

The Fiction Behind Left Behind

by Gary DeMar

MARK HITCHCOCK AND Thomas Ice have written *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times*. As the subtitle suggests, it is a defense of the end-time philosophy of Tim LaHaye as developed in his multi-volume Left Behind prophecy series. (I wonder why Mr. LaHaye can't defend himself?) Similar to the way I critiqued LaHaye's eschatology based on his non-fiction works in *End Times Fiction*, Hitchcock and Ice follow the same methodology in its defense, but with a significant difference. While I quote LaHaye's non-fiction prophecy works extensively, they quote him sporadically, and they wait until chapter eleven to do it.

While there is a great deal wrong with their book, it's Hitchcock and Ice's interpretation of Ezekiel 38–39 that I want to examine in this article. For centuries interpreters have struggled over how to interpret these two chapters (see chart),¹ but the dispensationalists have figured it out: It takes place after the rapture. Everything takes place after the rapture. Here's how Hitchcock and Ice open their chapter on what role Russia and Islam play in Bible prophecy:

VARIOUS GOD AND NATION CANDIDATES	
Verse	Candidate
Fourth	Goths
Fifth	Goths and Huns
Seventh	Huns
Eighth	Islamic empire
Tenth	Hungarians
Eleventh	Over-Turkish speaking tribes
Fourteenth	Tatars/Mongols
Fourteenth	Persecutors of the Church
Sixteenth	Non-dispersed tribes of Israel
Sixteenth	Turks and Saracens
Sixteenth	Mohammedans and the Papacy
Seventeenth	Pope and Spain
Seventeenth	Mexico (Americans)
Twentieth	Political leader and land of Russia

One of the initial key events of the end times as described in Left Behind is a massive surprise attack of Israel led by Russia. This invasion is detailed in a specific prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, written over twenty-five hundred years ago. That prophecy is found in Ezekiel 38–39.²

As I hope to show in this article, instead of finding modern-day Russia in Ezekiel, the prophecy relates to events in Israel's history after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity. I've covered this topic in *End Times Fiction* and *Last Days Madness*, so I'll only be dealing with some of the criticisms leveled against my thesis by Hitchcock and Ice.

THE ESTHER CONNECTION

I've concluded, with suggestions from a work produced by James B. Jordan,³ that Ezekiel is prophesying about what takes place in the book of Esther. Esther is one of the neglected books of the OT. Liberals treat it as fiction, and conservatives view it as a morality tale. If Haman had been successful in his plot to "destroy all the Jews . . . throughout the whole" Persian

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empire (Esther 3:6), we would not be here today. The seed line that gave the world Jesus Christ would have stopped in the fifth-century B.C. Isn't it odd that the Bible predicts the destruction of Solomon's temple, the sacking of Jerusalem, and the deportation of the Jews but prophesies nothing about the attempt to destroy every Jew on the face of the earth? It's my contention that Ezekiel 38–39 and Zechariah 12 describe prophetically what Esther fulfills historically.

SELECTIVE LITERALISM

In Tim LaHaye's Introduction to *TBLB*, we are once again introduced to the operating interpretive principle of "literal interpretation" that he claims only dispensationalists follow consistently:

Jerry [Jenkins] and I have unashamedly taken the position that all prophecy should be interpreted literally whenever possible. We have been guided throughout by the golden rule of interpretation: When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise (*TBLB* 7).



THE PROPHET EZEKIEL

So here was the question I asked in *End Times Fiction*: Why doesn't Tim LaHaye (and now Hitchcock and Ice) interpret the weapons of Ezekiel 38–39—bows, arrows, shields, war clubs, spears, horses, and chariots—literally? LaHaye accuses critics like me of "allegorizing" prophecy (*TBLB* 9) when he, along with Hitchcock and Ice, do a complete rewrite of Ezekiel 38–39 to make it fit a contemporary setting. There is nothing in these two chapters that would lead any interpreter to consider that the weapons are anything but literal. Even when Russia was thought to be the end-time bad guy of Ezekiel, the weapons were interpreted literally.⁴ When confronted with their attempts to "allegorize" the passage, we are told by them that they are only following what the Holy Spirit *really* means. Here's their explanation as to why the weapons are not to be interpreted literally:

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, 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 (*TBLB* 47).

