

EZEKIEL 38 AND 39
Part XIV
by Thomas Ice

Thus says the Lord GOD, "It will come about on that day, that thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil plan, and you will say, 'I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will go against those who are at rest, that live securely, all of them living without walls, and having no bars or gates, to capture spoil and to seize plunder, to turn your hand against the waste places which are now inhabited, and against the people who are gathered from the nations, who have acquired cattle and goods, who live at the center of the world.'"

—Ezekiel 38:10–12

Verses 10 through 13 records the intentions of the invaders. It is no problem for the God of the Bible to know the thoughts and intentions of one's mind and heart (Heb. 4:12–13) and thus reveal to us what one's motives are. Even though the Lord "put hooks in their jaws" (38:4) in order to bring the invaders down, the human thought process is revealed in this section.

BAD INTENTIONS

"The Lord God" is a term that denotes "the sovereign Lord of the nations,"¹ which is certainly on display in this passage. "On that day" is a reference to the preceding section when Israel is again settled in the land and the time when the invasion will take place. It is on that day that "thoughts will come into your mind." The Hebrew word translated "thoughts" is a common noun *dabar*, which is usually translated "word," "speech" or "thing"² depending on the context. In this context, the best rendering is "not words, but things which come into his mind. What things these are, we learn from verses 11 and 12."³ The Hebrew language does not have a word for "mind," even though it is used in the New American Standard translation from which I have quoted throughout this series. That is surely the sense of the word, but it is translated "mind" and is the Hebrew *labeb* that has the basic meaning of "inner man" or "heart."⁴ Thus, inner activity like thinking was assigned to the "heart." In this context, the passage speaks of the things that will take place in the inner man, which would be "thoughts."

Verse 10 concludes with the line, "you will devise an evil plan." This phrase is made up of three Hebrew words. "You will devise" is the Hebrew verb *hasabat*, which has the idea of "to weave," and in relation to the heart or mind it would convey the idea of weaving, scheming or devising a plan.⁵ The noun is from the same exact root as the verb. Thus, a literal translation would convey the idea of thinking thoughts. But since the third word is an adjective meaning "evil,"⁶ it is clear that the sense of this passage refers to an evil plan against God's chosen people, Israel. Therefore, this verse appears to be telling us that even though the general idea to attack Israel is the result of God's sovereign plan (38:4), the details are conceived and developed within the mind of Rosh and his band will invaders. Because it is characterized as a manmade scheme or plan, Rosh and his fellow attackers are held responsible.

THE PLAN REVEALED

The evil scheme is disclosed in verse eleven. The evil thoughts are those of Rosh and say, "I will go up against the land of unwalled villages." Verse 11 describes Rosh's perception of a regathered Israel at this time in history. There is no reason to think that Rosh's description is inaccurate. The verb "go up" is a very common Hebrew expression that means "to ascend, go up." It is commonly used of anyone going to the land of Israel or Jerusalem from outside the country. There is no military overtone in this verb.⁷ The land of Israel is described in this passage in the following four ways: 1) the land of unwalled villages; 2) those who are at rest; 3) that live securely; and 4) all of them living without walls, and having no bars or gates.

The first characterization of Israel as a land of unwalled villages means that they will not build walls around their villages for protection as in ancient times. Randall Price notes: "only the Old City of Jerusalem has a wall and the modern city since the late 1800's has existed outside these walls."⁸ This probably means that the nation will lack protection from invasion since that was the purpose of building walls in ancient times. Rabbi Fisch says, "Israel will have made no preparations against attack by building walls around his cities."⁹

The second phrase tells of a people who are at rest. The Hebrew participle *saqat* describes a people who are "quiet, undisturbed, and at rest."¹⁰ This verb is used frequently in Joshua and Judges to note the quiet or rest that resulted from Israel's military victories over the Canaanites as they conquered the Land under Joshua.¹¹ This term refers to quiet or rest from military conflict. The third term is *betah* and was used in verse 8. We saw that it refers to Israel living in security, which means confidence.¹²

The fourth characterization is all of them living without walls, and having no bars or gates. We have seen earlier that living without walls would literally mean that none of their cities or towns will have walls that the ancients had in order to hold off an invading army. This picture is reinforced by the note that they will not have bars or gates, presumably in walls that they do not have. Bars and gates were important points of defense in ancient city walls.

