



THE LAST DAYS ⁷

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

‘Eschatology’ is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological ‘system’ scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular “Left Behind” system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

BUT IS IT IN THE BIBLE?

THOUGHTS ON EZEKIEL 38 & 39 BY GARY DEMAR



“Buck was stunned when he read Ezekiel 38 and 39 about a great enemy from the north invading Israel with the help of Persia, Libya, and Ethiopia. More stark was that the Scriptures foretold of weapons of war used as fire fuel and enemy soldiers eaten by birds or buried in a common grave.”¹ According to Tim LaHaye, the “great enemy from the north” is modern-day “Russia.” The invasion includes jet planes, “exploding missiles, and “atomic and explosive” devices.

If LaHaye is true to his claim of literalism, then the Russian

“invasion” described in *Left Behind* should be a literal rendering of the events described in Ezekiel 38 and 39. There should be a one-to-one relationship between Ezekiel’s description of the battle and what LaHaye and Jenkins describe. Here is how LaHaye characterizes his interpretive methodology:

The best guide to Bible study is “The Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation.” To depart from this rule opens the student to all forms of confusion and sometimes even heresy.

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.²

LaHaye insists that the interpreter is to “take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.” We learn from LaHaye that the prophecies found in Ezekiel 38 and 39 “are among the most specific and easy to understand in the prophetic word.”³ But do we find descriptions of jets, missiles, and atomic weapons in these chapters? Buck supposedly saw all of these very modern weapons when he first read Ezekiel even though no one has seen them for more than 2500 years. Can such a modern-day battle scenario be found in Ezekiel 38 and 39 if, as LaHaye maintains, every word should be interpreted in terms of “its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise”? Let’s put LaHaye’s interpretive standard to the test.

“We are never told how many people are turned off by a constant rehearsing of end-time speculations that never come to pass. The reports we read only recount the successes. We almost never hear about how the works of modern-day prophetic speculators are used by secularists to discredit the Bible.”

Tim Callahan, *Bible Prophecy: Failure or Fulfillment?*

An Ancient Battle with Ancient Weapons

The battle in Ezekiel 38 and 39 is clearly an ancient one or at least fought with ancient weapons. All the soldiers (38:4) are riding horses (Ezek. 38:4, 15; 39:20). These horse soldiers are “wielding swords” (38:4), carrying “bows and arrows, war clubs and spears” (39:3, 9). The weapons are made of wood (39:10), and it is these abandoned weapons that serve as fuel for “seven years” (39:9). There is nothing in the context that would lead the reader to conclude that horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears mean anything other than horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears. This is not to say that a sword cannot be used symbolically. The Bible tells us to “take up . . . the sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17). Children are compared to a “quiver full” of arrows in Psalm 127:5. Even so, there doesn’t seem to be any indication in Ezekiel 38 and 39 that these implements of war are being used symbolically, that is, that they stand for something else. And even if they are symbols, it is a great leap in logic to assume that they symbolize twentieth-century weaponry.

What happened to LaHaye’s “golden rule of biblical interpretation”? He told us that not to follow this rule would lead to “all forms of confusion and sometimes even heresy.” To help readers of the *Left Behind* series to “gain a clearer understanding of end-time prophecy”⁴ from their perspective, LaHaye and Jenkins have written the non-fiction prophecy guide *Are We Living in the End Times?* that is interspersed with excerpts from the *Left Behind* series. In the twelve-page discussion of the battle described in Ezekiel 38 and 39 and developed in *Left Behind*, Jenkins and LaHaye never tell us how they were able to turn horses, war clubs, swords, bows and arrows, and spears into “war planes,” “intercontinental ballistic missiles,” “nuclear-equipped MiG fighter-bombers,”⁵ and “chunks of burning, twisted, molten steel smashing to the ground”⁶ while maintaining a “literal interpretation” where “every word” is to be taken “at its primary, literal meaning.”

