

A REVIEW OF AFTER THE EMPIRE
by Mark Hitchcock

Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1994

Reviewed by Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum

The basic, overall purpose of the book is to defend the traditional dispensational interpretation of Ezekiel 38:39. As a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, the question has been raised in many circles as to whether this traditional interpretation can still be maintained. While some have abandoned that traditional interpretation, the author does not and insists that the traditional identification of Russia is correct. Some adjustments will need to be made in light of the new reality, but, by and large, Russia is seen as the leader of a confederacy invading Israel. One of the adjustments is that in place of seeing the invasion as an allied Communist invasion, it should be viewed largely as being a Moslem invasion with Russia, nevertheless, as the head of the allied forces.

In the Forward and in the Introduction of the book, the basic purpose of the book is stated and concludes that Ezekiel 38 and 39 are now more possible as a result of the new reality than ever before.

In chapter one, "The End of an Empire," the author surveys the recent history of the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islam. Key to the author's argument are the two major problems in the world today resulting from the fall of the Soviet Union (p. 2). The first problem is that "the fall of the Soviet Union has left Russia with a devastated economy and a humiliated national ego. With the current rise of nationalist fervor, Russia is more dangerous than ever before." The second problem is that "the fall of the Soviet Union has also left a great power vacuum in central Asia and the Middle East, and this vacuum is being filled by a militant fundamentalist Islam." For the author, it is these two issues that have actually set the stage for "the great invasion of Israel in the end times." Later (p. 9), the author presents his view as to the content of the invasion and he sees the Ezekiel passage as predicting "a great Russian-Islamic invasion of Israel." According to the author, the "Russian republic will be involved, but a great impetus for the invasion will be provided by Islamic nations." In chapters two through six, the author deals with the question of the "who" of Ezekiel 38-39. Some of these identifications are the same as in other dispensational works, while others are different, largely based on the new reality. In chapter two, "Gog and Magog," the author deals with the identification of this area. Magog is largely identified through the Scythians as referring to present-day central Asia, which includes the following nations today: Kazakstan, Kirghizia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikstan (all of which are Moslem today), and the Ukraine (the only non-Moslem entity). The author states:

The names listed in Ezekiel 38:2-6 have been identified with many nations including the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Germany, and several different African and Arab nations. However, most of the identifications of the names in Ezekiel 38:2-6 have been based on either speculation, simply quoting someone else who agrees with the

author's conclusions, or by twisting the locations of the names to fit the current scenario to sensationalize the prophecy (p. 13).

The author's warning against sensationalism is well warranted, especially in dispensational circles which take prophecy seriously, but often have the tendency to sensationalize and use what I would call "newspaper exegesis." My problem is that often in the book the author, himself, seems to base much upon current events and, therefore, might be guilty of the very issue that he accuses others of. Gog is identified as a personal ruler and not a nation (p. 17). The author states that the name "Caucasus" means "Gog's fort" and that the word Caucasus is derived from two words: Gog and Chasan (p. 18). I personally do not know if this is true and it would have been helpful if some evidence could be given that makes a study of the word etymologically. The author's footnote merely quotes a book by Louis Bauman which I do not think, by itself, would prove the point. (Is this a case where the author is quoting another who would agree with him?) I am not saying that the etymology is not true, but only that I am not convinced of it; and it would have been helpful if it could have been evidenced from primary sources rather than merely quoting another writer - who probably did not speak Russian either - to prove that point.

Chapter three is entitled, "Is Rosh Russia?" The author equates Rosh with the Sarmatians whom the author claims were also known as the Rasapu, Rashu, Ros, and Rus (pp. 32-39). They settled from the Caspian Sea to the Russian Steppes into modern Ukraine and Russia and, therefore, are to be identified with Russia and the southern republics.

