

## EZEKIEL 38 AND 39

### Part III

by Thomas Ice

*“Son of man, set your face toward Gog of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal, and prophesy against him.”*

—Ezekiel 38:2

We have seen that Magog is a reference to the ancient Scythians, who gave rise to later descendants that settled along the eastern and northern areas of the Black Sea. “The descendants of ancient Magog—the Scythians—were the original inhabitants of the plateau of central Asia, and later some of these people moved into the area north of the Black Sea. The homeland of ancient Scythians is inhabited today by the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and the Ukraine.”<sup>1</sup> But who is “the prince of Rosh”?

#### THE ATTACK ON ROSH

The identification of Rosh is one of the most controversial and debated issues in the entire Gog and Magog prophecy, even though it should not be. I believe when one looks at the evidence it is overwhelming that this is a reference to the modern Russians. However, we need to first look at the evidence for such a conclusion.

Preterist prophecy critic, Gary DeMar contends, “In Ezekiel 38:2 and 39:1, the Hebrew word *rosh* is translated as if it were the name of a nation. That nation is thought to be modern Russia because *rosh* sounds like Russia.”<sup>2</sup> He then quotes “Edwin M. Yamauchi, noted Christian historian and archeologist, writes that *rosh* ‘can have nothing to do with modern ‘Russia.’”<sup>3</sup> On a *Bible Answer Man* radio broadcast in October 2002, the host, Hank Hanegraaff, asked Gary DeMar what he thought about Tim LaHaye identifying Rosh as Russia, since the two words sound so much alike. DeMar responded, “The idea that you can take a word in Hebrew that sounds like the word in English, and then go with that and to create an entire eschatological position based upon that is . . . it’s nonsense.” As I will show later, identification of the Hebrew word *rosh* with Russia is not based upon similarity of sound. That is a flimsy straw man that DeMar constructs so that he can appear to provide a credible criticism of our view on this matter. DeMar then declares: “The best translation of Ezekiel 38:2 is ‘the chief (head) prince of Meshech and Tubal.’”<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the possibility of a Russian/Islamic invasion of Israel in the end times, Marvin Pate and Daniel Hays say categorically, “The biblical term *rosh* has nothing to do with Russia.”<sup>5</sup> And later they state dogmatically, “These positions are not biblical. . . a Russian-led Muslim invasion of Israel is not about to take place.”<sup>6</sup>

A central issue in whether *rosh* refers to Russia is whether *rosh* is to be understood as a proper noun (the Russia view) or should it be taken as an adjective (the non-Russia view) and be translated in English as “chief.” This is a watershed issue for anyone who wants to properly understand this passage.

#### REASONS ROSH REFERS TO RUSSIA

Now, I want to deal with reasons why *rosh* should be taken as a noun instead of an adjective and then I will deal with whether it refers to Russia. The word *rosh* in Hebrew simply means “head,” “top,” or “chief.”<sup>7</sup> It is a very common word and is used in all

Semitic languages. It occurs approximately seven hundred and fifty times in the Old Testament, along with its roots and derivatives.<sup>8</sup>

The problem is that the word *rosh* in Ezekiel can be translated as either a proper noun or an adjective. Many translations take *rosh* as an adjective and translate it as the word “chief.” The King James Version, The Revised Standard Version, and the New International Version all adopt this translation. However, the New King James, the Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible, American Standard Version, and New American Standard Bible all translate *rosh* as a proper name indicating a geographical location. The weight of the evidence favors taking *rosh* as a proper name. There are five arguments that favor this view.

First, the eminent Hebrew scholars C. F. Keil and Wilhelm Gesenius both hold that the better translation of Rosh in Ezekiel 38:2-3 and 39:1 is as a proper noun referring to a specific geographical location.<sup>9</sup> Gesenius, who died in 1842 and is considered by modern Hebrew scholars as one of the greatest scholars of the Hebrew language, unquestionably believed that Rosh in Ezekiel was a proper noun identifying Russia. He says that *rosh* in Ezekiel 38:2,3; 39:1 is a, “pr. n. of a northern nation, mentioned with Meshech and Tubal; undoubtedly the *Russians*, who are mentioned by the Byzantine writers of the tenth century, under the name *the Ros*, dwelling to the north of Taurus . . . as dwelling on the river Rha (*Volga*).”<sup>10</sup>

This identification by Gesenius cannot be passed off lightly, as DeMar attempts to do. Gesenius, as far as we know, was not even a premillennialist. He had no eschatological, end time axe to grind. Yet, objectively, he says without hesitation that Rosh in Ezekiel 38—39 is Russia. In his original Latin version of the lexicon, Gesenius has nearly one page of notes dealing with the word Rosh and the Rosh people mentioned in Ezekiel 38—39. This page of notes does not appear in any of the English translations of Gesenius’ Lexicon. Those who disagree with Gesenius have failed to refute his sizable body of convincing evidence identifying Rosh with Russia.<sup>11</sup> I do not know what DeMar would say about this evidence since he never deals with it.