What does this mean in relation to the invasion? First, this passage is the perspective of Gog, who thinks that Israel is not properly defended and thus vulnerable to a surprise attack. Second, Price points out that, "Israel's security is based on the strength of its military, which is acknowledged as one of the best in the world and which has defended the country against overwhelming odds in numerous past invasions."¹³ Third, these conditions were never true at any time in Israel's past, thus it must refer to a future time as already noted by the phrases "after many days" and "in the latter years" (38:8). Keil says, "This description of Israel's mode of life also points beyond the times succeeding the Babylonian captivity."¹⁴

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Two reasons are revealed by God in verse 12 as Gog's motive for the future invasion of Israel. These reasons are indicated by a pair of infinitival phrases and are first, "to capture spoil" and second, "to seize plunder." In both instances the Hebrew text uses the same word twice, a verb as an infinitive followed by the noun in construct to the verb to describe Gog's motive for the invasion.

The first phrase, "to capture spoil," comes from the Hebrew root word *shalal* and means "to congregate, assemble together in order to rob."¹⁵ Thus, since both the verb and the noun are from the same Hebrew root, it would mean something like "to spoil spoil." However, that is not good English. The Hebrew idem is better rendered "to

capture spoil,” even though the fact that both words are from the same root is lost in translation.

The second idem, “to size plunder” comes from the Hebrew root *baz* and means “to plunder, spoil, take booty, rob.”¹⁶ Thus, it would have the sense in Hebrew of “spoiling spoil.” This word carries with it the idea of dividing up the spoil or bounty captured in a raid or military conquest. Thus, the clear motive for invasion is to gain material wealth. Charles Feinberg notes, “The enemy, greedy of Israel’s wealth, will embark on a campaign of conquest for gain.”¹⁷

The rest of verse 12 reinforces the two opening declarations concerning Gog’s motive for invasion. A third infinitive declares that Gog desires “to turn your hand against the waste places which are now inhabited, and against the people who are gathered from the nations, who have acquired cattle and goods.” The notion of “turning one’s hand against” pictures one doing a 180 degree turn around from the direction they were headed in order to attack another. This is described in verse 10 as Gog devising an evil plan, but must be seen as the human means to an overall process originally initiated by God Himself (38:2–4). To make matters worse concerning Gog’s evil thoughts is the picture painted by the last part of verse 12, which speaks of Israel returning to her land which had become a waste place in her absence, then turning it into a wealth producing land, that Gog and his attackers now want to invade in order to take this wealth for themselves. Israel has survived over 2,000 years of dispersion among the nations and God brings them back to her land in which they become highly productive and wealthy, only to have Gog and his allies attack them to take away her newly gained wealth. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on The Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, [1981] 2002), p. 1578.

² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford, 1907), electronic edition.

³ C. F. Keil, *Ezekiel, Daniel, Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 164.

⁴ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic edition.

⁵ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic version (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000).

⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic edition.

⁷ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic version.

⁸ Randall Price, *Unpublished Notes on The Prophecies of Ezekiel*, (2007), p. 40.

⁹ S. Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text & English translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Soncino Press, 1950), p. 255.

¹⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic edition.

¹¹ See Joshua 11:23; 14:15; Judges 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28.

¹² See Thomas Ice, “Ezekiel 38 and 39, Part XIII,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (Feb. 2008), pp. 6–7.

¹³ Price, *Ezekiel*, pp. 40–41.

¹⁴ Keil, *Ezekiel*, p. 165.

¹⁵ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic version.

¹⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic edition.

¹⁷ Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 222.