

Israel's enemies in the latter days (2)*

Graham Bacon

C. Ezekiel 38–39

THESE TWO chapters give a prophetic account in two parts of one event. It concerns a confederate group of nations which employs an army whose intention is to invade Israel, and is an advance account of the results of this attempt. A major principle of interpreting Bible prophecy is that each prophecy, whether contained within a few verses or spread over a chapter group, should be examined, firstly and primarily, in its own context, in its 'stand alone' significance. This context should be given priority.

If Ezekiel 38 and 39 are read in isolation, as it were, several features stand out. One is that the geographical names are easily identified as Middle Eastern locations, although some of the precise locations may be uncertain. The one exception is the name Gog, evidently a personality from the region of Magog. We are given a clue to the origins of his identity in 1 Chronicles 5:4, where Gog is listed as an Israelite of the tribe of Reuben.

Jews of Ezekiel's time would be very familiar with their forebears. They would have known of the Reubenite called Gog and would be aware of the implications of their forefather's relationship to Ezekiel's prophecy. Ezekiel evidently intimated that a strong Jewish influence would provoke the invasion. This is readily apparent to us since something like twenty-three signatures (out of thirty plus) on the Communist Manifesto of 1917 were Jewish. Karl Marx was a Jew, as was Lenin, and Trotsky's birth name was Davidovich Lev(i) Bernstein. The Gogian invasion will be a traitorous act by a Reubenite. Here is Gog in a modern context.

Another outstanding feature is that the destination of the invasion is Israel, mentioned seventeen times. There is no mention of any place name in Israel except Bashan, and no place mentioned as a site which the invading force captures or which marks the limit of their advance. However, there are descriptions of countryside, such as "mountains of Israel" (38:8), and indications where the invading force comes to its end, that is, "the open field" (39:5) and "the valley of those who pass by east of the sea" (v. 11).

A striking feature of an independent reading of these two chapters is that the invading force does not seem to achieve anything, least of all its main objective of looting (38:12). There is no account of any city taken, nor of any destructive actions; not a single Israeli is injured or life lost. The invasion seems to be utterly futile. The invader's weapons are burnt, but the account is specific that not even one tree is cut down to aid the fire (39:10), and the Israeli environment is not damaged.

This verse says of the Israelis: "they will plunder those who plundered them, and pillage those who pillaged them". There is no record of the Israelis being the subject of Gog's actual plunder and pillage. A possible explanation of the verse is that the Israelis plunder and pillage the Gogian army just like the army *intended* to plunder and pillage Israel: 'they will plunder those who would plunder them'.

A great earthquake in the land of Israel is recorded in 38:19,20, so that all creation "shall shake at [God's] presence. The mountains shall be thrown down, the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground". This passage needs to be placed alongside 39:9-16, where, after the quake, "those who dwell in the cities of Israel will go out" and commence an immense process of cleansing the land for seven months on a highly organised basis. The Israeli cities will still stand and will function effectively. Earthquakes are devastating within a limited range. Evidently this one will not include the cities of Israel.

Clouding the issue

How is it that most understand the Gogian invasion to involve the capture of Jerusalem and its division into halves, much slaughter and destruction in Israel, and, sometimes, the exile of a remnant Israeli people to Egypt? No such details are present in Ezekiel 38 and 39.

It seems that the interpretation of Ezekiel 38 and 39 has been influenced by, and made sub-

* Quotations are from the Revised Authorised Version.

servient to, the interpretation of Zechariah 12–14 in a way that mistakenly excludes Arab involvement. For most of the last hundred years it did not seem possible that the Arabs would have sufficient power and influence to offer significant opposition to Israel in the end times. Even after World War 2 the Arabs were of little account. It was confidently expected in the first half of the twentieth century that Britain would be a protective power over Israel and that some superpower would be needed to fulfil the role of the aggressor against Judah and Jerusalem referred to in Zechariah 12–14. Russia was seen as fulfilling the role of such an aggressor. Russia was identified, correctly, as the invading power of Ezekiel 38 and 39.

This Russian identification was used in interpreting Zechariah 12–14 in order to identify the power responsible for the siege of Judah and Jerusalem, the sack of Jerusalem, and the source of aggression from the “surrounding peoples” (12:1), because the Arabs were thought incapable of it. A misinterpretation of Zechariah has led to a misconception of what Ezekiel 38 and 39 are describing.

