

The setting described by Ezekiel was about a time when Israel would be living peacefully, “all of them dwelling without WALLS.” Conditions in Israel today are so insecure that the West Bank barrier, over 400 miles in length, has been built. Portions are a multi-layered fence system, while other sections are a 30-foot concrete wall. No one would refer to Israel today as “the land of unwalled villages”!



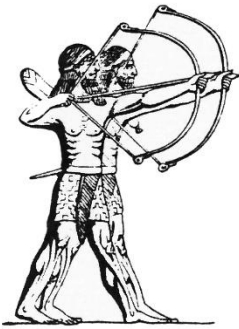
THIRD, we notice the *purpose* of this invasion against Israel. The enemy was to obtain, among other things, CATTLE! “And you will say...I will go up to the land...to take a spoil, and to take a prey...to carry away silver and gold, to take away CATTLE and goods, to take a great spoil” (Ezek. 38:11-13).

Dramatic sermons have portrayed the Russians coming against Israel to get wealth from minerals in the Dead Sea or for oil. But the invading forces Ezekiel spoke of come riding on horses to steal cattle (among other things). Does anyone really think Russia will come down to Israel to rustle cattle and haul them back to Russia?

When the passage says the invaders would come to take a “spoil,” some speculate that *spoil* means *oil*. But Israel is not an oil-producing country.

FOURTH, the weapons used by this army were PRIMITIVE weapons, not those of modern warfare. All of the soldiers ride on horses, “**ALL of them clothed with all sorts of armor, even a great company with bucklers [large shields]...ALL of them handling swords...ALL of them with shield and helmet,**” along with spears, bows and arrows (Ezek. 38:4, 5; 39:9).





The soldiers in Ezekiel's prophecy fight with bows and arrows. They have swords in their hands. They wear armor. Shields protect them from arrows that are shot from bows. The description, which is detailed, simply does not fit modern times.

FIFTH, these primitive weapons would be made of materials that could be used as FIREWOOD. "Those who dwell in the cities of Israel will go out and set on fire and burn the weapons, both the shields and bucklers, the bows and arrows, the javelins and spears." Consequently, they will not need to "take wood from the field nor cut down any from the forests, because they will make fires with the weapons"—a seven-year fuel supply (Ezek. 39:9,10).

Can anyone actually believe Russian will attack Israel with wooden weapons?

SIXTH, the setting for the invasion described by Ezekiel was when people used WOOD for fuel. Back over the centuries, wood was widely used for baking and heating (1 Kings 17:12; Jer. 7:18; Acts 28:3). But that is not the case for those living in Israel today. Their energy sources include natural gas, electricity, and solar energy. Over 90% of the homes have solar water heaters. They are not going into the forests to cut down trees for wood to burn.

Those who believe Ezekiel's battle is yet to happen, say that he (of necessity) had to use terms he was familiar with. So, when we read about bows and arrows, this can mean guns and bullets; wooden weapons can mean weapons made of steel; soldiers riding on horses can mean they are riding in tanks and Jeeps. That would be quite a stretch! But even if this were granted, it still could not explain the wording about Israel being at "rest" and dwelling "safely"! That is most definitely not the case in Israel today.

The armies Ezekiel described as invading Israel, were from a number of countries: Magog, Gomer, Tubal, Meshech, Togarmah. These were the names of the grandsons or great grandsons of Noah (Gen. 10:1-7). Just as the descendants of Jacob (Israel) were called the children of Israel (or later simply Israel), so these various names passed on down and provided names for different countries in that part of the world.

By today's standards, these countries were not very far from the land of Israel. We know they were close enough to carry on commerce among themselves. Ezekiel Chapter 27 provides a detailed list of things that they traded at the city of Tyre—including horses from Togarmah (verse 14).

Going back to my teenage years, I recall hearing that **Russia** would come down from the NORTH and attack Israel. It seemed to fit—isn't Russia north of Israel? Yes, but it is north of many places! "North" must be understood in context.

It was not uncommon for attacks on Jerusalem to come from the north. Prior to the Babylonian Captivity, Jeremiah warned: "Flee from the midst of Jerusalem....for disaster appears out of the north, and great destruction...Behold a people...will lay hold on bow and spear...they ride on horses, as men of war set in array against you, O daughter of Zion" (Jer. 6:1, 22,23).

