

RBL 04/2004



Bøe, Sverre

Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38–39 as Pre-Text for Revelation 19, 17–21 and 20, 7–10

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
2/135

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001. Pp. xvi + 449. Paper.
\$63.14. ISBN 3161475208.

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Gog and Magog, a revision of Sverre Bøe's 1991 dissertation completed at the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo, begins abruptly with a statement made in 1971 by then-governor of California, Ronald Reagan:

Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia. What other powerful nation is to the north of Israel? None. 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. (1)

Bøe immediately disavows such “anachronistic” readings of the biblical text but does suggest that the quote from Reagan highlights a significant and unresolved question concerning the identity of Gog—and Magog, with which it is often closely associated—in the Bible (1).

Bøe's task in *Gog and Magog* is twofold. First, he wants to explore “the history of the Gog and Magog traditions as such” (3). One or both of these terms appear in various places in biblical and extrabiblical texts (including, in some cases, possible references with alternative spellings), but no “major survey of the broader material attached to the

two names” has been attempted (1). Second, Bøe seeks to investigate the appropriation of the Gog and Magog traditions in Revelation, especially as they appear in Rev 20:8.

As the title implies, his goal is “to test the thesis of a possible Ezekielian ‘context’ or ‘pre-text’ for Rev 19:17–21:8” (5). Though others have explored the extensive similarities between imagery in Revelation and numerous Old Testament texts, Bøe finds that Rev 19:17–20:10 has not been adequately assessed along these lines. In order to do so, he begins the initial chapter with a brief review of scholarly attempts to understand Revelation’s relationship to the Old Testament; he finds “no consensus among scholars either on priorities or motivations” in this regard. Bøe senses in some previous inquiries “a certain *parallelomania*” in the failure “to differentiate clearly between influence and dependence” (13). Without asserting “originality methodologically” (25), he attempts to avoid such pitfalls by carefully articulating a set of “methodological considerations” that guide his study (see 21–35). For example, Bøe utilizes a diachronic approach to the extent that he is interested in “what ideas the author and the readers/listeners of Revelation held concerning [Gog and Magog] prior to their inclusion in Revelation.” But Bøe eschews diachronic concern for “oral traditions, literary strata or earlier versions of Revelation.” At the same time, inasmuch as he intends to treat Ezek 38–39 and Rev 19:17–20:10 “synoptically,” he approaches them with “a synchronic perspective” (23). Further, Bøe distinguishes between a textual “correspondence,” which “is meant to be neutral as to whether or not the author may be conscious about the similarity” (25), and an “allusion” as “something less verbatim than a *quotation* or *citation*” (26). He identifies a “pre-text” as “the old context from which allusions are taken” (27). Although individual readers may quibble with minor points here or there, Bøe’s basic methodological approach is reasonable and defensible. The first chapter of the book concludes with a brief and relatively standard survey of basic interpretive issues pertaining to Revelation (e.g., authorship, historical context, and genre).

The next three chapters include extensive surveys of the Gog and Magog traditions in the Old Testament, generally (ch. 2), in Ezek 38–39 (ch. 3), and in other literature such as *Sibylline Oracles*, *Jubilees*, various Qumran texts, and *I Enoch* (ch. 4). Among his conclusions relating to Old Testament material (including Hebrew, Greek, and other traditions), Bøe considers it likely “that at least some of John’s readers/listeners knew about the Gog-reading in Num 24:7 [many texts read “Gog” rather than “Agag”], possibly John knew it also.” Magog as the name of Japheth’s son in Gen 10:2 also appears to be significant within the developing tradition (75). In Ezek 38–39, Gog appears to be “a prince, leading a coalition of various remote powers gathered to attack Israel.” Magog serves as Gog’s “home-country, but the two names are never presented in the simple combination ‘Gog from Magog’ or ‘Gog and Magog.’” Moreover, “though Gog and his army are extraordinary in many ways, the texts nowhere present them as

mythological or demonic.” In fact, the implication is that their destructive intentions are part of a divine plan (138). In extrabiblical literature, the terms designate “Israel’s eschatological enemies,” though they appear to refer to humans rather than “mythological” figures (232).

After surveying these relevant literary materials, Bøe turns in chapter 5 to his primary interest: the relationship between Ezek 38–39 and the Gog and Magog imagery in Revelation. In short, on the basis of painstaking textual analysis and comparison, he concludes “that John takes the Gog and Magog traditions mainly [*sic*] directly from Ezekiel, not from the current Gog and Magog traditions.” John does not use these traditions slavishly, however. For one thing, he incorporates them twice in different ways in Rev 19:17–20:10. Bøe suggests that it is best to envision Revelation’s use of Gog and Magog as “a deliberate and reflected meditation on Ezekiel’s prophecies . . . privately and in public” (381). In a short summary chapter, Bøe asserts justifiably that we probably lack “any traditional theological term [e.g., typology, prophecy, fulfillment] which describes properly the intertextual relationship between John’s uses of the Gog and Magog traditions and Ezekiel 38–39.” Ultimately, according to Bøe, John’s unique contribution is found in the way in which he employs these terms “as universal categories (coming ‘from the four corners of the earth’) rather than as the enemies of Israel as an ethnic or political designation” (388).

This volume represents a solid analysis of an obscure tradition in biblical and extrabiblical literature. In general, Bøe’s methods are judicious, and his conclusions adequately reflect the evidence he has amassed. Certainly his work will be requisite reading for any future studies on Revelation’s relationship with other literature or the Gog and Magog imagery. Nevertheless, the book contains an absolutely appalling number of editorial oversights: misspellings, grammatical mistakes, and so forth. One wonders how the present form of the manuscript was able to clear the editorial process. In order that the mistakes do not threaten to overshadow Bøe’s actual argument, this is a book sorely in need of revision.