Second, the *Septuagint*, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates *Rosh* as the proper name *Ros*. This is especially significant since the *Septuagint* was translated only three centuries after Ezekiel was written (obviously much closer to the original than any modern translation).<sup>12</sup> The mistranslation of Rosh in many modern translations as an adjective can be traced to the Latin Vulgate of Jerome, which did not appear until around A.D. 400.<sup>13</sup> James Price, who has a Ph.D. in Hebrew from Dropsie, which is the leading Jewish academic University in America says, “The origin of the translation “chief prince of Meshech and Tubal” is traced to the Latin Vulgate. The early translators of the English Bible were quite dependent on the Latin Version for help in translating difficult passages. They evidently followed Jerome in Ezek 38:2, 3; 39:1.”<sup>14</sup> Price further explains the reason for the erroneous translation as follows:

Evidently by the second century A.D. the knowledge of the ancient land of Rosh had diminished. And because the Hebrew word *rosh* was in such common use as “head” or “chief,” Aquila was influenced to interpret *rosh* as an adjective, contrary to the LXX [Septuagint] and normal grammatical conventions. Jerome followed the precedent set by Aquila, and so diminished the knowledge of ancient Rosh even further by removing the name from the Latin Bible.

By the sixteenth century A.D. ancient Rosh was completely unknown in the West, so the early English translators of the Bible were influenced by the

Latin Vulgate to violate normal Hebrew grammar in their translation of Ezekiel 38–39. Once the precedent was set in English, it was perpetuated in all subsequent English Versions until this century when some modern versions have taken exception. This ancient erroneous precedent should not be perpetuated.<sup>15</sup>

Clyde Billington explains why Jerome went against most of the evidence and went with a deviant translation:

Jerome himself admits that he did not base his decision on grammatical considerations! Jerome seems to have realized that Hebrew grammar supported the translation of “prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal” and that it did not support his own translation of “chief prince of Moshoch and Thubal.” However, Jerome rejected translating Rosh as a proper noun because, “we could not find the name of this race [i.e. the Rosh people] mentioned either in Genesis or any other place in the Scriptures, or in Josephus. It was this non-grammatical argument that convinced Jerome to adopt Aquila’s rendering of Rosh as an adjective [“chief’] in Ezekiel 38–39.<sup>16</sup>

Third, many Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, in their articles on Rosh, support taking it as a proper name in Ezekiel 38. Some examples: *New Bible Dictionary*, *Wycliffe Bible Dictionary*, and *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

Fourth, Rosh is mentioned the first time in Ezekiel 38:2 and then repeated in Ezekiel 38:3 and 39:1. If Rosh were simply a title, it would probably dropped in these two places because in Hebrew when titles are repeated they are generally abbreviated.

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hitchcock, *After The Empire: Bible Prophecy in Light of the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 363. Quote from Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier: Invading Hordes from the Russian Steppes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays, *Iraq—Babylon of the End Times?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> Pate and Hays, *Iraq*, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford, 1907), electronic edition.

<sup>8</sup> Based upon a search conducted by the computer program *Accordance*, version 6.4.

<sup>9</sup> C. F. Keil, *Ezekiel, Daniel, Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 159. Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), p. 752.

<sup>10</sup> Gesenius, *Lexicon*, p. 752.

<sup>11</sup> Clyde E. Billington, Jr. “The Rosh People in History and Prophecy (Part One), *Michigan Theological*

*Journal* 3:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 62-3.

<sup>12</sup> The ancient Greek translations of Symmachus and Theodotian also translated Rosh in Ezekiel 38—39 as a proper noun. Billington, “The Rosh People in History and Prophecy (Part One),” p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Clyde E. Billington, Jr., “The Rosh People in History and Prophecy (Part Two),” *Michigan Theological Journal* 3:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 54-61.

<sup>14</sup> James D. Price, “Rosh: An Ancient Land Known to Ezekiel,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6:1 (1985), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Price, “Rosh: An Ancient Land,” p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> Billington, “The Rosh People in History and Prophecy (Part One),” p. 60.