EZEKIEL

Chapter 38

*A Prophecy Against Gog*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; prophesy against him  3 and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.  4 I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army—your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords.  5 Persia, Cush and Put will be with them, all with shields and helmets,  6 also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops—the many nations with you. 7 ”‘Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them.  8 After many days you will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety.  9 You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land. 10 ”‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme.  11 You will say, “I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people—all of them living without walls and without gates and bars.  12 I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land.”  13 Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all her villages will say to you, “Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?”’ 14 “Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it?  15 You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army.  16 You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, O Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. 17 ”‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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.  18 This is what will happen in that day: When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign LORD.  19 In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel.  20 The fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, every creature that moves along the ground, and all the people on the face of the earth will tremble at my presence. The mountains will be overturned, the cliffs will crumble and every wall will fall to the ground.  21 I will summon a sword against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign LORD. Every man’s sword will be against his brother.  22 I will execute judgment upon him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him.  23 And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD.’**

**38:1** *The word of the Lord came.*† This statement, repeated often for receiving God’s word, stands as an introduction to chs. 38–39, which are a unit. The future restoration of Israel under the reign of the house of David (ch. 37), prefiguring the redemption of the spiritual Israel of all nations, will bring about a massive coalition of sinister powers to destroy God’s kingdom. But the vast host that comes against Jerusalem will end up as dead bodies strewn over the fields of the promised land. Palestine will become the cemetery of the enemy hordes (cf. ch. 37).

**38:2** *Son of man.* See note on 2:1.

*set your face.* See note on 20:46.

It portends the hostile orientation formula. (CC)

*Gog.* Apparently a leader or king whose name appears only here and in Rev 20:8. Several identifications have been attempted, notably Gyges, king of Lydia (c. 660 b.c.). Possibly the name is purposely vague, standing for a mysterious, as yet undisclosed, enemy of God’s people.

The most agreement is found with “Gog,” who is usually identified with a powerful king of Lydia in west Asia Minor in the early seventh century b.c., known to the Greeks as Gyges and to the Assyrians as Gugu. The name is also attested in an archaeological excavation in the area. Since he ruled a century before the time of Ezekiel, it may be a dynastic name that his successors also bore. Much earlier, a “Gaga” also appears at Ugarit (second millennium b.c.) and in the Amarna letters (fourteenth century b.c.). (CC)

*of the land of Magog.* In Ge 10:2; 1Ch 1:5 Magog is one of the sons of Japheth, thus the name of a people. In Eze 39:6 it appears to refer to a people. But since the Hebrew prefix *ma-* can mean “place of,” Magog may here simply mean “land of Gog.” Israel had long experienced the hostility of the Hamites and other Semitic peoples; the future coalition here envisioned will include—and in fact be led by—peoples descended from Japheth (cf. Ge 10).

*chief prince.* Military commander-in-chief. The NIV text note gives the possible translation “prince of Rosh,” and if it is correct, Rosh is probably the name of an unknown people or place. Identification with Russia is unlikely, and in any case cannot be proven.

*Meshech and Tubal.* These sons of Japheth (see Ge 10:2; 1Ch 1:5) are probably located in eastern Asia Minor (cf. 27:13; 32:26). They are peoples and territories to the north of Israel (cf. vv. 6, 15; 39:2). As in the days of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the major attack will come from the north.

**38:3** *I am against you.* See note on 5:8.

**38:4** *I will turn you around.* Emphasis is on the fact that God is completely in control of all that is to follow.

*put hooks in your jaws.* As with Pharaoh in 29:4, Gog is likened to a beast led around by God.

Ezek 38:4–9 summarizes how Yahweh will use Gog for his own purposes. These verses divide into two parts, ending at 38:6 and 38:9, as is obvious from the repeated conclusion “many peoples (are) with you [Gog].” The phrase “hooks in your jaws” (38:4) is probably reused from 29:4, where Yahweh applied it to his conquest of Pharaoh as a crocodile in the Nile. It pictorially summarizes what the following verses elaborate: at least from God’s perspective, Gog’s pretentious and exhaustive preparations to attack and plunder Israel are involuntary. God uses all things, even the forces of evil, for the good of his people (see Jn 11:50; Rom 8:28). (CC)

**38:5** *Cush.* See NIV text note. The invading forces from the north (see v. 2 and note) are joined by armies from the south.

