

The Facebook Commentary on Revelation
Jon Paulien

Revelation Chapter 16

Rev 16 (Introduction)— This chapter is the third in a series of three, numbered plague sequences. The first was the seven seals of Revelation 6:1-17 and 8:1. They portray multiple disasters that afflict the earth, even though the actual word for “plague” (Greek: *plêgê*—two syllables) is not mentioned. The second in the series is the seven trumpets of 8:7 – 9:22 and 11:15-18. Again, these portray multiple disasters on the earth, although the Greek word for “plague” is not used. The term “plague”, on the other hand, is in the very title of this sequence (Rev 15:1, 6), “the seven last plagues” (Greek: *plêgas hepta tas eschatas*—Rev 15:1). All of these plagues bring suffering on the earth, in the seals that suffering falls on the righteous (Rev 6:9-11) and well as the unrighteous. In the trumpets and the bowl-plagues, the victims are exclusively the unrighteous (Rev 9:4, 20-21; 16:2, 6, 9, 11).

Passages like these in the book of Revelation occur at two levels. At the surface level, it appears that God is the active agent of these plagues. The seven seals are triggered by the opening of seals in the heavenly scroll (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7, etc.). The seven trumpets are triggered by seven angels successively blowing their trumpets in heaven (Rev 8:6, 7, 8, 10, 12, etc.). The seven bowls are triggered by temple angels who pour out the contents of their bowls on the earth (Rev 15:7, 16:1, 2, 3, etc.). Many scholars of Revelation, therefore, see these plagues, in parallel with the plagues on ancient Egypt, as a series of divine interventions for the purpose of delivering God’s people and exposing the characters of those who oppose them (including Satan). Consistent with this line of interpretation are the words of Stefanovic: “The angels are commissioned directly by God as his avenging commissioners. The wicked have ‘poured out’ the blood of God’s people (Rev 16:6); therefore, the bowl plagues are now poured upon them.” Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, second edition, pages 489-490. At the surface level, the seven last plagues are active interventions of God to judge the wicked and deliver the righteous.

Upon a second look at these plague passages an undercurrent can be seen below the surface. The “souls under the altar” (Rev 6:9) were not slain by God, but by human beings who “slay one another” (Rev 6:4). God is not the “destroyer” (Rev 9:11) of the fifth trumpet. He is the one who permits the destroyer to open the abyss (9:1) and the locust/scorpions to torment (9:3, 5). In the larger conflict that lies behind the scenes of Revelation are dynamics and rules of engagement that mean that God does not always get the outcome He desires in this world.

So in the context of a cosmic conflict over the character and government of God, God permits that which He does not will so He may win the conflict without force, and as far as possible, without violence. Similarly, in the seven bowl-plagues, the operation of demonic forces is explicit in 16:13-14. In the words of Tonstad, the operative concept in the bowl-plagues could be seen as revelation rather than retribution. The onlooking universe gets to see what the whole universe would be like if Satan were in control. And those who have rejected God and bought into the rewards they have gotten for accepting the mark of the beast (Rev 16:2; 13:16-17), find the demonic brand of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet “losing its luster” in the series of horrific consequences they experience (Rev 16:2-11). See Sigve Tonstad, *Revelation*, pages 224-229. Read in this way, the seven bowl-plagues underline the message of Jesus in John 10:10, ESV: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Reading the plagues of Revelation in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, alters what you see in the text.

In terms of structure, the seven seals are easily divided into four and three. The first four seals are connected through a series of four horses of different colors. In the last three seals, the horses vanish but the seals continue. The first four trumpets are relatively short and affect different parts of the earth. The last three trumpets affect human beings, are connected by the three woes, and are much more extensive than the first four. The seven bowl-plagues are more difficult to structure. The first five bowls affect nature, but also affect human beings directly (Rev 16:1-11). The last two bowls focus on the battle of Armageddon, a conflict between worldwide alliances at the end of time (Rev 16:12-21). But the fifth bowl also concerns the “throne of the beast” (Rev 16:10), which seems to look forward to the final battle to come. And the fifth plague doesn’t strike darkness, darkness itself is the weapon. So there is no earthly object of the fifth plague, like the earth, sea, rivers and springs, and sun in the first four. So while the structural division in the bowl-plagues is less clear than in the seals and the trumpets, I would structure them by four and three as well.

As mentioned briefly above, the seven bowl-plagues are reminiscent of the ten plagues that fell on ancient Egypt just before the Exodus. The first plague (Rev 16:2) recalls the plague of boils in Exodus 9:8. The second and third bowl-plagues (Rev 16:3-7) recall how Moses turned the waters of Egypt into blood (Exod 7:19). The fifth bowl-plague (Rev 16:10) reminds the reader of the ninth plague on Egypt, a plague of darkness (Exod 10:21). The sixth bowl-plague (Rev 16:13) makes reference to the frogs that annoyed the Egyptians (Exod 8:5). And the seventh bowl-plague (Rev 16:21) recalls the destructive plague of hail (Exod 9:23). Not only that, but the plagues on the Egyptians and the bowl-plagues have the same result, the hardening of those afflicted by them (Exod 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32, etc.; Rev 16:9, 11, 21). So the bowl-plagues are not designed to bring people to repentance (see Romans 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9), they expose the lack of repentance in those affected by them. They are a means of revelation rather than conversion.

Rev 16:1-- And I heard a loud voice from the temple say to the seven angels, “Go, pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God into the earth.” The “loud voice from the temple” (Greek: *megalês phonês ek tou naou*) occurs twice in the book of Revelation, here and in 16:17,

where it accompanies the seventh bowl that is poured out upon (Greek: *apo*) the air. The additional element there is that the voice not only comes out from the temple, it comes out from the throne. The voice here is also directly from God, because no one else but God is able to enter the temple at this time (Rev 15:8). So the voice is that of either the Lamb or “the one sitting on the throne”. It is the voice of God. There is a lesser parallel to this voice out of the temple in 11:19, where the God’s temple in heaven was opened and voices (*phônai*—perhaps “noises” there) are heard along with flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Loud voices in Revelation, with the possible exception of 8:13, are always associated with angels (Rev 5:2, 12; 7:2; 10:3; 14:7, 9, 15, 18; 19:17), the people of God (7:10; 12:10-- probably), or with God Himself (Rev 16:1, 17).

The word for temple here (Greek: *naos*) is the same as in Revelation 15:6 and 8, probably referring to the Most Holy Place. This demonstrates a clear connection between Revelation 15:5-8 and what follows in chapter 16. The term "poured out" (Greek: *ekcheete*) is reminiscent of the blood of the sacrifices being poured out at the brazen altar in the Hebrew tabernacle (Lev 8:16; 9:9). In Revelation 16:6 most major translations have “shed” the blood of saints, but it is the same Greek word as in this verse (Greek: *exechean*): **“For they have poured out the blood of saints and prophets. . . .”** The seven bowl-plagues are a just response to the persecution of God’s people. The bowls are poured out because the nations were angry (see Rev 11:18) and have poured out the blood of God's people. By “the earth” (Greek: *tên gên*) here is meant not just the land portion of the world, as it does in verse two, the entire planet is the object of these seven bowl-plagues.

Rev 16:2-- And the first angel went away and poured out his bowl into the earth, and an ugly and painful boil broke out upon the men who had the mark of the beast and had worshiped his image. The first angel “went away” (Greek: *apêlthen*) from the area of the heavenly temple to a place from which the bowl can be poured out into the earth. This movement is not stated in relation to the other six angels, it is assumed for them. A grammatical detail ignored by the KJV is the fact that the first three bowls are poured “into” (Greek: *eis*) the earth, the sea and the rivers and springs. The last four bowls are poured “upon” (Greek: *epi*) the sun, the throne of the Beast, the Euphrates and the air. All seven are in the accusative case, so the meaning is likely similar.

The word for “earth” here (Greek: *tên gên*) it is the same word as "earth" in the first trumpet (Rev 8:7) and earth in 16:1. But in the first trumpet and the first bowl, earth is the dry land portion of the planet, in contrast with the sea, the rivers and the heavenly bodies (Rev 8:8-12; 16:3-9). In 16:1, on the other hand, earth means the planet as a whole. While the bowl is poured out into the earth, the effect is directly on people. The first four trumpet plagues fall on the natural world, at least in terms of a surface reading of the text, but the first and fourth bowl plagues directly affect humanity. And not just any humanity, but specifically those who had the mark of the beast and had worshiped his image. They are the oppressors who sought to destroy those who were faithful to God in the end-time crisis (Rev 13:15-17; 16:5-6). This begins the fulfillment of what the third angel warned would happen to those who worshiped the beast and his image and received his mark on the forehead or the hand (Rev 14:9-11).

In the first plague, ugly (Greek: *kakon*) and painful (Greek: *ponêron*) sores break out on people. Given the range of meanings for the two adjectives, these boils are bad, evil, harmful and painful. The two adjectives are fairly interchangeable (see their usage in 1 Cor 5:8). In Greek, "boil" (*helkos*) is the same word as the affliction that broke out during the plague on the Egyptians (LXX: *helkê*). There, as here, the boils affected only the unrighteous, not the righteous. *Helkos* can mean a sore, an abscess, an ulcer or a wound. In the Old Testament, the word is also associated with leprosy (Leviticus 13:18-27), which is considered a punishment for sin (2 Kings 5:25-27 and 2 Chronicles 26:16-21), and is a curse of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:27 and 35). Job was afflicted "with a boil" (*helkei*) as well (Job 2:7). It is written in singular in Revelation 16, even though multiple boils seem implied (as with Job). Are the boils to be taken literally in Revelation 16? It is possible. There is no strong figurative meaning that makes sense, so it may be that one of the consequences of being found among the opponents of God at the End is tremendously painful skin sores. In Revelation, these boils fall on those who have the mark of the beast and worship the image (see Rev 13:15-17). They are the oppressors of God's people and not random ordinary people. God uses the sores to stop them in their tracks after they try to enforce a death decree against His people. In Revelation 16 God carries out what He promised in Revelation 14:9-11.

Rev 16:3-- And the second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man. And every living thing which is in the sea died. The second trumpet is parallel to this text in that a third of the sea turned to blood and a third of the living creatures died (Rev 8:8-9). The plague of the second trumpet is intensified and finalized in the second bowl plague where every living thing dies. This recalls the first of the Egyptian plagues, which occurred just before the Exodus (Exod 7:17-21). The strength of ancient Egypt was the Nile River. Turned into blood, the river was useless to them. Without water to drink, the human race in rebellion against God will not survive. So this plague is a serious intensification of the second trumpet. The great question for interpreters is whether God here is limiting the evil powers of the world directly or Satan is demonstrating his great power to destroy. While Satan desires to build up his kingdom, sin is naturally self-destructive, so Satan would, in a sense, be defeating himself. Evil exhibits its nature, even to its own hurt. See **Rev 15-18 (The Wrath of God)** at the beginning of the commentary on chapter fifteen.

It became like the blood of a dead man. The word "became" (Greek: *egeneto*) is a prominent word for creation in Genesis 1. When God spoke things "came to be" (LXX: *egeneto*—Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, etc.). This creation use of *egeneto* occurs repeatedly in the prologue to the Gospel of John. Fresh blood is a bright red color, but when it coagulates, it becomes dark, almost black. God has the power to transform the environment and Satan desires to be seen as having that power. **Every living thing.** The Greek here (*pasa psuchê zoês*) actually reads "every living soul." This is an echo of Genesis 1:20, where the fish of the sea are described as "living souls" (LXX: *psuchôn zôsôn*). As in Genesis 2:7, the word "soul" here refers to the whole creature, not to its inward parts. So there is much creation language in this clause.

Death and destruction are at work in the world on a large scale. This leads me to believe that the plagues are not the direct working of God. They are the outworking of Satan's way of

running things. He is like the thief who comes to steal and to kill and to destroy. God is the source of abundant life instead (John 10:10). To the degree that this is an ecological disaster, the author of Revelation wants us to understand that there is a demonic incitement behind the deterioration of the environment. The decline of the environment is the ways things go when Satan is in charge.

Rev 16:4-- And the third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. The basic description of this bowl-plague (Rev 16:4) is simple and minimal, building on the actions in the previous plague. In part, this is possible because the third bowl-plague is interpreted at some length by a pair of heavenly songs (Rev 16:5-7) that are recorded before the outpouring of the fourth plague (Rev 16:8-9). The third trumpet (Rev 8:10-11) is parallel to this plague. There the water is embittered, with the result that those who drink the water die. In the third bowl, on the other hand, all the waters turn to blood and there is no reference to death. The songs that follow praise the justice and fairness of God for executing or allowing judgment appropriate for the crime.

. . . **they became blood.** The implied subject of “became” (singular in the Greek: *egeneto*) is plural, the rivers and springs. Grammatically, it is possible that the rivers and springs don’t become blood, but rather when the plague is poured out, “blood happens.” I have, however, translated on the assumption of a plural subject with a singular verb, which can occur in Greek.

The transformation of water into blood is not only reminiscent of the first plague on the Egyptians (Exod 7:17-21), it is also reminiscent of Jesus’ first miracle at Cana, described in John 2:1-11. There the character of God is beautifully displayed. God cares so much about the well-being of His creatures to attend a wedding and perform a miracle that enhances the enjoyment of the happy couple and their guests. John describes it as an exhibition of Jesus’ glory (John 2:11), which in John is a revelation of the character of God. This places a different spin on the plagues. The plagues are undoing God’s gracious gift of nourishing water and turning into an image of death and destruction. The contrast between this plague and the wedding of Cana is evidence of the real actor behind all this destruction, Apollyon and Abaddon, Satan himself (Rev 9:11). As Tonstad notes, it is God who lovingly created the sea and the springs of water (Rev 14:7). Satan is here undoing the goodness of God’s creation, showing what the universe would be like if he were in charge.