In chapter four, "The Wounded Bear," the author largely deals with the current events in Russia, focusing on Vladimir Zhirinovsky (pp. 46-54). Much of the chapter is spent on this man and the author of the book certainly sees him at least as a type of Gog, if not possibly Gog himself. Here is where the danger of using current events sets in. The author lists 13 "terrible facts about this rising star in Russia." The tenth point states that "for Zhirinovsky, the year 1994 is the key year." He quotes Zhirinovsky as saying that his party "may definitely come to power in 1994." But here we are, at the end of 1995, about to enter 1996, and this has simply not happened. Therefore, the book is already dated. I would again, in light of all this, caution against this kind of "newspaper exegesis" based upon current events. I believe Bible prophecy should be expounded like any other area of theology of Scripture and systematized. Where there is clear fulfillment (such as the re-establishment of Israel, etc.), it should be identified. But we should be careful not to predict possible future fulfillments of a specific prophecy in writing until it has actually come to pass; only then can we be certain. I believe too often it is this kind of speculation that has given prophecy a bad name. This section is largely speculative on Zhirinovsky. To be sure, the author never clearly says that Zhirinovsky is the Gog of Ezekiel 38-39. He does, however, state that while "it is obviously much too early to know if this man is Gog of Ezekiel 38-39," Zhirinovsky "certainly has many of the characteristics that such a leader will undoubtedly possess" (p. 53). I think we should avoid this kind of identification even when it is only tentative. If Zhirinovsky gets assassinated in the near future, or dies of any other cause, much of this chapter becomes moot and dated, not to mention totally irrelevant.

Chapter five is entitled, "Let's Talk Turkey." To the author, modern-day Turkey covers four of the places identified in Ezekiel 38: Meshech, Tubal, Togarmah, and Gomer. Obviously, the author rejects some early interpretations (i.e., Meshech = Moscow; Tubal = Tobolsk; Gomer

= Germany). After discussing why these identifications are no longer feasible, the author makes the following comments:

This case serves as a clear example of why Bible prophecy should not be interpreted in light of current events, but rather current events should be interpreted in light of the Bible . . . We must be careful not to sensationalize prophecy or to try to force it into the mold of current events (pp. 60-61).

I fully support this statement. My problem is that the author, himself, seems to often base things on current events and intends to sensationalize prophecy, as his discussion of Zhirinovsky seems to show.

Chapter six, "Muslims, Muslims, and More Muslims," goes on to identify Persia with modern Iran; Cush with Sudan; and, Put with Libya. Of course, there is no problem with the identification of Persia with Iran. While Cush could certainly include Sudan, it must also incorporate a great part of what is, today, Ethiopia. The major problem is identifying Put with Libya since the normal Hebrew word for that country is Lub. It would probably be wiser to connect Put with Somalia.

Chapter seven, "Pyramid Power," focuses on Egypt. Of course, Egypt is not mentioned in the Ezekiel 38-39 passage. However, the author connects the invasion with Daniel 11:40-45, which he sees as speaking about the same invasion, or at least the same timing.. In that passage, there is the mention of "the king of the south," which in the context of Daniel 11 is certainly Egypt, a point with which all are in agreement. The author finds evidence that the two passages speak of the same invasion in that in this passage both "Libya and Sudan are mentioned in conjunction with her." The author then adds: "Notice that the nations Egypt is allied with are Sudan and Libya, two of the nations involved in the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39. If these passages are describing the same invasion, then Egypt will clearly be a key player in this invasion" (pp. 88-89). In the context, Egypt is identified as "the king of the south," so there is no problem with that identification. For Sudan, the Hebrew again says Cush, which might be Sudan or might be Ethiopia. However, in this passage, the word for Libya is the standard Hebrew word for that country, Lub. The author does not deal with the differences in the Hebrew name and does not ever clearly try to show why Put and Lub are the same country. However, the differences in the Hebrew wording by themselves would imply different countries. Lub is, indeed, Libya and that is the correct identification in Daniel 11. However, the Put of Ezekiel 38-39 is not Libya, but Somalia. The only common country mentioned between Ezekiel 38-39 and Daniel 11 is Cush. There really is not enough evidence to prove that the invasions are the same.

The author presents four reasons why he believes that the events of Ezekiel 38-39 and Daniel 11:40-45 are the same events and "are parallel to one another with each supplying details that the other one omits" (pp.89-90). His first argument is that the Daniel passage refers to "the king of the north." What the author does not do is trace the usage of this term throughout Daniel 11; in all previous references to that term in that chapter, "the king of the north" is always Syria. The author is a bit inconsistent in his handling of the passage. He clearly identifies "the king of the south" as Egypt, for that is the way that term is used throughout Daniel 11. The inconsistency arises in that "the king of the north" always refers to Syria throughout Daniel 11 up until this section of Daniel, where the author would apparently make this the exception to the rule.

