

Yehezkel's Unique Prophecy of the War of Gog¹

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Introduction

On Shabbat Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot we read Yehezkel's prophecy of the War of Gog as the Haftarah. In this essay, we will consider several facets of this prophecy in its natural context in Sefer Yehezkel.

The oracles of Gog in Yehezkel chapters 38-39 form a dramatic climax to a series of prophecies of restoration following the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. Some time after Israel returns to her land from exile, a coalition headed by King Gog from the land of Magog will invade Israel. God will dramatically intervene and defeat the coalition. God's name then will be sanctified before all humanity.

In rabbinic literature, this cataclysmic event is referred to as “the war of Gog and Magog.” In the biblical text, however, Gog is the name of an otherwise unknown king² who hails from the land of Magog—one of Yaphet's sons (Bereshit 10:2). Like Gog, the land of Magog plays no role elsewhere in Tanakh.

This prophecy is commonly understood as messianic. Identifications of the enemies have changed with historical times, depending on the perceived threats of the era coupled with the hope that the messianic age was near. For example, some commentators (e.g. Abarbanel, Malbim) identified these events with great wars between Christianity and Islam. In 1977, Rabbi Moshe Eisemann explained the prophecy to allude to Nazi Germany.³ In 1971, Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, offered a different slant:

Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers of darkness against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia ... But it didn't seem to make sense before the Russian Revolution, when Russia was a Christian country. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description of Gog perfectly.⁴

¹ A fuller version of this article originally appeared in *Sukkot Reader Volume II* (New York: Tebah, 2012), pp. 46-56.

² The only biblical reference to the name Gog outside of this prophecy is among the descendants of Reuven (I Divrei HaYamim 5:4), but this prophecy is about a foreign invader, not an Israelite.

³ Moshe Eisemann, *Yechezkel / The book of Ezekiel: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: Mesorah, 1977), pp. 580-582.

⁴ Cited in Margaret S. Odell, *Ezekiel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), p. 476.

Despite the best efforts of commentators and politicians, however, Rambam prudently cautions that we cannot ascertain Gog's identity until the Mashiah comes (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2).

In this essay, we will consider the passage in its broader context in Sefer Yehezkel. We begin with several central issues in Yehezkel chapters 38-39. We then analyze the unique role of this prophecy in the larger unit of Yehezkel's prophecies of restoration and the book as a whole.

Chapters 38-39

The armies of Gog invade Israel not as a punishment for sins, but rather to plunder a redeemed and peaceful nation. God intervenes, thereby demonstrating His power and glory to the nations and to Israel. Like the original exodus from Egypt, Israel will be entirely passive, while God acts in history as Redeemer.

The timing of the expected fulfillment of this prediction is the subject of debate:

After a long time (mi-yammim rabbim) you shall be summoned; in the distant future (be-aharit ha-shanim) you shall march against the land...

Yehezkel 38:8⁵

This shall happen on that distant day (be-aharit ha-yamim)...

Yehezkel 38:16

מִיָּמִים רַבִּים, תִּפְקַד--
בְּאַחֲרֵית הַשָּׁנִים תָּבוֹא אֵל-
אֶרֶץ...
יִחְזַקְאֵל לַח:
בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים תִּהְיֶה...
יִחְזַקְאֵל לַח:טז

The expressions of distance in time may indicate a period considerably later than the prophet. Additionally, this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. Consequently, many midrashim and later commentators understand the prophecy to refer to the messianic era. However, it is possible that Yehezkel predicts events that could have transpired shortly after he prophesied. Yehezkel links this prophecy to his other prophecies of restoration in chapters 34-37, and it appears that he expects those predictions to occur shortly (see 39:8).⁶ It is possible that there was potential for all of Yehezkel's prophecies to have been fulfilled during his lifetime, even if they did not occur and were instead deferred to the messianic era.⁷

Commentators also puzzle over the uniqueness of the prophecy of Gog. Yehezkel appears to state that his prophecy is the fulfillment of a long history of earlier prophecies:

Thus said the Lord God: Why, you are the one I spoke of in ancient days through My servants, the prophets of Israel, who prophesied for years in those days that I would

כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹקִים, הֲאִתָּה-הוּא אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי
בְּיָמִים קְדָמוֹנִים בְּיַד עֲבָדַי נְבִיאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
הַנִּבְּאִים בְּיָמִים הָהֵם, שָׁנִים--לְהֵבִיא אֶתְּךָ,

⁵ Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

⁶ See Yehiel Moskowitz, *Da'at Mikra: Yehezkel* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985), p. 304.