Rev 16:5-7-- And I heard the angel of the waters, saying, “You are righteous, who is and who was, the Holy One, because you have judged in these ways. ⁶ Because they have poured out the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. They are worthy.” ⁷ And I heard from the altar, saying, “Yes! Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are your judgments.” The songs in this passage echo the earlier song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev 15:3-4). That means these songs are tied to the setting of the earlier song (Rev 15:2, 7), which places all of the plagues in the context of the heavenly crisis concerning God’s character and government (Rev 5:1-6). They are affirming a view of God that is widely held to be untrue (Rev 16:9, 11, 21). The plagues are part of a startling demonstration of the respective characters of

God and Satan. It is in the end-time context that God's judgments are declared to be trustworthy and fair, because they have been convincingly demonstrated to be so. The saints and prophets had been judged in earthly courts simply for serving God and rejecting the counterfeit. The consequences of those cruel and slanderous actions reverse the judgments of the earthly courts. Both the saints and the character of God are vindicated in the events at the close of human history.

And I heard the angel of the waters. . . . A new character is introduced in verse 5, the "angel of the waters". Such an angel is not mentioned elsewhere in Revelation, but is known from extra-biblical literature. Ethiopic Enoch 66:2 mentions "angels who were in charge of the waters." This is in the context of Noah's Flood, where the Intertestamental author described angels in charge of the waters underground who were tasked to release those waters to destroy "all who live and dwell upon the earth" (66:1). If John's original readers were familiar with that concept, they might see the seven bowls as counterparts to the destructions that occurred during the Flood.

In Revelation 16, the angel of the waters is clearly a reference to the angel who poured out his bowl upon the rivers and springs in verse 4. In Revelation 7:1 there are angels that have control over the winds, and in Revelation 14:18 there is an angel that has authority over fire. So Revelation is open to the idea that angels are assigned various territories or elements (see also Rev 4:6). In the first of the two songs here, the angel of the waters declares that God's judgments on the persecutors of the saints are righteous. In other words, God's judgments are in harmony with the covenant and with His own character. They are also righteous because they are appropriate to actions of the ones being judged. They have shed the blood of saints and prophets and they now have blood to drink. Whether God's judgments in the bowls are active or passive is discussed in **Rev 15-18 (The Wrath of God)**.

. . . righteous . . . Holy . . . These two words (Greek: *dikaïos . . . hosios*) are often used together in ancient priestly dedication inscriptions throughout Asia Minor, possibly under Jewish influence. So speaking of God in this way would have felt natural to the original hearers of Revelation. When Revelation borrows language from the wider religious culture, it is for two reasons: 1) to communicate more clearly in that culture, and 2) to critique the culture. In this instance, it would be to communicate.

. . . who is and who was . . . This formula recalls Revelation 1:4, 8 and 4:8, but (like Rev 11:17) leaves out the "is to come" (Greek: *ho erchomenos*). This is a clue that Revelation's story is approaching the End here. God is no longer coming because His arrival is at hand.

. . . because you have judged in these ways. "In these ways" translates the Greek *tauta* and refers only to the third bowl, not the second. The third bowl concerns fresh water for drinking, the second concerns sea water. So it is the third bowl that is particularly a consequence of the bloodshed that the persecutors of the saints have caused.

And I heard from the altar. . . . This expression (Greek: *êkousa tou thusiastêriou legontos*) is somewhat ambiguous. The KJV translates, "I heard another out of the altar say. . . ." The NIV and NRSV have, "I heard the altar respond. . . ." Is it the altar itself speaking or a voice coming from the altar? I chose to translate in a way that preserves the ambiguity, "I heard from the altar. . . ." A second song, coming from the altar, agrees with the first song.

God's judgments are righteous (fair) and trustworthy (Greek: *alêthinai*). In the midst of a collapsing planet, with God being blamed for it all (Rev 16:9, 11, 21), we are assured that the God revealed in Jesus Christ can be trusted. Whether God's judgments are active or passive, they are ultimately in harmony with His character of other-centered love.

And I heard from the altar. . . . Who is it that speaks from the altar? Is it from the altar of incense in the heavenly sanctuary? That would make this expression parallel to that of verse 1, the voice from the temple. It would be the voice of God. But in the larger context of Revelation, the altar here could be the altar of burnt offering referenced in Revelation 6:9-11. In that case it would be the voice of the "souls under the altar" in the fifth seal. They cried out for judgment and vengeance. If the voice from the altar represents the cries for justice throughout human history, the seven bowl-plagues are describing an end-time answer to those prayers.

The song of the angel of the waters, like the song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 15:3-4), contains many possible allusions to the Old Testament. Psalm 119:137, NIV: "Righteous are you, O LORD, and your laws are right." In the Greek Old Testament of this verse (Psa 118:137, LXX), God is righteous (*dikaios*) and His judgments (krisis) are upright (*euthês*), which is very close to the wording of Revelation 16:5. Psalm 145:17, ESV: "The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind (Hebrew: *chesed*—the word for relentless, covenantal love) in all his works. Isaiah 49:26, ESV: "I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." This verse comes in the context of the eschatological return from captivity. The imagery portrays God rescuing His people from the powerful nations that held them captive (Isa 49:22-25). An allusion to this verse would underline the idea that the plagues are, at least in part, actions of God that deliver His end-time people.

In terms of an Old Testament background to the songs in this passage, Tonstad prefers to highlight Jeremiah 12:1, a potential text generally overlooked by commentators: "Righteous are you, O LORD, when I complain to you; yet I would plead my case (Hebrew: *ariv*— a word for dispute, quarrel, lawsuit) before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" ESV. Jeremiah is not speaking for God here, he is speaking to God in protest over the injustices he is observing as the Babylonians prepare to conquer Judah. Both Jeremiah and the angel of the waters say, "You are righteous," but Jeremiah is not saying it in approval, he is passing judgment on God, offering a legal challenge. The rightness of God is in doubt. In the legal context, "You are righteous" is a declaration of acquittal in court! God is cleared of the charges that have accumulated in the past. Jeremiah's charges—Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the treacherous thrive?—are echoed in the words of the souls under the altar in Revelation 6:9-11. These questions are at the center of the cosmic conflict over God's character and government portrayed in Revelation 5. In the words of Tonstad, when the angel of the waters says, "You are righteous," it implies that "We were in the wrong; we were mistaken; we did not know." This is the conclusion of a process, and in the course of that process God seemed to be in the wrong. But the evidence of Revelation, the bowls in

particular, turns that around, God is vindicated of all charges. Continuing to repeat such charges in the face of all the evidence will henceforth be seen as blasphemy (Rev 16:9).

. . . **you have given them blood to drink.** . . . In light of all we have said about Satan above, what do we make of this statement? Taken in isolation it seems a clear statement that God is the direct author of the suffering and destruction in these plagues, as seems to have been the case in the Exodus from Egypt. But as Tonstad notes, God has created a moral order in which actions have consequences, both for good and for ill. There is a correspondence between deeds and consequences. The consequences of the evil actions mentioned in the first angel's song are called God's work in the sense that they are the natural outcomes of the moral framework that God has established in the universe. Human rebellion and the original rebellion of Lucifer in heaven lead inexorably to death and destruction. Death and destruction are not the will and purpose of God, they are the inevitable outcomes of free choices that the creatures of God have made. God can be called the author of these plagues because He is the author of creaturely freedom and the moral order that spells out the consequences of creaturely actions, both good and bad.

Rev 16:8—“And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was permitted to scorch the human race with fire.” The fourth trumpet has a parallel plague on the sun, moon and stars, affecting only a third of them for a third of the time. In the fourth bowl, the plague is complete. And instead of darkening the sun, the strength of the sun is increased so that the pain of the fourth plague is that of excessive heat. Whether or not the current climate crisis is in any way related to this, it is certainly global warming on an extreme scale. But if this is literal, global warming, the godly are somehow spared this plague. The “human race” (Greek: *tous anthrôpous*) that is scorched refers specifically to those who have the mark of the beast (Rev 16:2), not to the human race as a whole. This could be an argument in favor of a spiritual interpretation of the first four bowls. See discussion on the issue of literal versus spiritual plagues in **Rev 16:1-9 (Summary)**—below.

“And the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was permitted to scorch the human race with fire.” The antecedent of “it” (Greek: *autô*) is grammatically ambiguous. It is masculine, but so are both the sun (Greek: *helios*) and the implied bowl angel (Greek: *angelos*). Since the Greek word for bowl (*phialê*) is feminine, it can be ruled out as the antecedent. Is it the angel that is permitted (Greek: *edothê autô*) to scorch the human race with fire or is it the sun? As the nearer antecedent, I have chosen the sun as the active agent of the scorching. Once again, a creation of God designed to bless with light, warmth, and in a spiritual sense knowledge, is turned into a source of harm and destruction. Objects that God intended for good have been transformed into instruments of torment and destruction.

Rev 16:9— “And the people were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent in order that they might give Him glory.” The crucial point in this verse is that the followers of the beast had an opportunity to repent. While some do repent (Rev 11:13), most of humanity does not. The opportunity to repent is identified as the preaching of the first angel (Rev 14:7). In refusing to

give glory to God, they are rejecting that angel's call. To give God glory is to speak well of Him and of His character. But the plagues do not cause the followers of the beast to change their minds. They continue to reject the call to glorify God. In fact, they do the opposite, they blaspheme or slander the name of God. In doing so, they show solidarity with the beast (Rev 13:6). They hold God responsible for the actions of Satan and of human beings who are controlled by Satan.

There comes a point in both personal and corporate life, when suffering loses its remedial force because the character is set and the desire for spiritual things is no longer felt. If suffering doesn't melt the heart, it hardens it. Those who worship the beast and his image and have received the beast's mark have reached that point.

. . . **who had authority over these plagues.** God has the authority to permit Satan's end-time activities or to bring them to a halt. So in that sense, God takes responsibility for the bowl-plagues, even when He does not activate them. So the unity of the nations against His people is also described as part of controlling plan (Revelation 17:17). But while God takes responsibility for His own actions, the wicked do not. Instead, they blame Him for the consequences that come as a result of their own choices and actions.

It is hard for westerners to understand the tension between the sovereignty and control of God, on one hand, and the personal responsibility of human beings for their actions, on the other. It is a wonderful dichotomy because we suffer from both extremes today. Some people believe that the universe is out of control, God is dead, and life is impossible to manage. Other people feel that God is so much in control that they have no freedom or responsibility and, therefore, life has no meaning. In Hebrew thought, there was no contradiction in the idea that God is fully in control, yet human beings are still responsible for their actions. This paradox enables us to trust that everything will turn out all right and yet we do everything in our power to participate in the work of God to make things right.

Rev 16:1-9 (Summary and Conclusion)-- The first four plagues affect the four parts of creation mentioned in Revelation 14:7c. In the first angel's message, God is the one who made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and the fountains of waters. The act of creation was a gift of love in behalf of the creatures God placed on this earth. But in the first four bowl-plagues, the same four domains are smitten with plagues. This is a reversal of the original creation and a reversal of God's purpose.

Are the plagues literal or figurative? It is difficult to know with the plagues. In the book of Revelation, a figurative reading is normally preferred (see comments on Rev 1:1). The seals and trumpets make sense in a symbolic way because they contain language pointing to a figurative approach. The bowl-plagues, on the other hand, are written in a more straightforward, literal fashion. So I am inclined to take these first four plagues as fairly literal descriptions of the terrible experience that lies ahead for those who have rejected God's gracious provision for their salvation.

If taken figuratively, though, what might the plagues represent? A clue could be found in the covenant curses of the Old Testament, which sometimes use flowery, cosmic language to evoke the spiritual consequences that come as a result of sin. The boils resembling leprosy

could represent the physical, emotional, and social consequences of a society in rebellion against God (Isaiah 1). The waters turning to blood could represent the abandonment of law and order or a universal war that will play a part in the destruction of the wicked. In favor of a figurative approach would be the fact that literally turning the ocean waters red with human blood would require the slaughter of more people than currently live on the earth. The scorching sun could represent the intensified glare of God's word as it points out sin and calls for judgment on those who oppose God. More could be said about this, but I'm not convinced that this is a compelling reading of these verses.

Taken more literally, the bowl-plagues would represent the terrible experience that the last generation of the wicked will undergo. In these plagues we see the justice of God in allowing the unrighteous to reap what they have sown. Human rebellion reaches a place where the very survival of the planet is at stake. The plagues are appropriate to the crime (Rev 16:5-7). The bowl-plagues also demonstrate that the lost are not lost on the basis of some arbitrary decree of God. The close of human probation is simply a time when everyone on earth has made a settled decision for or against God at the very same time. The plagues also are not arbitrary even after the close of probation, because they demonstrate that those counted as lost are rightly counted as such. The plagues show that the wicked continue to oppose God no matter the circumstances and their opposition even becomes more severe as the plagues go on. The seals and the trumpets brought people to repentance, but now the lost are no longer capable of grasping God's salvation. The bowl-plagues also allow Satan to demonstrate what the universe would be like if he were in charge. Both his character and God's are further clarified in these final events. As horrific as these plagues are, they ultimately serve a purpose in clarifying the issues in the great controversy over the character and government of God.

Seventh-day Adventists look to the writings of Ellen White for clues to the meaning of difficult texts in the book of Revelation. In the case of the first four plagues, her most direct comments come in the book *The Great Controversy*, pages 627-634. But in these pages she has very little to say about the interpretive issues we have been discussing. She seems to address the transition between Revelation 15 and 16 in the following: "When Christ ceases His intercession in the sanctuary, the unmingled wrath threatened against those who worship the beast and his image and receive his mark (Revelation 14:9-10), will be poured out." GC 627. The bowl-plagues are seen as after the close of probation, as we have seen from the text itself. Are the plagues literal or figurative? On page 628 she essentially quotes the text of Revelation 16:2-9 without explanation. She does, however, see them as analogous to the plagues of Egypt, which were literal. She sees them as the consequence of the death decree in Revelation 13:15. "By condemning the people of God to death, they have as truly incurred the guilt of their blood as if it had been shed by their hands." GC 628.

