Gog and Magog

The Gog and Magog people being walled off by Alexander’s forces.

For the Gog and Magog statues in London, see Gogmagog and Corineus. For other uses, see Gog (disambiguation) and Magog (disambiguation).

Gog and Magog (/ɡɒɡ/; /ˈmeɪɡɒɡ/; Hebrew: גֹּוגוָמֹגוֹג)
The Gog and Magog people being walled off by Alexander’s forces.

Gog u-Magog) in the Hebrew Bible may be individuals, peoples, or lands; a prophesied enemy nation of God’s people according to the Book of Ezekiel, and one of the nations according to Genesis descended from Japheth son of Noah.

The Gog prophecy is meant to be fulfilled at the approach of what is called the “end of days”, but not necessarily the end of the world. Jewish eschatology viewed Gog and Magog as enemies to be defeated by Messiah ben Joseph, which will usher in the age of the true Messiah. Christianity’s interpretation is more starkly apocalyptic: making Gog and Magog allies of Satan against God at the end of the millennium, as can be read in the Book of Revelation.

To Gog and Magog were also attached a legend, certainly current by the Roman period, that they were people contained beyond the Gates of Alexander erected by Alexander the Great. Romanized Jewish historian Josephus knew them as the tribe descended from Magog the Japhethite, as in Genesis, and explained them to be the Scythians. In the hands of Early Christian writers they became apocalyptic hordes, and throughout the Medieval period variously identified as the Huns, Khazars, Mongols, or other nomads, or even the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

The legend of Gog and Magog and the gates were also interpolated into the Alexander Romances. In one version, “Goth and Magoth” are kings of the Unclean Nations, driven beyond a mountain pass by Alexander, and blocked from returning by his new wall. Gog and Magog are said to engage in human cannibalism in the romances and derived literature. They have also been depicted on Medieval cosmological maps, or Mappa mundi, sometimes alongside Alexander’s wall.

Gog and Magog appear in the Quran as Yajuj and Ma-juj (Arabic: يا أوجوج و مأوجوج Yaʾjūj wa-Maʾjūj), adversaries of Dhul-Qarnayn, widely equated with Cyrus the Great and al-Iskanadar (Alexander the Great) in Islam. Muslim geographers identified them at first with Turkic tribes from Central Asia and later with the Mongols. In modern times they remain associated with apocalyptic thinking, especially in the United States and the Muslim world.

1 The names Gog and Magog

The first mention of the two names occurs in the Book of Ezekiel, where Gog is an individual and Magog is his land; in Genesis 10 Magog is a person, son of Japheth son of Noah, but no Gog is mentioned. In Revelation, Gog and Magog together are the hostile nations of the world.[1][2] Gog or Goug the Reubenite[lower-alpha 1] occurs in 1 Chronicles 5:4, but he appears to have no connection with the Gog of Ezekiel or Magog of Genesis.[3]

The form “Gog and Magog” may have emerged as shorthand for “Gog and/or the land of Magog”, based on their usage in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.[5] An example of this combined form in Hebrew (Gog u-Magog) has been found, but its context is unclear, being preserved only in a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls.[lower-alpha 2][6]

The meaning of the name Gog remains uncertain, and in any case the author of the Ezekiel prophecy seems to attach no particular importance to it; efforts have been made to identify him with various individuals, notably Gyges, a king of Lydia in the early 7th century, but many scholars do not believe he is related to any historical person.[7] The name Magog is equally obscure, but may come from the Assyrian mat-Gugu, “Land of Gyges”, i.e., Lydia.[8] Alternatively, Gog may be derived from Magog
rather than the other way round, and “Magog” may be code for Babylon. The Biblical “Gog and Magog” possibly gave derivation of the name Gogmagog, a legendary British giant. A later corrupted folk rendition in print altered the tradition around Gogmagog and Corineus with two giants Gog and Magog, with whom the Guildhall statues came to be identified.