Consistency demands that "the king of the north" of Daniel 40-45 also refers to Syria. The "north" of Ezekiel and the "north" of Daniel are two different geographical territories. Again, the only point of similarity between the two passages is the mention of Cush and that is insufficient to make it the same. His second evidence is that "the northern invader is allied with a southern bloc of nations," and here he again uses Sudan and Libya as common ground. As was already shown, the only common ground is Cush (whether it is Ethiopia or Sudan) and otherwise while Lub is mentioned in Daniel, it is not mentioned in Ezekiel. His third line of evidence is that "the general time period of both of these passages is identified as 'the latter days,' or Tribulation period." However, the term "latter days" need not be limited to just the Tribulation. It is a general term for the last days which could include the days preceding the Tribulation, as well as the days following the Tribulation. While the author concludes his third argument by saying, "clearly, these passages must be describing the same invasion because two invasions of this magnitude could not occur in such a short period of time in the same general area," this is too dogmatic a conclusion based on the evidence. The Ezekiel passage describes conflict only within Israel. Daniel describes a much wider conflict which does include an invasion of Israel, but also includes conflicts in Africa and in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, to claim that "two invasions of this magnitude could not occur in such a short period of time in the same general area" is merely an assumption and there is no reason to assume that it could not happen. The fourth argument is that "prophets who were contemporaries frequently developed similar or identical themes in their writings." For that reason, the author concludes that the invasion described by Ezekiel and Daniel must be the same. However, this is conjecture and there is no reason to assume that because two prophets were contemporary, therefore, they spoke of the same time.

Chapter eight, "Hooks in the Jaws," largely deals with specific conditions that must be in place preceding the invasion. These include that Israel must be regathered in unbelief (pp. 94-96); Israel must be resting in security (pp. 96-98). The places called Sheba and Dedan are identified with Saudi Arabia, identification largely accepted by all (pp. 100-101). The place called Tarshish is identified with Spain, a far more accurate identification than England. However, the author goes on to expand the meaning of Tarshish to refer to "all of the western nations." This, in turn, is identified as "the end-time empire of the Antichrist." This chapter contains quite a few presuppositions which are assumed to be true and then used to draw certain conclusions.

Chapter nine, "When Gog Meets God," deals with the supernatural destruction of the invading force as described by Ezekiel 38-39. When the author discusses the burial of the dead, for some reason he places the burial site in the Land of Moab, east of the Dead Sea (pp. 113-115). However, Ezekiel 39:11-12 clearly says that a burial ground will be given "in Israel," and the Land of Moab is outside the Land of Israel. The author concludes what he does because the burial place is said to be "east of the sea." However, normally in biblical language, "the sea" refers to the Mediterranean and so, therefore, what is east of the sea would be the land of Israel. It simply cannot refer to Moab, which is clearly outside the Land of Israel. Furthermore, the major purpose of hiring people to look for the remains is for the cleansing of the Land. This is a reference to the fact that in the Mosaic Law, bodies that are left unburied render the Land ceremonially unclean. This would only have reference to the Land of Israel and not to territory outside the Promised Land, such as Moab. The author merely assumes that "the sea" refers to the Dead Sea, though normally it would be the Mediterranean. From that assumption, he simply

ignores that the text clearly says that the burial place will be in Israel, and, so, instead puts it in Moab.

In chapter 10, "God's Glorious Purpose," the author points out that the reason for this invasion, from the divine side, is for the glory of God, to redeem a sinful people, and to prepare for the final restoration of Israel. All of this is consistent with the statements of the text and context.

Probably the most crucial chapter is chapter 11, "Timing is Everything," where the author discusses the "when" of this invasion. The purpose of this chapter is to deal with the various views as to when this prophecy will be fulfilled. The author presents arguments against those views he rejects and arguments in favor of the view he holds. The author lists six different views. On four of these views, the reviewer, of course, would agree with him. The author's own view is that the event takes place in the middle of the Tribulation. The reviewer's view is that it takes place before the Tribulation. Therefore, this review will only deal with those two positions.

Before dealing with the author's view and the reviewer's view, in that order, one comment should be made about the author's critique of the pre-trib view (pp. 127-128) The author states that this view must be rejected because "this view nullifies New Testament teaching of the imminence of the Rapture." The author, of course, is merely making an assumption that those who hold to a pre-tribulational view of the invasion automatically hold to a pre-Rapture view of the invasion and, therefore, would not believe in imminence. That is far from the truth. The doctrine of imminence simply means that nothing has to precede the Rapture, not that things cannot happen before the Rapture. For example, it is clear that for a seven-year covenant to be signed, which begins the Tribulation, there would have to be a restored Jewish state. This requires a Jewish state to exist before the Tribulation, before a covenant could be signed that would begin the Tribulation. It is obvious, then, that a restoration of Israel would have to be pre-tribulational. This is not the same as saying pre-Rapture since the doctrine of imminence would simply mean that no one could know which one comes first: the Rapture or the re-establishment of Israel. Only by virtue of fulfillment do we now know that the establishment of Israel came before the Rapture. By the same token, those of us who hold to a pre-tribulational position on this invasion are not saying it will also happen before the Rapture. The Rapture is, indeed, imminent and, therefore, nothing has to precede the Rapture, though things may. Those of us who hold to a pre-tribulational Russian invasion are not saying it will automatically come before the Rapture. The point is, if both events are pre-tribulational, only after one or the other happens will we know which comes first. The Rapture could come today, or could happen after the invasion. But, again, it is wrong to assume that because something is pre-tribulational, it must, therefore, also be pre-Rapture.