Rather than focusing on the nature of the plagues and the opposers of God, Ellen White places most of her attention on the experience of the faithful during this time, something not addressed in Revelation 16:1-9 (GC 629-634). They too will suffer on account of the plagues, but "they will not be left to perish. . . . While the wicked are dying from hunger and pestilence, angels will shield the righteous and supply their want." GC 629. She quotes many biblical texts about God's sheltering care in times of trouble (GC 629-630). "Could men see with heavenly

vision, they would behold companies of angels that excel in strength stationed about those who have kept the word of Christ's patience." GC 630. There follows a digression on the ministry of angels in the course of human history (GC 630-632).

In concluding her account of the first four bowl-plagues, Ellen White closes on a very positive note. While the deliverance of the faithful seems long in coming, it is assured in the end. "If the blood of Christ's faithful witnesses were shed at this time, it would not, like the blood of the martyrs, be as seed sown to yield a harvest for God. Their fidelity would not be a testimony to convince others of the truth; for the obdurate heart has beaten back the waves of mercy until they return no more. If the righteous were now left to fall a prey to their enemies, it would be a triumph for the prince of darkness." GC 634. She infuses the horrific account of the first four plagues with a beacon of hope. "Glorious will be the deliverance of those who have patiently waited for His coming and whose names are written in the book of life." GC 634. In the next chapter, "God's People Delivered," she briefly touches on plagues five through seven (GC 635-636). To these plagues (Rev 16:11-21) we now turn.

Rev 16:10-11-- The fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became darkened, and they gnawed their tongues on account of the pain. And they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and they did not repent of their works. The first four plagues are poured out on human beings in general so that people begin to realize that something terrible is happening. The fifth plague, on the other hand, is poured out on the seat of the beast's system, the place of his authority. It was Satan (in the form of a dragon) who delegated to the sea beast his own power and throne and authority (Rev 13:2). So in these plagues we see not only the demise of individuals, but also the systems through which Satan has opposed God and persecuted God's people.

If the first four plagues are to be taken literally, a shift seems to take place here. The gnawing of tongues and cursing God on account of the darkness suggests that the darkness is not literal. Darkness does not cause pain of itself unless the pain is from a fear of the dark. This darkness is somehow more severe than normal darkness, it is, perhaps, a devastating humiliation of some kind. This supernatural darkness recalls the more literal darkness of the ninth plague on Egypt (Exod 10:21-23). Just as Pharaoh's magicians were exposed by the plagues (Exod 9:11), so the beast's kingdom is humiliated before the world. But no matter what God does, the plagues fail to elicit a repentance from those whose minds are made up against Him. The opponents of God have persisted in rebellion until it is too late to return to Him. They have left themselves open to the great deception through which Satan will gather his forces for the great final battle that begins during the sixth plague (Rev 16:13-14).

. . . his kingdom became darkened, and they gnawed their tongues on account of the pain. . . . they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores. The gnawing of the tongue occurs in the context of extreme pain. There is no logical connection in normal life between literal darkness and such intense physical pain. Neither does literal darkness cause sores to form on human bodies. Since the sores were first mentioned in the first bowl, it seems that the plagues of Revelation 16 are cumulative, as were the plagues of Egypt. There is an accumulation of plagues rather than merely a succession of them. The

condition of the world and its people is getting progressively worse.

In the Old Testament, darkness is often a symbol of calamity (Isa 59:9-10; Ezek 30:18; 32:7-8; Joel 2:2). The calamity here is the soon destruction of the beast's kingdom, signaled by the gathering darkness. The darkness of this plague parallels the deep darkness of the fifth trumpet. If the seat of the beast is equivalent to the Abyss in the fifth trumpet, the place from which the darkness and the locusts emanated (Rev 9:2). Blaspheming God is ultimately the work of Satan, so the adherents of the beast's kingdom are seen to be doing Satan's work.

Darkness is also the absence of light. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. If that were in mind here, the darkness could involve a removal of Satan's disguise which reveals the beast power as well. This seems to fit well with Revelation 18:9-10 and John 3:19-21.

. . . the throne of the beast. The throne of the beast, the seat of authority which people recognize, is at this time thrown into darkness (Rev 13:2). The authority of the sea beast was given him at the time of his resurrection by the dragon and with the encouragement of the land beast. By contrast, the throne of God is also mentioned in this part of the book of Revelation (Rev 12:5; 14:3; and 16:17). A throne is a place from which authority and power flow. This plague seem to be a challenge to the sea beast's assumed authority. That challenge may come through literal darkness or through a devastating loss of knowledge or function that causes the sea beast to be humiliated before the world. The sense of wondering after the beast is gone (Revelation 13:3). The change of atmosphere eventually leads to the destruction of the evil trinity, which is represented by the harlot in Revelation 17. God's great final counterattack is here set in motion and nothing will stop it until all opposition is gone and pain, sorrow, mourning and death are banished from the universe.

. . . the God of heaven. . . . This title for God is mentioned only twice in Revelation, here and in 11:13. There some repented and gave God glory (Rev 16:9). Here they only blaspheme God, they consider Him the direct cause of their misery.

Rev 16:12-16 (Introduction)— At the end of the sixth plague comes the only mention in the Bible of the word "Armageddon." It is the name given in Revelation for the great battle at the consummation of history. The purpose of the sixth plague is to show both how the powers that oppose God and His people at the end come together and how they meet their end. In order to understand the battle of Armageddon, you have to see it in the context of the whole passage, beginning with verse 12. That is an important pivotal verse. It not only introduces the sixth plague (Rev 16:12-16), it ties the sixth plagues with Revelation 17 and the two chapters that follow it. In this passage we get a glimpse of events that will be at the center of focus through Revelation 19. So Revelation 16:12 is deserving of considerable attention, as we will see. It is the foundational text for the rest of the book of Revelation.

Whenever you face challenges like this in the book of Revelation, it is wise to consider three additional methods; 1) looking at the larger context within Revelation, 2) looking at the Old Testament background of the text, and 3) seeing how the New Testament modifies the Old Testament background in light of Christ.

Rev 16:12-- The sixth angel poured out his bowl upon the great River Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order that the way of the kings from the rising of the sun might be prepared. The language of this verse is pretty straightforward on the surface. The pouring out of the bowl results in a specific river being dried up to make a path for the “kings of the east,” presumably kings approaching the Euphrates River from the east. It seems pretty easy to understand at first. But there is a problem. All of the other plagues so far have had catastrophic effects either on the whole earth or on one of its most important entities. In contrast with this the mere drying up of a single river does not seem to come anywhere close to the same significance as the first five, in comparison it seems like nothing. After all, the Euphrates is rather seasonal normally, its flow dries up naturally at certain times of the year. So this text must represent something more than a surface reading might suggest. So like many other parts of Revelation it is not difficult to know what it says, but it may be much more difficult to understand what it means.

. . . **the great River Euphrates.** The Euphrates River, often called “the great river” (Gen 15:18; Deut 1:7; Josh 1:4, etc.) or simply “the river” (Gen 36:37; Exod 23:31; Num 22:5, etc.) in the Old Testament. According to passages like the above, the Euphrates River formed the northern border of the territory promised to Israel. Enemy super-powers like Assyria and Babylon were largely situated on the other side of the Euphrates. So movement across that river in ancient times would always be a threat to Israel. The Euphrates River is also mentioned in Revelation 9:14. As such, the Euphrates River functioned as the middle ground between the territory of Israel and the territory of its potential enemies.

But in Revelation it is even more significant that the Euphrates River passed right through the center of ancient Babylon. Ancient Babylon was somewhat like Kansas City, a modern city that lies on both sides of the Missouri River and in two different states, but is still a single, unified city. The river was an integral part of the city, providing water for the inhabitants and their crops and providing a protective moat in a place where it rarely rains and water can be very hard to find. Without the river, ancient Babylon could not have survived. As we will see, the sixth bowl-angel, who poured his bowl on the Euphrates River, returns at the beginning of Revelation 17 to elaborate further on the sixth plague, including the relationship between Babylon and the Euphrates River. There we will see the brilliant way John integrates the river and the city into his prophetic portrayal of the final events of earth’s history.

Was the reference to the Euphrates River intended to be literal or did it have a symbolic meaning? John’s understanding of the Euphrates River in this text is explained in the immediate context, Revelation 17. In Revelation 17:1, one of the seven bowl-angels returns to explain something about one of the seven plagues to John. “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters’” (Rev 17:1). Which of the seven bowl-angels is this? It would have to be an angel dealing with water, either the second, the third, or the sixth. Since the prostitute who sits on many waters is named Babylon in verse 5, the waters of verse 1 are the Euphrates River (called “many waters” in Jeremiah 51:13), the river of Babylon.

In Revelation 17:1 a prostitute named Babylon is sitting on many waters. That topic is taken up again in 17:15, NIV: “Then the angel said to me, ‘The waters you saw, where the

prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.'" Revelation 17:15 defines the Euphrates River for John. It does not represent the literal river or the territory through which it flows, it represents the civil and political authorities of the whole world. It is representative of the world's civil and secular powers including all races, ethnic groups, people groups, and languages. It is a symbol of the many nations of the world that will give their support to end-time Babylon. When modern nations work loosely together for a common cause, it is called an alliance (such as NATO). Ancient Babylon was a collection of many nations purposefully tied together by force and called an empire. So the Euphrates River in Revelation 16:12 represents the power of many nations in support of end-time Babylon. If that is the case, what does the drying up of the river represent?

We mentioned earlier that the Euphrates River functioned as the middle ground between Israel at its most powerful and its potential enemies. The secular, political powers of the world are the middle ground between the people of God and the religious authorities in opposition to God. They can also represent the middle ground of people in the world who are neither committed to the true God nor hostile to Him or His people. As such, they are the object of persuasion from both sides and are forced to side with one or the other in the final battle. Their ambivalence is clear in how they act in Revelation 17.

In Revelation 16-18, there are multiple allusions to the Old Testament's description of ancient Babylon's fall, beginning with the drying up of the Euphrates River here. In the Old Testament, the drying up of the waters often symbolized a mighty act of God on behalf of His people (Exod 14:21-22; Josh 3:14-17). The fall of Babylon is described in three major places in the Old Testament: Jeremiah 50-51; Isaiah 44-47; and Daniel 5. The meaning of the drying up of the Euphrates River becomes clearer with a close look at some of these texts.

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'The people of Israel are oppressed, and the people of Judah as well. All their captors hold them fast, refusing to let them go. Yet their Redeemer is strong; the LORD Almighty is his name. He will vigorously defend their cause so that he may bring rest to their land, but unrest to those who live in Babylon.'" Jer 50:33-34.

One reason that ancient Babylon fell is that it had become an oppressor of Israel and God desired to demonstrate His power to defend and deliver His people. This factor is also central in Revelation.

"'A sword against the Babylonians!' declares the LORD--'against those who live in Babylon and against her officials and wise men! A sword against her false prophets! They will become fools. A sword against her warriors! They will be filled with terror. A sword against her horses and chariots and all the foreigners in her ranks! They will become women. A sword against her treasures! They will be plundered.'" Jer 50:35-37.

Jeremiah 50 offers a summary of the strengths of Babylon that had enabled it to be a great ancient nation: its population, officials, wise men, false prophets, warriors, military equipment, and financial resources. God weakened Babylon's support system in preparation for her fall.

The meaning of the drying up of the Euphrates River becomes clearer with a look at texts like Jeremiah 50 and 51. "A drought on her waters! They will dry up. For it is a land of idols, idols that will go mad with terror." Jer 50:38. God undermined Babylon by attacking what

made her powerful and what supported her goals. Here the means of the attack was to dry up the Euphrates River. The Euphrates River in Jeremiah 50:33-38 becomes a symbol of all the resources that made ancient Babylon strong. God's opposition to ancient Babylon was for at least two reasons that are mentioned in this passage: 1) to rescue oppressed Israel from Babylon, and 2) its idolatry. The fall of Babylon theme in Revelation alludes to both of these. The opponents of God in Revelation oppress the saints (Rev 17:6, 13:15-17) and practice idolatry (Rev 9:21-22; 13:15).

This is supported by a passage in the next chapter of Jeremiah: "Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'See, I will defend your cause and avenge you; I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry. Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives.'" Jer 51:36-37. This repeats that the drying up of Babylon's waters is due to God wanting to rescue His people from Babylon. The drying up of the Euphrates River makes the ruin of Babylon possible. And in Revelation the meaning is taken one step further. The drying up of the River Euphrates (Rev 16:12) becomes the equivalent of the ten kings (Rev 17:14) stripping, eating and burning the prostitute Babylon (Rev 17:16). The civil/secular/political powers of the world not only withdraw their support for Babylon, they gang up on her and destroy her.

The drying up of the Euphrates River is further clarified in Isaiah. "This is what the LORD says--your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,' who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please;' he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'" Isa 44:24-28. These words indicate that both Babylon's destruction and the restoration of Jerusalem are fulfillments of prophecy. So this passage introduces two further reasons for Babylon's fall: 1) prophecy must be fulfilled, and 2) Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple need to be restored and re-built.

In the Old Testament, therefore, there are a total of four reasons given for the fall of Babylon: 1) God's desire to deliver Israel from her oppressors; 2) Babylon's own idolatry; 3) the fulfillment of prophecy; and 4) God's desire to rebuild Jerusalem. Cyrus, the king of Persia, is described as God's agent in this process. He will conquer Babylon by drying up the River Euphrates, delivering God's people, and beginning the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple. See also Isaiah 45:1-4, where Cyrus, a pagan king who does not know God, is called Messiah, a term reserved elsewhere for God's ultimate deliverer of Israel (Dan 9:26). Drying up the Euphrates River is not enough by itself to conquer Babylon, since there were walls along the river. So in Isaiah 45:1, God promises that when the river dries up the gates of Babylon will be open to give Cyrus' army a ready entrance.

The army of Cyrus (along with Darius as "kings of the east"-- Persia), surrounds Babylon to commence a siege. The double walls are too big to breach and there are twenty years of

supplies inside the city, so a normal siege would not work. Since the river passes through the center of the city, Cyrus decides to dry up the Euphrates River (by diverting the river upstream) and try to get under the walls that cross the river. The night that he diverts the river, there is a wild, drunken party in the city (Daniel 5) so the gates are left open (as prophesied in Isaiah 45:1), and Cyrus conquers the city. He decrees that the former inhabitants of Judah were free to return home and to rebuild Jerusalem. These events described in the Bible are confirmed in some detail by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (*The Histories*, Book 1, 191) and, to a lesser degree, by the Cyrus Cylinder, which archaeologists uncovered in more recent times. John used a historical event to portray the outcome of Revelation's end-time events.