2 Judeo-Christian texts

2.1 Ezekiel and the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, Gog only appears in chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.

The Book records a series of visions received by the 6th-century BC prophet Ezekiel, a priest of Solomon’s Temple, who was among the captive during the Babylonian exile. The exile, he tells his fellow captives, is God’s punishment on Israel for turning away, but God will restore his people to Jerusalem when they return to him. After this message of reassurance, chapters 38–39, the Gog oracle, tell how Gog of Magog and his hordes will threaten the restored Israel but will be destroyed, after which God will establish a new Temple and dwell with his people for a period of lasting peace (chapters 40–48). The Gog oracle, as internal evidence indicates, was composed substantially later than the chapters around it.

“Son of man, direct your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince, leader of Meshech and Tubal, and prophecy concerning him. Say: Thus said the Lord: Behold, I am against you, Gog, the prince, leader of Meshech and Tubal ... Persia, Cush and Put will be with you ... also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops—the many nations with you.”

Of Gog’s allies, Meshech and Tubal were 7th-century kingdoms in central Anatolia north of Israel, Persia towards east, Cush (Ethiopia) and Put (Libya) to the south; Gomer is the Cimmerians, a nomadic people north of the Black Sea, and Beth Togarmah was on the border of Tubal. The confederation thus represents a multinational alliance surrounding Israel. "Why the prophet’s gaze should have focused on these particular nations is unclear," comments Biblical scholar Daniel I. Block, but their remoteness and reputation for violence and mystery possibly “made Gog and his confederates perfect symbols of the archetypal enemy, rising against God and his people”. One explanation is that the Gog alliance, a blend of the “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10 and Tyre’s trading partners in Ezekiel 27, with Persia added, was cast in the role of end-time enemies of Israel by means of Isaiah 66:19, which is another text of eschatological foretelling.

Although the prophecy refers to Gog as an enemy in some future, it is not clear if the confrontation is meant to occur in a final “end of days” since the Hebrew term aḥarit ha-yamim (Hebrew: אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים) may merely mean “latter days”, and is open to interpretation. Twentieth-century scholars have used the term to denote the eschaton in a malleable sense, not necessarily meaning final days, or tied to the Apocalypse. Still, the Utopia of chapters 40–48 can be spoken of in the parlance of “true eschatological character, given that it is a product of “cosmic conflict” described in the immediately preceding Gog chapters.

2.2 Gog and Magog from Ezekiel to Revelation

Over the next few centuries Jewish tradition changed Ezekiel’s Gog from Magog into Gog and Magog, the Japhethite in Genesis 10, even though Gog’s paternal lineage is not explicitly given, due to the string of other names present: Meshech, Tubal, Gomer are all sons of Japheth thus “brothers” of Magog; Togarmah of “Beth Togarmah” is Magog’s “nephew”. Of Gog’s allies, Meshech and Tubal were 7th-century kingdoms in central Anatolia north of Israel, Persia towards east, Cush (Ethiopia) and Put (Libya) to the south; Gomer is the Cimmerians, a nomadic people north of the Black Sea, and Beth Togarmah was on the border of Tubal. The confederation thus represents a multinational alliance surrounding Israel. “Why the prophet’s gaze should have focused on these particular nations is unclear,” comments Biblical scholar Daniel I. Block, but their remoteness and reputation for violence and mystery possibly “made Gog and his confederates perfect symbols of the archetypal enemy, rising against God and his people”. One explanation is that the Gog alliance, a blend of the “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10 and Tyre’s trading partners in Ezekiel 27, with Persia added, was cast in the role of end-time enemies of Israel by means of Isaiah 66:19, which is another text of eschatological foretelling.