The "golden rule" of dispensational interpretation has become dross. Why would the people in Ezekiel's day need to understand a prophecy if it wasn't meant for them? Why confuse the people of Ezekiel's day and all those who have read this prophecy over the last 2500 years and us, the people for whom it's supposedly meant? How do Hitchcock, Ice, and LaHaye *know* that this is what the Holy Spirit means?

Consider how they argue against a literal interpretation: "The focus clearly is not the specific weapons that will be used by these invaders" (*TBLB* 47). The weapons may not be the passage's "focus," but they can't be dismissed

as inconsequential to the narrative. The weapons are part of the story from beginning to end, and if taken literally would negate the future scenario outlined by the authors. To show their inconsistency, Hitchcock and Ice criticize C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays for interpreting the list of nations as symbolic.⁵ “If this is true,” they write, “then why does Ezekiel take the time to specifically mention ten proper names? Why be so exact? Why not just say that ‘a vast group of nations will invade’ if that’s what you mean?” (*TBLB* 210, n. 17). I couldn’t agree more. So why doesn’t Hitchcock and Ice’s own principle of literalism apply to the weapons? Why is the text so exact? Why not just say “a vast group of terrible and fierce weapons will be used”? The answer is obvious: the weapons are ancient because the battle is ancient. Those who first read the prophecy understood it, and we who read it today should also understand it.

THE LATTER YEARS

Hitchcock and Ice claim that the battle described in Ezekiel 38–39 has to be a *distant* future battle because it takes place in the “latter years” (38:8) and the “last days” (38:16). “Fortunately,” they write, “Ezekiel actually tells us when this invasion will occur. In Ezekiel 38:8, he says specifically that this invasion will occur in the ‘latter years.’ This is the only occurrence of this exact phrase in the Old Testament” (*TBLB* 46).⁶ The phrase may be unique, but the Hebrew word translated “latter” occurs several times in the OT. More about this in a moment. A careful reading of the text will show that “latter years” is defined for us:

“After many days you will be summoned; in the latter years you will come into the land that is restored from the sword, whose inhabitants have been gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel which had been a continual waste; but its people were brought out from the nations, and they are living securely, all of them” (Ezek. 38:8).

“The latter years” means “after many days,” that is, sometime in the future when a certain series of observable events take place. Ezekiel wrote during the Babylonian captivity. He is prophesying about the future when God will restore the Jews to their homeland “from many nations.” Of course, this took place when Cyrus issued his decree “in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah” (Ezra 1:1). Some 50,000 exiles returned to Israel to rebuild the temple and city.

The same Hebrew phrase translated “last days” in Ezekiel 38:16 is often translated as “the days to come” in other contexts. In *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* “the last days” is described as “a prophetic phrase denoting the final period of the history *so far as the speaker’s perspective reaches*.” In the case of Genesis 49:1, it’s “the period of Israel’s possession of Canaan.”⁷ The use of the phrase in Numbers 24:14 probably refers to the battle with the Midianites that took place in Israel’s



THE RETURN OF THE EXILES

near future (31:1–12; Josh. 13:21–22). The prophecy of Deuteronomy 31:29, where “latter days” is used in some translations, is best seen as referring to the events described in the period of the Judges. How do we know this? Moses says, “For I know that after my death *you* will act corruptly and turn from the way which I commanded you; and evil will befall *you*, . . . For *you* will do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger with the work of *your* hands.”⁸

So then, the phrase the “latter years” is a time reference about events that are future to the writer; it is not “eschatological,” that is, it’s not a reference either to a post-rapture tribulation period or a post-tribulation earthly millennium.

