

EZEKIEL 38 AND 39
Part XV
by Thomas Ice

“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.’ Sheba, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages, will say to you, ‘Have you come to capture spoil? Have you assembled your company to seize plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to capture great spoil?’”

—Ezekiel 38:12–13

Twice Israel and Jerusalem are said in Ezekiel to dwell at the center of the earth. “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her’” (Ezek. 5:5). Rabbi Fisch says, “Following Ezekiel, Dante places Jerusalem at the centre of the world, with the Ganges as the extreme east and the pillars of Hercules as the extreme west.”¹ Israel and its chief city Jerusalem was created by God and placed in the center of the earth so that she could be a light to the nations as the Lord desired to use her to spread His message across the globe. Rabbi Fisch notes, “Jerusalem intended to be the radiating centre of the knowledge of God for all peoples.”² It is within such a context that Ezekiel 38:12 notes that the nation of Israel is “at the center of the world.”

ISRAEL: CENTER OF THE WORLD

The Hebrew word translated “world” in the New American Standard translation that I use is really the Hebrew term for “earth.” *Ha’aretz* is used over 2,500 times in the Hebrew Old Testament³ and is used in five basic ways: 1) ground, earth; 2) a specific piece of ground; 3) a territory or country; 4) the whole of the land, the earth; 5) depths of the earth or the underworld.⁴ In this context it clearly is a reference to the entire earth. It is important to note that “earth” instead of “world” is used in the original, since world could denote the people and not the land. The emphasis here is upon being in the center of the earth’s land—the geographical navel. The Hebrew word for “center” is literally “the navel,”⁵ “as the navel is in the centre of the body.”⁶

Why is Israel’s location mentioned at this point in the passage? I agree with Rabbi Fisch’s opinion: “This is mentioned to stress the viciousness of Gog’s plan. He dwelt in the far north, a great distance from the Land of Israel; so the people of the latter could have had no aggressive designs upon him.”⁷ C. F. Keil echoes Rabbi Fisch’s view and describes it as one of their two motives for invasion in the following:

This figurative expression is to be explained from ch. v. 5; “Jerusalem in the midst of the nations.” The navel is not a figure denoting the high land, but signifies the land situated in the middle of the earth, and therefore the land most glorious and most richly blessed; so that they who dwell there occupy the most exalted position among the nations. A covetous desire for the possessions of the people of God, and envy at his exalted position in the centre of the world, are therefore the motives by which Gog is impelled to

enter upon his predatory expedition against the people living in the depth of peace.⁸

Belief in Israel's special status and global location explains the famous rabbinical statement derived from these two passages in Ezekiel:

As the navel is set in the centre of the human body, so is the land of Israel the navel of the world . . . situated in the centre of the world, and Jerusalem in the centre of the land of Israel, and the sanctuary in the centre of Jerusalem, and the holy place in the centre of the sanctuary, and the ark in the centre of the holy place, and the foundation stone before the holy place, because from it the world was founded.⁹

Many commentators on this passage only stress the economic gain as the single motive for Gog's invasion from the human perspective. However, this final phrase in verse 12 makes it clear that they also invade out of envy of Israel's special status with God and her resulting geographic location.

SHEBA AND DEDAN

Who are Sheba and Dedan? "Sheba and Dedan are not difficult to identify. They are located in the modern country of Saudi Arabia."¹⁰ "*Sheba and Dedan* are counties in northern Arabia," notes Arnold Fruchtenbaum.¹¹ As indicated in the context, they were known for their commercial trading, thus, their interest in the Gog invasion of nearby Israel in order to take spoil. Randall Price locates Sheba as modern Yemen in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula and Dedan as Saudi Arabia.¹² Regardless of their precise location on the Arabian peninsula, there appears to be no doubt that it is a reference to Saudi Arabia and perhaps some of the other Arab nations currently occupying that peninsula.

TARSHISH

Sheba and Dedan are said to be in alignment with "the merchants of Tarshish, with all its villages." What does the phrase "the merchants of Tarshish" mean? Like those in Sheba and Dedan, they are said to be merchants or traders. But where is Tarshish located?

