

**NOTHING CAN SEPARATE  
ISRAEL FROM GOD'S CARE  
EZEKIEL 38-39**

## Gog of the land of Magog

In his commentary on Ezekiel in the Interpretation series published by John Knox Press, Louisville 1990, page 182, Joseph Blenkinsopp includes the following in his introduction to chapters 38-39:

‘It will be seen that the author has skilfully drawn together into a consecutive narrative several major themes of prophetic eschatology. These may be set out as follows:

The enemy will attack from the north

(Jeremiah 1:13-15; 4:5-18; 6:22; Joel 2:20)

Their invasion will lead to a final war in which Yahweh fights for Israel

(Isaiah 17:12-14; Habakkuk 3:8; Zechariah 14:3-4)

This final conflict will be accompanied by earthquake and cosmic convulsions

(Isaiah 24:19-23; Nahum 1:4-5; Joel 4:15-16)

It will take place in the land of Israel (Isaiah 14:24-25),

in fact, in or near Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:1-5)

Following the defeat of the enemy, their weapons will be destroyed

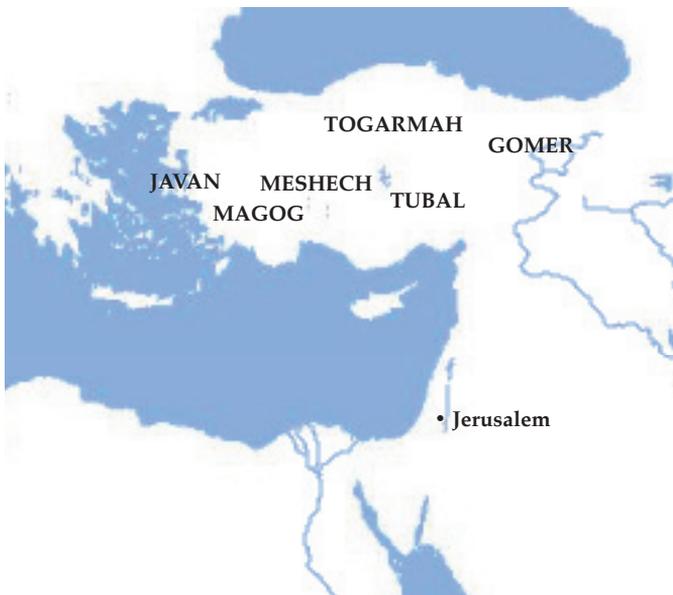
or used as fuel (Isaiah 9:5)

God’s people will celebrate with a sacrificial banquet

(Isaiah 34:5-8; Jeremiah 46:10; Zephaniah 1:7-8)

There are some indications, in both the prophetic writings and the psalms, that several of these themes may have been brought together in mythic recital and cultic celebration long before Ezekiel. If so, Ezekiel 38-39 moved a step farther by giving them a distinctly narrative form which can be seen as transitional between prophetic eschatology and the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. Hence the importance of these chapters in the evolution of the biblical view of the tension between good and evil in human affairs and its eventual resolution.’

Table of Nations: Genesis 10:2-3



A likely setting for the basic text is the exile before the emergence of Persia. Ezekiel himself could well be responsible for the original oracles. Ezekiel is drawing on the oracles of Jeremiah who prophesied:

Thus says YHWH: See, a people is coming from the land of the north, a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth.

– Jeremiah 6:22

Jeremiah went on to identify the threat from the north with the aggressive campaign of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 36:29). Ezekiel builds on what he has already said in regard to Assyria, Elam and Meshech-Tubal, earlier aggressors from the north, now in the underworld (see 32:17-28). He speaks of ‘Gog’ (probably the Lydian king, Gyges 680-650BC), prince of Magog (the land of Gog), and the least known and most sinister ‘chief prince of Meshech and Tubal’ (verse 3). He is drawing on the Table of Nations Genesis 10:2-3. Note also his listing Tubal and Meshech as among Tyre’s trading partners (Ezekiel 27:13).

It is clear from verse 4 that, whatever the outcome, it is YHWH who, for his own purposes, is leading the monster Gog. A later hand has overloaded the narrative by including Persia, Ethiopia and Libya (Put). Gomer and Togarmah are known to be ‘from the remotest parts of the north’ (verse 6). Gomer is the dark land of the wild and aggressive Cimmerians. Togarmah was also listed among Tyre’s trading partners (see 27:14).

Gog and the various hordes that join him are commanded to be ready to submit to YHWH’s designs (verse 7). They are to attack ‘the mountains of Israel’ (verse 8). Ezekiel speaks of post-exilic Israel, a ‘land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations’ (verse 8). After a long period when Israel was a depopulated wasteland, it has been restored and former exiles are now living there ‘in safety, all of them’ (verse 8).