When you compare the fall of Babylon story with the book of Revelation, it becomes clear that the story is a crucial background to the last third of Revelation. In the ancient story, Cyrus, who rules the empire to the east of Babylon, conquers Babylon by drying up the Euphrates River. He then delivers God's people from captivity to go home and rebuild Jerusalem. This sequence of events in the Old Testament fits what is happening in the latter part of the book of Revelation. There an end-time Cyrus, Jesus Christ, conquers end-time Babylon by drying up the end-time Euphrates River and delivering end-time Israel so that a new Jerusalem can be built. The fall of Babylon to Cyrus becomes a subtext for everything taking place within Revelation 15-22.

There are three key terms that need explanation in this text. The first, the Euphrates River, was explained as the civil and political powers of the world in Revelation 17. The second, the drying up, was explained on the basis of the Old Testament as removing the resources that make end-time Babylon strong. The third key term is the "kings from the rising of the sun" (Greek: *tôn basileôn tôn apo anatólēs hēliou*). As we will see, this term is best explained with reference to the rest of the New Testament.

The waters of the Euphrates River were dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east or from the "rising of the sun" (Greek: *anatólēs hēliou*). They are not the kings "of" the east, they are specifically the kings from (Greek: *apo*) the east. They are not specified as a portion of the "kings of the earth" but as kings who come from the direction of the sunrise. We will see in 16:13-14 that they are placed in contrast to the "kings of the whole inhabited world" (Greek: *tous basileis tēs oikoumenēs holēs*), so they are not a portion of those kings but kings of a different kind. An understanding of the New Testament use of the rising of the sun shows that they are the spiritual forces of God who enter spiritual combat with the forces of Satan (Rev 16:15-16; 17:14).

In the New Testament, the term "sun-rising" (Greek: *anatólē* or *anatólēs hēliou*) is used in two main ways. The first is as a simple, directional reference, "the east." So the translation "kings from the east" is not incorrect. But the term is also used in a symbolic way with reference to Jesus Christ and the work He is accomplishing. One key reference is Luke 1:78, where Zechariah sings a song celebrating John the Baptist's birth and saying that he will prepare the way for a greater One: ". . . because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun (Greek: *anatólē*) will come to us from heaven. . ." Luke 1:78. This is clearly a reference to the first coming of Jesus, in fact, it is a reference to Jesus Himself. The term "from the east" can also be a reference to Jesus' second coming: "For as the lightning comes from the

east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." Matthew 24:27, ESV, see also verses 28-31.

In Revelation, an angel--either Christ or His agent--ascends from the rising of the sun (Revelation 7:2). So the kings from the rising of the sun, from the east, would seem to be related to Christ, rather than a subset of the kings of the world. The kings come from the east just as Jesus comes from the east at the second coming. This is further evidence that the kings from the east on God's side rather than with the many opponents of God and His people listed in Revelation. This is supported by the Old Testament use of "sun" and "sunrise" with its anticipation of the ministry of Christ (Mal 4:2; Zech 3:8, LXX; Zech 6:12, LXX). The kings from the rising of the sun are an allusion to Cyrus the Persian, who functioned as God's Messiah in the original fall of Babylon (Isa 45:1). While the actual attack came from the north, Isaiah 41:2, 25 confirm that Isaiah considered Cyrus to be "from the east."

In the context of John's day, the Euphrates River was roughly the border between the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire to the east. In the time of Trajan, shortly after the writing of Revelation, Rome succeeded in crossing the Euphrates and conquering the Mesopotamian territory that had belonged to ancient Babylon and Assyria. But this conquest was short-lived. At the time Revelation was written, fears were rising in the Empire that Nero would somehow come back from the dead and lead the Parthians in a massive invasion of the Empire from the east. Many scholars consider that the main point of this text. No doubt some of John's his readers and hearers might have wondered how much the vision had to do with the literal Euphrates and the Parthians. But such a view seems much narrower than the expansive scope of the cosmic conflict that forms the heart of John's vision. A careful reading of the text indicates a more spiritual purpose than simply a commentary on events that were current at that time.

If the primary focus of the kings from the rising of the sun is an allusion to the role of Cyrus in the historical fall of Babylon, why is the word "kings" (Greek: *tôn basileôn*) in plural here? In the original context, Cyrus was "the king" and to use the singular term would seem make more sense here. But while Cyrus was the primary actor in conquering Babylon, he was actually leading an alliance of at least two major powers, Media and Persia. Cyrus installed the king of the Medes, Darius, as king of Babylon after taking the city.

While Jesus Christ is the end-time equivalent of Cyrus, the use of the plural "kings" is appropriate in the context of Revelation as well. "They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." Revelation 17:14, NIV. Jesus is called King of Kings, which means that other kings are riding into the end-time battle with Him. The church inherited the promise to Israel that they would be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5-6; Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 20:4-6). So Jesus' fellow kings are His called, chosen and faithful followers.

The titles "called, chosen and faithful" are consistently used in the New Testament with reference to the people of God (Rom 1:6-7; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Pet 2:9). The final battle is fought on earth by the Lamb and His earthly followers. This is not a literal battle, but a spiritual one, as will be clarified later. The "army of heaven" includes God's earthly saints because they have been treated as already being in heavenly places (Rev 14:1; 15:2; 19:1-5). So the saints of God

are called by many names in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 16:12, they are the kings from the rising of the sun. In Revelation 17:14 they are the called chosen and faithful followers of Jesus. They are also called "a kingdom of priests" (Rev 1:5-6 and 5:9-10), the 144,000 (Rev 7:4-8), the great multitude (Rev 7:9-12; 19:1), the remnant (Rev 12:17), and the saints (Rev 14:12; 17:6). So the kings from the east would seem to be a reference to the great end-time people of God under the leadership of Jesus Christ. They are named by many names in the book of Revelation, but in God's eyes they are one people. Their end-time victory is prepared by the drying up of the Euphrates River. The term, "kings from the east," is defined in Revelation 17:14; the term "Euphrates" is defined in Revelation 17:15.

Rev 16:12 (Summary)-- In the last days of earth's history there will be a world-wide confederacy of those faithful to God in Jesus Christ. There are many names to describe these people and their activities: the kings of the east, those who are with the Lamb, the remnant, the 144,000, the saints, etc. In Revelation, it is not essential that they be organized in human terms, as an institution or a denomination. In the crisis of the last days, they are likely to be made up of small groups of kindred spirits from every nation, tribe, language and religion. In spite of tremendous pressure to worship the beast and his image, there will be a few world-wide who will maintain their faithfulness to God.

In Revelation 16:13-14, Satan seeks to meet this spiritual attack on his kingdom by exercising all his demonic powers to deceive and gathering all the nations of the whole world to his side for the final battle of the great day of God Almighty. He will seek to use those nations to coerce all the world's undecided people to go along with his side of the controversy. The outcome of that great final battle is spelled out in the seventh bowl-plague and the elaborations that follow in chapters 17-19.

In the study of this verse, we have used the special methodology laid out in the book *The Deep Things of God*. We began with the basic exegesis of Revelation 16. Then we looked at the larger context (Revelation 17) to determine the meaning of the Euphrates River (the civil and secular powers of the world at the End). We then explored the Old Testament background to determine the meaning of the drying up of the Euphrates (Babylon's loss of support from the civil and secular powers of the world). And finally we examined how the imager of this verse was clarified by the New Testament usage of east and sunrise as a witness to Jesus Christ (kings of the east are Christ and His people in the final conflict of earth's history). Revelation 16:12 is one of the best opportunities to use extended methods to carry out an analysis of any text in the book of Revelation.

Rev 16:13-16 (Introduction)—The sixth bowl-plague is summed up in Revelation 16:12. The Kings of the East (Jesus Christ and those on this earth faithful to Him at that time—Rev 17:14) launch a final attack on Satan's kingdom resulting in the drying up of the Euphrates River (representing the civil and secular powers of the world), the ending of civil, economic and military support for end-time Babylon. While Babylon is not mentioned in the previous verse (Rev 16:12), it is brought to our attention by means of the Euphrates River. The Euphrates River represented Babylon's support system in the ancient context. In Revelation itself, the

Euphrates River comes to represent world-wide civil, secular, and political power united to serve end-time Babylon. It is not yet clear who that end-time Babylon is but it will become clearer as we work our way through Revelation.

In Revelation 16:13-14, the narrative steps back to describe how Satan prepared to meet this spiritual attack on his kingdom. These verses sum up the forces arrayed against Christ and His people in the final crisis. Satan will use all his demonic powers to deceive and gather all the nations of the world to his side for the final battle of the great day of God Almighty (Rev 16:14, 16). At the same time a final call goes out to gather God's faithful out of all the nations and religious institutions into a world-wide alliance of the saints (Rev 16:15; 14:12). When both of these gathering movements are complete, the world is ready for Armageddon and the sixth plague commences (Rev 16:12).

Rev 16:13-- And I saw, out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. "And I saw" (Greek: *kai eidon*) introduces a new phase of the vision. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet is a reference to the unholy trinity of Revelation 13; the dragon, the sea beast and the land beast. Reference to the dragon is obvious (cf. Rev 12:3). Reference to "the beast" is also fairly obvious, since that is the short form for the beast from the sea already in Revelation 13 (Rev 13:3-5; 14-15, 17-18). The false prophet is always listed together with the dragon and the beast (Rev 19:20; 20:10). The description of the false prophet in 19:20 connects it with the deceptive signs, the image of the beast and the mark of the beast (Rev 13:13-17). So it is virtually certain that the false prophet and the land beast of Revelation 13:11-18 are one and the same. Rather than speaking of the beast from the earth, the author uses false prophet, with reference to the land beast's mimicking of the Holy Spirit (see further comments in **Revelation 13 (Introduction)** and the use of deceptive miracles (Rev 13:13-14). So I would consider dragon, beast and false prophet a direct recall of the three enemy powers in Revelation 13.

. . . out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet . . . The dragon is defined as Satan himself in Revelation 12:9. But the narrative in Revelation 12:3-5 echos the attempts of Herod to destroy the baby Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt 2:13-18). So in Revelation 12 the dragon represents not only Satan, but also earthly powers that he controls to do his bidding. In the end-time context of Revelation 16, the powers of Satan are exercised with signs, wonders and deceptive miracles (Rev 13:13-14, see also 2 Thess 2:9-10 and Matthew 24:24-27). So the dragon would represent the direct activity of Satan to influence the religious world to follow him rather than the true God.

The sea beast is an agent of the dragon that exercises his authority to dominate the world in the period following New Testament times until the Time of the End. We have identified the sea beast with the medieval church, its errors and its persecutions (see comments and excurses in relation to Rev 13:1-10). Revelation suggests that the dark side of Christianity is not limited to the Middle Ages, but will manifest itself powerfully at the End as well.

The land beast/false prophet is a religious power that arises toward the end of history. We have more cautiously identified that power in the current situation with the reluctant

world empire of today, the United States of America. If that projection holds true moving forward, the United States of America will someday repudiate the First Amendment and attempt to influence the religious world in a manner similar to the medieval church in Europe and the Middle East. But Revelation 13:13-14 makes it clear that a major factor in that American ascendancy will be deceptive miracles, something not currently at the center of American consciousness. So this expresses a setting that would still be in the future.

From a Seventh-day Adventist perspective, it is important to examine one of Ellen White's more specific expositions of Revelation, focused on this very passage. Her most direct exposition of Revelation 16:13-14 in *The Great Controversy* is found in pages 561-562. To save space, I will share just the key sentences for our purpose. "Satan has long been preparing for his final effort to deceive the world. . . . Little by little he has prepared the way for his masterpiece of deception in the development of spiritualism. He has not yet reached the full accomplishment of his designs; but it will be reached in the last remnant of time. Says the prophet: (quotes Rev 16:13-14). Except those who are kept by the power of God, through faith in His word, the whole world will be swept into the ranks of this delusion." Exegesis of this text supports the idea of satanic involvement in the run-up to the sixth plague. But it does not help us define the three characters that make up the unholy trinity in this text. She addresses that issue on page 588.

Note the following statement from Ellen White on the unholy trinity: "Through the two great errors, the immortality of the soul and Sunday sacredness, Satan will bring the people under his deceptions. While the former lays the foundation of spiritualism, the latter creates a bond of sympathy with Rome. The Protestants of the United States will be foremost in stretching their hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power; and under the influence of this **threefold union**, this country will follow in the steps of Rome in trampling on the rights of conscience. As spiritualism more closely imitates the nominal Christianity of the day, it has greater power to deceive and ensnare. Satan himself is converted, after the modern order of things. He will appear in the character of an angel of light. Through the agency of spiritualism, miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and many undeniable wonders will be performed. And as the spirits will profess faith in the Bible, and manifest respect for the institutions of the church, their work will be accepted as a manifestation of divine power." GC 588.

While GC 588 does not qualify as a quotation or a direct allusion to Revelation 16:13-14, the concept of a "threefold union" seems to echo the unholy trinity, and the concept of satanic deceptions seems to echo this passage as well. If so, she seems to equate the dragon with spiritualism, the beast with "the Roman power" (to her the Papacy), and the false prophet with Protestant America. While the above statement is familiar to many, she has much more to say in *Great Controversy* about these three protagonists, and I hope soon to read the latter part of GC again with these three protagonists in mind. Those who have recently read through that are welcome to offer feedback.

If, as Tonstad believes, the plagues are the handiwork of Satan, then the activity in this verse fits very well. If, as Stefanovic seems to believe, the plagues are judgments of God upon the unrighteous, then this verse concerns the activities of Satan in anticipation of God's final

movements to end his rebellion. I lean toward Tonstad's position at this time but acknowledge that the evidence can be read either way.