Gog and Magog siege the City of Saints. Their depiction with the hooked noses noted by Paul Meyer. [26]
—Old French Apocalypse in verse, Toulouse MS. 815, fol. 49v

...can be traced through the literature of the period. The 3rd book of the Sibylline Oracles, for example, which originated in Egyptian Judaism in the middle of the 2nd century BC, changes Ezekiel’s “Gog from Magog” to “Gog and Magog,” links their fate with up to eleven other nations, and places them “in the midst of Aethiopian rivers”; this seems a strange location, but ancient geography did sometimes place Ethiopia next to Persia or even India. [26] The passage has a highly uncertain text, with manuscripts varying in their groupings of the letters of the Greek text into words, leading to different readings; one group of manuscripts (“group Y”) links them with the “Marsians and Dacians”, in eastern Europe, amongst others. [30]

The Book of Jubilees, from about the same time, makes three references to either Gog or Magog: in the first, Magog is a descendant of Noah, as in Genesis 10; in the second, Gog is a region next to Japheth’s borders; and in the third, a portion of Japheth’s land is assigned to Magog. [31] The 1st-century Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, which retells Biblical history from Adam to Saul, is notable for listing and naming seven of Magog’s sons, and mentions his “thousands” of descendants. [32] The Samaritan Torah and the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made during the last few centuries of the pre-Christian era) occasionally introduce the name of Gog where the Hebrew original has something else, or use Magog where the Hebrew has Gog, indicating that the names were interchangeable. [33]

Chapters 19:11–21:8 of the Book of Revelation, dating from the end of the 1st century AD, tells how Satan is to be imprisoned for a thousand years, and how, on his release, he will rally “the nations in the four corners of the Earth—Gog and Magog—to a final battle with Christ and his saints.” [2]

“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the Earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore.” [35]

2.3 Midrashic writings

After the failure of the anti-Roman Bar Kokhba revolt in the 2nd century AD which looked to a human leader as the promised messiah, Jews began to conceive of the messianic age in supernatural terms: first would come a forerunner, the Messiah ben Joseph, who would defeat Israel’s enemies, identified as Gog and Magog, to prepare the way for the Messiah ben David; [lower-alpha 8] then the dead would rise, divine judgement would be handed out, and the righteous would be rewarded. [37][38]

The aggadah, homiletic and non-legalistic exegetical texts in the classical rabbinic literature of Judaism, treat Gog and Magog as two names for the same nation who will come against Israel in the final war. [39] The rabbis associated no specific nation or territory with them beyond a location to the north of Israel, [40] but the great Jewish scholar Rashi identified the Christians as their allies and said God would thwart their plan to kill all Israel. [41]

3 Alexander the Great

See also: Gates of Alexander

The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus identified the Gog and Magog people as Scythians, horse-riding barbarians from around the Don and the Sea of Azov. Josephus recounts the tradition that Gog and Magog were locked up by Alexander the Great behind iron gates in the "Caspian Mountains", generally identified with the Caucasus Mountains. This legend must have been current in contemporary Jewish circles by this period, coinciding with the beginning of the Christian Era. Several centuries later, this material was vastly elaborated in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius and Alexander Romance.

3.1 Precursor texts in Syriac

The Pseudo-Methodius, written originally in Syriac, is considered the source of Gog and Magog tale incorporated into Western versions of the Alexander Romance. An earlier-dated Syriac Alexander Legend contains a somewhat different treatment of the Gog and Magog material, which passed into the lost Arabic version, or the Ethiopic and later Oriental versions of the Alexander romance. Written by a Christian based in Mesopotamia, the Legend is considered the first work to connect the Gates with the idea that Gog and Magog are destined to play a role in the apocalypse. The legend claims that Alexander carved prophecies on the face of the Gate, marking a date for when these Huns, consisting of 24 nations, will breach the Gate and subjugate the greater part of the world.

The Pseudo-Methodius added a new element into the narrative: two mountains moving together to narrow the corridor, which was then sealed with a gate against Gog and Magog. This idea found its way into both the Western Alexander Romance and the Quran.