THE ESTHER CONNECTION

In *The Truth Behind Left Behind*, Hitchcock and Ice are critical of my claim that Ezekiel 38–39 is a prophetic parallel to Haman’s planned attack to kill all the Jews throughout the Persian kingdom (Esther 3:6) that does not succeed (9:1–25). Curiously, they don’t deal with the many parallels between Ezekiel 38–39 and Esther that I do present.⁹ Instead, they write that I fail “to account for several striking differences between Ezekiel 38–39 and Esther 9” (see the five-part chart from *TBLB* 45):

Part One

Hitchcock and Ice claim that in Ezekiel “the land of Israel is invaded (38:16)” and the enemies fall on the mountains of Israel,” while in Esther 9 “Jews are attacked in cities throughout the Persian empire.” If it was Haman’s agenda “to destroy all the Jews . . . throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esther 3:6), and Israel was part of the Persian empire where 50,000 Jews lived at that time, it stands to reason that the land of Israel was invaded since it was part of the Persian empire. In fact, relatively few were killed in Susa, the capital of Persia, as compared to what had been “done in the rest of the king’s provinces” (9:12). Consider Esther 9:16: “Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king’s provinces assembled, to defend their lives and rid themselves of their enemies, and kill 75,000 of those who hated them.” Surely many died “on the mountains of Israel (39:4)” as they attempted to invade the nation.

Hitchcock and Ice write that “Gog, the leader of the invasion, is buried in Israel (39:11).” If Haman the Agagite is the Hamon-gog of Ezekiel,¹⁰ then it’s possible that while he was executed in Susa (Esther 7:10; 9:25), he was buried along with his “multitude” in Israel “by east of the sea” (Ezek. 39:11).¹¹ This “troubler of Israel” was made an example by his victors. The Jews wanted all who passed by the site to see what happens to those who oppose the people of God and stand in the way of His redemptive program.

Part Two

Hitchcock and Ice argue that in Ezekiel “the Jews bury their dead bodies

EZEKIEL 38-39	ESTHER 9
The land of Israel itself is invaded (38:16). The enemies fall on the mountains of Israel (39:4). Gog, the leader of the invasion, is buried in Israel (39:11).	Jews are attacked in cities throughout the Persian empire and defend themselves (9:2). The enemies die throughout the Persian empire.
The Jews bury the dead bodies over a period of seven months to cleanse the land of Israel (39:12).	No need to cleanse the land because the dead bodies aren't in Israel.
The invaders are destroyed by a massive earthquake in the land of Israel, inflicting, plagues, and fire from heaven (38:19–22). God destroys the enemies supernaturally.	Attackers are killed by the Jewish people themselves, assisted by local government leaders (9:3–5).
Invaders are from as far west as ancient Put (modern Libya) (Ezekiel 38:5) and as far north as Magog, the land of the Scythians.	The Persian empire did not include these areas. It only extended as far west as Cush (modern Sudan) (Esther 8:9) and as far north as the bottom part of the Black and Caspian Seas.
God even sends fire upon Magog and those who inhabit the coastlands (39:6).	There is nothing even close to this in Esther 9.

over a period of seven months to cleanse the land of Israel (39:12), but in Esther there is “no need to cleanse the land because the dead bodies aren’t in Israel.” So the Jews let 75,000 bodies rot where they dropped? Of course they buried the bodies wherever they fell, but most especially in Israel since a dead body defiled the land (Num. 35:33–34; Deut. 21:1–9). Once again, the war against the Jews was kingdom-wide, including the land of Israel since that’s where most of the Jews were living. They were easily identifiable as Jews. If you want to kill Jews, you go where the Jews are. Many Jews in the diaspora kept their identity hidden: “Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known” (Esther 2:10).