In Revelation 13 these powers used deception (Rev 13:13-14—Greek: *plana*) and force (Rev 13:15-17) to attempt to win the world to their side. In the next verse (Rev 16:14) demonic signs or miracles are used to win the kings of the whole world to the side of Satan's trinity. The use of force in the final context is implied in the military language of verse 14 and in Revelation 17:6, 18:24, and 19:2. So the story in Revelation 16-19 builds on the foundation laid in Revelation 12-14.

Previously, only the sea beast's mouth was in view (Rev 13:2) but in this verse all three mouths are in view. The mention of "mouth" in relation to the unholy trinity also recalls the "war of words" in heaven in Revelation 12. The war there is described in military language (Rev 12:7-8) but is actually carried out with words in Revelation 12:9-11. Satan uses words to accuse and deceive (Rev 12:9-10) and God's faithful call on the blood of the Lamb through the word of their testimony in Revelation 12:11.

. . . out of the mouth. . . Throughout Revelation, the mouth is a weapon in the battle between good and evil. On God's side, the mouth of Christ is the source of the weapon with which He "makes war" against the unrepentant (Rev 2:16) and against the nations that oppose Him (Rev 19:15, 21). Fire proceeds from the mouths of the two witnesses and destroys their enemies (Rev 11:5). On the other side, the mouth of the serpent/dragon spews out water to destroy the woman (Rev 12:15). The mouth of the sea beast (Rev 13:2) produces blasphemies against God and against those who dwell in heaven (Rev 13:5-6). Here the mouths of the unholy trinity produce demonic spirits like frogs to persuade the kings of the whole world to unite for the last battle of earth's history. The great battles of Revelation are not primarily military, they are concerned with truth and lies about the character and government of God.

. . . three unclean spirits like frogs. . . The term "Babylon" is not used in the sixth bowl, but in this verse it is once again anticipated in the original language. The "unclean spirits" (Greek: *pneumata akatharta*) are the means by which the dragon endeavors to enlist the nations of the world to his side in the final conflict. The reference here looks forward to the unclean spirits of 18:2 (Greek: *pneumatōs akathartou*). The terms "clean" and "unclean" seem to play an important role in distinguishing between the people of God/things of heaven and Babylon in Revelation (cf. Rev 19:8, 14). In the LXX of Zechariah 13:2, the "unclean spirit" (LXX: *to pneuma to akatharton*) will be removed from the land of Judah in the future. So the reference in this verse is appropriate to the setting just before the eschaton. The "deceitful spirits" (Greek: *pneumasin planois*) that will come in later times according to 1 Timothy 4:1 may also be relevant to this verse (cf. the "evil spirit" [*pneuma ponêron*] of 1 Sam 16:14). The three parts of Babylon in 16:19 likely refer to the dragon, beast and false prophet of this verse.

This verse contains the only reference to frogs (Greek: *batrachoi*) in the entire New Testament. The reference here recalls the plague of frogs during the Exodus (LXX: *batrachois*, etc.—Exod 8:2-13). This connection is further supported by the Exodus imagery running throughout the seven bowl plagues (see further comments on the plagues of the Exodus in Revelation 16 in **Rev 16 [Introduction]**). The Revelation plagues are modeled on the Egyptian

plagues that fell during the Exodus: boils, water turning to blood, a painful darkness and then frogs. What role did the frogs of the Exodus play? Stay tuned.

The Exodus narrative relates a number of scenes in which Pharaoh's magicians mimic the miracles performed by Moses and Aaron. First there is the miracle of walking sticks turning into snakes (Exod 7:10-13). Then there is the miracle of turning water into blood (Exod 7:14-24). Then there is the miracle of an overwhelming plague of frogs (Rev 8:1-15). Every one of these miracles was performed also by the magicians of Pharaoh (Exod 7: 11-12, 22; 8:7). But beginning with the third plague, the plague of gnats, the magicians of Pharaoh were unable to mimic them and acknowledged their helplessness to Pharaoh (Exod 8:18-19). This means that the plague of frogs precipitated the last deception performed before Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. The allusion to frogs in Revelation 16:13 means that what is about to occur in verse 14 is the last deception of Satan before the return of Christ. In ancient Egypt, no more deceptive miracles were allowed after the plague of the frogs. The frogs were the last deception of the Exodus. In the book of Revelation, deception is a major aspect of the outline of the final battle. The frogs become an important image because frogs represent the last deception of earth's history. The three frogs are the evil counterpart of God's three angels in Revelation 14:6-12.

This final, deceptive activity is directed by end-time Babylon, the sum total of the counterfeit trinity (Rev 16:19). End-time Babylon is multiple entities working together--a spiritual empire made up of all three characters united for a short time at the end. As we have seen in Revelation 12 and 13, each of these characters has a separate history, but Satan enables them to unite together (Rev 16:14, see also comments on Rev 17:1-3) for a short time at the end of earth's history. This is his special preparation for the battle of Armageddon.

Rev 16:14-- For they are the spirits of demons, doing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole inhabited world to gather them for the battle of the great day of God Almighty. The unclean frogs are here defined as the spirits of demons. They are the demonic counterpart to the three angels of Revelation 14:6-12. To the Greeks, demons were beings that are superior to humans and inferior to the gods. To the Hebrews, the angels had the role. In later Judaism, demons were subordinates that served the purposes of Satan just as angels were subordinates to serve the purposes of God. In the New Testament, demons are powerful beings that function in behalf of Satan. In the Gospels, the terms "demons," "unclean spirits," and "evil spirits," are interchangeable (Mark 3:7-30). In Revelation 9:20 idolatry is equated with the worship of demons. Among Jesus' many miracles was freeing people from demonic oppression (Matt 4:24).

That these unclean spirits proceeded from the mouths of the unholy trinity (Rev 16:13) indicate that they are messenger angels like the three angels of Revelation 14:6-12. Their mission is to persuade the kings of the world to join each other in support of the demonic trinity in the end-time battle with the kings of the east for control of the world. An Old Testament parallel to this scene is in 1 Kings 22:21-23. There a "deceptive spirit" persuades King Ahab to ignore the prophetic message from God and go into the battle that will cost him

his life. Revelation 16 portrays the end-time equivalent of that scene. See also Additions to Esther 11:6-7.

. . . **doing signs.** . . . According to this verse, the demonic frogs also do miraculous signs. The word “signs” is used to describe Jesus’ miracles in the Gospel of John (John 2:11, 23; 3:2, etc.). These “signs” were evidence that Jesus was the Word of God, more than just a man. But here these signs serve the purposes of Satan, persuading the kings of the world that the counterfeit trinity is the true God. So the role of the demonic spirits in this passage has two parts-- miraculous signs and deceptive persuasion (on the latter, see also Rev 13:13-14). The concept of miraculous signs was limited to the land beast in Revelation 13, but in this passage that power is extended to all three members of the unholy trinity (Rev 16:13). They are all part of the end-time deception.

The purpose of the deception is to persuade the rulers of the world to give homage to the unholy trinity rather than the true trinity. The three frogs unify the kings so that their power can be placed in the service of end-time Babylon. Revelation 13 depicts the gathering of the unholy trinity (worldwide, end-time religious alliance) for the end-time battle. Revelation 16 depicts the gathering of the world’s governments into a worldwide, end-time political alliance. This gathering is not physical or literal. The kings are not being gathered to a literal battle in a specific geographical location. This gathering is the creation of worldwide alliances which will support the aims and goals of Satan in the final crisis. The result of this gathering is two great end-time evil alliances: 1) religious Babylon and 2) the secular-political unity of the nations. Revelation 16:14 is a critical piece of the final gathering of forces against God at the End.

. . . **the kings of the whole inhabited world.** . . . The phrase “kings of the whole inhabited world” is parallel in meaning to the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12; 17:1, 15). Since the drying up of the Euphrates is after these frogs gather the kings in support of the unholy trinity (which is Babylon—Rev 16:19), this gathering of the kings precedes the end-time union of Babylon and the kings (religion and government-- Rev 17:1-3) and the drying up of the Euphrates (16:12), which leads to the destruction of end-time Babylon by the secular/political powers of the world (Rev 17:15-16). So this verse sets the stage for Revelation 17, where Babylon (worldwide religious authority) rides the beast (secular/political authority). The demonic trinity sends three demonic angels to persuade the civil, secular, and political powers of the world to serve them rather than the true God. The method of persuasion is deceptive miracles.

. . . **the battle of the great day of God Almighty.** The Greek word translated “battle” (*polemon*—from which we get the English word “polemic”) is standard military language that is used for spiritual purposes in the New Testament. Ephesians 6:10-17 is the “armor of God” passage in which multiple pieces of Roman armor are used by Paul as analogies for spiritual warfare against Satan’s temptations. But the most powerful of such texts is 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, ESV: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” Warfare in the New Testament sense does not make use

of fleshly weapons, which tear human beings to pieces. Instead, it is a battle for the mind. It is tearing down the arguments of Satan so that every thought can be directed toward the obedience of Christ. So while the language of Armageddon is military language, it is describing a battle for the minds of this world, a battle to win the allegiance of the world's people to one or the other of two competing visions of God in the final crisis.

Looking back on Revelation 13-14, there are two sets of angelic messengers being presented to the world. The three angels of Revelation 14 present the everlasting gospel to the world (Rev 14:6-7). The three demonic frogs (evil angels) present their counterfeit of the gospel to the world (Rev 16:14). The three angels represent the true trinity of Revelation (Rev 1:4-6), the three frogs represent the demonic counterpart of the godhead. Two great God-like entities send their messengers to the world, so the stakes are very high. The success of the demonic persuasion here would be measured by the degree to which the kings actually gather for the great final battle. If the demonic trinity succeeds in uniting all the nations of the earth under their leadership, it would enhance their prospects in the "battle of the great day of God Almighty." When the civil and secular powers of the world lend their powers to the worldwide alliance of religious institutions, the stage is set for the final battle.

The sixth trumpet is parallel to the sixth bowl-plague. The sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl both combine military and demonic language with a reference to the Euphrates River. So the sixth trumpet also depicts the gathering of satanic forces for the end-time battle of Armageddon. The sixth trumpet speaks of an army of 200 million in contrast with the 144,000 who have been sealed for God (Rev 9:16, cf. 7:4). The sixth bowl describes the same gathering as the kings of the whole inhabited world. If, as I have concluded, the "hour, day, month and year" represents a point in time, that point in time is possibly also the moment when the gathering of the kings of the whole inhabited world occurs.

Although the Scripture Index in *The Great Controversy* doesn't mention it, there is another Ellen White statement that seems clearly to refer to Revelation 16:14 and adds quite a bit of color to what this verse may be predicting:

"Fearful sights of a supernatural character will soon be revealed in the heavens, in token of the power of miracle-working demons. The spirits of devils will go forth to the kings of the earth and to the whole world, to fasten them in deception, and urge them on to unite with Satan in his last struggle against the government of heaven. By these agencies, rulers and subjects will be alike deceived. Persons will arise pretending to be Christ Himself, and claiming the title and worship which belong to the world's Redeemer. They will perform wonderful miracles of healing and will profess to have revelations from heaven contradicting the testimony of the Scriptures."

The mention of miracle-working demons going forth to the kings of the world seems a clear verbal parallel to Revelation 16:14. The concept of Satan's last struggle against the government of heaven and the deception of rulers are thematic parallels to this verse. It seems to me that GC 624 contains a clear allusion to Revelation 16:14. More detail is given in the paragraph that follows.

Further detail from Ellen White on the end-time deception forecasted in this passage of Revelation: "As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate

Christ. The church has long professed to look to the Saviour's advent as the consummation of her hopes. Now the great deceiver will make it appear that Christ has come. In different parts of the earth, Satan will manifest himself among men as a majestic being of dazzling brightness, resembling the description of the Son of God given by John in the Revelation. Revelation 1:13-15. The glory that surrounds him is unsurpassed by anything that mortal eyes have yet beheld. The shout of triumph rings out upon the air: "Christ has come! Christ has come!" The people prostrate themselves in adoration before him, while he lifts up his hands and pronounces a blessing upon them, as Christ blessed His disciples when He was upon the earth. His voice is soft and subdued, yet full of melody. In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. He declares that those who persist in keeping holy the seventh day are blaspheming his name by refusing to listen to his angels sent to them with light and truth. This is the strong, almost overmastering delusion." GC 624.

Rev 16:13-14 (Conclusion)—This passage is one of four passages in the New Testament dealing with the end-time deception. The first is Matthew 24:24-27. False Christs and false prophets will arise at the End to deceive, if it were possible, even the elect. An aspect of that deception is a secret return of Christ (Matt 24:25-26). The deception can be detected by the very fact that all cannot see the secret return (Rev 1:7). It will be known to some and not known to others. The actual coming will be as visible as lightning (Matt 24:27). The second deception passage is 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12. The satanic deception will mimic the earthly ministry of Jesus, with its miracles, signs, and wonders (2 Thess 2:9; Acts 2:22). It will include a counterfeit of the Second Coming (2 Thess 2:8-9), a counterfeit of the gospel (2 Thess 2:10). The delusion is convincing to those who have rejected the gospel (2 Thess 2:10-12). The third deception passage is Rev 13:13-14. The land beast will counterfeit the work of the Holy Spirit, with a false Pentecost. This deception will lead people to demand that all worship the image of the beast or face death and the loss of all economic privileges (Rev 13:15-17). Revelation 16:13-14 clarifies that the source of the final deception is the active attempt of demonic spirits to deceive the world with the goal of uniting the world's religious and political authorities against Christ and His followers (Rev 17:14). As we will see in Revelation 17, the result of 16:13-14 on the demonic side is two worldwide alliances, one of religious institutions and one of secular/political power, that are arrayed against Christ and His called, chosen and faithful ones in the final battle.

