

## How advances in modern Hebrew scholarship are revolutionizing our understanding of biblical prophecy

For centuries, controversy and debate has swirled amongst Biblical scholars concerning how to properly translate and interpret the Hebrew word rosh as found in the Oracle of Gog of Magog, Ezekiel 38 & 39. Some scholars have argued that rosh should be translated as an adjective—meaning chief—and others have argued that it should be translated as a proper noun, referring to a place. The effect of this controversy on various translations is quite apparent when we compare a handful of today’s most popular translations. As we see below, The King James Version, The New International Version and The English Standard Versions all translate rosh as an adjective:

*“Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, **the chief prince** of Meshech and Tubal...” —KJV*

*“Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the **chief prince** of Meshech and Tubal...” —NIV*

*“Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, **the chief prince** of Meshech and Tubal...” —ESV*

On the other hand, the New American Standard Bible and the New King James Version both translate rosh as a proper noun:

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

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

Adhering to the idea that rosh should be translated as a proper noun referring to a place, many prophecy teachers have argued that Ezekiel was speaking here of Russia. In support of this view, virtually all popular prophecy teachers have looked to two renowned scholars of Hebrew, Wilhelm Gesenius and C.F. Keil.

The problem with relying entirely on Gesenius and Keil is that scholars of ancient Biblical Hebrew, just like any other field of study, are constantly growing and gaining new insights and understanding in their fields. While Gesenius (1786-1842) and Keil (1807-1888) were great Hebrew scholars of their day, advances in the field of Biblical Hebrew since the 19th century have shed much new light on this subject, causing the majority of Hebrew scholars today to reject the translation of rosh as a proper noun. Beyond this, if one reads Gesenius’ efforts to link Rosh to Russia, he relies not primarily on arguments that relate to the Hebrew language of the passage, but instead on arguments from history—namely the testimony of Byzantine and Arab writers who lived close to sixteen hundred years after Ezekiel. But as I have pointed out in several previous articles, the historical-grammatical method of interpretation, as employed by virtually all conservative evangelical scholars today, doesn’t seek to understand how the passage would have been understood a thousand years after the prophet spoke, but rather how Ezekiel himself would have understood the words and names found within the passage. Gesenius’ reliance on what I refer to as the “ancestral-lineage-migration” method of

interpretation is rejected by all genuine Biblical scholars today and should be rejected by all serious and responsible students of prophecy as well.

Unlike Gesenius, Keil, argues for the translation of rosh as a proper noun solely on grammatical grounds. Keil however, is far less confident than Gesenius, admitting that the translation of rosh as a proper name is only “probable” at best.

It is important to note that eight years after the release of Keil’s commentary on Ezekiel, his instructor in Hebrew, Ernest W. Hengstenberg, released his own commentary on Ezekiel, coming out and strongly disagreeing with his student. Hengstenberg stated:

*Gog is prince over Magog, moreover chief prince, king of the kings over Meshech and Tubal, the Moschi and Tibareni (ch. xxvii. 13, xxxii. 26), who had their own kings, but appear here as vassals of Gog. Many expositors render, instead of chief prince, prince of Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal. But the poor Russians have been here very unjustly arranged among the enemies of God’s people. Rosh, as the name of a people, does not occur in all the Old Testament.*

Not only did Hengstenberg disagree with Keil, so also did Frederick Delitzsch, another German Hebraist who co-authored the well-known Commentary On The Old Testament with Keil.

Of course, in all of the many prophecy books that claim that rosh refers to Russia, all cite Gesenius and Keil, but none ever mention either Delitzsch or Hengstenberg.

On the other hand, those who have argued in favor of translating rosh as an adjective point out that of the roughly 600 times that it is used throughout the Bible, it always means chief or head. Scholars have also pointed out that nowhere in Scripture is a place ever referred to as rosh.

Any honest observer of the long-standing conflict between translators will acknowledge that on grammatical grounds, both sides have expressed valid points. But the conflict between the two positions was never fully resolved... *until somewhat recently.*

After so many years of debate among scholars, finally, Daniel I. Block, a scholar of Hebrew and Old Testament at Wheaton College, the foremost scholar of the Book of Ezekiel in the World, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament on Ezekiel*, (1998) after considering the many historical arguments as well as various advances in the scholarship of Biblical Hebrew, has very ably offered a solution, satisfying all of the issues raised by both sides of the debate. While Block acknowledges the need to translate rosh as a noun (as Gesenius and Keil argued), he also also calls attention to its appositional relationship to the other names in the text as well as its normal usage throughout the Bible as a reference to “chief.” (as Hengstenberg and Delitzsch argued). And so, having synthesized the strengths of both positions, Block’s translation reads as follows:

*“Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, **the prince, chief** of Meshech and Tubal”*

In the years since Block has set forward this translation, the overwhelming majority of modern Hebrew and Old Testament scholars have embraced his translation. This has not been the case, however, within the world of popular Bible prophecy. Block’s solution has yet to filter down to the average student of prophecy. Because the belief that Ezekiel is speaking of Russia is such a wide-

spread and deeply entrenched view, some popular prophecy teachers are still determinedly clinging to an entirely outdated view.

While some of the most up to date Bible commentaries and translations follow Block's approach, few students of prophecy are even aware of this development. But as students of Bible prophecy begin to catch up with modern scholarship on this issue, it is revolutionizing their perspective on Ezekiel's prophecy. Despite generations of speculation that Russia would someday lead an invasion of Arab nations against Israel, as it turns out, the prophet Ezekiel is simply not referring to Russia. In my new book, *[Mideast Beast: The Scriptural Case for an Islamic Antichrist](#)*, I walk the reader through all of the historical as well as modern developments concerning this essential prophecy. When this ancient oracle is properly understood alongside other key Biblical prophecies, it is truly shocking how pressing and relevant its message becomes for our day, particularly in light of the present tectonic geo-political shifts taking place throughout the Middle East.

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