Parts Three and Five

Hitchcock and Ice claim that in Ezekiel “the invaders are destroyed by a massive earthquake in the land of Israel, infighting, plagues, and fire from heaven (38:19–22). God destroys the enemies supernaturally” while in Esther the “attackers are killed by the Jewish people themselves, assisted by local government leaders” (9:3–5). God could have used these supernatural events to intimidate Israel’s foes: “And no one could stand before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples” (9:2). The fact that Esther does not record these events does not mean they didn’t happen. In Esther 9:12, there is a passing reference to what had been “done in the rest of the king’s provinces.” But that’s all that’s said. But there might be another explanation. Notice how David expresses his thanksgiving to God for delivering “him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul” (2 Sam. 22:1; also see Ps. 18): “the earth shook and quaked” (2 Sam. 22:8; cf. Ps. 18:7; Ezek. 38:19); “the foundations of the mountains were trembling and were shaken, because He was angry” (Ps. 18:7b; Ezek. 38:18); “He sent out arrows, and scattered them, lightning, and routed them” (2 Sam. 22:15; cf. Ps. 18:14); “from the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds, hailstones and coals of fire” (Ps. 18:12; Ezek. 38:22); “the channels of the sea appeared, the foundations of the world were laid bare, by the rebuke of the LORD, at the blast of the breath of His nostrils” (2 Sam. 22:16; cf. Ps. 18:15; Ezek. 38:20). To “send fire upon Magog” (Ezek. 39:6) is comparable to “the blast of the breath of His nostril” (2 Sam. 22:16). It’s a metaphor for destruction (Amos 1:10, 12; 2:2, 5). Ezekiel writes that “the mountains also will be thrown down, the steep pathways will collapse” (38:20). Similar language is used in the NT for the coming of the Messiah, and yet nothing physical actually happened (Mark. 11:23; Luke 3:5; cf. Isa. 40:4). Ezekiel describes events from a God-centered perspective while Esther, which never mentions God, explains things from a man-centered perspective. Ezekiel uses poetic language, similar to the way David does in 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18, to describe how Israel’s enemies were defeated, while Esther describes the actual battle similar to the way David’s actual battles were fought—with swords by an army of his men.

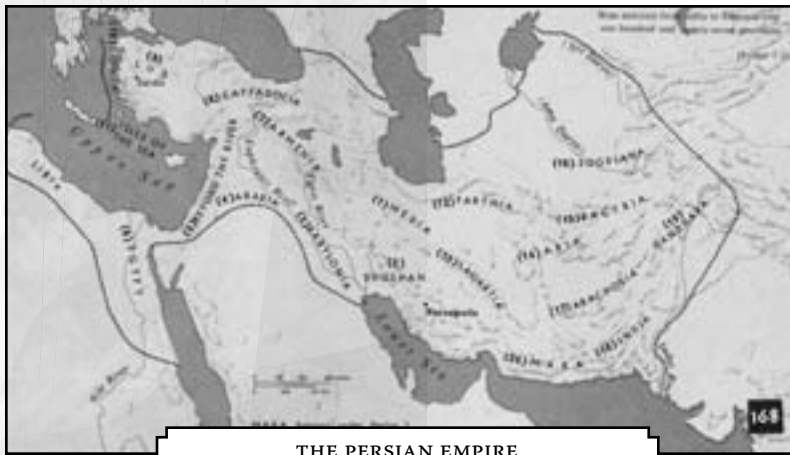


REBUILDING THE WALL OF JERUSALEM

Part Four

Hitchcock and Ice assert that the “invaders are from as far west as ancient Put (modern Libya) (Ezekiel 38:5) and as far north as Magog, the land of the Scythians,” while the Persian empire “only extended as far west as Cush (modern Sudan) (Esther 8:9) and as far north as the bottom of the Black and Caspian Seas.” The authors claim that Put was not part of the Persian empire. *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*¹² includes Put (Libya) in the territorial boundaries of the Persian empire. They then try to identify Magog with “the land of the Scythians.” This is highly debatable. The dogmatism of Hitchcock and Ice on points of geography from a time 2500 years ago is astounding. Edwin Yamauchi, an unparalleled scholar in this area, writes, “The baffling nature of the names ‘Gog and Magog’ has led to a variety of identifications down through the centuries. . . . Thus various attempts to

explain the background of Gog and Magog have not won universal consent.”¹³ We just don’t know the exact boundary lines of these ancient nations. The fact that ancient names are used for these nations and ancient weapons are used for the battle that takes place, it’s clear that Ezekiel 38–39 is a prophetic event that has been fulfilled.



