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Is Ukraine war the onset of Gog and Magog? Explainer

Here's why Christians are connecting Gog and Magog to the Ukraine war.

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Though many world leaders expressed surprise, it should have been easy to predict that Russia would invade Ukraine. Many Ukrainian and Russian intelligence agencies had been tracking the Kremlin's war plans for weeks.

It also was quite predictable that many Christians would certainly start connecting this conflict to the "War of Gog and Magog," the last days' global confrontation described in Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39. As one colleague Malcolm Hedding once observed, the speculation about Gog and Magog seems to ramp up "every time Vladimir Putin sneezes."

Indeed, I have witnessed endless speculation about the onset of this prophetic battle throughout my entire 50 years of walking with the Lord and by the world, as well as to the Israeli media, the sudden excitement among Christians about Bible prophecy being fulfilled and a sudden celebrity like Ukraine can come over as odd and, even worse, quite scary.

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Most of the speculation about Gog and Magog has centered around Russia, or the former Soviet Union, and their allies coming against Israel. Some view it as an imminent war which could be triggered any day now. Others conflate the war of Gog and Magog with the Battle of Armageddon, insisting they are the same conflict. Yet others place it at the end of the Millennium, relying on additional prophetic passages found in the New Testament.

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So what exactly is the War of Gog and Magog? And does it really have anything to do with the horrific war now raging in Ukraine?

A book of mystery, clarity

To begin with, we should note that the book of Ezekiel is full of mystery and veiled imagery.

Even in the first few verses, the prophet declares, "I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1) – all cities to NAJVI, and then he sees the "living creatures" and a "wheel in the middle of a wheel" (Ezekiel 1:16). Thus the imagery has traditionally discouraged their fellow Jews from even reading the book of Ezekiel until they have studied all the other Hebrew Scriptures.

Photo by Carlos Delgado (Wikimedia Commons)

But towards the end of Ezekiel, the book does seem more straightforward and follows a clear chronological order, which takes an added meaning when reading it from our perspective today.

Beginning with chapter 33, the Lord stresses to Ezekiel his role and duty as a "watchman" who must warn the people of Israel and Jerusalem of impending judgment and exile. Then in chapters 36 and 37 we see incredible prophecies of the great regathering of Israel in the last days, which involves both a physical regathering back to the Land and then a spiritual ingathering back to God by a dynamic outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, his vision of the "Valley of Dry Bones" in chapter 37 depicts it as the nation is literally resurrected from the dead – which in many ways aptly describes the miraculous rebirth of Israel as a nation just three years after the death of the Holocaust.

Then comes chapters 38 and 39, which basically mirror each other in foretelling of a future battle involving an array of nations who come up against a regathered Israel "dwelling in safety," but God destroys them in a fiery judgment from heaven. This is followed by chapters 40 to 48, where he sees a magnificent future Temple in a glorious and greatly enlarged city of Jerusalem.

Focusing our attention first on Ezekiel 38, the prophet is told to deliver a warning to "Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal," namely that God is against them and is determined to bring them up against Jerusalem, even against their will (Ezekiel 38:1-6).

Other nations will join them, with the prophet specifically naming Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and the "house of Togarmah from the ends of the north" (Ezekiel 38:5-6). In the "latter years," they will come like a storm cloud covering the land, and set out to destroy the people of Israel who have been regathered from all the nations and are "dwelling in safety," a "peaceful people" living back in their land in "unwalled villages" that have "neither bars nor gates" (Ezekiel 38:8-11). This attack will be launched by "a great company and mighty army," with "countless people of the earth, you and those who are with you, mounted on horses" (2 Kislev 38:14-16). But God will destroy them by "great hailstones, fire and brimstone" and he might "magnify himself and show himself before the nations (Ezekiel 38:18-23).

Chapter 39 continues describing this same battle against Gog, while adding that the victory at God's hand will be so complete, Israel will need seven months to bury the dead and seven years to burn the weapons of warfare. At the same time, Israel and the nations are brought in awe of God's majestic power and understand better the divine purpose of Israel's long journey of exile and return.

So, does the current Russian invasion of Ukraine portend that the war of "Gog and Magog" is brewing before our very eyes?

Reasons for restraint

First, Bible scholars have varying views on what is meant by "Gog of the land of Magog." Some suggest he is a human leader, and his arena is that it refers to a demonic ruler or principality which has a stronghold over a certain nation or people, a concept which can be found throughout the Bible.

Regarding "Rosh," some say this refers to "Rus" or the Russian people, but in Hebrew the word means "head" or "chief." Thus, it should be read as "chief prince of Meshech and Tubal." Nonetheless, Ezekiel does say some entities that make elements of this said army will come from the "far north" – and Moscow just happens to be a great distance directly north of Jerusalem.

Other nations join Gog of Magog, and some can be readily identified in our day. For instance, Persia is today's Iran. Others can be more hard to tie to the "lands of Israel" listed in Genesis 10. Thus, Cush refers to roughly the area of Ethiopia, Put is Libya, and Gomer is Turkey. Togarmah is Turkey, too. Gomer and Togarmah were descendants of Japheth, who settled around Turkey, the Black Sea, Caucus mountains and into western Europe. Still, there remains much mystery and speculation as to exactly who they might refer to today, but the passage certainly portrays a broad array of nations.

Even so, the alignment of nations right now does not seem to fit the "Gog and Magog" scenario.

Russia, in fact, is extremely isolated over its invasion of Ukraine. At a rare emergency session of the United Nations General Assembly last week, only four nations (Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria) joined Russia in voting against a resolution strongly condemning Moscow for its aggression. Even traditional Russian allies like China, Cuba and Iran abstained in the vote.