Tarshish appears to be a wealthy trading community on the extremity of the Mediterranean world. "Tarshish is ancient Tartessus in the present-day nation of Spain."¹³ This view is supported by standard Hebrew language reference books.¹⁴ For example, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner in their Hebrew Lexicon say, "these point to Spain with its rich mineral resources. [Tarshish] could be a town the territory of which is in the region of the mouth of the Guadalquivir. With some variation this is probably the most widely accepted view today"¹⁵ "We read often in the OT of 'ships of Tarshish' which were large, oceangoing vessels (Ezk 27:25) that carried all sorts of precious cargo, especially metals such as silver and gold (I Kgs 10:22; 22:48; II Chr 9:21; Isa 60:9; Jer 10:9; Ezk 38:13) as well as iron, tin, and lead (Ezk 27:12)."¹⁶

Harvard Professor, Barry Fell, has done extensive study on these matters and their relation to activities in pre-Columbus America. Dr. Barry Fell says:

From the Bible we learn that the ships of Tarshish were the largest seagoing vessels known to the Semitic world, and the name was eventually

applied to any large ocean-going vessel. . . . the ships of Tarshish became proverbial as an expression of sea power. . . .

it is not unlikely that the merchants of Tarshish may have been associated with the trans-Atlantic migration of the Celts who came to America. Indeed James Whittall, with whom I have discussed the decipherment of Tartessian inscriptions here in America, thinks that the American Celts were deliberately brought here by Phoenicians, who wanted mining communities to exploit American natural resources, and with whom they could then trade. If this hypothesis is correct, then Tartessian vessels would surely have played a major role in the Celtic migration to New England.¹⁷

There does appear to be a significant basis to support the notion that the merchants of Tarshish are connected with the seafaring Phoenicians of 3,000 years ago. These merchants naturally established trading posts scattered along their various routes. Dr. Stuart McBirnie may well be right when he concludes:

Only in the past half-dozen years has much light been thrown on the historic location of ancient Tarshish. Books and articles in learned archaeological journals written before that time now seem to have rather limited value. In some instances, they are more confusing than helpful, despite the prestige of their authors. The reasons for certainty of identification are found in recent archaeological discoveries which confirm that ancient authorities were right all along in their identification of Tarshish as a Western European colonizing power based in Spain.¹⁸

Thus, the merchants of Tarshish appear to refer to the Phoenician maritime and trading community located in Spain during the general time of King Solomon, 3,000 years ago. The merchants of Tarshish, during the last 500 years, developed into the modern mercantile nations of Western Europe like Spain, Holland, and Britain. Hitchcock concludes: "Tarshish, or modern Spain, could be used by Ezekiel to represent all of the western nations which Saudi Arabia will join with in denouncing this invasion. . . . It is highly probable that Ezekiel used the far western colony of Tarshish to represent the end-time empire of the Antichrist."¹⁹ Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ S. Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text & English translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Soncino Press, 1950), p. 25.

² Fisch, *Ezekiel*, p. 25.

³ From a search conducted by the computer program *Accordance*, version 7.4.2.

⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic version (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000).

⁵ Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew Lexicon*, electronic version.

⁶ Fisch, *Ezekiel*, p. 25.

⁷ Fisch, *Ezekiel*, p. 25.

⁸ C. F. Keil, *Ezekiel, Daniel, Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 166.

⁹ Midrash Tanchuma, *Qedoshim*.

¹⁰ Mark Hitchcock, *After The Empire: Bible Prophecy in Light of the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers 1994), p. 100.

¹¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, [1982] 2003), p. 111.

¹² Randall Price, "Ezekiel" in Tim LaHaye & Ed Hindson, editors, *The Popular Bible Prophecy Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), p. 191.

¹³ Hitchcock, *After the Empire*, pp. 100–101.

¹⁴ See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, eds., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew—Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, rev. ed, 1977) p. 1076-77; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew & Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 875.

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

¹⁶ R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 Vols., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), II:981.

¹⁷ Barry Fell, *America B. C.*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1976, [1989]), pp. 93-94.

¹⁸ W. S. McBirnie, *Antichrist* (Dallas: Acclaimed Books, 1978), p. 62.

¹⁹ Hitchcock, *After the Empire*, p. 101.