*Put.* Libya (Africa).

**38:6** *Gomer.* Another of Gog’s northern allies (see note on v. 2), mentioned in Ge 10:3; 1Ch 1:6 as one of the sons of Japheth. According to non-Biblical sources, these peoples originated north of the Black Sea.

*Beth Togarmah.* See note on 27:14. According to Ge 10:3 and 1Ch 1:6 Togarmah is one of the children of Gomer.

It should be noted that the number of evil allies is seven, the same as the total number of nations addressed in the Gentile oracles (chapters 25–32; cf. those who accompany Egypt in Sheol in 32:17–32). “Seven years” (39:9) and “seven months” (39:12, 14) appear symbolically later. This common numerical symbol of completeness makes the point that no localized skirmish is in mind, but rather a universal conspiracy against God’s people. The same point is made by the wide geographical range of Ezekiel’s names of nations, extending from the northern to the southern extremes of the world known to Israel. (CC)

**38:7** The second part (38:7–9) of the summary of Yahweh’s purposes with Gog (38:4–9) begins with two singular Hebrew imperatives, translated as “ready yourself; prepare yourself.” Then singular imperfects with a kind of imperatival force follow in 38:7b–9. The singular verbs indicate a primary preoccupation with Gog, while the accompanying phrases make plain that all his allies are included as well. Ironically, of course, Gog has no idea who is giving these commands; he thinks he is acting independently. Similarly, in Is 45:1–5 Cyrus is unknowingly led by God to conquer Babylon to fulfill God’s redemptive purpose. (CC)

**38:8** *After many days … In future years.*† After all the events of national restoration, the immigration and settlement in Israel as described in chs. 34–37 will be completed and the Messianic kingdom established. See Isa 2:2.

But as stressed before, if we try to fit this into a more precise chronological sequence, we are making Ezekiel answer questions that he is not addressing. Chiliasts might try to relate this prophecy to the seven-year “tribulation” or the like in their scheme (with a “rapture” of Christians before or halfway through that “tribulation”), to be followed by a return of Christ to an earthly reign lasting a literal thousand years, before the arrival of the eschaton. But we must understand the “millennium” of Rev 20:1–6 to be the present church age, the time of the “now but not yet.” The “end” came with the fulfillment of the OT at Christ’s first coming (see τέλος in Lk 22:37; cf. Jn 13:1; τελέω in Jn 19:30), but still to come is the final “end” (τέλος,Mt 24:6, 13–14; cf. Rom 6:22; 1 Cor 15:24; Rev 21:6), the consummation of all things at his second coming. During this present time, Satan is now waging his last-ditch battles against the redeemed, and the Scriptures suggest that his warfare, manifest in antichrists (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7) and “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:1–12), will intensify before the final defeat of all evil at Christ’s parousia. Thus we arrive at a “chronological” conclusion in harmony with other biblical notices of the end times in which we now live (e.g., Acts 2:17; Heb 1:2). (CC)

**38:9** *like a cloud.* Jeremiah similarly describes the invasion from the north in Jer 4:13.

Two meteorological similes (“like”) are used to describe the massive incursion led by Gog. In the first, the verb עָלָה, “come up,” indicates hostile advance, and עָנָן, “cloud,” in the second indicates that both similes refer to a storm (see the textual notes). The same verb and the plural of עָנָן, “clouds,” are in Jeremiah’s description of the enemy from the north (Jer 4:13). The key noun שֹׁאָה, translated adjectivally here in Ezek 38:9 as “devastating,” seems to depend on the storm coming from afar in Is 10:3. (CC)

**38:10** *On that day.* A phrase common to other prophetic writings but found only here in Ezekiel; it refers to the day of Gog’s invasion of Israel.

*thoughts will come into your mind.* The divine initiative (v. 4) is paralleled, as it often is in Scripture, by human action (cf. Dt 31:3; Isa 10:6–7).

*evil scheme.* A raiding expedition (see v. 12).