LaHaye is Not Alone

LaHaye writes that one way we know

that Ezekiel 38 and 39 “can only mean modern-day Russia” is because of “etymology,” that is, by studying the origin of words. The Hebrew word *rosh* that is found in Ezekiel 38:2 is said to be a people-group that refers to modern-day Russia. Part of the argument rests on the belief that *rosh* sounds like Russia. Those who hold this view translate Ezekiel 38:2 this way: “Son of man, set your face toward Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal.” The key phrase is “prince of Rosh,” which they would have us to understand as the “leader of Russia.” A more accurate translation, the one followed by the King James Version, based on the way *rosh* is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, would read this way: “Son of man, set your face toward Gog of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.” Even scholars who would agree with LaHaye on many other prophetic points admit that *rosh* does not refer to Russia. Charles Ryrie even takes issue with the New American Standard translation of Ezekiel 38:2 when he writes: “The prince of Rosh” is better translated as “the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.”⁷ While the New American Standard Bible uses “the prince of Rosh” in Ezekiel 38:2 and 39:1, it has a marginal note in 39:1 which reads “chief prince of Meshech.” Meshech and Tubal are not linked with a place called Rosh in any other place in the Bible (Gen. 10:2; 1 Chron. 1:5; Isa. 66:19;8 Ezek. 27:13; 32:26), so it is extremely unlikely that in these two cases alone *rosh* takes on an entirely different meaning from the way it is used elsewhere in the Old Testament.

This interpretation is not unique to LaHaye. Hal Lindsey popularized the interpretation in his *Late Great Planet Earth*.⁹ LaHaye follows Lindsey’s view to the letter. LaHaye writes the following in his *The Beginning of the End*:

The name Moscow comes from the tribal name Meshech, and Tobolsk, the name of the principal state, comes from Tubal. The noun Gog is from the original tribal name, Magog, which gradually became Rosh, then Rus, and today is known as Russia. In the very interesting book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, my friend Hal Lindsey presents a lengthy discussion of the identity of these nations. I was so impressed by the accuracy of his sources and his readable style

that I obtained permission to quote him at length, with numbered footnotes indicating his sources.¹⁰

The Rosh=Russia interpretation was introduced to Christians in the first edition of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1917. Scofield wrote that “The reference to Meshech and Tubal (Moscow and Tobolsk) is a clear mark of identification (i.e., with Russia).”¹¹ The views of Scofield, Lindsey, and LaHaye are not supported by Bible-believing Christian historians, archaeologists, and linguists. Edwin M. Yamauchi, professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, is an authority on the subject, and disagrees with Lindsey’s analysis. He writes that the Hebrew word *rosh* “can have nothing to do with modern ‘Russia.’ This would be a gross anachronism, for the modern name is based upon the name Rus, which was brought into the region of Kiev, north of the Black Sea, by the Vikings only in the Middle Ages.”¹² Other evangelical scholars agree:

There is no evidence from the ancient Near East that a country named Rosh ever existed. Some would understand *rosh* as modern Russia. Proponents of this view usually appeal to etymology based on similar sounds (to the hearing) between two words. Such etymological procedures are not linguistically sound, nor is etymology alone a sound hermeneutical basis on which to interpret a word. The word “Russia” is a late eleventh-century A.D. term. Therefore, the data does [sic] not seem to support an interpretation of *rosh* as a proper name of a geographical region or country.¹³

Rosh is a common Hebrew word that is used hundreds of times in the Bible and means “chief,” “head,” or “beginning.” For example, Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the Jewish New Year. It is described as a “high holy day” because it is the chief or head holy day of the year. It literally means “head of the year” or “first of the year.” Jews also celebrate Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the new month in the Jewish calendar and celebrated during the morning worship time in a Jewish synagogue (1 Sam. 20:5).

Any concordance will show that *rosh* is never used as a proper name that refers to a nation.¹⁴ There are priests in Israel and there are “chief priests.” The word for “chief” is *rosh* (2 Kings 25:18; 1

Chron. 27:5; 2 Chron. 19:11; 24:6; 26:20; 31:10; Ezra 7:5; Jer. 52:24).

