

***Armageddon at the Door***  
**By Jon Paulien**

**Chapter Two**  
**Discovering “Armageddon”**

I was new to the Seminary when I first got seriously interested in the Battle of Armageddon. I was living in an old dormitory at Andrews University (Old Burman Hall) that my father had also lived in at one time. All the seminarians were placed on the top floor, where things would occasionally get out of control. I remember one night when a couple of budding preachers got into an argument and ended up spraying each other with fire extinguishers in the hallway. So much for maturity arriving automatically at the age of 21!

Anyway, in that dorm situation I had the opportunity to rekindle an old friendship with a young man named Don. Don had been blind from birth, which led to many interesting situations back in college (Atlantic Union College), where he had lived across the bath from my roommate and I. Knowing that Don needed transportation from time to time, I decided to include him in whatever Sabbath activities I was involved in. One Sabbath he asked if we could attend worship services at a small African-American church about fifteen miles away. He had been asked to teach the lesson. I didn't have anything else I had to do, so I agreed to drive him over. The highlight of the drive to church was a small hump in an otherwise flat road. Since Don

couldn't see, I sped up approaching the hump and gave him a roller coaster type surprise. It was the kind of thing that I often did just to let him know he was a regular guy and wasn't going to be coddled because of what others might perceive as a handicap.

Don had barely gotten around to forgiving me when we arrived at the little church. After he led out in the Sabbath School lesson, we sat with the congregation of about 25, waiting for a guest speaker to arrive, hoping one of us wouldn't get drafted at the last minute. Just in time he walked in, a large African-American pastor who quickly let us know that, in spite of the small crowd, he had come to "preach!" And preach he did!

The sermon was on the Battle of Armageddon. He moved from text to text with confidence. The story he told about the end-time battle was fascinating, I had never heard anything quite like it before. Working particularly from some Hebrew words in Ezekiel, he painted a scenario in which the people of God would gather in the Middle East at the end of time. They would be at peace with God and man, and all would seem to be well. But suddenly from the far north would come a massive attack. In the Hebrew of Ezekiel, he found references to Russia (Hebrew *rosh*, translated "chief prince" in Eze 38:2), Moscow (Hebrew *Meshech*) and Tobolsk (Hebrew *Tubal*), explaining that the army that would attack the Middle East was the army of the Soviet Union, joined by the Iranians and others.

The attack would focus on the land of Israel, as we know it today. The attacking army was of such large numbers they appeared like clouds covering the land. In the middle of this attack God would intervene with a large earthquake, which would so frighten the army that they would begin to fight each other. God then would cause what was left of the Soviet army to

be devastated with nuclear missiles (see Ezek 38:22), presumably with the assistance of the United States. The missiles would destroy 85 per cent of the attackers. It would take seven months to bury the Soviet dead.

Needless to say, this scenario blew my young pastoral mind. I was really excited to get into the text for myself and see if these things were so. In the car on the way home I shared my excitement with Don. Don was a year ahead of me at the Seminary, and he immediately scoffed that the sermon was, “A bunch of baloney.” He accused the preacher of being completely oblivious to sound principles of interpretation. Somewhat deflated, I nevertheless determined to study for myself and think for myself. When one preacher says the opposite of another, the only sensible response is to go back to the Word of God for yourself. But there was a plus side to that Sabbath morning experience. That sermon launched me into a lifelong study of the battle of Armageddon. If it were not for that sermon, the book you hold in your hand might never have been written. So God can use any circumstance He wishes to bring us to the place where He wants us to be.

Getting back to my dorm room that afternoon I grabbed the fourth volume of my SDA Bible Commentary and looked up Ezekiel 38. Sure enough, the scenario outlined in the sermon could be found there, although it was listed as one of several options, and a fairly unlikely option at that. I pulled out the text of Ezekiel 38, looking for references to the Battle of Armageddon. To my great surprise, the word Armageddon was not found anywhere in Ezekiel 38, in fact I could not find it anywhere in the Book of Ezekiel at all. I was shocked! A sermon on the battle of Armageddon was largely based on Ezekiel 38, yet Ezekiel 38 had nothing to say

about the battle of Armageddon! How did the preacher know that Ezekiel 38 had anything to do with Armageddon?

I decided it was time to get serious about this research. I pulled out a complete concordance, determined to find every reference to Armageddon no matter where it might be located in the Bible. If I couldn't trust a preacher's word, I wanted to be sure I didn't leave out any text that might be helpful in understanding the end-time battle.

I couldn't believe my eyes. No matter what concordance I used the word "Armageddon" could be found nowhere in the Bible except Revelation 16:16. Only one single reference! Here is my translation of that text: "And he gathered them together at the place which is called in the Hebrew language, Har-magedon." There is no other reference to the word Armageddon (or Har-magedon) anywhere in the Bible. Whatever we can know about the Battle of Armageddon will be known from the context of this verse in the Book of Revelation.

As you may remember, if you have read my previous book, *The Deep Things of God*, the larger context of Revelation includes the other 65 books of the Bible. 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. We will explore this larger context in the following chapters of this book, but in this chapter we want to focus on the meaning of the word "Armageddon" itself.

*Where did the "H" in Har-magedon come from?* I wondered. I soon learned in Greek class (I was taking Intermediate Greek that quarter) that the answer was in a small mark on top

of the “a” in Armageddon. That mark is called a “breathing mark.” The breathing mark I found at the beginning of “Armageddon” is the kind of breath you take when you pronounce the letter “h.” In many ancient 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. So “Har-mageddon” in Greek was 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. But modern translators seem to have kept the 2 “ds” because people are familiar with the spelling.