A series of typical Hebrew idioms comprise this sentence, describing Gog’s subjective involvement in what is about to happen. רְּבָרִים, ordinarily translated “words,” is somewhat broader in Hebrew. Often it implies actions, but here “thoughts,” unspoken words. They take shape in Gog’s “heart” (לֵבָב) in the sense of “mind” (in 11:5 and 20:32 a similar idiom used רוּחַ, “spirit”). What these thoughts are we hear in 38:11–12, but first they are described as “a scheme of evil” (רָעָֽהמַחֲשֶׁ֥בֶת). The cognate accusative construction “to scheme a scheme” (חָשַׁב מַחֲשֶׁבֶת) is common Hebrew style, and I have retained it in my literalistic translation. (CC)

**38:11-12** These verses express the total depravity of unregenerate man, who by nature is held in slavery to sin and the devil (e.g., Rom 6:16–20; Titus 3:3. (CC)

**38:11** *land of unwalled villages.* Speaks of a blissfully peaceful, ideal future time when walls no longer will be needed. See Zec 2:4–5, which assumes, as does this passage, that the Lord alone is sufficient protection (cf. 36:35–36).

**38:12** *center of the land.*† The Hebrew for “center” also means “navel,” a graphic image for the belief that Israel was the vital link between God and the world (the idea occurs also in 5:5). The word occurs elsewhere in the Bible only in Jdg 9:37. Since the Hebrew for “land” can also mean “earth,” Jerusalem is both the center of the land of Israel and the center of the earth in God’s plan of universal redemption.

The metaphor of the land situated “at the navel of the earth,” odd though it sounds to us, was in antiquity a common idiom associated especially with shrines. Here part of the point is that Israel’s prominent position at the “navel” of the earth excites the envy and cupidity of Gog and his allies all the more. Israel itself may well have associated more with the expression. Because of the long history of God working salvation at this location, Israel and especially Jerusalem are the hinge of history, and possibly also in a vertical sense, implying a bond of heaven and earth in one place. For Christians, of course, our understandings of the metaphor are only magnified by the realization that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, whose atoning death and resurrection at Jerusalem have reconciled God and humanity. “In him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). Ezekiel does not again use the language of “navel” or “middle” (in the sense it was used in 5:5 for Jerusalem), but in chapters 40–48 the importance of the temple mount is virtually the total theme. In this context of a looming attack, “navel” emphasizes that this will not be merely another war, of which the pages of history are full, but a war that will have decisive significance in world history, and since it occurs at the theological center of the world, it will involve space as well as time. All of this is close to the “new creation” language of Christological eschatology (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; see also Jn 19:41; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1–5). The old must perish, as it will in this battle, to make room for the new. (CC)

**38:13** *Sheba.* Southwest corner of the Arabian peninsula (modern Yemen), known for trading (Job 6:19; see 23:42; 27:22; 1Ki 10:1–2).

*Dedan.* See note on 25:13.

*Tarshish.* See note on 27:12.

The possibility of acquiring much booty arouses the interest of others as well, which they express by peppering Gog with verbose questions, which to a large extent simply repeat his own language from 38:12. Conceivably, a challenge to Gog is implied, but more likely the questions simply represent the desire of others to share in Gog’s attack against God’s people, as well as the vision of easy spoils in which they can also share. Whether on a large international scale or in smaller, even personal, contacts, the picture of sinful human nature’s greed and covetousness rings all too true. (CC)

**38:14-16** These verses mostly only restate what has already been said earlier in the chapter. Ezek 38:14 underscores that the nations involved are deliberately taking advantage of Israel’s perceived security and launching their massive invasion when its guard is completely down.