CONCLUSION

The Truth Behind Left Behind is a poorly argued book. It was written for the dispensational faithful. The authors contradict themselves about what it means to interpret the

Bible literally. We learn from Hitchcock and Ice that it’s “wooden literalism” they reject. Really? I suggest that you buy a used copy from Amazon, read their chapter on “How We Should Interpret Bible Prophecy,” reread Ezekiel 38–39, and tell me why the weapons are not ancient weapons. Then write Hitchcock and Ice and ask them the same question. It’s time to reject dispensationalism, charts and all, and get back to studying the Bible with the Bible in hand.

Notes

1. Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Day and the Hour: Christianity's Perennial Fascination with Predicting the End of the World* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2000), 68.
2. Mark Hitchcock and Thomas Ice, *The Truth Behind Left Behind: A Biblical View of the End Times* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2004), 44. Hereafter as *TBLB*.
3. James B. Jordan, *Esther in the Midst of Covenant History* (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1995).
4. T.R., "Commentary on Ezekiel's Prophecy of Gog and Magog," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (October 1816), 307.
5. C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays, *Iraq—Babylon of the End Times?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 75. What Hitchcock and Ice do not tell their readers is that Pate and Hays do not interpret the weapons literally. At least they're consistent.
6. The fact that this phrase is used only once in the OT should lead the interpreter not to be so dogmatic in his assertions as to its meaning. The process in determining what a phrase means is to see how it's used elsewhere in Scripture. If it's not found in any other context, then the closest parallel must be consulted. Hitchcock and Ice fail to follow this procedure in so much of their exposition.
7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (BDB), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford), 31. BDB does go on to say, "but it often=the ideal or Messianic future." The Messianic future could be the first coming of Christ which was certainly Messianic and in the future. But all the examples following this statement in BDB refer to events in the *near* future.
8. "In the days to come, Cf. Gn. 49:1; in the Judges' period (cf. Jdg. 2:11–16; 3:7)." R.K. Harrison, "Deuteronomy," *The New Bible Commentary*, eds. Donald Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, , 1970), 227.
9. Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 12–15.
10. Haman is an Agagite (Esther 3:1, 10), a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag who was captured by Saul and hacked to pieces by Samuel (1 Sam. 15). Gog and Magog, the people of God, may be symbolic names for Israel's long-time enemy, the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:18). In Ezekiel 39:11, Gog is said to be buried in a place called "Hamon-Gog." Is Esther's Haman (the Agagite) Ezekiel's Hamon-Gog"? See Jordan, *Esther*, 7–9.
11. There is some debate whether "east of the sea" refers to the Mediterranean Sea or the Dead Sea. Those who travel north and south along Israel's coast are always "east of the sea." Why mention east? Why not just say "the sea"? The Dead Sea has an east and west shoreline.
12. Yohanan Ahoroni and Michael AviYonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1977), 168. The historian Herodotus (480–429 B.C.) says Darius that "established 20 governments of the kind which the Persians call Satrapies, assigning to each its governor, and fixing the tribute which was to be paid him by the several nations" (*Histories* iii:89). These he proceeds to enumerate, a long list embracing nearly all the nations of the East—Asia Minor, Phoenicia Syria, Cyprus, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Susa, Babylon, Assyria, Media, Armenia, Parthia—these are all enumerated, with the amount of the tribute paid by each nation (*Histories* iii:90–94).
13. Edwin Yamauchi, *Foes From the Northern Frontier: Invading Hordes from the Russian Steppes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 22, 24.