The author gives his own arguments in favor of the mid-tribulational view (pp. 137-142). The author presents his basic scenario of the invasion, which can be summarized as follows (p. 137): Israel is living in peace because of the covenant with the Antichrist, but the Gog and Magog invasion shatters this peace. The Antichrist then counterattacks with his own invasion of Israel which, in turn, paves the way for his worldwide rule. (However, in the Ezekiel passage, Gog and Magog are destroyed without any counter invasion.) This scenario is again based upon the assumption that Ezekiel and Daniel are talking about the very same thing, but there is no real

exegetical evidence for this and overall the descriptions are quite radically different. Again, the only correlation mentioned between the two passages is Cush, and that is simply insufficient grounds.

The author then presents "four central arguments in support of this view," but goes on to list five. His first argument is that "Israel is pictured in these chapters three times as 'living securely'." The author admits, however, that this argument is not unique to his view and by itself would not argue against a pre-tribulational view since that is also a time that Israel could be living in security, keeping in mind that the word for "peace" is never used. The second argument is that "the purpose of God's destruction of the invaders is to provide a sign to both the nations and Israel." He then goes on to say: "This purpose is in harmony with other Tribulation judgments that are meted out by God to show the Gentiles and Jews that he is sovereign." However, this purpose need not be limited to the Tribulation and other acts of God during all periods of times would have the same purpose. Certainly, a divine act of judgment before the Tribulation could just as much serve as a sign as it could if it was in the Tribulation. Furthermore, the Ezekiel passage clearly states that the purpose is for God to be sanctified in the eyes of many nations and in the eyes of Israel, resulting in salvation. However, of the specific judgments of the Tribulation, this specific purpose is not stated. Rather, what is stated is that the nations experience the wrath of God. Furthermore, Revelation goes on to say that with the Tribulation judgments men do not repent, but either try to hide from God or continue worshipping demons. That is not the response of the nations and Israel in Ezekiel 38-39. The third argument is that "this passage correlates with the invasion of the king of the south and the king of the north in Daniel 11:40." We have already seen that there is little ground to identify these two invasions as being one and the same and the author sees too much common ground than is warranted by the text. Egypt and Lub are not found in the Ezekiel text, and none of the nations found in the Ezekiel text are found in Daniel with one exception, Cush. That is simply not enough common ground to make the identification that dogmatic. Furthermore, to be consistent with Daniel 11, "the king of the north" must refer to Syria. Therefore, the argument that the same nations are involved is simply not warranted. The fourth argument is based upon Ezekiel 38:17 which mentions that other prophets have spoken of this invasion in the past. The author admits that no other prophecy specifically mentions Gog and Magog prior to Ezekiel. The author tries to find such references in the mention of "the Assyrian" in Isaiah 31:8-9 and Micah 5:5. Also, a possible reference is Joel 2:20, which mentions "the northern army." That these passages are speaking of the same invasion could be seriously questioned. Furthermore, how could Gog, the leader of Magog, be referred to as "the Assyrian"? Even if we assume that all these identifications are correct and they all speak of the same invasion, that still does not rule out using the same arguments for some of the other views of the timing of this event. The author's fifth argument is that "the invasion in Ezekiel 38-39 may be linked with the casting of Satan from heaven in Revelation 12 near the middle of the Tribulation period." However, this is largely conjecture and there is no real implication of any cause and effect relationship between the casting out of Satan in Revelation 12 and the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39. To hold, this argument presupposes that the mid-trib view is the correct view. This is probably the weakest of the arguments.