**<sup>1</sup>The word of YHWH came to me: <sup>2</sup>Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. Prophecy against him <sup>3</sup>and say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal;**

**<sup>4</sup>I will turn you around and put hooks into your jaws, and I will lead you out with all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armour, a great company, all of them with shield and buckler, wielding swords. <sup>5</sup>Persia, Ethiopia, and Put are with them, all of them with buckler and helmet; <sup>6</sup>Gomer and all its troops; Beth-togarmah from the remotest parts of the north with all its troops—many peoples are with you.**

**<sup>7</sup>Be ready and keep ready, you and all the companies that are assembled around you, and hold yourselves in reserve for them. <sup>8</sup>After many days you shall be mustered; in the latter years you shall go against a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which had long lain waste; its people were brought out from the nations and now are living in safety, all of them. <sup>9</sup>You shall advance, coming on like a storm; you shall be like a cloud covering the land, you and all your troops, and many peoples with you.**

## The enemy war plans

<sup>10</sup>Thus says the Lord YHWH: On that day thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme. <sup>11</sup>You will say, "I will go up against the land of un-walled villages; I will fall upon the quiet people who live in safety, all of them living without walls, and having no bars or gates"; <sup>12</sup>to seize spoil and carry off plunder; to assail the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who are acquiring cattle and goods, who live at the centre of the earth. <sup>13</sup>Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all its young warriors will say to you, "Have you come to seize spoil? Have you assembled your horde to carry off plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to seize a great amount of booty?"

<sup>14</sup>Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and say to Gog: Thus says the Lord YHWH: On that day when my people Israel are living securely, you will rouse yourself <sup>15</sup>and come from your place out of the remotest parts of the north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army; <sup>16</sup>you will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the earth. In the latter days I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I display my holiness before their eyes.

Verses 10-16 are generally read as editorial comment. Verses 10-13 highlight Gog's evil and greedy intent. Other merchants are not happy: Sheba (27:22) and Dedan (27:21) from the Arabian peninsula, and Tarshish (27:12) from the Mediterranean.

Verses 14-16 repeat what has already appeared in earlier verses. As was the case in the judgment against Sidon (see 28:22), so here YHWH's transcendent majesty will be revealed by his judgment of Gog (verse 16).

The language of verse 17 gives the impression that its authors are looking to the distant past, which argues to its being composed long after Ezekiel's time.

Verses 18-23 are also supplementary. The focus is on the devastation brought about by YHWH's anger, declared in cosmic terms. The apocalyptic style is post-exilic. The divine judgment condemning Gog and his forces to devastation is part of a universal judgment.

**<sup>17</sup>Thus says the Lord YHWH: Are you he of whom I spoke in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel, who in those days prophesied for years that I would bring you against them?**

**<sup>18</sup>On that day, when Gog comes against the land of Israel, says the Lord YHWH, my wrath shall be aroused. <sup>19</sup>For in my jealousy and in my blazing wrath I declare: On that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; <sup>20</sup>the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and the animals of the field, and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all human beings that are on the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground. <sup>21</sup>I will summon the sword against Gog in all my mountains, says the Lord YHWH; the swords of all will be against their comrades. <sup>22</sup>With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him. <sup>23</sup>So I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am YHWH.**

The invaders are defeated

**<sup>1</sup>And you, son of man, prophesy against Gog, and say: Thus says the Lord YHWH: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal! <sup>2</sup>I will turn you around and drive you forward, and bring you up from the remotest parts of the north, and lead you against the mountains of Israel. <sup>3</sup>I will strike your bow from your left hand, and will make your arrows drop out of your right hand. <sup>4</sup>You shall fall upon the mountains of Israel, you and all your troops and the peoples that are with you; I will give you to birds of prey of every kind and to the wild animals to be devoured. <sup>5</sup>You shall fall in the open field; for I have spoken, says the Lord YHWH.**

**<sup>6</sup>I will send fire on Magog and on those who live securely in the coastlands; and they shall know that I am YHWH. <sup>7</sup>My holy name I will make known among my people Israel; and I will not let my holy name be profaned any more; and the nations shall know that I am YHWH, the Holy One in Israel. <sup>8</sup>It has come! It has happened, says the Lord YHWH. This is the day of which I have spoken.**

**<sup>9</sup>Then those who live in the towns of Israel will go out and make fires of the weapons and burn them—bucklers and shields, bows and arrows, handpikes and spears—and they will make fires of them for seven years. <sup>10</sup>They will not need to take wood out of the field or cut down any trees in the forests, for they will make their fires of the weapons; they will despoil those who despoiled them, and plunder those who plundered them, says the Lord YHWH.**

Verses 1-5 appear to fit nicely as a continuation of 38:2-9. The apocalyptic style just seen in the supplementary verses 18-23 is entirely lacking. In line with Isaiah's oracle about the destruction of Samaria (Isaiah 14:25), Ezekiel declares the destruction of the invading forces on 'the mountains of Israel' (verse 2). In verse 4 we see the wild animals gathering to feast on the fallen.