Rev 16:15-- Behold, I come as a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and hangs on to his garments, in order that he might not walk naked and they see his shame. In this verse there is an abrupt change of pace in the midst of all the evil activity. The contrast between this verse and the one that precedes and follows is so great that many commentators have suspected that it does not belong here. But while the contrast is sharp, I would argue that this kind of abruptness is not unusual in Revelation (see Rev 12:4-7). In the midst of the activities of satanic agents and their human counterparts (Rev 16:13-14, 16) comes an appeal to faithfulness in the final crisis. John here ties together many of the New Testament messages that focus on

preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus. In the midst of preparation for the final battle, there is a glimpse of the role of the righteous in the same events.

The appeal here appears to come from Christ Himself, echoing His appeal to Laodicea in Revelation 3:18 (see below). The passage begins by recalling the words of Jesus Himself in the letter to Sardis: "If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief!" Rev 3:3, NIV. In the context of the end-time battle, we hear the common New Testament call to be ready for Jesus' return: "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." 1 Thess 5:2, ESV, cf. 2 Pet 3:10. The End will be a great surprise, coming when people least expect it (Matt 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40). The theme of all these passages is the suddenness of the End and the importance of being constantly ready for it. Those awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus need to be spiritually alert, like soldiers on guard duty. They are not to be distracted by partying, drunkenness or the worries of this life (Luke 21:34-36).

Blessed is the one who stays awake and hangs on to his garments. . . . This is the third of the seven "beatitudes" in the book of Revelation. In the Mishnah (*Middoth* 2:1) the story is told that if the captain of the temple found any member of the temple police sleeping at his post during the night, his clothes would be stripped off and burned and he would be forced to exit the temple naked. That story bears a striking resemblance to this text. In the midst of the final battle of earth's history, the readers of Revelation are admonished to hang onto their clothes, lest they be found naked and in shame. In this analogy the outer garment becomes the blanket under which one sleeps. But in sleeping one is not prepared for the garment/blanket to be snatched away.

In Matthew 24 and 25, watchfulness is a central theme (Matt 24:42, 48-50; 25:13). Jesus there uses a series of parables to define what He means by watchfulness or staying awake. In the parable of the servant (Matt 24:45-51), watchfulness means to care for the needs of others. Treating others badly (Matt 24:49) is the opposite of watching. So watching is concerned with how those awaiting Christ's return treat one another. This theme is underlined also by the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). In the parable of the ten virgins, watching is equated with being wise in having sufficient oil for the lamps. The contrast between the wise and foolish virgins reminds the reader of the wise and foolish men who built houses on the rock and the sand respectively (Matt 7:24-27). The wise in Matthew not only hear the words of Jesus, they do them. So watching in Matthew 25 involves obedience to the words of Jesus as one waits for His return. That obedience is the sign of whole-hearted loyalty to Christ. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) watching is defined as making active use of the gifts God has given to those who await Jesus' return. The call to alertness at the End means to live a life of authentic service to others in response to the words and actions of Jesus.

. . . in order that he might not walk naked and they see his shame. . . . In ancient times one of the most effective ways to humiliate the soldiers of a defeated army was to parade the captives naked in front of a jeering crowd. Old Testament references to this practice include Isaiah 20:4, Ezekiel 16:37-39 and Nahum 3:5. In each case this represented God's judgment on Egypt, Judah, and Assyria respectively. Something similar happens in Revelation 17:16.

There is a powerful allusion here to the letter to the church of Laodicea (Rev 3:17-18). There are four major words that are found together in the Bible only in this verse and the

Laodicean message. These are the words for garments (3:18—*himatia*, 16:15—*ta himatia*), seeing (Rev 3:18-- *blepês*, Rev 16:15—*idou*), nakedness (3:18—*gumnotêtos*, 16:15-- *gumnos*) and shame (3:18—*aischunê*, 16:15-- *aschêmosunên*). Nakedness represents the fate of Babylon after her defeat (Rev 17:16). White garments, on the other hand, are the remedy for Laodicea's nakedness and shame, which is another way of describing spiritual lukewarmness (Rev 3:15-17). These garments stand for the righteous actions of the saints (Rev 19:7-9, cf. Matt 22:11-14) and represent the loyal trust in Christ that end-time believers need to have in order to survive the challenges of the end-time (Rev 3:4-5; 6:9-11; 7:9, 13-14).

So as the End with all its troubles and deceptions approaches in the book of Revelation, Jesus appeals to His followers to remain loyal to Him, utilizing echoes of the New Testament admonitions to readiness for His return. These admonitions can be found in all three Synoptic Gospels; Matthew, Mark, and Luke; in Paul's letters; and in Revelation's letters to the seven churches, particularly Sardis and Laodicea (see references above). In terms of its background and context, it is the last call of God to gather His end-time confederacy of saints (more on this in comments on Revelation 17).

Reading these words with the seven churches in mind, the original readers of Revelation would have recognized the call to keep watch over their attitudes, thoughts, and behavior, and to remain faithful no matter the deceptions or coercion that the forces on Satan's side can muster. They are to exercise watchfulness and discernment, fortified with the words of Jesus and the New Testament admonitions to be ready for the Second Coming.

Rev 16:16-- And he gathered them to the place that in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon. This verse continues the action of verse 14. There the three demonic frogs (counterfeit of the three angels of Rev 14) gather (Greek: *sunagagein*) the kings of the whole inhabited world for the battle of the great day of God Almighty. The use of the infinitive for "gather" indicates the purpose of the frogs in going out to the world. So in verse 16 one would expect a third person plural sentence—"they gathered"—but instead the verse begins with "he gathered" (Greek: *sunêgagen*). This switch is apparently intentional as there is no manuscript problem here.

The word "he" is actually not there in the Greek, it is implied in the third person singular form of the verb (*sunêgagen*). So it could be masculine, feminine or neuter. Early interpreters of Revelation (like Stuart and DeWette) noted that the word "spirits" (Greek: *pneumata*) as in "spirits of demons" (Rev 16:14) is a neuter plural. And neuter plural subjects in Greek can take a singular verb (at least one Syriac translations reads the text this way). In that case verse 16 would simply be a natural extension of the gathering in verse 14. But most commentators have not followed Stuart in this because if that had been John's intention, it would have resolved the uncertainty to simply use the word "spirits" as the subject here. By leaving the subject unspoken, John seems to be pointing to a singular person also involved in the gathering of verse 14.

What, then, does the "he" refer to in verses 13-14? The frogs/spirits, as mentioned, are plural and the kings of the world are plural. So the nearest reference would be God, as in "the great day of God Almighty." But in verse 14 it is the demonic powers that are gathering. How could it be said that God and the demonic forces are working together to achieve a demonic

unity? Another option is to go back to verse 13's reference to the dragon, who is the chief enemy player in Revelation 12-13. But such an antecedent is distant enough in the text to be very unlikely. Another option is a grammatical error on John's part (not uncommon in Revelation). He means to write a third person plural, but writes the singular instead, continuing the reference to the three frogs.

Since a grammatical error here would change the meaning, something John would notice, I prefer to see the antecedent of "he gathered" as God. Behind the activity of Satan and his angels is the permissive will of God, who allows Satan to demonstrate his character to the universe through his actions in the final conflict. There is support for this idea in Revelation 17:17, where God is working behind the scenes on His opponents, using their own intentions to achieve His purposes in the end. A similar reference can be found in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, which God is portrayed as "sending" (Greek: *pempei*) the end-time deception that is carried out by the intentions of Satan (2 Thess 2:9). Verse 15, then, is not an out-of-context insertion by a rather dull editor, it shifts the focus from the actions of Satan to the purposes of God in allowing those actions. Verse 14 depicts the mustering of spiritual forces in opposition to God at the End, verse 15 implies the mustering of the spiritual forces who will accompany Christ in the final battle ("the kings of the east" — Rev 16:12; 17:14).

. . . **the place that in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon.** You will notice that I transliterate Har-Magedon rather than Armageddon. Har-Magedon begins with the Greek letter alpha, but includes a breathing mark that adds the "h" sound at the beginning of the word. According to the text, this word needs to be understood in relation to the Hebrew language, it is not simply a Greek concept. This one is a one-time occurrence in all of Greek literature. I wrote the article on "Armageddon" in the [Anchor Bible Dictionary](#), a comprehensive, six-volume work that is widely referred to by scholars. It contains an entire article for each major name or person in the Bible. See "Armageddon" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 1, 394-395 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992). See also the excurses in this commentary below. In the article I reviewed a variety of different opinions and, after much research, came to this conclusion: "Har" means "mountain" in Hebrew and "mageddon" is uncertain, but likely refers to the northern Israelite city "Megiddo" (see the Greek and Hebrew of Joshua 12:22, Judges 1:27, 2 Kings 9:27 and 2 Chronicles 35:22). As is usually the case in Revelation (Rev 1:1), the reference is likely intended to be symbolic rather than literal.

While there is no mountain in the world named Megiddo, the mountain overlooking the ancient city is named Mount Carmel. This would recall the Old Testament showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, which took place on Mount Carmel and was decided by fire from heaven (1 Kings 18). In Revelation, the Mount Carmel event is echoed by the land beast who calls fire down from heaven to persuade the people of the earth not to follow the True God (Rev 13:13-14). That the event on Mount Carmel was a spiritual battle rather than a physical one, fits well in the context of Revelation 16:15. If this identification of Har-Magedon is correct, the battle of Armageddon is a replay of the Mount Carmel showdown regarding the identity of the true God. In Revelation this showdown is between the unholy trinity (Rev 16:13-14) and the true Trinity (Rev 1:4-5). The "mountain of Megiddo" suggests an end-time replay of the Mount Carmel showdown. In the context of clashing end-time gospels (Rev 14:6-12; 16:13-

14) this mountain is a place of decision, the final opportunity for people to change their minds before the End.

It is important to note here once again that this gathering of evil forces for the end-time battle is prior to the drying up of the Euphrates in 16:12. The drying up of the Euphrates is one of the final elements in the end-time battle. It precipitates the demise of the evil gathering rather than its beginning. The gathered kings withdraw their support for Babylon and take part in its destruction (Rev 17:15-16). This is a later stage of the battle than the gathering depicted here. Revelation 16:13-16 depicts movements leading up to the battle, 16:12 depicts a decisive movement toward the end of the battle. Strictly speaking, therefore, the sixth plague is the drying up of the River Euphrates. The rest of the description describes what happens before the pouring out of the sixth bowl. Revelation 17, therefore, elaborates on the cryptic events introduced in the sixth and seventh bowl-plagues (Rev 16:12-21). The evil forces are gathered in the sixth plague (Rev 16:13-14, 16), they are destroyed in the seventh (Rev 16:17-21). In the sixth bowl plague, the spiritual nature of the battle of Armageddon becomes clear, but the battle itself is fought at the pouring out of the seventh bowl (Rev 16:17-21).

Rev 16:16 (Spiritual Lessons)-- In the book of Revelation, there is a significant difference between the situation of the original Mount Carmel showdown and Armageddon. In the original Mount Carmel showdown the falling of fire from heaven upon Elijah's altar demonstrated that Yahweh was the true God of Israel. But in the book of Revelation, the fire falls on the wrong altar. It is an act of the counterfeit trinity rather than the true trinity. At that point in time, the evidence of the five senses will point to the deception rather than the truth. Secular people depend on their five senses and judge by sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. If people trust in their senses alone they will be set up for the end-time deception. The end-time deception will demonstrate conclusively to the senses that the counterfeit trinity is the true God. So the end-time deception comes after the great end-time proclamation of the gospel (Rev 14:7).

To endure such a strong deception, believers must be grounded in the Scriptures. A counterfeit only works in relation to something genuine. The better you understand the Word of God the more prepared you are for the counterfeit. At a time when the five senses fail to confirm the message of Scripture, believers must lean on the abundant evidence that the Scriptures tell the truth about God and about the realities of the end-time. Understanding Armageddon prepares one to appreciate the end-time proclamation of the gospel and to avoid the great end-time Mount Carmel deception.

Rev 16:16 (Excursis on the Meaning of Armageddon)—Since Har-Magedon (Greek: *Harmagedôn*) is a compound word that appears only once in the Bible, our understanding of the word must begin with the evidence of this very verse. Whatever we can know about the Battle of Armageddon will be known from the context of this verse in the Book of Revelation. Fortunately, the visions of Revelation often build on the words and ideas of the Old Testament, either by alluding to it directly or echoing its language. In addition, Revelation is firmly related to the New Testament, where the gospel of Jesus Christ provides the foundation for its end-

time message. So the meaning of “Armageddon” needs to be explored within the larger context of Scripture as a whole.

Since there is no letter “h” in the Greek language, the sound is added to the word by means of what is called a breathing mark, like an apostrophe placed on top of the letter “a”. In many ancient Greek manuscripts the breathing marks don’t appear and even when they do, it is sometimes easy to miss them. So the translators of the King James Bible just wrote out the letters and ignored the breathing mark at the beginning of the word. “*Harmagedôn*” in Greek was simply translated as “Armageddon” in English. And Armageddon has become a word we all recognize. The two “ds” in Armageddon are harder to explain, since there is only one “d” in the Greek of Revelation 16:16. But modern translators seem to have kept the 2 “ds” because people are familiar with the spelling.

In Revelation 16:12-16, the name *Harmagedôn* is the location of the final battle of earth’s history (16:16), three demonic frogs gather the kings of the whole earth to the great end-time battle of God Almighty (16:13-14). The text of Revelation 16:16 is perfectly clear on one thing. The word *Harmagedôn* is in some way Hebrew in origin. In Hebrew, the word “har” means “mountain.” *Harmagedôn* makes some sort of reference to a mountain. But “*agedôn*” is not a word you can find in a Hebrew dictionary. However, the word can be found in many Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament, the best known of which is the Septuagint (LXX), a translation reportedly produced by seventy Greek and Hebrew scholars in Alexandria around two hundred years before the time of Jesus. The LXX ended up being the main Bible of the early Christian church.