Russia is North of Israel

LaHaye makes the point that Ezekiel refers to those who come from the “remote parts of the north” (Ezek. 38:6, 15; 39:2). While it is true that Russia is north of Israel, it is also true a number of nations are north of Israel and that the Bible often uses north as a designation for a geographical area that includes the northeast. For example, Babylon was east of Israel, but Jeremiah 4:6 warns that the disaster comes “from the north” (Jer. 1:13-15; 3:18; 6:1, 22; 10:22; Zech. 2:6-7). The same is true for the Assyrians (Zeph. 2:13) and Persians (Isa. 41:25; Jer. 50:3). Is the Bible mistaken? Not at all. “From the perspective of the Holy Land, the invaders came down from the north, even if their place of origin was actually to the east. Ezekiel is giving the direction of the invasion, not the place of the invader’s origin.”¹⁵ Archeologist Barry Beitzel states that “the Bible’s use of the expression ‘north’ denotes the direction from which a foe would normally approach and not the location of its homeland.”¹⁶

For Such a Time as This

If the battle described in Ezekiel 38 and 39 does not refer to modernday Russia, then when and where in biblical history did this conflict take place? Instead of looking to the distant future, James B. Jordan believes that “it is in [the book of] Esther that we see a conspiracy to plunder the Jews, which backfires with the result that the Jews plundered their enemies. This event is then ceremonially sealed with the institution of the annual Feast of Purim.”¹⁷ Jordan continues by establishing the context for Ezekiel 38 and 39:

Ezekiel 34 states that God will act as Good Shepherd to Israel, and will bring them back into the land. He continues this theme in Ezekiel 36, saying that God will make a new covenant with Israel. The inauguration of this new covenant, which we can call the Restoration Covenant, is described in Zechariah 3, where God removes the filth from Joshua the High Priest and restores the Temple and Priesthood . . . Ezekiel continues in Ezekiel 37 with the vision of the valley of dry bones. The

Spirit of God would be given a greater measure than before (though of course not as great as at Pentecost in Acts 2), and the result would be restoration of the people. No longer would there be a cultural division between Judah and Ephraim, but all would be together as a new people . . . At this point, Ezekiel describes the attack of Gog, Prince of Magog, and his confederates. Ezekiel states that people from all over the world attack God’s people, who are pictured dwelling at peace in the land. God’s people will completely defeat them, however, and the spoils will be immense. The result is that all nations will see the victory, and “the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord their God from that day onward” (Ezek. 39:21-23) . . . Chronologically this all fits very nicely. The events of Esther took place during the reign of Darius, after the initial rebuilding of the Temple under Joshua [the High Priest] and Zerubbabel and shortly before rebuilding of the walls by Nehemiah . . . Thus, the interpretive hypothesis I am suggesting (until someone shoots it down) is this: Ezekiel 34-37 describes the first return of the exiles under Zerubbabel, and implies the initial rebuilding of the physical Temple. Ezekiel 38-39 describes the attack of Gog (Haman) and his confederates against the Jews. Finally, Ezekiel 40-48 describes in figurative language the situation as a result of the work of Nehemiah.¹⁸

The slaughter of Israel’s enemies in Ezekiel 39 fits with the number of deaths listed in Esther 9:16 (75,000). In Esther 9:5 we read that “the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying.” Ezekiel 38:5-6 tells us that Israel’s enemies come from “Persia, Ethiopia [lit., Cush], and . . . from the remote parts of the north . . .,” all within the boundaries of the Persian Empire of Esther’s day. From Esther we learn that the Persian Empire “extended from India to Ethiopia [lit., Cush], 127 provinces . . .” in all (Esther 8:9). “In other words, the explicit idea that the Jews were attacked by people from all the provinces of Persia is in both passages.”¹⁹ The parallels are unmistakable.