The Arabs have more than sufficient wealth and influence to place enormous pressure on Israel, to divide the land (Ezek. 35:10), to blaspheme God and consume Israel (v. 12), to demand sovereignty over Jerusalem, to exhort their people to expel the Jews, to call on all nations to support their claims (which the United Nations seems willing to do) and to fulfil all the prophecies about Israel’s enemies in Zechariah 12–14, Ezekiel 35 and elsewhere.

The significance of the names

There is a further significant difference between Ezekiel and Zechariah. Very clearly the primary subject of Zechariah 12–14 is the city of Jerusalem, which is referred to seventeen times, while ‘Judah’ occurs eight times. The name ‘Israel’ occurs only in the introduction (v. 1), never in the body of the prophecy. But in Ezekiel 38 and 39 this is reversed. Jerusalem is not mentioned even once, nor is Judah; only Israel. What is the significance of this, since it surely cannot be a matter of chance?

It is likely that the use of ‘Judah’ in Zechariah is signifying that the events described in that prophecy involve a partly restored Israel, just as Judah was a description of part of the Israel of old. But ‘Israel’ in Ezekiel is referring to the fully restored ancient lands of old Israel after Christ’s



Dotted lines represent five areas, presently predominantly occupied by Palestinians, which Obadiah vv. 19,20 shows will form greater Israel. The thin line is the highway from Damascus to Amman. The cross represents where Gog’s host is destroyed.

return, which will be very much larger than the Israel of today.

Obadiah describes this expansion. Verses 19 and 20 of Obadiah detail the lands at present occupied by the Palestinians which will be restored to Israel. Of course, Obadiah uses the Old Testament names, and the modern equivalents are supplied here in brackets. “The South [Israelis in the Negev] shall possess the mountains of Esau [south Jordan], and the Lowland [coastal plain Israelis] shall possess Philistia [Gaza]. They shall possess the fields of Ephraim and the fields of Samaria [the West Bank], and Benjamin shall possess Gilead [north Jordan]. And the captives of this host of the children of Israel shall possess the land of the Canaanites as far as Zarephath [south Lebanon]”. Note particularly that all of Jordan, as we know it, will become greater Israel. When this happens, Judah becomes Israel.

The implication is that “the mountains of Israel” (Ezek. 38:8) invaded by Gog, and upon which he falls, are in what we know as north Jordan. Thus, referring to the birds and animals

feeding on the bodies of the slain army of Gog, Ezekiel 39:18 says: "You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, drink the blood of the princes of the earth, of rams and lambs, of goats and bulls, all of them fatlings of Bashan". Bashan is located in the north Jordan/south Syrian border region, "the mountains of [greater] Israel" upon which Gog will fall.

A further geographical clue is given in 39:11: "I will give Gog a burial place there in Israel, the valley of those who pass by east of the sea; and it will obstruct travellers"; or, "I will give unto Gog a place there of graves in Israel, the valley of the passengers on the east of the sea" (AV). Young renders "the valley of the passengers on the east of the sea" as the valley "east of Chinnereth".¹ A line drawn on a map eastward from the Sea of Galilee to the main highway from Damascus to Amman locates this spot (see [map above](#)). This is where the travellers on the highway are hindered from proceeding on their

journey and, according to the AV, have their noses stopped.

It is possible today to drive to this spot on the highway in the mountains north of Amman, the capital of Jordan, which will become part of Israel, "a burial place . . . in Israel", on "the mountains of Israel". It seems that close by an assembly point will be chosen for components of the Gogian army from the north (Magog etc., that is, Russia), the east (Persia, that is, Iran), the south (Ethiopia, that is Sudan, etc.) and southwest (Libya). What better place than the wilderness east of north Jordan? Having moved just a short distance, to the east of the Sea of Galilee on the Damascus/Amman Highway in the region of old Bashan, the combined army is stopped in its tracks by the mighty power of God and destroyed before it can carry out its plan. The untouched Israelis issue forth out of their cities to embark on the enormous task of cleansing the land. This is the message of Ezekiel 38 and 39.

D. The latter-day Assyrian

THE references to the Assyrian attack on Israel, in particular Micah 5, are very often taken to be connected with the prophecies of Zechariah 12-14 and Ezekiel 38 and 39, giving a triangle of prophecies said to support the idea of the Gogian capture of Jerusalem, and giving rise to the once popular identification of Russia as 'the latter-day Assyrian'. But geography is the fatal defect in such a scheme.

