

EZEKIEL 38 AND 39
Part VIII
by Thomas Ice

“And I will turn you about, and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them splendidly attired, a great company with buckler and shield, all of them wielding swords;”

—Ezekiel 38:4

As we continue to look at the description of the weapons and mode of transportation that will be used by Gog and his invading force, we must let the text tell us what it means. “A vivid picture is given of the actual attack of the Russian forces,” declares William Hull. “Great tanks, mechanized troop carriers, huge guns and all the latest in war equipment move as a mighty wave across the land,” he says. Hull concludes: “Ezekiel describes this as: *All of them riding upon horses*. Here again Bible students have been lead astray by placing the emphasis upon what they are to be mounted on, rather than the fact that they are to be mounted.”¹ Randall Price notes that some, “see these terms as ‘prophetically anachronistic’ (or phenomenological), since Ezekiel had no frame of reference to describe the weapons of this future age.”² This is a view I once held, as I will note later.

Gary DeMar criticizes such an approach when he says, “If someone like Tim LaHaye is true to his claim of literalism, then the Russian attack he and Jerry Jenkins describe in *Left Behind* should be a literal representation of the actual battle events as they are depicted in Ezekiel 38 and 39.”³ DeMar continues, “How do Hitchcock, Ice, and LaHaye *know* that this is what the Holy Spirit really *means* when the text is clear enough without any modern-day embellishment?”⁴ This may surprise some, but I think DeMar is basically right in his criticism of us on this point, even though he is demonstrably wrong about so many other items he addresses in the prophecy of Ezekiel 38 and 39.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Bernard Ramm, who would not be sympathetic to our view of Bible prophecy quotes Webster and defines literal as “the natural or usual construction and implication of a writing or expression; following the ordinary and apparent sense of words; not allegorical or metaphorical.”⁵ Charles Ryrie formulates an extensive definition of literal interpretation when he states the following:

This is sometimes called the principle of *grammatical-historical* interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called *normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated *plain* interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.⁶

“The *literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy,” notes commentator E. R. Craven. “Nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.”⁷

David Cooper provides a classic statement of the literal hermeneutical principle in his “Golden Rule of Interpretation,” which says: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”⁸ In other words, there must be a literary basis in the text of any statement that a word or phrase should not be taken literally, unless one can explain that a figure of speech or metaphor makes more sense in a given context than the plain, literal meaning. In other words, Cooper’s dictum says that a word or phrase should be taken literally unless there is a reason in the text of the passage to take it as a figure of speech or a metaphor. Matthew Waymeyer provides a helpful rule of thumb when he says: “In order to be considered symbolic, the language in question must possess (a) some degree of *absurdity* when taken literally and (b) some degree of *clarity* when taken symbolically.”⁹

THE LITERAL MEANING

Since there does not appear to be demonstrable figures of speech or symbols in this passage for “army,” “horses and horsemen,” “buckler and shield,” and “swords,” then consistency requires that this battle will be fought with these items. These weapons of war cannot be similes for modern weapons since there are not textual indicators such as “like” or “as.” There does not appear to be any figures of speech that sometimes occur without using a “like” or “as.” For example, Jesus said, “I am the door,” “I am the bread of life,” etc. While these are not figures of speech in and of themselves, in their contexts it is clear that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. However, there is nothing in the context of Ezekiel 38 which would indicate that Ezekiel is seeing modern weapons yet using known terminology of his day.

As I have thought more critically about literal interpretation and this passage while doing this series, I have come to disagree with a statement made by Mark Hitchcock and I where we said: “Ezekiel spoke in language that the people of his day could understand. If he had spoken of MIG-29s, laser-fired missiles, tanks, and assault rifles, this text would have been nonsensical to everyone until the twentieth century.”¹⁰ Instead, I have come to agree with DeMar who says: “A lot has to be read into the Bible in order to make Ezekiel 38 and 39 fit modern-day military realities that include jet planes, ‘missiles,’ and ‘atomic and explosive’ weaponry.”¹¹ Even though I think DeMar is right on this one point, it does not mean that his conclusion is correct. He says, “The weapons are ancient because the battle is ancient.”¹² True, these were weapons that were used in ancient times, but some are still used today. Also, DeMar either ignores many textual facts or does not take literally timing statements like “after many days” (Ezek. 38:8), but especially “latter years” (Ezek. 38:8) and “last days” (Ezek. 38:16), which I will deal with later.

I think futurist Paul Lee Tan has framed the issue well as follows:

There are some prophecies which, in describing eschatological warfares, predict that the weapons to be used then will be bows and arrows, chariots and horses, spears and shields. Are these to be taken literally? If we adhere strictly to the proper view of prophetic form, we must consider these weapons the same as that which will be used in eschatology. They must not be equated with vastly different modern war devices, as the H-bomb or the supersonic jet fighter. Interestingly, these prophesied military instruments though centuries old have not been made obsolete. The horse, for instance, is still used in warfare on certain kinds of terrain.¹³

Without intending to be dogmatic on this issue, the view I think that makes the most sense is one I heard pastor Charles Clough¹⁴ teach on an audiotape in the late 60s or early 70s. Clough was at the time a trained and experienced meteorologist who thought the events of the tribulation could likely degrade modern weapons systems so as to render them unusable. Later, Clough would go on to work for about 25 years as a meteorologist for the U. S. Army where he studied the impact of weather on weapons systems. He still holds the same view today. Price explains as follows:

However, there is no reason why these basic weapons might not be used in a future battle, if the conditions or the stage of battle prevent the use of the more advanced technology. Wars fought in certain rugged Middle Eastern terrains such as the mountainous region of Afghanistan (cf. 39:2-4) have required modern armies to use horses, and bows and arrows continue to be employed in various combat arenas. In addition, if the battle takes place in the Tribulation period, the conditions predicted for that time, such as seismic activity, meteor showers, increased solar effects, and other cosmic and terrestrial catastrophes (Matthew 24:7; Revelation 6:12-14; 8:7-12; 16:8-9, 18-21) would so disrupt the environment that present technology depending on satellite and computer-guided systems as well as meteorological stability would utterly fail. Under such conditions most of our modern weapons would be useless and more basic weapons would have to be substituted. At any rate, there is no reason to relegate the text to the past on the basis of supposedly anachronistic language.¹⁵

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ William L. Hull, *Israel: Key to Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 35–36. (emphasis original)

² Randall Price, *Unpublished Notes on The Prophecies of Ezekiel*, (2007), p. 42.

³ Gary DeMar, "Ezekiel's Magog Invasion: Future or Fulfilled?" *Biblical Worldview Magazine*, vol. 22 (December, 2006), p. 4.

⁴ DeMar, "Ezekiel's Magog Invasion," p. 6. (italics original)

⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 119.

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, [1965], 1995), pp. 80–81. (italics original)

⁷ E. R. Craven and J. P. Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner, 1872), p. 98. (italics original)

⁸ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research

Society, [1942], 1970), p. 11.

⁹ Matthew Waymeyer, *Revelation 20 and the Millennial Debate* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2004), p. 50. (italics original)

¹⁰ Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2004), p. 47.

¹¹ DeMar, "Ezekiel's Magog Invasion," p. 4.

¹² DeMar, "Ezekiel's Magog Invasion," p. 6.

¹³ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 223.

¹⁴ At the time, Charles A. Clough was pastor of Lubbock Bible Church in Lubbock, Texas.

¹⁵ Price, *Unpublished Notes on Ezekiel*, p. 42.