This interpretation has several things going for it. First, the narrative can be read whereby every word can be taken “at its primary, literal meaning” without resorting to allegorizing. Lindsey, quot-

ed by LaHaye in his *The Beginning of the End*, admits that “‘Horses, swords, armor, bucklers, and shields’ could be symbolic terms of implements of warfare that in our day would represent tanks, M-16s, machine guns, rockets, bazookas, etc.”²⁰ There is nothing in the text that indicates that the battle is symbolic, but for Lindsey and LaHaye, the battle is symbolically represented, something which Lindsey admits deep in his exposition of the passage.

Second, the Bible itself gives us the interpretation. By comparing Scripture with Scripture, without the aid of “prophecy experts” or speculation, the average Christian can interpret the Bible.

Third, because the interpretation of Exekiel 38 and 39 is found within the Bible, we are not dependent on changes in future historical events.

NOTES

1. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 14.
2. Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians will Escape All the Tribulation* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 240. *No Fear of the Storm* has been republished as *Rapture Under Attack*. Also see Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?: Current Events Foretold in Scripture*.
3. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, 84.
4. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*, v.
5. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 10.
6. LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind*, 14.
7. Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1978), 1285.
8. Some editions of the New American Standard Bible include “Rosh” in Isaiah 66:19: “Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Rosh, Tibal, and Javan.” No other translation includes “Rosh” in this listing. The Hebrew text does not include “Rosh.” The Lockman Foundation’s on-line version of their updated translation of the NASB does not include “Rosh” in Isaiah 66:19.
9. Hal Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 59-71.
10. Tim LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991), 65.
11. *The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 883n.
12. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier: Invading Hordes from the Russian Steppes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 20.
13. Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 6:930. For a discussion of five contemporary views of this battle, see Ralph H. Alexander, “A Fresh Look at Ezekiel 38 and 39,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 17 (Summer 1974), 162-65.
14. One of Benjamin’s sons is named “Rosh” (Gen. 46:21), but no one identifies him with Russia. Russia was not settled by Jews from the tribe of Benjamin.
15. Daily, *The Gathering Storm*, 166.
16. *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985), 5.
17. James B. Jordan, *Esther: In the Midst of Covenant History* (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1995), 5.
18. Jordan, *Esther*, 5-7.
19. Jordan, *Esther*, 7.
20. Lindsey quoted in LaHaye, *The Beginning of the End*, 80.

ENDLESS UNFULFILLED PROPHECIES PRODUCE PARALYSIS

ADAPTED FROM 'RAPTURE FEVER' BY GARY NORTH

When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him (Deut. 18:22).

'During the 1970's, when The Late Great Planet Earth was out-selling everything, the rapture was the hot topic. Pastors preached about heaven, and Christians eagerly anticipated being taken up at any moment to meet their Lord in the air. When Christ didn't return after 40 years since the establishment of a new Israel in 1948 without the fulfillment of prophesied events, disillusionment began to set in.'

In 1977, a book written by premillennial historian Dwight Wilson appeared: *Armageddon Now!: The Premillennial Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*. This book recorded the teachings of hundreds of books and pamphlets regarding the Antichrist, the Beast, and similar prophetic themes in the Bible, all of which had been applied to current events—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—by premillennial, dispensational authors. The book received guarded praise from the dean of dispensational scholars, John F. Walvoord, who for three decades served as the president of Dallas Theological Seminary. He said modern dispensationalists can “learn from it many important lessons applicable to interpretation today.” But one dispensational scholar failed to learn a single lesson from Wilson's book: John F. Walvoord.

As a U.S. war with Iraq loomed in late 1990, Walvoord revised his 1974 book, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, and it sold over a million and a half copies. It did so by rejecting Dr. Wilson's warning: do not use sensational interpretations of Bible prophecy in order to sell books. If you do, he warned, you will look like a charlatan in retrospect, and you will also injure the reputation of Christ and His Church.