One notes the explicit covenant bond in these verses in God’s repeated reference to “my people Israel” (38:14, 16) and to “my land” (38:16). Previously there had been mostly only generalities about returnees and restoration. (CC)

With the verb “I will bring you” (וַהֲבִאוֹתִ֙יךָ֙, 38:16b), we reach the main point of these verses. Yahweh is not merely allowing Gog to come, but summoning him as his agent. The common “in the latter days” (בְּאַחֲרִ֨ית הַיָּמִ֜ים) is used here instead of the unique variant in 38:8 (see the commentary there), but the meanings are essentially the same. (CC)

Finally, the purpose of the whole confrontation will be a worldwide manifestation of Yahweh’s holiness, as reaffirmed in 38:23. Previously in the book, the recognition formula, “(then) you/they will know that I am Yahweh,” often referred to knowledge gained by Yahweh saving his people and judging his enemies. The formulation with God as the direct object, “that the nations may know me,” occurs in Ezekiel only here. This leads Zimmerli, Allen, and others to see a later interpolation, but that sort of “logic” eludes me. The virtual universalism of the clause, implying that all will know God by experiencing either his judgment (upon unbelievers) or his salvation (for believers), is of a piece with the semi-eschatological ambience of all of chapters 38–39. (CC)

**38:17** *Are you not the one I spoke of … ?* Probably a general reference to earlier prophecies of divine judgment on the nations arrayed against God and his people.

There really can be no doubt that the question God addresses to Gog requires a positive answer, as implied at the end of the verse: “I would bring *you* against them.” That answer is made more emphatic by approaching it indirectly through a question, which does not simply make the assertion, but suggests an inquiry for the sake of getting a definite answer. (CC)

Who are the prophets of (literally) “former days” (a counterpart to “latter days” in 38:16), who had made such prophecies? If one looks for specific OT proof texts about Gog (apart from Ezekiel 38–39 themselves), one will look in vain. But if one considers all the many earlier prophecies of Yahweh’s Day of Judgment upon the heathen, it is possible to include a vast percentage of all earlier prophecies. None of them specifically mention Gog, of course, but this verse affirms that Gog and his many attacking allies are fulfillments of what the earlier prophets had spoken, and likewise with his imminent destruction at the hand of Yahweh. The great showdown battle is not at all at variance with the promise of the ultimate restoration of Israel, although for a time it might seem otherwise, just as the ongoing persecutions of the church cause her to yearn all the more for the final deliverance when her warfare shall have ceased. The parallels are not precise, of course, but such an understanding is instructive for the study of specifically “messianic prophecy.” After the fulfillment in Christ, one can look back and see how the earlier Scriptures were indeed fulfilled perfectly, even if in prior times the details seemed unclear (cf. Lk 24:27, 44). (CC)

This verse is also very instructive about the history of the canon. There is ample evidence that prophetic sayings were recorded and collected already during a prophet’s lifetime (e.g., Jeremiah’s relation with Baruch as evident in Jer 36:1–4 and 45:1–2, and, less clearly, Isaiah and his sons in Is 8:16). Already Moses in Deuteronomy (especially chapters 13 and 18) evinces an awareness of prophecy, both true and false. 2 Ki 17:13–23 describes the demise of the northern kingdom as a fulfillment of prophecy, and Amos 3:7 indicates an awareness of God’s regular revelation through his prophets. We cannot trace the details of a “prophetic tradition,” but there obviously was one—probably two, both true and false, as the running conflicts between the two make plain. And with the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel’s own prophetic ministry was authenticated (Ezek 24:25–27; 33:21–22), as were those of other faithful prophets who had predicted the same, and the addition of their books to the definitive canon of inspired books was, humanly speaking, a rather natural development. (CC)

**38:18-20** The language of Yahweh’s wrath has occurred before, of course, and also of earthquakes (3:12–13; 37:7). Ezek 38:18 announces the eruption of Yahweh’s wrath; 38:19 in oath language announces that Yahweh will manifest it through an earthquake; and 38:20 details how all creation, animate and inanimate, will be affected. (The list of creatures resembles Gen 1:26, 28 and 9:2.) Every symbol of stability, whether natural or manmade, will be shattered. That it is Yahweh’s activity is expressed by “before me/in my presence” (מִפָּנַ֡י) near the beginning of 38:20, as well as by the passive verb “will be overthrown” (Niphal, וְנֶהֶרְס֣וּ) for the mountains later. The theophanic language is reminiscent of the revelation at Sinai. The language of cosmic upheaval accompanying Yahweh’s advent occurs often in Scripture (e.g., Is 24:17–23; frequently in Joel; Pss 18:6–15; 144:5–6). In Hag 2:6–7 and Zech 14:4–5, earthquake is a harbinger of Yahweh’s eschatological acts of salvation, as also in the NT: Mt 24:29–31; Mk 13:24–27. The earthquake at the death of Christ signals the impending end of the old, fallen creation (Mt 27:54), and the one at his resurrection (Mt 28:2) announces that the believers’ hope of resurrection on the Last Day has already been accomplished in Christ. After the seventh angel pours out his censer and God announces, “It is done!” (Rev 16:17), there shall be one final, climactic earthquake greater than all others that shall take place at the second advent of Christ (Rev 16:18). (CC)

