

Rosh: Russia or Chief?

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For centuries, controversy and debate has swirled amongst Biblical scholars concerning how to properly translate and interpret the Hebrew word *rosh* as found in Ezekiel's Prophecy of Gog of Magog. 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 geographic name. 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*

Relying on the translation of *rosh* as a proper noun referring to a place name, 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 the field of Biblical Hebrew, just like any other field of study, is constantly growing and gaining new insights. 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 virtually all 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 doesn't even actually make grammatical arguments, but instead makes arguments from history—namely the testimony of Byzantine and Arab writers who lived close to sixteen hundred years after Ezekiel. But the historical-grammatical method of Biblical 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 not confident in his own position admitting that the translation of *rosh* as a proper name is only “probable” at best. It is also noteworthy 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, in which he strongly disagrees 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. In all of the many commentaries and 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). Thus, 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 set forward this translation, the overwhelming majority of modern Hebrew and Old Testament scholars have embraced it. 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 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.