From there, the author goes on to consider three main objections to his own position. The second is largely speculative as the author tries to answer the objection that in the Ezekiel

passage the attack is not against the Antichrist but against Israel. The author's basic answer is that because Israel and the Antichrist are allied in covenant, Gog and Magog's invasion of Israel is automatically an attack on the Antichrist. Furthermore, again connecting the invasion with Daniel 11, the author argues that Daniel emphasizes one facet of the invasion while Ezekiel emphasizes the other facet and, therefore, they may not necessarily be contradictory. For the reviewer, that is neither here nor there. The real issue and problem with the view has to do with the seven months of burying the dead (the first problem), and the seven years of burning the equipment (the third problem). His solution to the first problem is to again connect the invasion with Daniel 11:41-43, where he points out that "after the Antichrist invades Israel he immediately initiates a southern campaign against Egypt, Libya, and the Sudan to consolidate his authority. It could be that it is during his brief absence that the Jews will bury the dead." However, this "brief absence" will have to be seven months long, not likely in the overall chronology of the second half of the Tribulation. Furthermore, it again presupposes that Ezekiel and Daniel are talking about the same thing and, therefore, the attempt is to solve the problem in Ezekiel by going to Daniel 11, which offers very little support that the invasions are the same. As will be shown later, in the middle of the Tribulation the Jews happen to be fleeing the Land and they would not have time to bury their own dead, let alone the dead of the invaders. He then addresses the third problem, i.e., why would they burn the weapons when they will need them at that time during the period of persecution, he answers: "However, it is also true that these Jews who will flee into the wilderness will need firewood for fuel during the Tribulation, and it is likely that the abundance of despoiled weapons will provide a ready source for them." In addition to what will be said later about this issue, two points can be made here. First of all, according to Matthew's description of Israel's flight (24:15-22), when the Jews must flee, they do not even have time to take so much as a coat. It is not likely that they will burden themselves with firewood as they are fleeing. What the author does not specifically deal with is the fact that it takes seven years of burning the weapons. Since the second half of the Tribulation is only 3 1/2 years long, that would mean they would have to burn the weapons for about 3 1/2 years into the Messianic Kingdom. The nature of the Messianic Kingdom - and the renovations that will take place - just simply does not allow for this scenario. The major problem that all views face is what to do with the seven months of burial and the seven years of burning, and this view does not adequately deal with this very issue. More will be said on this point after we finish surveying the last two chapters of the book.

In chapter 12, "Setting the Stage," the author portrays the Last Days events as being comprised of the world being "divided into four great spheres of power." He first mentions "the king of the north" and once again identifies Daniel 11 and Ezekiel 38-39 as dealing with the very same invasion. He identifies this as Russia, along with the former Asian republics of the Soviet Union, as well as Turkey and Iran. But, again, "the king of the north" in Daniel is Syria and not Russia. "The king of the south" is identified with Egypt and other North African Muslim countries. "The king of the west" is identified as "the reunited Roman Empire" and the kingdom of the Antichrist. The "kings of the east" are identified with nations such as India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and "all the nations of the Orient, or Far East." However, a more consistent interpretation of "the east" as it is used throughout Scripture is to identify it with the Mesopotamia region, especially Babylonia and Assyria. The chapter ends with the Armageddon scenario, a discussion of which goes beyond the purpose of this review.

The last chapter (13), entitled "Ezekiel and You!," is a presentation of the gospel and encouragement to labor in the work of the Lord. This is certainly a valid objective for all teachings of prophecy.

In the appendix of the book, the author presents a "Proposed Chronology of the Tribulation Period." An observation I would like to make here is that the author, as his first chronological point, mentions the regathering of Israel in fulfillment of Ezekiel 37, which he says, "began in 1948." It should be observed that the author himself sees Ezekiel 37 as being fulfilled, at least partially, before the Tribulation. Therefore, the belief of Israel's restoration as being pre-tribulational is not an argument against imminence. What the author himself admits about the restoration of Israel should also be applied to the pre-tribulational view of the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39. It is not an argument against imminence. Another observation I wish to make about his chronology is that when listing the events of the middle of the Tribulation, he includes the fact that "the Jewish people will flee from the Promised Land amid great persecution." The very fact that Israel must flee from the Promised Land in the middle of the Tribulation again shows they would not have any time to spend seven months burying the dead, nor will they have seven years of burning the equipment, which would require them being within the borders of the Land and not outside of it.

This reviewer opts for a pre-tribulational view of the invasion of Ezekiel 38-39. The following, then, are pages which are reproduced from my own prophecy work entitled, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (pp. 77-83). Altogether it deals with four different views of the timing of the invasion. Within it you will find the reviewer's arguments against the position of the author, the mid-tribulational view (pp. 77.78), and the arguments in favor of a pretribulational position, as well as answering arguments opposed to it (pp. 80-83).