⁷ The prophet appears to state that the full realization of his prophecies was dependent on some repentance on Israel's part: "[Now] you, O mortal, describe the Temple to the House of Israel, and let them measure its design. But let them be ashamed of their iniquities: When (or "if") they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the plan of the Temple and its layout..." (43:10-11, see Rashi ad loc.). For further discussion of unfulfilled or deferred prophecies of redemption in Tanakh, see Hayyim Angel, "Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1-12 in Context," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009), pp. 3-10; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 117-126.

bring you against them!
Yehezkel 38:17

עֲלֵיהֶם.
יחזקאל לה:יז

Several commentators attempt to locate earlier biblical prophecies that anticipate this prophecy. For example, Yeshayahu predicts the downfall of Assyria (Yeshayahu chapter 10), Tzefaniah predicts a Day of the Lord against wicked nations (Tzefaniah 1:14-18), and Yirmiyahu predicts a northern invader (Yirmiyahu 1-6). However, a king Gog is never mentioned in these earlier prophecies. Yirmiyahu's northern enemy, Babylonia, invaded in Yirmiyahu's lifetime as a punishment for Israel's sins. As discussed above, it is unclear if Yehezkel intended his prediction to be fulfilled immediately, and the invasion of Gog was not cast as a punishment for Israel's sins. More decisively, Yehezkel predicts that God will rescue Israel from Gog, whereas Yirmiyahu correctly expected the northern invader to inflict great destruction. It is evident that there is no direct precedent for Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog in Tanakh, even though several of its themes and formulations occur in earlier prophecies.

Hellenistic and rabbinic sources likewise recognized that there is no clear textual precedent for the war of Gog, so they inserted it into earlier texts. In the Torah, Bilam predicts "*ve-yarom me-Agag malko*" ("their king shall rise above Agag" [Bemidbar 24:7]). Instead of "Agag," the Septuagint reads "Gog." Similarly, the Septuagint inserts Gog into a prophecy of Amos regarding a locust plague:

This is what my Lord God showed me: He was creating [a plague of] locusts at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout—the late-sown crops after the king's reaping (ahar gizei ha-melekh).

Amos 7:1

כֹּה הִרְאֵנִי, ה' אֱלֹקִים, וְהִנֵּה
יוֹצֵר גִּבִּי, בְּתַחֲלֵת עֲלוֹת הַלְקֹשׁ;
וְהִנֵּה-לְקֹשׁ--אֶסֶר, גִּזְיֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ.
עמוס ז:א

In the place of "*ahar gizei ha-melekh*" ("after the king's reaping"), the Septuagint reads "*ahar Gog ha-melekh*" ("after King Gog").

Rather than inserting Gog into actual verses, one Sage in the Talmud suggests that Eldad and Medad (Bemidbar 11:26-29) prophesied regarding Gog:

R. Nahman said: They prophesied concerning Gog and Magog, as it is said (Yehezkel 38:17): "Thus said the Lord God: Why, you are the one I spoke of in ancient days through My servants, the prophets of Israel, who prophesied for years in those days that I would bring you against them!"

Sanhedrin 17a⁸

רב נחמן אמר על עסקי גוג ומגוג היו
מתנבאין שנאמר כה אמר ה' אלקים
האֵתָהּ הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי בַיָּמִים קְדָמוֹנִים
בְּיַד עֲבָדֵי נְבִיאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנְּבִאִים בַּיָּמִים
הָהֵם שְׁנַיִם לְהִבִּיא אוֹתָךְ עֲלֵיהֶם.
סנהדרין יז.

R. Nahman identifies Eldad and Medad's prophecy with Yehezkel's prophecy of Gog specifically to explain the elusive earlier biblical precedent to which Yehezkel appears to refer.