We begin our search for the identity of the latter-day Assyrian in Isaiah 19. Here is described the final destiny of three nations: Egypt, Israel and Assyria. The bulk of Isaiah 19 is concerned with the destiny of Egypt, and from verse 16 onwards the events of our time are foretold. "And the land of Judah will be a terror to Egypt" (v. 17) aptly describes the abject defeats of Egypt by a partly restored Israel ('Judah') in the desert wars, and the following verses describe an exciting future time when marvellous things bring the Egyptians to the Lord: "the LORD will strike Egypt, He will strike and heal it; they will return to the LORD, and He will be entreated by them and heal them" (v. 22). We cannot see anything of this in Egypt's sad condition today, but it is heartening to note that better things lie ahead for her.

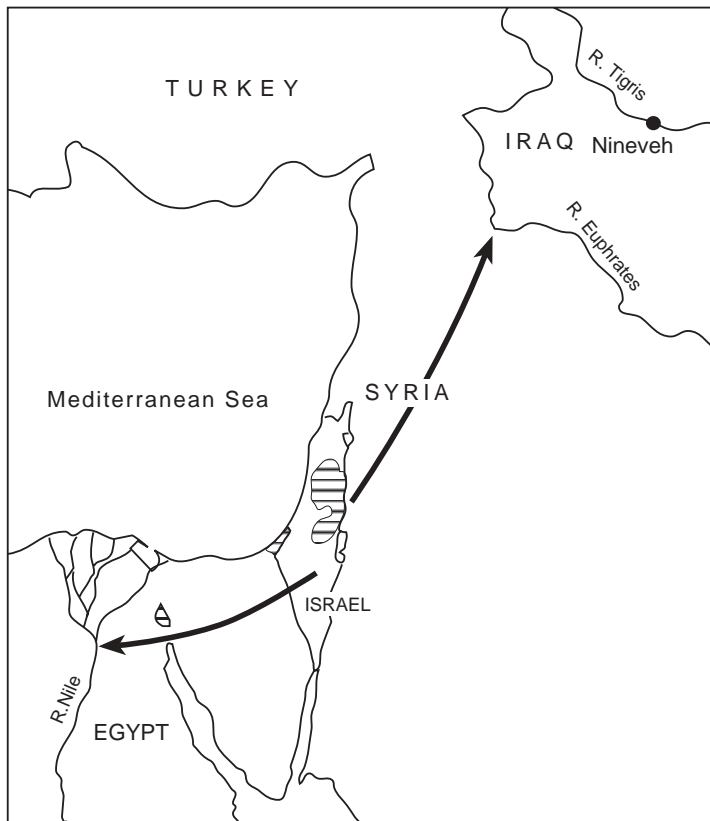
The last three verses join the future of Egypt, Israel and Assyria together in the one blessed destiny. The three countries are connected by a

continuous highway with no breaks or impediments (v. 23), and the three countries "serve" each other. Then comes a wonderful statement: "In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, 'Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance'" (vv. 24,25).

A glance at the [map](#) below will show that the highway of verse 23 follows the route of Abraham's famous migratory journey from Haran to Canaan, extended as it was into Egypt. This covers the territory promised to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 15:18, "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates", being from the Nile to the Euphrates. This expanse covers the lands we know as Egypt, Israel and Syria. Here we have a modern identity of Assyria which points to Syria. But there is more.

Micah 5 has an extended reference to Assyria. The chapter begins with a chill warning. The NIV margin says, "Strengthen your walls, O walled city, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod".

1. See *Young's Concordance* under "Valley of the Passengers".



Isaiah 19:23-25 joins Egypt, Israel and Assyria in a continuous highway. This connects the Nile with the Euphrates in the terms of the promise to Abraham for the extent of the greater promised land. Micah 5:6 demonstrates that "Assyria" includes the nation in which Nineveh is located, that is, Iraq. The events of Micah 5:1-6 are those which make the joyous conclusion of Isaiah 19 possible.

The next verse pinpoints Jesus Christ as the ruler in Israel who is struck on the cheek by the Assyrian. His birth in "Bethlehem Ephrathah" is noted, and of Bethlehem it says, "yet out of you shall come forth to Me the one to be ruler in Israel". This quite positively applies the prophecy to the second advent of Jesus.

The prophecy continues:

"And this one shall be peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land, and when he treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princely men. They shall waste with the sword the land of Assyria, and the land of Nimrod at its entrances; thus he shall deliver us from the Assyrian, when he comes into our land and when he treads within our borders".

The capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire was Nineveh, built (founded) by Nimrod (Gen. 10:11). The "seven shepherds and eight princely men" of Micah 5:5 go into "the land of Assyria, and the land of Nimrod". Micah is speaking about what we now know as Iraq, since the city of Nineveh was in the country we now know as

Iraq. Furthermore, Syria and Iraq were the core of the old Assyrian Empire. There can be little doubt, putting the geographical information of Isaiah 19 and Micah 5 together, that the modern equivalent of Assyria is Syria and Iraq.