Even though Babylon was east of Jerusalem, because of the vast deserts and the need for water, the route of travel into Israel was from the north. As the *Pulpit Commentary* (note on Jer. 1:14)

says, the Babylonians "were an eastern people from the point of view of Palestine; but the caravan-road which the Chaldean armies had to take entered Palestine at Dan, and then proceeded southward."

One country in Ezekiel 38, Togarmah, was mentioned as coming to battle against Israel from the "far north" (Ezekiel 38:6). But the other countries mentioned—Persia, Ethiopia, Libya, and Gomer—were east, west, and south of Israel. This raises a question: Why do some place so much emphasis on the north—and specifically Russia—when these other countries were also mentioned as part of the attempted invasion?

Support for the idea that Ezekiel prophesied about Russia is sought in the Hebrew word *ro'sh* (Ezek. 38:3). Depending on translation, *ro'sh* has been made to refer to a *person* or a *place*:

"Gog, the **chief** [*ro'sh*] prince of Meshech and Tubal"; or:
"Gog, the prince of **Rosh** [*ro'sh*], Meshech, and Tubal."

Building on the latter wording, it has been supposed that "*ro'sh*" is simply another way of saying Russia! But "*ro'sh*" is a common Hebrew word that appears in the Old Testament about SIX HUNDRED TIMES, meaning "head," "top," "chief," or "captain." It seems very unlikely that it could mean Russia in this one instance! As *Ellicott's Commentary* (putting it mildly) says: the attempt to derive "the name of Russia cannot be considered as sufficiently supported." The same can be said about trying to make "Meshech" mean Moscow and "Tubal" mean Tobolsk.

Following the *attempted* invasion described by Ezekiel, "*then* those who dwell in the cities of Israel will go out and set on fire and burn the weapons, both the shields and bucklers, the bows and arrows, the javelins and spears; and they will make fire with them for SEVEN YEARS" (Ezek. 39:9)—thus, for Israel, a seven-year period of **great victory!** There is nothing here about a seven-year **great tribulation** period.

"Gog and Magog" are mentioned in the book of Revelation (Rev. 20:8, 9)—the **imagery** is based on Ezekiel 38 and 39—but with an entirely *different* application. In Revelation, people and places from Old Testament *history* are used as symbols: "Jezebel," "Balaam," "Sodom," "Egypt," "Babylon," "New Jerusalem" (in contrast to the *old* Jerusalem), etc. So is it with "Gog and Magog."

In Ezekiel, Gog is a *prince*. In Revelation, Gog is a *nation*.

In Ezekiel, Gog is spoken of as coming against Israel accompanied with people from various countries around Israel; in Revelation, Gog and Magog are pictured as nations in the four quarters of the earth, in number as the sands of the sea.

In Ezekiel, Gog and his troops come against Israel, a people who have returned from captivity and are dwelling without walls; in Revelation, Gog and Magog go up on the breadth of the earth and compass the city of the saints [believers in Jesus].

In Ezekiel the enemy is Gog of the land of Magog; in Revelation, Gog and Magog.

In Ezekiel, Gog's troops are defeated in Israel and their left-behind-weapons are burned for **seven years**; in Revelation, Gog and Magog are destroyed by fire from God out of heaven. This would destroy any wooden weapons, instantly, then and there!

So, all of this brings us to the question: Was the defeat of Israel's enemies described by Ezekiel fulfilled in what is now past history?

Some believe it was fulfilled at the time of Esther, when Israel was still "a land of unwalled villages" (Ezek. 38:11). A number of connecting links between Ezekiel's prophecy and the book of Esther are cited.

We recall that the Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persians. Cyrus, in his first year as king of Persia, allowed the Israelites to return—to rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple (Ezra 1:1-4; Isa. 45:1, 13). Later, Ahasuerus came to power and ruled over the vast Persian Empire which "extended from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces" (Esth. 8:9). **Esther** (meaning "star") became his Queen and has the starring role in the book.

Haman, on the other hand, is the bad guy in the book of Esther. He devised a plan whereby every single Jew would be killed (Esth. 3:13). Is **he** mentioned in Ezekiel's prophecy?

In Ezekiel, the conflict was to be led by one who is called "the chief prince" (Ezek. 38:1-3). This fits Haman. "After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman...the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat *above all the princes* that were with him. And all the king's servants...bowed, and revered Haman" (Esth. 3:1).