Perhaps the most likely reading of Yehezkel 38:17 is that Yehezkel is not referring back to his predecessors who predicted Gog. Rather, he is predicting what people will exclaim when his own

⁸ Translations of Talmudic passages taken from Soncino.

prophecy is fulfilled in the future: “this is what Yehezkel had predicted long ago!” Rashi, Kara, Radak, and Yehiel Moskowitz⁹ adopt this reading. If their reading is correct, then Yehezkel’s prophecy of Gog is indeed groundbreaking, and Yehezkel does not claim otherwise.

In addition to the cataclysmic war, Yehezkel prophesied that the God-Israel relationship will then achieve its ideal state. The prophecy of Gog concludes:

<p><i>I will never again hide My face from them, for I will pour out My spirit (eshpokh et ruhi) upon the House of Israel—declares the Lord God.</i></p> <p>Yehezkel 39:29</p>	<p>וְלֹא-אֶסְתִּיר עוֹד פָּנַי, מִהֶם, אֲשֶׁר שָׁפַכְתִּי אֶת-רוּחִי עַל- בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹהִים. יְחֻזְקָא לַט:כט</p>
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Additionally, this change in Israel’s spiritual fortunes contrasts with their previous state, when God hid His face as a result of Israel’s sinfulness:

<p><i>And the nations shall know that the House of Israel were exiled only for their iniquity, because they trespassed against Me, so that I hid My face from them and delivered them into the hands of their adversaries, and they all fell by the sword. When I hid My face from them, I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their transgressions.</i></p> <p>Yehezkel 39:23-24</p>	<p>וְיָדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי בַעֲוֹנָם גָּלוּ בֵּית- יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל אֲשֶׁר מָעְלוּ-בִּי, וְאֶסְתֵּר פָּנַי, מִהֶם; וְאֶתְנַם בְּיַד צָרֵיהֶם, וַיִּפְּלוּ בְּחֶרֶב בָּלָם. בְּטֻמְאַתָּם וּכְפֹשְׁעֵיהֶם, עָשִׂיתִי אִתָּם; וְאֶסְתֵּר פָּנַי, מִהֶם. יְחֻזְקָא לַט:כג-כד</p>
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Gog and its Precedents in Sefer Yehezkel

Although there is no direct biblical precursor to Yehezkel’s prophecy of Gog, the prophecy draws substantially from earlier passages in Yehezkel. Yehezkel parallels Gog with contemporaneous nations who represent arrogance and evil. Similar to Gog, God also places hooks in Egypt’s mouth (29:4; 38:4), a sign of divine power over that arrogant nation. Edom represents all evil nations who harm and plunder Israel. As part of the process of restoration, God will punish Edom and restore Israel (35:1-36:5). Yehezkel recapitulates these elements in the final war of Gog. Redemption of God’s name occurs only when arrogance and evil are defeated—not only when Israel is redeemed.

Gog in the Context of Yehezkel’s Prophecies of Restoration

Yehezkel’s prophecies of restoration envision a better leadership (ch. 34), Edom’s ultimate defeat (ch. 35-36), the return of Jews to their land and God’s purification of the nation (ch. 36), God’s revival of “dead” Israel (37:1-14), and the reuniting of the northern and southern kingdoms (37:15-28). These prophecies are followed by the war of Gog (ch. 38-39).

Generally speaking, prophets speak of Israel’s restoration as the final stage in the redemption process. If there are troubles, they precede the redemption. Following this dominant prophetic view, Rambam (*Hilkhos Melakhim* 12:2) takes for granted that the war of Gog will be an earlier stage of Israel’s redemption. Yehiel Moskowitz lists rabbinic sources that similarly place the war of Gog before the final redemption. In Yehezkel’s prophecy, however, Gog’s coalition invades to plunder a redeemed nation (38:8, 11, 14). This positioning is unique in prophetic literature.

⁹ Moskowitz, *Da’at Mikra: Yehezkel*, p. 309.

However, Yehezkel's presentation fits his consistent perspective that the primary redemption is not of Israel, but rather of God. Even after Israel returns to her land, God cannot ultimately be redeemed until all human evil is eliminated.¹⁰

Several midrashim poignantly capture the love, patience, and anguish that God experienced during His banishment from Jerusalem in Sefer Yehezkel:

R. Aha said: "God's Presence may be likened to a king who left his palace in anger. After going out, he came back and embraced and kissed the walls of the palace and its pillars, weeping and exclaiming: 'O the peace of my palace, O the peace of my royal residence, O the peace of my beloved house! O peace, from now onward let there be peace.'"