The headlines about the imminent war in Kuwait were too powerful a temptation. Since the first version of the book had not cost him his academic reputation within dispensational circles (he had none outside these circles), there seemed to be no reason not to try to cash in again. Feeding frenzies must be fed, after all. Apparently publishing highly specific interpretations of Bible prophecy that are disproved within a year or two, and possibly six months—has something important to do with spreading the gospel.

Dispensationalists have been visibly addicted to sensationalism. It is an addiction that is not easily broken. The “highs” that sensationalism briefly provides during any Middle Eastern crisis are just too alluring. The addicts never remember their last round of withdrawal pain, when their confident expectations of imminent deliverance once again failed to come true. Dr. Wilson's book, *Armageddon Now*, is an attempt to remind them of those many failed prophecies. It offers them an example of academic integrity, as well as a helping hand psychologically. Addicts of prophecy sensationalism need both: integrity and psychological help.

In early 1991, Walvoord told the world that the biblical clock of prophecy was ticking. He was wrong. It was not the clock of prophecy that he heard ticking; it was a time bomb for popular dispensationalism. It exploded on August 21, 1991: the defeat of the Communist *coup* in the Soviet Union, unques-

tionably the most startling three-day geopolitical reversal of the twentieth century.

When the coup began on August 19, geopolitical affairs still looked as though dispensational prophecy books could conceivably be salvaged. But when this coup failed, it ended any immediate or even intermediate threat to the State of Israel from Russia (“Magog”). The Soviet Union had disintegrated. The republics declared their independence. During the *coup*, the Soviet KGB and the Red Army's military masters could not even control downtown Moscow, let alone invade the State of Israel. Unless the State of Israel should, for some suicidal reason, attack Russia, there is not going to be a Russian-Israeli war. The failed coup placed a tombstone on top of a huge pile of utterly inaccurate prophecies made by the leaders of popular dispensationalism, a pile of errors that had been growing since 1917. The Rapture is just around the corner, the faithful have been told, because Russia is building up its military machine, and the State of Israel is simply sitting there. Defenseless. Waiting to be surrounded by Russia. Now what?

Three and a half years before Russia surrounds the State of Israel, dispensational laymen have been publicly assured for over seven decades, the Rapture will pull all Christians out of their miserable, culturally impotent, present condition—the wretched of the earth. But if Russia is not in a position to invade the State of Israel, then the Rapture cannot be imminent. In short: no imminent Russian invasion, no imminent Rapture. Put another way, to the extent that a dispensationalist is longing for the Rapture, he is longing for Russia to invade the State of Israel. He longs for the beginning of the Great Tribulation of Israel in which, according to Walvoord, two-thirds of the nation of Israel's population will perish. Because this dispensationally inevitable holocaust will begin 3.5 years after the Rapture, he longs for the Rapture. An imminent Rapture, if it is sufficiently imminent, means that he will not have to die, even though millions of Jews will. But now this “blessed hope” is gone for our generation; the invasion by Russia has been postponed indefinitely. This means that the Rapture has been postponed indefinitely.

This, I believe, is a logical, theological, but utterly unacceptable conclusion for most dispensationalists. It is too hard a pill for them to swallow. They will either identify a new potential invader of the State of Israel or else abandon dispensationalism completely. If most of the movement's leaders take the former course, as is likely, they will have to act very fast. They must quickly locate a potential invader that can and will bring a gigantic army against tiny Israel. They will also have to agree with each other if they are to maintain their contention that Bible prophecies about the Great Tribulation and Armageddon are: (1) future, (2) literal, and (3) clear. Will it be Iraq? After what the United States did to Iraq? This seems highly improbable. Then who? What nation is large enough, mobile enough, and determined enough to invade the State of Israel? Arab nations, perhaps, but do they constitute the long-predicted unified army of invasion? Arabs? Unified? Does anyone seriously believe that the combined military forces of the United States and the State of Israel will be helpless to defeat a military alliance of Arabs anytime soon?