

Russia—a guard to South Ossetia?

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Ossetia has links to the Scythians, the Magogites, of old. The Russian military activity in Georgia reflects its role as a guard, both protective and prison guard, as prophesied in Ezekiel 38.

WHILE THE WORLD was watching the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Georgian forces were seeking to gain control of the breakaway region of South Ossetia. This brought an overpowering response from Russia, which moved into South Ossetia and beyond. These events shed light on the greater invasion which is prophesied in Ezekiel 38.

Ossetia and Scythia

In Ezekiel 38 it is written, “And the word of the LORD [Yahweh] came unto me, saying, Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him, and say, Thus saith the Lord GOD [Yahweh]; Behold, I am against thee, O Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal: and I will turn thee back, and put hooks into thy jaws, and I will bring thee forth, and all thine army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed with all sorts of armour, even a great company with bucklers and shields, all of them handling swords” (vv. 1-4).

Magog was identified by Josephus as referring to the Scythians: “Magog founded those that from him were named Magogites, but who are by the Greeks called Scythians”.¹ The Scythians, according to Herodotus, were located north of the Black Sea, the southern part of the River Danube being their western border: “The Ister [Danube] is of all the rivers with which we are acquainted the mightiest . . . Counting them from the west it is the first of the Scythian rivers”.²

In the last days, southern Russia and also Ukraine constitute the ancient heartlands of the Scythians. The influence of the Scythians also stretched down into the Caucasus, between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. In a previous article

in this magazine³ I referred to an article by the writer Mike Edwards in the *National Geographic* about the Scythians. We made the following quotation from the article:

“Yet, scholars say, a remnant of the Scythians endures in the 700,000 Ossetians, whose homeland today is a two-part enclave straddling the Caucasus Mountains . . . The Ossetians declare that their ancestors were the Alans, a tribe in which survived the genes of both Scythians and Sarmatians, who came after them from the Asian Steppe”.⁴

This link between the Ossetians and the Scythians is of interest, given the recent developments involving Russia and Georgia over the disputed South Ossetia region. However, there is much more that can be drawn from Edwards’ article with regard to the Ossetians and the ancient Scythians.



Map of Georgia showing the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, VI, 1.
2. Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 4, 48.
3. “Towards an autocrat of Russia”, *Oct. 2004*, p. 392.
4. Edwards, M. (1996), “Searching for the Scythians”, *National Geographic*, Vol. 190, No. 3, pp. 54-79.



Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

Picture: bigstockphoto.com

Edwards goes on to state that it is “language and tradition that suggest . . . links between Ossetia and Scythia”. For example, he cites an interview with a historian, Vitaly Gussalov, who pointed out that the word for ‘river’ in Ossetian, *don*, derives “from the ancient eastern branch of the Iranian language, the language of the Scythians and also the Sarmatians”. According to Edwards, “Scythian words preserved in Greek texts provide other linguistic connections to the Ossetian tongue”. With regard to tradition, he notes, “like the Scythians, Ossetians revere horses”. Also, according to Edwards, the Ossetian practice of lighting a fire beside a grave at a funeral reflects the way, he says, the Scythians used torches to purify graves.

Whilst these claimed links between Ossetians and the Scythians should not be stretched too far, they help us to see that the land of Magog, which we know is to the north of Israel (v. 15), includes the land within the Caucasus.

Background to the present conflict

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Georgia gained independence in 1991. Between 1992 and 1994 minority ethnic groups within two provinces of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, fought separatist wars against the Georgian government. A peacekeeping force, consisting mostly of Russian forces, was deployed in South Ossetia in 1994. In 2000, President Putin imposed visa requirements on Georgians traveling to Russia. 2002 saw a rise in tension, with three key issues angering the Russians. Firstly,

Georgia allegedly sheltered Chechen rebels, to which Russia responded with an air raid. Secondly, Georgia applied for NATO membership. Thirdly, Georgia agreed to allow a pipeline to be built through its territory to take oil from the Caspian Sea to Turkey, thus avoiding Russia.