3.2 Alexander romances

This Gog and Magog legend is not found earlier versions of the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, whose oldest manuscript dates to the 3rd century, but an interpolation into recensions around the 8th century. The latest and longest Greek version are described the Unclean Nations, which include the Goth and Magoth as their kings, and whose people engage in the habit of eating worms, dogs, human cadaver and fetuses. They were allied to Belsyrians (Bebrykes) of Bythinia in modern-day North Turkey, and sealed beyond the "Breasts of the North", a pair of mountains fifty-days' march away to the north.

Gog and Magog appear in somewhat later Old French versions of the romance. In the verse Roman d'Alexandre, Branch III, of Lambert le Tort (c. 1170), Gog and Magog ("Gos et Margos", "Got et Magot") were vassals to Porus, king of India, providing an auxiliary force of 400,000 men. Routed by Alexander, they escaped through a defile in the mountains of Tus (or Turs), and were sealed by the wall erected there to last until the advent of the Antichrist. Branch IV of the poetic cycle tells that the task of guarding Gog and Magog, as well as the rule of Syria and Persia was assigned to Antigonus, one of Alexander’s successors.

Gog and Magog consuming humans.
—Thomas de Kent’s Roman de toute chevalerie, Paris manuscript, 14th cent.

Gog and Magog also appear in Thomas de Kent’s Roman de toute chevalerie (c. 1180), where they are portrayed as cave-dwellers who consume human flesh. A condensed account occurs in a derivative work, the Middle English King Alisaunder (vv. 5938–6287). In the 13th century French Roman d’Alexandre en prose, Alexander has an encounter with cannibals who have taken over the role of Gog and Magog. This is a case of imperfect transmission, since the prose Alexander’s source, the Latin work by Archpriest Leo of Naples known as Historia de Preliis, does mention “Gogh et Macgogh”, at least in some manuscripts.

The Gog and Magog are not only human flesh-eaters, but illustrated as men “a notably beaked nose” in examples such as the “Henry of Mainz map”, an important example of Mappa mundi. Gog and Magog caricaturized as figures with hooked noses on a miniature depicting their attack of the Holy City, found in a manuscript of the Apocalypse in Anglo-Norman.

4 Identification with civilizations

Early Christian writers (e.g. Eusebius) frequently identified Gog and Magog with the Romans and their emperor. After the Empire became Christian, Ambrose (d.397) identified Gog with the Goths, Jerome
4.2 The confined Jews

Some time around the 12th century, the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel came to be identified with Gog and Magog, possibly the first to do so was Petrus Comestor in Historia Scholastica (c. 1169–1173). As noted, Riccoldo had reported a Mongol folk-tradition that they were descended from Gog and Magog. As noted, Riccoldo had reported a Mongol folk-tradition that they were descended from Gog and Magog. He also addressed many minds (Westerners or otherwise) being credulous of the notion that Mongols might be Captive Jews, but after weighing the pros and cons, he concluded this was an open question.

The Flemish Franciscan monk William of Rubruck, who was first-hand witness to Alexander’s wall in Derbent on the shores of the Caspian Sea in 1254, identified the people the walls were meant to fend off only vaguely as “wild tribes” or “desert nomads” but one researcher made the inference Rubruck must have meant Jews, and that he was speaking in the context of “Gog and Magog” Confined Jews were later to be referred to as “Red Jews” (die roten juden) in German-speaking areas; a term first used in a Holy Grail epic dating to the 1270s, in which Gog and Magog were two mountains enclosing these people.

The author of the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, a 14th-century best-seller, said he had found these Jews in Central Asia where as Gog and Magog they had been imprisoned by Alexander, plotting to escape and join with the Jews of Europe to destroy Christians.
5 Gog and Magog in Muslim tradition

Iskandar (Alexander) builds a wall to seal Yajuj and Majuj; here aided by divs (demons).
— Persian miniature from a Falnama, 16th cent.\[99\]\[100\]


The early Muslim traditions were summarised by Zakariya al-Qazwini (d. 1283) in two popular works called the Cosmography and the Geography. Gog and Magog, he says, live near to the sea that encircles the Earth and can be counted only by God; they are only half the height of a normal man, with claws instead of nails and a hairy tail and huge hairy ears which they use as mattress and cover for sleeping.\[104\] They scratch at their wall each day until they almost break through, and each night God restores it, but when they do break through they will be so numerous that “their vanguard is in Syria and their rear in Khorasan”\[105\].