Meanwhile, Turkey has an historic animosity towards Russia, and is currently blocking Russian warships from traversing the narrow straits into the Black Sea. Finally, Israel itself has recently developed a unique relationship with Russia that helps both sides avoid direct confrontation and accommodate each other's interests.

Looking back, the stars were much better aligned with Ezekiel 38-39 in Soviet times, when Russia and the Warsaw Pact bloc, along with several African client states, backed their regional Arab allies in fighting a war of wars against Israel in 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982.

There are other clear reasons to question right now the immediacy of the "War of Gog and Magog."

Consider that while Israel has indeed been regathered from all the nations, this is not a nation "dwelling in safety ... having neither bars nor gates" (Ezekiel 38:8-11). Rather, Israel maintains the most constant state of alert any nation on earth. There are always war planes in the air guarding its narrow borders 24/7. There are always more Israeli fighter jets waiting on the runways, armed and engines revving, ready to scramble. There are also hundreds of thousands of Israeli reservists who are ready to be called up at a moment's notice. Arrow 3 is protecting against the hundreds of thousands of rockets now aimed at its cities – including some that may soon be tipped with nuclear warheads.

Remember "Revelation"

In addition, it is hard to avoid the clear reference to "Gog and Magog" in Revelation 20:8, which places this battle at the end of the Millennium. In examining this key prophetic passage, it is first worth noting how the book of Revelation resembles the book of Ezekiel in some important ways.

Like Ezekiel, the book of Revelation is full of mystery and veiled imagery. But just as in Ezekiel, towards the end of Revelation, the Apostle John begins to speak clearly and sets out a clear chronological order of events running the closing chapters of Ezekiel.

In Revelation 19, John describes the Battle of Armageddon as a last days' global conflict centered around Israel, which he places just before the Return of Christ. Then at the start of Chapter 20, he introduces the concept of the Millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. By this time, the veiled imagery is disappearing. So times, John the Revelator specifically states this Messianic Age will last for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:2-7).

The "dragon" of earlier chapters is now fully identified as Satan, or "that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan," and he is bound in the bottomless pit for those 1,000 years (Revelation 20:2-3).

Yet at the end of the Millennium, Satan is released one last time and allowed to "go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them" (Revelation 20:8-9).

Note how this concise wording encapsulates Ezekiel 38-39, ending with the very same fiery judgment from heaven. This is an unmistakable reference to the same battle described in Ezekiel, and it is clearly the same conflict as the War of Gog and Magog could happen any day now. Some expert scholars, from problem by saying there are actually two such battles, one before and one after the Millennium, based on the theory of "progressive prophetic fulfillment" – a principle of biblical interpretation which holds that a prophetic passage can have several partial fulfillments over time leading up to its ultimate completion. There indeed are instances of this in the Bible, such as passages related to the latter days coming up of the Holy Spirit. But I am not convinced that it applies to the Gog and Magog conflict.

This sense is reinforced by the way the chronology found at the very end of Revelation continues to parallel the last chapters of Ezekiel. Right after the Battle of Gog and Magog, we see the glorious New Jerusalem descending in Revelation 21:9-22 just as the great and magnificent Jerusalem of Ezekiel chapters 40-48 immediately follows the Gog and Magog conflict in chapters 38-39.

A time of ingathering

However these important prophetic passages play out, the current Russian invasion of Ukraine has propelled the world into a very dangerous moment in human history.

The horrific suffering in Ukraine is difficult to watch, and the war there could lead to a much wider conflagration involving the nuclear superpowers of Russia and the West. Yet I believe we are in the days of Israel's ingathering, as tens of thousands of Jews are now seeking to flee the fighting in Ukraine, as well as the economic collapse hitting Russia due to the world's response to their aggression. According to the latest reports, Israel is expecting to take in as many as 100,000 Ukrainian and Russian Jews over coming months.

So, just what do this tragic events in Ukraine mean from a prophetic standpoint?

Instead of floating on Ezekiel 38-39, I believe the Holiness prophets have spoken of a generation a much clearer prophetic picture for discerning our times through their repeated allusions to the Exodus. Throughout the major and minor prophets, and even all the way into Revelation, there are many passages which refer to the Exodus from Egypt as a model or paradigm for the end of this age (see, for instance Isaiah 11:16, Jeremiah 16:14 and 23:7; Hosea 2:15 and Micah 7:15).

Jeremiah even tells us twice that the last day's return of the Jews from all the nations where they were scattered will exceed Israel's deliverance from Egypt – which for the Jewish people still stands as the greatest moment in their history.

For over 50 years now, we have been in a season of ingathering and Savior on Zion, as the Jewish people have been coming home from all the nations where they were exiled for two long millennia. In the Exodus account, Pharaoh has "let My people go" and they are still coming home from all directions. But then Pharaoh regretted freeing the Hebrew slaves and went after them, and God judged and destroyed the Egyptians at the parting of the Red Sea.

Today, Jews are still being freed to go home to Israel, but one day the nations will regret letting them come back to the Land and especially to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, and they will try stage to this city and nation. Yet once again, God will deliver the Jewish people and defeat the hostile their enemies by a mighty hand. This confrontation at the end of the age is what we usually refer to as the Battle of Armageddon, from Revelation 16, but it is also described in Joel 3, Zechariah 12 and 14 and many other passages. In due time, this ingathering and deliverance will be greater than the Exodus itself, and it will usher in the time of Messiah's reign for 1,000 years.

Ezekiel 38-39 is a very important prophetic passage, but it is not the Gog and Magog. That conflict appears to be a final confrontation where Satan is allowed to deceive the nations one last time so those born during the millennium have the same chance as you and me to choose between living and serving God or rebelling against Him.

At this being said, may we never be detracted from the task now at hand – continuing to regather the Jewish people and help secure their place in the Land of Israel for what lies ahead.

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