So what does Micah 5 contribute to our picture of the future? It reveals yet another assault on Israel, which is separate from what is prophesied by Zechariah and Ezekiel. The geographical names are unique and the prophecy demands to be treated independently. It reveals just how Syria and Iraq are converted to come to the Lord, as Isaiah 19 shows. Certainly now they are in no position to be regarded as on God's side. Here is the task of the "seven shepherds and eight princely men". Princely men are strong and forceful. They "waste" the lands of Iraq and Syria and bring them to heel. The present Syrian and Iraqi rulers will have to submit or be removed.

Shepherds are teachers and carers. Seven of these go with the eight strong men and teach those remaining, those who are prepared to listen and be teachable. They will shepherd and teach the remnant of the Syrians and Iraqis about the righteousness of Jesus's rule in Jerusalem.

They do a good job because the result is disclosed in Isaiah 19. From being a belligerent and invading force against Jesus, Syria and Iraq turn to be part of the nucleus of the Kingdom of God on earth.

These concepts of prophetic fulfilment were unimaginable a hundred years ago. Today they are an eminently sensible solution to the horrendous problems confronting the world in the Middle East. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

(Concluded)

Red Sea or Reed Sea?

Debbie Hurn

THAT THE Israelites of the Exodus passed through the Red Sea (that is, the Suez Gulf or its ancient extension, the Bitter Lakes) is not a popular theory amongst the commentators. Many have been the scholars who have jumped to the alternative 'Reed Sea'. One can hardly pick up a translation or handbook that does not include an annotation that the Hebrew phrase *yam suph* means 'Reed Sea'.

If this is so then it provides a contra-indication for a crossing through the Suez Gulf, as it is known that no reeds grow in the waters of the Red Sea, nor indeed in the Bitter Lakes between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean.¹ Reeds require an inflow of fresh water, with which they can even grow at the edge of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea), as they do at Ein Feshka and Ein Bokek. The Red Sea, often known as the Arabian Gulf in ancient times (a name now sometimes given to the Persian Gulf), contains some of the world's hottest and saltiest sea water. No water enters the Red Sea from rivers, and rainfall is scant.

Before the Suez Canal inundated the Suez depression with sea water in the 1860s, there were reeds growing in most of the lakes and marshes in the north of the isthmus between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean, and these were fed by out-flowings of the Nile and a few fresh springs. Many commentators have been particularly willing to accept the 'Reed Sea' translation, for these northern bodies of water were generally seasonal or shallow, which fact tends to reduce the need for a miracle.

We need not, however, prefer a Gulf of Suez crossing just because it is 'more' miraculous, for Yahweh often uses natural phenomena to bring about His purpose—for example, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by a Rift Valley earthquake causing a subterranean explosion of

existing combustibles. But when an explanation does not fit the Biblical record and calls into question the historicity of the text, we must emphatically reject it and await a better theory.

Translation difficulties

Despite the apparent unanimity of Bible commentators on the 'Reed Sea' interpretation, there is some trouble with consistency of translation. Where *yam suph* has nothing to do with the Exodus, as for example in 1 Kings 9:26 and Jeremiah 49:21, and/or where the specified body of water is clearly the Gulf of Eilat (Num. 14:25; 21:4; Deut. 1:40; 2:1), there is no choice but to identify *yam suph* with the Red Sea. Yahweh promised that He would set the borders of the land of Israel "from the Red sea even unto the sea of the Philistines" (Ex. 23:31), that is, from the Gulf of Eilat to the Mediterranean Sea. It would be absurd to identify *yam suph* here with the Sirbonis or Menzaleh lakes, or with any of the other bodies of water close to Egypt and the Mediterranean shore.

In the earliest known translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, a translation by Jewish scholars in Alexandria from Hebrew into Greek in about 300 B.C., *yam suph* is consistently represented by *erythra thalassa* (literally 'Red Sea'), except in Judges 11:16, where *suph* is preserved. The meaning of *suph* may be somewhat variable, but it certainly does not mean 'red', so *erythra* is not simply the transfer of the meaning of *suph* to the Greek.

The Septuagint scholars tended to translate place names rather than to transliterate them,

1. "Reed Sea or Red Sea? How the mistake was made and what Yam Sûp really means", B. F. Batto, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/Aug. 1984, p. 59.