When Yajuj and Majuj were identified with real peoples it was the Turks, who threatened Baghdad and northern Iran;\[106\] later, when the Mongols destroyed Baghdad in 1258, it was they who were Gog and Magog.\[107\] The wall dividing them from civilised peoples was normally placed towards Armenia and Azerbaijan, but in the year 842 the Caliph Al-Wathiq had a dream in which he saw that it had been breached, and sent an official named Sallam to investigate.\[108\] Sallam returned a little over two years later and reported that he had seen the wall and also the tower where Dhul Qarnayn had left his building equipment, and all was still intact.\[109\] It is not entirely clear what Sallam saw, but he may have reached the Jade Gate, the westernmost customs point on the border of China.\[110\] Somewhat later the 14th-century traveller Ibn Battuta reported that the wall was sixty days’ travel from the city of Zeitun, which is on the coast of China; the translator notes that Ibn Battuta has confused the Great Wall of China with that built by Dhul-Qarnayn.\[111\]

6 Modern apocalypticism

In the early 19th century, some Chasidic rabbis identified Napoleon’s invasion of Russia as “The War of Gog and Magog”.\[112\] But as the century progressed, apocalyptic expectations receded as the populace in Europe began to adopt an increasingly secular worldview.\[113\] This has not been the case in the United States, where a 2002 poll indicated that 59% of Americans believed the events predicted in the Book of Revelation would come to pass.\[114\] During the Cold War the idea that Russia had the role of Gog gained popularity, since Ezekiel’s words describing him as “prince of Meshek”—rosh meshek in Hebrew—
sounded suspiciously like Russia and Moscow.\textsuperscript{[15]} Even some Russians took up the idea, apparently unconcerned by the implications ("Ancestors were found in the Bible, and that was enough"), as did Ronald Reagan.\textsuperscript{[15][16]} Post Cold War-millenaries still identify Gog with Russia, but they now tend to stress its allies among Islamic nations, especially Iran.\textsuperscript{[117]} For the most fervent, the countdown to Armageddon began with the return of the Jews to Israel, followed quickly by further signs pointing to the nearness of the final battle–nuclear weapons, European integration, Israel’s seizure of Jerusalem, and America’s wars in Afghanistan and the Gulf.\textsuperscript{[118]} In the prelude to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush told Jacques Chirac, “Gog and Magog are at work in the Middle East". "This confrontation", he urged the French leader, “is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase His people’s enemies before a new age begins".\textsuperscript{[119]} Chirac consulted a professor at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lausanne to explain Bush’s reference.\textsuperscript{[120]}

In the Islamic apocalyptic tradition the end of the world would be preceded by the release of Gog and Magog, whose destruction by God in a single night would usher in the Day of Resurrection.\textsuperscript{[121]} Reinterpretation did not generally continue after Classical times, but the needs of the modern world have produced a new body of apocalyptic literature in which Gog and Magog are identified as the Jews and Israel, or the Ten Lost Tribes, or sometimes as Communist Russia and China.\textsuperscript{[122]} One problem these writers have had to confront is the barrier holding Gog and Magog back, which is not to be found in the modern world: the answer varies, some writers saying that Gog and Magog were the Mongols and that the wall is now gone, others that both the wall and Gog and Magog are invisible.\textsuperscript{[123]}

7 See also
- Armageddon
- Eschatology
- Magog

8 Explanatory notes

[1] All Reubenites are held to be descendants of Reuben in the view of the Torah. But it is unclear what family relationship Gog’s father Joel has with the sons of Reuben in verse 3.\textsuperscript{[13]}

[2] 4Q523 scroll

[3] The encryption technique is called atbash. BBL ("Babylon") when read backwards and displaced by one letter becomes MGG (Magog).