We notice in this verse (and others) that Haman was an "Agagite" (Esth. 8:3). As such, he was a descendant of Agag (literally or, at least, in his attitude as an "enemy of the Jews"). "Agag," as pointed out in *Strong's Concordance*, was a title used by each Amalekite king. Several times we read about: "Agag the king of the Amalekites" (1 Sam. 15:8, 20, 32).

Where "Agag" is mentioned in Numbers 24:7, the *Samaritan* and *Septuagint* (both highly respected manuscripts) have "Gog." Thus linking Gog, Agag, Agagite, and the Amalekites together.

Looking again at Ezekiel 38, it opens with the words: "And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying...set your face against **Gog**...and prophesy against him."

Further on down we read: "Prophecy and say to Gog...Are you not the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel? At that time they prophesied for years that I would bring you against them" (Ezek. 38:14-17). Did God's prophets for years prophesy about **Russia** having conflict with Israel? No one believes that.

But numerous passages—Exod. 17:16; Deut. 25:17-19; Judges 5:14; 1 Sam. 15:1-3; 30:1; etc.—speak of war between Israel and Amalek (the Amalekites), whose leader had the title Agag, Agog, or simply Gog!

As we shall see, Ezekiel's prophecy mentions **Hamon** (Ezek. 39:11-16). Could this simply be a different spelling of **Haman**, the bad guy in the book of Esther? Because there were no vowels in ancient Hebrew, *h-m-n* could be written as Hamon or Haman. A slight difference in the spelling of names is not uncommon in Scripture.

Ezekiel described the defeat of Israel's enemies in these words: "...there they will bury Gog and all his multitude...they will call it the Valley of Hamon Gog" (Ezek. 39:11). The term "Hamon Gog" could be written as Hamon the Agogite (or

Agagite), matching the phrase in Esther about "Haman the Agagite" (Esth. 3:10; 8:3; 9:24).

It might seem that the conflict described by Ezekiel was larger than the one in the book of Esther. However, what happened at the time of Esther was no small feat. The Jews annihilated over **75,000** of their enemies throughout all the provinces of the entire Persian Empire (Esth. 9:6, 12, 16). This is a greater number than the American casualties in the Revolutionary War (25,000), or the Korean War (36,516), or the war in Vietnam (58,209).

While there are some interesting parallels between Ezekiel's prophecy and the events in the book of Esther, there are also some "loose ends." Everything does not fit.

In his commentary, Adam Clarke (1762-1832), cites numerous victories for the Jewish people at the time of the Maccabees when the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes were overthrown, pointing out a number of parallels with the conflict described by Ezekiel's battle. He does admit that the prophecy is "difficult," but clearly favored an historical—not future—fulfillment.

All details about prophecies that have been fulfilled may not be spelled out in a secular history available today. But often, *within the prophecies themselves*, there is enough internal evidence to establish the proper timeframe. Isaiah 16:14, for example, says: "Within **three years**...the glory of Moab will be despised...and the remnant will be very small and feeble." In his commentary, Matthew Henry points out that we have no history, sacred or secular, that says this happened within three years. But there is no reason to doubt it was fulfilled as stated.

Victories for Israelites—when the odds were against them—happened at the time of Esther, at the time of the Maccabees, and other times. But it must be remembered that the promises of protection for Israel were **conditional**:

"IF you will walk in my statutes and keep my commandments...you shall dwell in your land *safely*. I will give *peace* in the land...you will chase your enemies...five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you....**BUT** if you do *not* obey me, and do not observe all these commandments...you shall be *defeated by your enemies*. Those who hate you shall reign over you" (Lev. 26:3-8, 14-17).

If Ezekiel described an invasion that is yet future, huge armies of the world will have to go back to a dependance on horses! Every soldier will ride a horse. Their weapons will be spears, bows and arrows, made of wood! If future, Israel will have to be at rest, dwelling safely, living in peace, and be known as "a land of unwalled villages"!

For these reasons, I believe Ezekiel described an ANCIENT battle—not a Russian invasion in MODERN times. This information has been presented "as a study," not for any division or strife. It is not a "salvation issue" and I am perfectly content, in the words of Paul, to let everyone be persuaded in his own mind.

—RW June/July 2024



RALPH WOODROW
PO BOX 21
PALM SPRINGS, CA 92263
Email: ralphwoodow@earthlink.net
Phone: (760) 327-6049
Website: ralphwoodrow.org