Critical consensus dates this kind of language as late and “apocalyptic,” but we have formal parallels from seventh-century Assyria, indicating its antiquity. (CC)

**38:19** *earthquake.* Signaling the mighty presence of God, who comes to overwhelm the great army invading his land.

**38:20** The fourfold listing of the animal world indicates the totality of nature (see note on 1:5; cf. Ge 9:2; 1Ki 4:33; Job 12:7–8 for similar listings).

**38:21** *I will summon a sword.* God’s sword of judgment (Isa 34:5–6; Jer 25:29).

The “sword” is highlighted as Yahweh’s instrument of punishment, as previously, especially in chapter 21 (see also chapters 5–6). It appears to specify internecine warfare in the enemy camp as its precise mode of action. It is a standard motif in the biblical “war of Yahweh” (often preferred today to “holy war” to avoid confusion with Muslim *jihad*). Classical examples of the motif occur in Gideon’s war with the Midianites (Judg 7:22) and in Jehoshaphat’s battle with a Transjordanian coalition (2 Chr 20:23). (CC)

*Every man’s sword will be against his brother.* The coalition of Israel’s enemies will turn on itself, as did the armies that attacked Judah in the time of Jehoshaphat (2Ch 20:22–23).

**38:22**† The list of divine weapons describes the judgment to be executed in the cosmic dimensions of the final “day of the Lord” (see Isa 24:17–23; 29:5–8; 66:15–16; Joel 2:30–3:16; Am 8:9; Zec 14:1–21).

Yahweh will use other agents besides the sword. They are grouped in three pairs: (1) “plague” and “bloodshed,” as in 5:17 and 28:23; (2) “torrential rain” and “hailstones,” as in 13:11, 13; and (3) literally, “fire and sulfur” (traditionally “fire and brimstone”), which God rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19:24 (cf. Deut 23), perhaps by means of volcanic activity, because of their abominations, including homosexuality. “Fire” was an instrument of judgment in Ezek 20:47; 21:31; and other verses. “Sulfur/brimstone” occurs only here in Ezekiel, and the LXX renders it here (also in Gen 19:24; Deut 29:23; and other passages) by θεῖον, which the NT employs in its depiction of hell as the “lake of fire burning with sulfur” (Rev 19:20; see also Rev 20:10; 21:8; cf. Lk 17:29; Rev 14:10). (CC)

**38:23** As the previous verse had echoed 38:6 and 38:9, this final verse picks up the theme of world recognition of Yahweh in 38:16. All the verbs in the first sentence are reflexive. The first two are the only occurrences in Ezekiel of the verbs גָּדַל and קָדַשׁ in the Hithpael, “I will prove myself great, and I will prove myself holy” (see further the textual note). “I will make myself known” translates the Niphal of יָדַע, which had been used before for Yahweh’s self-disclosure (20:5, 9; 35:11; 36:23). That sentence is then capsulized in the simple, but characteristic recognition formula, “then they will know that I am Yahweh,” which to a large extent summarizes and consummates not only the chapter, but the whole book—and the whole Bible. (CC)

The recognition of God’s holiness (the Sanctus or Trisagion) is the ceaseless acclamation of the angels surrounding him (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8), and his greatness, glory, and honor are the unending hymn of the angels together with all the redeemed in heaven (Rev 5:9–14; 7:9–12). The scenes of the end at the return of Christ, many replete with eschatological signs as in Ezek 38:19–22, remind us that God displays his holiness and righteous not only in the vindication of his faithful servants, but also in his final judgment and destruction of unbelievers, the devil, and his minions (e.g., Rev 11:16–19; 14:7–11; 19:1–6; 20:7–15). (CC)