[5] A Gog is mentioned in I Chronicles 5:4, but he is Gog of the tribe of Reuben, an Israelite, and can hardly be the same as the Gog of Ezekiel.\textsuperscript{[13]}

[6] Composed between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC

[7] Tooman’s view is that the “latter days” means “the end of history-as we-know-it and the initiation of a new historical age”.

[8] The coming of the Messiah ben David “is contemporary with or just after that of Messiah ben Joseph” (van der Woude (1974), p. 527).\textsuperscript{[16]}

[9] Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 1.123 and 18.97; The Jewish War 7.244–51


[11] Also called Christian Legend concerning Alexander, ed. tr. by E. A. Wallis Budge. It has a long full-title, which in shorthand reads “An exploit of Alexander.. how.. he made a gate of iron, and shut it [against] the Huns”.

[12] The first invasion, prophesied to occur 826 years after Alexander predicted, has been worked out to fall on 1 October 514; the second invasion on A.D. 629 (Boyle 1979, p. 124).

[13] The oldest manuscript is recension α. The material is not found in the oldest Greek, Latin, Armenian, and Syriac versions.\textsuperscript{[56]}

[14] Recension ε

[15] Recension γ

[16] Alexander’s prayer caused the mountains to move nearer, making the pass narrower, facilitating his building his gate. This is the aforementioned element first seen in pseudo-Methodius.


[18] Note the change in loyalties. According to the Greek version, Gog and Magog served the Belsyrians, whom Alexander fought them after completing his campaign against Porus.

[19] “Tus” in Iran, near the Caspian south shore, known as Susia to the Greeks, is a city in the itinerary of the historical Alexander. Meyer does not make this identification, and suspects a corruption of mons Caspius etc.


[21] Toulouse manuscript 815, folio 49v.

[22] The idea that Gog and Magog were connected with the Goths was longstanding; in the mid-16th century, Archbishop of Upsala Johannes Magnus traced the royal family of Sweden back to Magog son of Japheth, via Sueño, progenitor of the Swedes, and Gog, ancestor of the Goths.\textsuperscript{[2]}
Riccoldo observed that the Mongol script resembled Chaldean (Syriac, a form of Aramaic), and in fact it does derive from Aramaic. However he saw that Mongols bore no physical resemblance to Jews and were ignorant of Jewish laws.

Rubruck refers Derbent as the “Iron Gate”, this also being the meaning of the Turkish name (Demir kapi) for the town. Rubruck may have been the only Medieval Westerner to claim to have seen it.

Also “barbarous nations”, “savage tribes”.

Based on Rubruck stating elsewhere “There are other enclosures in which there are Jews” since Roger Bacon, having been informed by Rubruck, urged the study of geography to discover where the Antichrist and Gog and Magog might be found.

Albrecht von Scharfenberg, Der jüngere Titurel. It belongs in the Arthurian cycle.

9 References

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[33] Lust 1999a, pp. 536–537.
[35] Revelation 20:7–10
[38] Bøe 2001, pp. 201–204.
[40] Mikraot Gedolot HaMeor p. 400


[54] Van Donzel & Schmidt 2010, p. 54.


[59] Anderson 1932, p. 35.


[70] Lust 1999b, p. 375.


[74] Brook 2006, pp. 7–8, 96.


[79] Painter, George D. Painter, ed. (1965), The Tartar Relation, Yale University, pp. 64–65

[80] William of Rubruck & Rockhill (tr.) 1900, pp. xxi, fn 2.


[86] Marco Polo & Yule (tr.) 1875, pp. 283, fn 5.


[93] Marco Polo & Yule (tr.) 1875, pp. 58, fn 3.


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**Modern apocalyptic thought**


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