If you look up “*agedôn*” in a concordance to the LXX (Septuagint), you will find three references, Joshua 12:21; Judges 1:27; and Second Chronicles 35:22. Joshua 12:21 is part of a list of all the kings of city-states that Joshua killed in the conquest of Canaan: “The king of Taanach, one; the king of *Megiddo*, one.” Josh 12:21 (ESV). In the Greek of the LXX, *agedôn* is the word that was chosen to translate Megiddo (Hebrew: *Megiddô*)! Megiddo was an ancient Canaanite city at the edge of the Valley of Jezreel, it was part of the inheritance given to the tribe of Manasseh after the conquest. The Valley of Jezreel lay between Samaria and Galilee. So it was a pretty strategic location. The reference here was to the city of Megiddo and not something else, since the list included the kings of a whole series of major cities all over Canaan: Jerusalem, Hazor, Lachish, Arad, Libnah, Hebron, Gezer and Jericho. So *agedôn* here was not a reference to a mountain or a valley, but to a city! It was not a list of the cities conquered, but a list of cities whose king was killed in battle.

The second reference to *agedon* in the LXX is Judges 1:27: “But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or *Megiddo* and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land.” Jdg 1:27 (NIV). Once again this is a list of cities, this time in the territory of Manasseh. Once again *agedon* is the Greek word used to translate Megiddo, the name of one of the cities in the list.

The third text is 2 Chronicles 35:22 (NIV): “Josiah, however, would not turn away from him, but disguised himself to engage him in battle. He would not listen to what Neco had said at God’s command but went to fight him on the plain of Megiddo.” Pharaoh Neco (Neco) II of Egypt wanted to prevent the destruction of the Assyrian Empire by Babylon, around 609 BC. So

he took his army and planned to pass through King Josiah's territory to join the remaining Assyrians at Carchemish in what is modern-day Iraq. Josiah intervened with his army and was killed near the city of Megiddo in a futile attempt to stop Necho. What is significant about this reference is that the name Megiddo could be applied to the whole valley in which the city was located.

What Joshua 12:21, Judges 1:27 and 2 Chronicles 35:22 all have in common is that the Greek *Magedon*, with one "d," consistently translated the Hebrew *Megiddô*, with two "d"s. In the Hebrew a double letter is usually signified by a little dot, but the dot is not always there in the text, the native speaker senses it based on how the particular letter is related to the other letters in the word. Perhaps the translators of the LXX worked from Hebrew texts that didn't have the dot. That might explain why translators of the English Bible translate *Harmagedon* with two "d"s: Armageddon. The original translators must have understood *Harmagedôn* to mean "Mountain of Megiddo," and Megiddo has two "d"s.

The story of the origin of the word "Armageddon" doesn't end with the three *Magedôn* texts. In 2 Kings 9:27 the LXX actually translates *Megiddô* with a double "d," as *Mageddôn*! This further confirms that the English term Armageddon seems to be based on the concept "Mountain of Megiddo": "When Ahaziah king of Judah saw what had happened, he fled up the road to Beth Haggan. Jehu chased him, shouting, "Kill him too!" They wounded him in his chariot on the way up to Gur near Ibleam, but he escaped to *Megiddo* and died there." 2 Kgs 9:27, NIV. So in three of the four cases of *magedôn/mageddôn* in the Greek Old Testament there is a clear reference to the city. In the fourth case, the name's reference is expanded to the whole plain in which the city of Megiddo was located. The region of Megiddo was often an ancient battleground. It was near Megiddo that the armies of Israel under Deborah and Barak defeated Sisera and his Canaanite army (Judg 5:19). The scene of the fatal struggle between Josiah and Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23:29-30; 2 Chr 35:22) was such a memorable event in Israel's history that the mourning for Josiah was recalled a hundred years later in Zechariah 12:11. Thus, if the author of Revelation was alluding to this ancient battleground, Megiddo's significance for ancient Israel made it an appropriate background to his description of the final battle between the forces of good and evil.

The most natural understanding of *harmagedôn* in Rev 16:16, therefore, is "Mountain of Megiddo," a compound word derived from the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word *har*, which means "mountain," and the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew for *Megiddo*. But while the Old Testament knows of a city of Megiddo (Josh 17:11; Judg 1:27; 1 Kgs 4:12; 9:15; 2 Kgs 9:27; 23:29,30), a king of Megiddo (Josh 12:21 RSV), a valley of Megiddo (2 Chr 35:22; Zech 12:11), and waters of Megiddo (Judg 5:19), it never mentions a Mountain of Megiddo. Not only is Mountain of Megiddo not found anywhere in the Old Testament, it is not found anywhere in all of the ancient world before the reference in Revelation. Not only that, the fathers of the church over the two or three centuries after Revelation was written didn't interpret it as Mountain of Megiddo either. So if John understood Armageddon as Mountain of Megiddo, he was taking it to mean something no one before or after him understood. So it is not clear what the most obvious reading of Armageddon is supposed to mean in the context of the sixth and seventh plagues of Revelation.

A further challenge to the Mountain of Megiddo interpretation is that if you go to the Old Testament passages related to the end of the world, the final battle of earth's history is never described as happening at Megiddo, the final battle is always around Jerusalem. In Zechariah 12 there is a future battle in which all the nations gather against Jerusalem, but God delivers the city by making it like an immovable rock (Zech 12:1-9). In Zechariah 14 all the nations gather against Jerusalem and conquer it, with half the people going into exile. But at that point God intervenes with a plague on Jerusalem's enemies and restores the city (Zech 14:1-15). In Joel 3:12-16 all the nations advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, just outside Jerusalem. Once again God intervenes to destroy these armies. In Daniel 11 the King of the North pitches his tents near the "glorious holy mountain," a reference to the site of the temple. Then Michael stands up to defend his people (Dan 11:40-45; 12:1). You will even find echoes of the final battle around Jerusalem in Revelation 14, just two chapters before Armageddon (Rev 14:19-20). So nowhere in the Bible is there any evidence that the end-time battle will occur in relation to Megiddo, much less to a Mountain of Megiddo.

When you look at the scholarly literature on Armageddon, there have been seven major views on the meaning of Armageddon over 1900 years of interpretation. For a more detailed description of these seven options see "What is Armageddon?" on the Armageddon web site: www.thebattleofarmageddon.com.

(1) A geographical location in Palestine, such as the Valley of Jehoshaphat or Mount Tabor.

(2) The "mountain of slaughter," based on Zech 12:11.

(3) The "mountain places" of Megiddo, including Mount Carmel.

The first three explanations of Armageddon are based on how the translators of the Septuagint understood the Hebrew Bible. The next three attempts suggest that the text we have is corrupted or changed. They show how the shift of a letter or two would change the meaning of the word.

(4) The city of Megiddo.

(5) The "fruitful mountain" or "fruitful city."

(6) The "mountain of assembly."

(7) A mythical mountain at the end of the world. This last view is not based on the grammar of Rev 16:16, but on ancient legends.

Barring the discovery of additional evidence, the word studies done on *harmagedôn* have brought us about as far as they can. All the major ideas on the subject have been around for more than fifty years. The abundance of solutions and the great creativity with which they have been developed certainly suggest that it is unwise to be dogmatic about the meaning of the word Armageddon.

What simplifies things a little for me is the realization that most scholars have basically settled on one of two interpretations. 1) Many scholars agree that "mountain of Megiddo" must be a reference to some sort of geographical location in Palestine, either literal or spiritual. Five or six of the seven options are variations on this basic idea. 2) The rest of the scholars went with some form of the "mountain of assembly" interpretation. In that view, *Harmagedôn* describes the heavenly throne room as the object of Satan's final attempt to put

himself on God's throne (Isa 14:12-15; 2 Thess 2:4). The bottom line is to figure out which of the two basic options is more likely.

The strongest argument against the "mountain of Megiddo" reading of Armageddon is that there is no such thing as a mountain of Megiddo in the Old Testament or anywhere in the ancient world. But that is an argument from silence. Just because the scattered literature we have from the ancient world doesn't mention an idea, doesn't mean the ancients didn't know about it. And even if they didn't make that connection, it doesn't mean John could not have made the connection on the basis of his vision and his previous study of the Old Testament, especially in the Greek.

A second argument against the "mountain of Megiddo" reading is that none of the early fathers of the Christian church interpreted Armageddon as Mountain of Megiddo either. This is true throughout the second, third and fourth century after New Testament times. One might think that if the meaning of Armageddon was that obvious, those closest to the time of John would have known about it. But none of them did. But that argument has its limits as well. Those same early church fathers were so puzzled by Paul that his theology went completely unnoticed for the same 200-300 years. We know that Paul's writings existed during those centuries, yet his theology made essentially no impact on the church during those times. It was not until Augustine, around the year 400, that Paul's theology began to have an impact. So if the early fathers of the church could completely ignore the theology of Paul, which covered half the books of the New Testament, why should we be surprised if they did not have a clue about Armageddon either?

In the Old Testament the final battle is normally located around Jerusalem. But it wouldn't be impossible for a New Testament writer to use Josiah's battle against Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29-30; 2 Chronicles 35:20-24) or Deborah and Barak's battle against the Canaanites (Judges 4:6-16) as an example of the battle at the end of the world (the defeat of Saul by the Philistines also occurred on the same general ground). But there is an even better alternative than these.

The ancients sometimes spoke about the Valley of Megiddo or the waters of Megiddo, but Megiddo was actually an ancient city, guarding the pass that led across Mount Carmel. That's why a lot of battles were fought there. Mount Carmel is a ridge along the southern edge of the Valley of Jezreel. It starts at the coast in modern-day Haifa and runs southeast for a dozen miles toward the Jordan Valley. The best way to cross it is a pass that feeds right into the city of Megiddo at the base of the mountain. The traditional site where Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal is the highest point on the ridge, just overlooking Megiddo. As with the book of Revelation, Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal was settled by calling down fire from heaven (Rev 13:13-14). The fire demonstrated that the God of Israel was the true God. The fact that the prophets of Baal could not bring fire down from heaven proved that they were not worshiping the true God.

Word studies related to *Har-magedôn* indicate that only the Mountain of Megiddo interpretation is based on a straightforward reading of the Greek text of both Revelation and the Old Testament. Emendations that suggest "city of Megiddo" or "mount of assembly" could possibly be correct, but they are not based on direct evidence in the biblical text. So I believe

“Mountain of Megiddo” was a cryptic way of recalling the Old Testament story of Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal. On Mount Carmel there was an encounter between Yahweh and Baal, between Elijah and Baal’s prophets (1 Kgs 18:19-20, see also 2 Kgs 2:25; 4:25). There were competing claims as to who was the true God, and the showdown on the mountain settled the issue by fire.

It seems to me that the Mount Carmel interpretation best explains the final battle in Revelation. The story of Elijah on Mount Carmel is like a background story to the whole account from Revelation 13 to Revelation 19. It functions a lot like the Fall of Babylon story functions in the same texts. To fully understand Revelation you need to be familiar with the story of Babylon’s fall as told in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel.” Similarly, one has to consider the Mount Carmel story to fully understand what John is trying to say as he writes out his vision.

The first clear reference to the Carmel episode in Revelation 13-19 is the one that first triggered my imagination, Rev 13:13-14. There the land beast calls fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of men. This comment was part of a series of allusions to Old Testament events such as the deceptive magicians of Pharaoh (13:13-14), the creation of Adam (13:15), and the death decree of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3 (13:15). All four incidents were challenges to the identity of the true God in the Old Testament. Satan challenged the words of God in Genesis 3. Pharaoh’s magicians challenged the words Moses and Aaron spoke for God just before the Exodus. Nebuchadnezzar challenged the vision he had received from God in Daniel 2 by setting up the image of Daniel 3. And, of course, Elijah faced the challenge of Baal on Mount Carmel.

It was on Mount Carmel that fire was called down from heaven to prove that Yahweh was the true God. But in the case of Revelation 13, it is the land beast who calls fire down from heaven. Like the magicians of Pharaoh, the land beast seeks to prove that the counterfeit god is really the true one. And in the end-time showdown, the outcome of Mount Carmel is reversed. In Revelation the fire falls on the wrong altar. Thus the Battle of Armageddon will include a major deceptive action on the part of Satan and his earthly supporters. It will provide seemingly irrefutable evidence to human eyes and ears that the counterfeit trinity is the true God. Only those aware of this prophecy would be inclined to reject it.

The next reference to Mount Carmel comes in the context of the word Armageddon itself (Rev 16:12-16). As part of the sixth bowl plague in Rev 16:12-16, the mention of *harmagedôn* comes at a pivotal point in the book of Revelation. The drying up of the Euphrates River in verse 12 is a central issue in Revelation 17. Rev 16:13 contains a reference to a deceptive trinity called the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The beast here is a reference to the sea beast of Revelation 13, so the false prophet must be a reference to the land beast. On the original Mount Carmel it was the priests of Baal who played the role of false prophets. That role in the Battle of Armageddon is played by the land beast of chapter 13.

The reference to the demonic trinity in verse 16:13 connects this passage with chapters 13 and 19, where the same characters are at work. It was on Mount Carmel that there were many false prophets who tried to bring fire down from heaven. It is near the end-time Mount Carmel that the beast and false prophet of Rev 16:13 meet their fate, as outlined in Revelation 19. As in the original Mount Carmel event, the issue is settled in Revelation 19:20-21 by fire

and by sword. The outcome is the same in both cases.

This series of allusions to the Mount Carmel story provide the assurance that the most obvious reading of *har-magedôn* is also the one that best fits the overall story of the Battle of Armageddon. The larger context of Revelation is the place where the Mount Carmel interpretation of Armageddon finds its clearest support.

Having said this, however, it must be pointed out that the sixth bowl plague itself is not the Battle of Armageddon, it is the gathering of forces for that battle. The battle itself is outlined in the seventh bowl plague, which is described in Rev 16:17-21 and elaborated in Rev 17:12-17 and chapter 18 as a whole. The outcome of the battle is the fall of Babylon. So Revelation mingles two very important stories of the Old Testament, the Fall of Babylon and the Fall of the prophets of Baal. Images of both events lie behind the story of Revelation.

The gathering of forces to the place called *Har-magedôn* (Rev 16:13-16) precedes the seven bowl plagues of which Revelation 16:12 is a part. It parallels the scene of Revelation 7:1-3, the time when the four angels hold back the winds so that the faithful can be sealed. As the faithful are being sealed for God, the unrighteous are being marked as loyal to the unholy trinity (Rev 13:17-17). When everyone on earth has made a decision regarding the two gospels offered to them (by the three angels of Rev 14:6-12 and the three frogs of 16:13-14), probation closes, the winds are let loose and the plagues begin to happen.