The judgment against Gog is expanded in verses 6-8 to include the destruction of the land of Gog ('Magog') and the peoples along the coast of Asia Minor. Earlier the people of Israel had brought dishonour to YHWH's 'holy name' (see 36:20-23). The destruction of the mysterious forces from the north will reveal convincingly YHWH's power and fidelity to Israel. This is the 'day' of YHWH.

The basic oracle is again expanded with the account of the destruction of Gog's weapons (compare Isaiah 9:4).

Since it is not clear which ‘sea’ the text is referring to (the Mediterranean, the Dead Sea, or the Sea of Gennesaret), there is no agreement on the whereabouts of the valley of burial. Verse 12 focuses on the purification of the land.

Verses 13-16 insist on the care needed to ensure the burials are completed properly. This is the role of those especially commissioned for the task.

In verses 17-20 we return to the original oracle. It picks up from verse 5. YHWH is setting up a sacrificial banquet to which he is inviting the birds and the wild animals (compare Jeremiah 12:9). We find the image of a sacrificial banquet in Isaiah 34:5-8, Zephaniah 1:7 and Jeremiah 46:20. The whole of heaven and earth know of YHWH’s victory and are invited to celebrate it. No one is to leave the table not having had their fill.

**<sup>11</sup>On that day I will give to Gog a place for burial in Israel, the Valley of the Travellers east of the sea; it shall block the path of the travellers, for there Gog and all his horde will be buried; it shall be called the Valley of Hamon-gog.**

**<sup>12</sup>Seven months the house of Israel shall spend burying them, in order to cleanse the land.**

**<sup>13</sup>All the people of the land shall bury them; and it will bring them honour on the day that I show my glory, says the Lord YHWH. <sup>14</sup>They will set apart men to pass through the land regularly and bury any invaders who remain on the face of the land, so as to cleanse it; for seven months they shall make their search. <sup>15</sup>As the searchers pass through the land, anyone who sees a human bone shall set up a sign by it, until the buriers have buried it in the Valley of Hamon-gog. <sup>16</sup>(A city Hamonah is there also.) Thus they shall cleanse the land.**

**<sup>17</sup>As for you, son of man, thus says the Lord YHWH: Speak to the birds of every kind and to all the wild animals: Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood.**

**<sup>18</sup>You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth—of rams, of lambs, and of goats, of bulls, all of them fatlings of Bashan. <sup>19</sup>You shall eat fat until you are filled, and drink blood until you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you. <sup>20</sup>And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with warriors and all kinds of soldiers, says the Lord YHWH.**

**<sup>21</sup>I will display my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. <sup>22</sup>The house of Israel shall know that I am YHWH their God, from that day forward.**

**<sup>23</sup>And the nations shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity, because they dealt treacherously with me. So I hid my face from them and gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword. <sup>24</sup>I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions, and hid my face from them.**

**<sup>25</sup>Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name.**

**<sup>26</sup>They shall bear their shame, and all the treachery they have practised against me, when they live securely in their land with no one to make them afraid, <sup>27</sup>when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have displayed my holiness in the sight of many nations.**

**<sup>28</sup>Then they shall know that I am YHWH their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind; <sup>29</sup>and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord YHWH.**

Verses 21-22 repeat the aim of this summoning and destruction. It is to reveal YHWH's majesty and power, to the nations, and also to Israel.

Verses 23-29 leave aside the Gog narrative, and look back on YHWH's dealings with Israel. It functions as a concluding editorial comment.

Verses 23-24 summarise why it is that Israel 'went into captivity'. It was because they were unfaithful: they 'dealt treacherously'. The exile was punishment for their sin. YHWH hid his face from them, in that they were unable to go into his presence and worship in his temple.

With their restoration all this is reversed: 'Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob'(verse 25). We are being prepared for Ezekiel's fourth and final vision: that of the restored temple.

Verse 25 is the only time the verb 'have mercy' (רָחַם) occurs in the Ezekiel scroll. At the same time they will 'bear their shame'. They must not forget their past sins, for they must learn from them.

The sending into exile and the gathering back reveal YHWH to his people who come to know him through both. YHWH promises that he will never again hide his face from them, and that he will pour out his spirit on the house of Israel.

The effect of the Gog narrative is to highlight the truth that whatever the future might bring, it is all in YHWH's hands, and YHWH will remain faithful to his covenant. Israel will always be his people.