There was a ‘peaceful revolution’ in Georgia in 2003, which saw the ousting of Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Saakashvili coming to power. In 2006, Georgia arrested four Russian military personnel whom it accused of spying. Russia responded with economic sanctions, the deportation of hundreds of Georgians from Russia and the halting of Georgian imports. Also, the gas supply to Georgia was disrupted following an explosion to a pipeline in Russia. In 2007, talks between Georgia and South Ossetia, hosted by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, collapsed. Following Kosovo gaining independence earlier this year, South Ossetia used this as a precedent and asked for its own independence.⁵

“Be thou a guard”

If President Saakashvili thought he could simply take control of South Ossetia while the world’s attention was on the opening of the Olympic Games then he was sadly mistaken. Whatever the arguments about who provoked whom, the Russian response was ruthless. Within a short

5. Information in this section derived from time lines in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Financial Times* for 9 Aug. 2008.

space of time the Georgians were fleeing south, fearful the Russians were intending to attack the capital Tbilisi. As well as South Ossetia, the Russians moved into Abkhazia, fuelling the separatist tendencies that are also present there.

In Ezekiel, the prophet is inspired to say to Gog, "Be thou prepared, and prepare for thyself, thou, and all thy company that are assembled unto thee, and be thou a guard unto them" (v. 7). According to Strong's concordance, the Hebrew word translated "guard" is first used in Genesis 40:3, where it is translated "ward": "And he put them in *ward* in the house of the captain of the guard, into the prison, the place where Joseph was bound". Here, the sense of the word conveys the idea of keeping a person prisoner. On the other hand, the word is used in Nehemiah, where the sense is that of a protective guard: "Likewise at the same time said I unto the people, Let every one with his servant lodge within Jerusalem, that in the night they may be a *guard* to us, and labour on the day" (4:22). Is the Russian guard in Ezekiel 38 a prison guard or a protective guard?

According to the BBC, Mr Medvedev, the Russian President, said that "Russia was the 'guarantor' of the interests and lives of those in South Ossetia and Abkhazia".⁶ So Russia is certainly seeking to portray itself as a protective guard. On the other hand, the behaviour of Russia has been described by President Bush as "bullying and intimidation". Whilst separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia may see Russia as

a protective guard, it would be naïve to ascribe simply altruistic motives to the Russian intentions. The Caucasus is a vital strategic area, linking Europe and Asia, and Russia clearly wishes to control this area.

With regard to the use of the word "guard" in Ezekiel 38, perhaps the other uses of the word in the Old Testament are teaching us to see both senses there. At the time of the invasion of Israel, Gog will proclaim itself as a protective guard, a "guarantor" of the interests and lives of the nations listed in that prophecy as its allies. However, when necessary it will also be a ruthless prison guard.

At the time of writing, the Russians still have a significant military presence in Georgia. This presence is not just in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but in other Georgian territory as well. Whatever the outcome of this present crisis, the sudden movement of Russian troops south should warn us of the speed with which events can develop. It should also show us that Russia is surely, even now, capable of carrying out the invasion described in Ezekiel 38.

In Revelation 16:15 it is written, "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame". When Russia moved into Georgia, were we truly watching or were we watching the Olympics?

6. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7564176.stm>.

Your Letters



Church or ecclesia?

I agree with Brother Peter Cox's short article "Church or ecclesia" (May 2008, p. 99), particularly his concluding words, "there is no Scriptural justification for brethren and sisters to refer to the believers as the 'church', when the latter word means something quite different. We are the 'called out ones', the ecclesia".

I think it is necessary to make some comments on Brother Jeremy Thomas' letter on the same subject in the August issue (p. 174). The etymology of words in Scripture is very relevant. One

example is "knowledge" in Colossians 3:10, where the Greek is *epignōsis*, which means 'precise and correct knowledge' according to Thayer's lexicon. This is teaching us that the new man which must be developed in us after our baptism is only renewed by correct knowledge of God's Word.

So with the word *ekklēsia*. Its meaning teaches us that we have been called out of this world of darkness to the glorious light of God's Word of truth. It teaches us that we are separate from the churches of Christendom, something that we should always remember. The Catholic Church may have the word emblazoned over the door