The gathering of the kings of the world by the three unclean spirits (Rev 16:13-14) is the demonic counterpart to the gathering call of the three angels of Rev 14:6-11, who represent the followers of the Lamb. Therefore, the battle of Armageddon serves as the climax of the spiritual battle over worship outlined in chapters 13 and 14 (Rev 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:7, 9, 11), a battle in which the whole world would be brought to a fateful decision with permanent results. As in the original instance, the issue is settled in Revelation 19:20-21 by fire and by sword. A closer look at chapters 13-17 of Revelation will unpack the details of the Battle of Armageddon. Get your Bibles ready for an adventure!

Rev 16:17-- And the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air, and a loud voice came out from the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" According to Revelation 16:1, the seven bowl-plagues fall upon the earth. The second plague falls on the sea (Rev 16:3). The third plague falls on the rivers and springs (Rev 16:4). The sun has turned hostile to life on this earth (Rev 16:8-9). The one thing untainted by the earlier plagues is the air, which is smitten in this text (Rev 16:17). So the cycle of earthly destruction is now complete.

But there is likely a deeper meaning to the mention of air here. Ephesians 2:2 describes Satan as the "prince of the power of the air." The air is described as Satan's residence or headquarters. The fifth plague plunged the throne of the beast into darkness (Rev 16:10). But the seventh plague is a direct assault on the residence of Satan himself, it is the final blow to Satan's schemes. Just as the air is found all over the earth, so the seventh plagues sums up all the others and bring the series to an end.

The announcement of the seventh bowl-plague comes out of the temple, echoing Revelation 16:1 and referring back to the introductory vision where there is great glory in the temple and no one can enter the temple until the plagues are finished (Revelation 15:5-8). In

Revelation 16:1 a loud voice from the temple commissions the seven angels to pour out the bowls. It is the voice of God Himself. In Isaiah 66:6, the voice from the temple is that of Yahweh, announcing “recompense” (Hebrew: *meshalêm gemul*; LXX: *antapodidontos antapodosin*) upon those who oppose Him. God has borne patiently with the rebellion until now, but it is time for things to come to an end.

In the book of Revelation, there is no distinction between God's throne room and the temple. Where one is mentioned, the other seems to be in the mind of the author. Here the unity of the two is made explicit. The voice comes from the throne, which is in the temple. The throne within the temple is the governing center of the universe. It stands in opposition to the throne of Satan (Rev 2:13; 13:2) and the throne of the beast (Re 13:2; 16:10). So this command indicates that the final events of earth's history will here reach their climax.

God's very final actions to undo the work of the demonic trinity are summed up in one Greek word that translates into three English words: "It is done!" Greek: *gegonen*. Luke 14:22 uses *gegonen* to describe the completion of preparations for the eschatological banquet. Within Revelation, this phrase anticipates the same words at the end of the millennium (Rev 21:6) and may also recall Jesus' concluding words from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30—Greek: *tetelestai*). In both contexts, a single Greek word in the perfect tense. At the cross this word announced victory over Satan and the beginning of the last days (Heb 1:2).

In the end-time Mount Carmel experience, the evil trinity will seem to have won but it will be a very short-lived victory. In the seventh plague, God quickly acts to destroy any advantage gained by Satan. So in this context, “It is done!” announces the final victory over Satan and the conclusion of history. The outcome of the battle of Armageddon is announced. It results in the total defeat of Satan. So in verse 17 the seventh plague is announced. In verses 18-21 the plague is carried out. The sixth and seventh plagues of Revelation are elaborated in chapters 17-19, as we will see.

Rev 16:18-- And there were lightnings and noises and thunders and a great earthquake. It was such a terrible and massive earthquake that none like it has ever happened since humanity has been on the earth. In the book of Revelation, the flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and earthquake are phenomena that are consistently associated with the throne of God (4:5; 8:5; and 11:19, cf. Exod 19:16). So at first glance it is a bit surprising to see them in the context of these plagues. Earthquakes in the Old Testament are often associated with the Day of the Lord, God's final judgment. But this is earth's final earthquake, an earthquake that will be like no other in its severity. In Hebrews 12:26-29, earthquake is a metaphor for removing things that can be shaken so that the things that cannot be shaken will remain. The three demonic spirits sought to unite all powers on earth in one final assault (Rev 16:13-14), but there is no natural bond between those united by hatred of what is good. Once again rebellion demonstrates its lack of ability to unify the world and the universe (cf. Rev 17:16). God has borne patiently with the rebellion until this point, but the conflict is unsustainable. At this point God determines that it is time for the rebellion to come to an end so that peace and harmony in the universe can be restored. The details of this conclusion are described more fully in chapters 17 and on.

Rev 16:19— And the Great City was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the Great was remembered before God to give her the cup of the wine of the fury of His wrath. The earthquake of Revelation 16:18 has its most direct effect on the “great city”, which is also identified as Babylon (cf. Rev 17:18 and 18:10). As we will see, Babylon is an end-time religious confederacy that is here defined as having three parts. The trumpets, falling on thirds of the earth, are likely falling on various parts of Satan’s earthly domain. Pursuing the narrative of Revelation 16:12-21, the three parts of Babylon would be the dragon, beast and false prophet of 16:13. Babylon is the world-wide end-time union of religious authority, which sends out to the world the counterfeit gospel of the three frogs (Rev 16:13-14), uniting the secular powers of the world with itself. That unity will be short-lived. In this verse Babylon is shattered and returned to the divided entities with which it began. The cities of the nations represent the collapse of a separate world-wide unity, that of the civil and secular powers of the world. They gained strength from their short-term union with Babylon. But after Babylon’s fall (Rev 17:16), they too will fall (Rev 17:17).

Babylon the Great was remembered before God to give her the cup of the wine of the fury of His wrath. This verse also asserts that at this time Babylon “was remembered” (Greek: *emnêsthê*) before God. This reference to Babylon looks back to chapter 14, but it much more looks forward. Babylon is at the heart of everything that happens in chapters 17 and 18. Revelation 17 particularly concerns the things that lead up to Babylon’s fall (Rev 17:1-5). Revelation 18 elaborates on the fall itself. In Revelation 18:5, God “has remembered” (Greek: *emnêmonousen*) Babylon “. . . for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.” The result of that remembrance is the giving of Babylon the cup of God’s wrath. See comments on Rev 14:10 and Rev 15—The Wrath of God. In Psalm 75:7-8 the cup represents God’s judgments in the midst of human affairs. But note that in Revelation 18:6, the cup of God’s wrath is actually Babylon’s own cup, with which she oppressed others. It is not some arbitrary imposition of punishment on God’s part, the wrath of God is allowing to Babylon all the natural consequences of her own actions. The “double portion” indicates that the consequences of sin will be even worse for the perpetrator than they were for the victims. It is in the time preceding Babylon’s fall that the call goes out for God’s people to leave the institutions that are part of Babylon (Rev 18:4).

Babylon the Great was remembered before God. God’s remembrance is not always negative. In Acts 10:31, an angel assures Cornelius that his prayers and kindness toward the poor “were remembered” (Greek: *emnêsthêsan*) before God and that is why God arranged for Peter to visit him and share the gospel. This recalls Old Testament passages like Numbers 10:8-10, where the blowing of trumpets in battle would “remind” God to deliver Israel, and the blowing of trumpets at the appointed festivals would “remind” God of His covenant relationship to them. When Israel remembered God’s mighty acts for them in the past, He repeated those mighty acts in the present (Psa 66:3-6; 2 Chr 20:5-24). God’s remembering is in proportion to the response or lack of it on the part of the human race.

Rev 16:20-21-- Every island fled away and mountains were not found. Great hail weighing as

much as a talent (around 100 pounds) fell from heaven upon men, and men blasphemed God because of the plague of hail, since the plague of hail was so severe. In the sixth seal, the islands and mountains were also removed from their place (Rev 6:14), indicating the world-wide severity of this earthquake. Both texts are in the context of the final events before the Second Coming of Jesus. The earthquake is so severe that the islands sink into the sea and the mountains are leveled to the surface of the earth. The great earthquake is one of the indicators that human history on this earth is about to come to an end.

The term “talent” (Greek: *talantaios*; Latin: *talentum*; Hebrew: *kikkar*), as a unit of weight, originated in Mesopotamia. It represented weights around the Greco-Roman world from 50 to 130 pounds in British/American measurements today (25 to 60 kilograms). Translations generally play it safe by saying “around 100 pounds.” These hailstones are the size of the giant slingstones used as artillery in ancient catapults. Hailstones a fraction of that size would be extremely newsworthy. John reaches far beyond the ordinary in describing what is happening here. If the hailstones described here are literal and worldwide, the destructive consequences would be unimaginable.

In the Old Testament hailstones were one of the plagues during the Exodus (Exod 9:24-25). Hailstones were also used as weapons of God against the Canaanites who threatened His people (Joshua 10:11) and in the victory over Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:22, cf. Job 38:22-23; Isa 28:2; 30:30; Ezek 13:10-14). Whether the hailstones are a direct action of God or a general consequence of sin, they are considered judgments from God.

If the hailstones in this passage are symbolic, they imply that the seventh plague is the full and final judgment of God on human history. As mentioned in the comments on verse 18, earthquake is a metaphor for removing things that can be shaken so that the things that cannot be shaken will remain (cf. Heb 12:26-29). There are many “kingdoms” in this world, the only kingdom that cannot be shaken is the kingdom of God (Dan 2:44; 6:26; 7:14, 18). John adds to the finality of this hailstorm by using the word translated “so severe” (Greek: *sphodra*) at the end of this passage. It is an adverb meaning “extremely” or “greatly” and occurs nowhere else in Revelation.

As great as the earthquake and hailstorm is, there are apparently survivors among the unrighteous. These busy themselves blaspheming God. The unrepentant state of the wicked here is in contrast with the survivors of the earthquake in Revelation 11:13. They gave glory to the God of heaven. But throughout the bowl plagues, there is no such positive response. The unrighteous blame God for their suffering and only curse Him more and more (Rev 16:9, 11, 21), indicating that they have gone beyond the point of being able to return to God. Probation is truly closed and the plagues have sorted the saints out from among the unrighteous who persist in cursing God. In spite of the extremely great earthquake and the “so severe” hailstones, no change is effected in the unrighteous. From a wider biblical perspective, these plagues must be interpreted in the context of a God who loves the human race so much that He was willing to die for it (Rev 5:5-12). Probation has closed, not as a result of some arbitrary or angry decree of God, but on account of persistent and increasing human rebellion that would destroy everything God has created were He not to intervene. God is not to blame for suffering and evil, yet human beings continually blame Him for it anyway.

Rev 16:12-21 (Summary)—There are two sets of forces arrayed against the end-time confederacy of the saints (represented by the kings of the east in verse 12). 1) The united civil-secular-political powers of the world (symbolized by the Euphrates River [16:12], the kings of the whole world [16:14] and the cities of the nations [16:19]). And 2), a world-wide confederacy of religion (end-time Babylon--the union of the ungodly trinity, made up of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet). Both sets of evil forces meet their end at the conclusion of the battle of Armageddon in the seventh bowl. We will learn more about their destruction and the order in which their actions take place in the comments on Revelation 17.

We have earlier seen that the war in heaven was described in military language, but is actually a war of words over the character and government of God. Similarly, the battle of Armageddon is described in military language, but is also a battle over the rulership of the universe in general and the earth in particular. Seeing Armageddon as a spiritual battle is consistent with both the evidence of this passage (Rev 16:15) and the wider perspective of the New Testament. The clearest description of spiritual warfare in the New Testament is found in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, NIV (cf. also Eph 6:10-17): "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

The weapons followers of Jesus fight with are not "fleshly" (Greek: *sarkika*) weapons. Fleshly weapons are those that tear you to pieces: Bradley tanks, AK-47 rifles and F-35 fighter planes. But Christian warfare is of a different nature. Christian weapons are not the kind that tear you to pieces. They work according to spiritual principles and have divine power to demolish strongholds, which Paul defines as arguments and pretensions that are in opposition to the knowledge of God. Christian warfare is taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. The battle of Armageddon is ultimately a battle for the mind--to harness the thoughts on the real priorities of life. The battle of Armageddon is about the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual allegiance of everyone on earth. Preparation for the return of Christ (Rev 16:15) is about disciplining the mind and the thoughts to where allegiance to Christ is the natural tendency of the life.

Rev 16:12-21 (Spiritual Lessons)— Spiritual discernment and clarity of mind are among the chief qualities of God's end-time people. They are result of good physical and mental health applied to a lifetime of careful scripture study and prayer. If the only way to defeat the deceptions of the end-time is by clear knowledge of God's Word, we will want to be as sharp and clear as possible when we study it. That often means studying in groups whenever possible, since groups are more intelligent than any individual person can be. The study of the scriptures themselves is an excellent way to stretch the mind. As with the muscles of the body, the mind are the spiritual life are strengthened by "exercise." When it comes to these matters, it is wise not to trust one's own senses or opinions. It is possible to put Bible texts together in

such a way as to deceive. What any commentary on the Bible says is of value only to the extent that it reflects accurately what is in the scriptures.

In his own spiritual reflection on Armageddon, Tonstad highlights once again the clash between two ways of exerting authority in the world, the way of deception and force, on the one hand, and the way of truth and non-violence, on the other. Followers of Jesus must not allow themselves to be seduced by the idea that God wins the war on the basis of superior power and force. Armageddon theologies that see the battle as a literal one in the Middle East are all too prone to approve force used against perceived enemies like Communism and Islamism. Whenever godly people condone or apply force to gain the upper hand in this world, Satan wins even if it is his forces that seem defeated. On the surface, God wins the victory, in reality His character is once more dragged through the mud. As a spiritual battle, Armageddon is the final demonstration of Satan's true character for the whole universe to see. To be on God's side at the End is to choose the path that appears weakest to the human eye.