Ekhah Rabbah Prologue 25

"Being bound in chains" (Yirmiyahu 40:1): R. Aha said: If it is possible to say so, both He and Jeremiah were bound in chains. As a parallel it is written (Yehezkel 1:1), "I was among the captives."

Ekhah Rabbah Prologue 34

א"ר אחא למלך שהיה יוצא
מפלטין שלו בכעס משהיה יוצא
היה חוזר ומגפף ומנשק בכותלי
פלטין ובעמודי פלטין ובוכה
ואומר הוי שלום בית פלטין שלי
הוי שלום בית מלכותי הוי שלום
בית יקרי הוי שלום מן כדון הוי
שלום.

איכה רבה, פתיחה כה

והוא אסור בזיקים, א"ר אחא
כביכול הוא והוא אסור בזיקים,
ודכוותיה כתיב ואני בתוך הגולה.
איכה רבה, פתיחה לד

On a deeper level, Sefer Yehezkel may be considered an "autobiography" of God during the period of the destruction. God goes into exile (chapters 8-11), driven away by Israel's sins. God must redeem Israel in order to sanctify His name even if Israel does not merit redemption (ch. 20, 36). The book's climactic vision is of a rebuilt Temple with God's Presence returning to it (ch. 40-48). The prophecy of Gog, which involves the eradication of human evil coupled with the worldwide sanctification of God's name, fits the unique message of the book. God is at the center of exile and redemption. Therefore, Israel's exile and restoration are ancillary to this process, rather than central to it.

It is fitting that the Kaddish prayer derives its opening formula, *Yitgaddal ve-Yitkaddash*, from the conclusion of chapter 38:

Thus will I manifest My greatness and My holiness (ve-hitgaddilti ve-hitkaddishti¹¹), and make Myself known in the sight of many nations. And they shall know that I am the Lord.

Yehezkel 38:23

וְהִתְגַּדַּלְתִּי, וְהִתְקַדַּשְׁתִּי,
וְנִדְעָתִי, לְעֵינֵי גוֹיִם רַבִּים;
וְיָדְעוּ, כִּי-אֲנִי ה'!
יחזקאל לח:כג

The Kaddish is a prayer for the sanctification of God's name as a result of divine exile after the Temple was destroyed. One Talmudic passage captures this spirit when discussing the Kaddish and its significance:

¹⁰ See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "Ezekiel: Priest-Prophet," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:1 (2011), pp. 35-45; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 122-133.

¹¹ This grammatical form is also found in Vayikra 11:44, *ve-hitkaddisitem ve-heyitem kedoshim*, you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy.

R. Yosei entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah appeared. ... He asked me, "What did you hear in this ruin?" I replied: "I heard a divine voice, cooing like a dove, and saying: 'Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world!'" He said to me: "... Not in this moment alone does it so exclaim, but three times each day it says this! And more than that, whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: 'May His great name be blessed (yehei shemei ha-gadol mevorakh),' God shakes His head and says: 'Happy is the King who is thus praised in this house! Woe to the Father who had to banish His children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their Father!'"

Berakhot 3a

Throughout his book, Yehezkel conveys glimpses of divine heartbreak and anger, but also an eternal hope for the future manifestation of God's glory. The ultimate redemption occurs when God returns to a rebuilt Temple and purified nation and land, with all human evil eradicated. When this occurs, God's name is sanctified and Yehezkel's vision of redemption has been fulfilled.

תניא, אמר רבי יוסי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך, ונכנסתי לחורבה אחת מחורבות ירושלים להתפלל. בא אליהו זכור לטוב ... ואמר לי: בני, מה קול שמעת בחורבה זו? ואמרתי לו: שמעתי בת קול שמנהמת כיונה ואומרת: אוי לבנים שבעוונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין האומות. ואמר לי ... לא שעה זו בלבד אומרת כך, אלא בכל יום ויום שלש פעמים אומרת כך; ולא זו בלבד, אלא בשעה שישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות ועונין יהא שמייה הגדול מבורך הקדוש ברוך הוא מנענע ראשו ואומר: אשרי המלך שמקלסין אותו בביתו כך, מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו, ואוי להם לבנים שגלו מעל שולחן אביהם.
ברכות ג.