After discovering that Rev 16:16 is the only place in the Bible where the word Har-magedon appears, I studied the immediate context in Rev 16:12-16. The name Har-magedon is the location of the final battle of earth’s history (v. 16). In that battle three demonic frogs gather the kings of the whole earth to the great battle of God Almighty (v. 13-14). There is no question that this is the closing battle of this earth’s history. According to the text, there are several other players in that battle: the great River Euphrates and the Kings from the Rising of the Sun are mentioned in verse 12, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet are mentioned in verse 13. And verse 15 makes it clear that the people of God are somehow involved as well. Only one thing was clear at this point. The Battle of Armageddon was truly the final battle of earth’s history. The meaning of the word was still a mystery.

The text of Rev 16:16 is perfectly clear on one thing. The word Har-magedon is in some

way Hebrew in origin. So I decided to search and see if the word “Har-magedon” or something like it could be found in the Hebrew Old Testament, but it wasn’t there. No wonder students of the Bible have been frustrated over this text for centuries! The word translated “Armageddon” occurs only one time, in Rev 16:16.

At this point I remembered that many words in Greek and Hebrew are compounds, in other words, they are combinations of two or more smaller words. For example, the English word “understand” is made up of two smaller words, the word “under” and the word “stand.” When you “stand under” someone else you can more clearly perceive the world from their perspective. So the meaning of a compound word is often clarified by breaking it up into its component parts.

After examining the various possibilities, I made my first breakthrough. In the Hebrew, the word “har” means “mountain.” Har-magedon makes some sort of reference to a mountain. In fact, one could translate the word “Mountain of Magedon.” Finally, I was getting somewhere! If I could only find a mountain named Magedon, I might be able to pinpoint the location of the final battle of earth’s history! So I began looking through atlases of the ancient world for a mountain named Magedon, but I didn’t find one. A quick look at a Hebrew concordance also indicated that “magedon” was not a word in the Hebrew vocabulary. So I was stumped once more. All I knew is that “Har-mageddon” represents some sort of mountain.

One day in class a New Testament teacher was discussing the ancient world into which Jesus was born and in which the early church grew and developed. As he was discussing various developments in the time of Jesus he repeatedly talked about “the Septuagint.” I had never

heard this word before, so after several repetitions I raised my hand and asked, “What is the Septuagint?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the teacher said, “I thought everyone was familiar with that.”

I know he didn’t mean it that way, but the comment sure made me feel dumb.

“In the centuries before Jesus was born,” he went on, “more and more Jews began moving to other parts of the Mediterranean world. Many settled in Egypt and Asia Minor, others settled in Syria and Greece. Some even went as far as Rome and Spain. In most of these areas Greek had become a common unifying language, so the children of these Jews learned the Greek language growing up and over time they gradually lost their ability to understand Hebrew. That meant that if they were to be able to study what we call the Old Testament, they would need to have a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language.

Another student interrupted. “But what did they do for these people in the synagogue before such a translation was made?”

“They continued to recite the Hebrew Bible from the front,” the professor replied, “just as Jews still do today. But they followed the reading with a “targum” (they called it), an oral translation of the Hebrew into the local language of the people. We know that the oral Aramaic targums (translations) eventually were written down, and the oral Greek targums no doubt formed the basis of the written translation that came together over a couple hundred years in Alexandria.

“According to Jewish tradition, seventy scholars got together in Alexandria and each of them made his own independent translation of the five books of Moses from Hebrew into

Greek. When they got together and compared these seventy translations with each other, they discovered that all seventy translations were identical! According to the story, this was how the Septuagint came into being, the Greek translation of the Torah.”

“But what does the word Septuagint mean?” another student asked.

“Oh, sorry,” said the teacher. “I probably should have explained that right off. The word “Septuagint” comes from the Greek word for “seventy.” It reflects the story about the 70 translators. Obviously, scholars today don’t think it happened exactly that way, but somehow the Septuagint translation got put together in the centuries just before Jesus came to earth. What is important to Christians is that the Septuagint became the first Bible of the Christian church. It helps us understand how early Christians understood the Old Testament.”

I jumped into the discussion again. “Is that why New Testament quotations of the Old Testament often read quite differently from our own versions of the Old Testament?” I was hoping this wasn’t another dumb question.

“Right!” said the teacher. “New Testament writers often quote the Septuagint rather than translating directly from the Hebrew text. It is clear that there are significant variants between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text that has been passed down to us. Scholars have long debated whether the Septuagint or our Hebrew text is more true to the original. But the differences can be seen in the quotations of the Old within the New Testament itself.”

Wow, was that class ever an eye-opener! I went up to the teacher afterward and asked where I could find a Septuagint and whether or not there was any concordance I could use to look up words in it. He told me how to find these tools in the library. I couldn’t wait for some



free time to see if the Septuagint would be any help in my quest to understand the meaning of Har-magedon. Today you could do the following study on many computer Bible programs.

I had a free hour a couple of days later and went to the Seminary Reference Library. I pulled down a printed copy of the Septuagint and then found the concordance to the Septuagint. I found myself holding my breath as I opened the concordance looking for “har-magedon,” but I was disappointed. The word *har-magedon* wasn’t in the Septuagint either. I slumped back in my chair for a moment. *No wonder everybody but that preacher thinks this is a complicated topic*, I thought. But then I remembered that *har-magedon* was a compound word!

So I paged over to the “m” section looking for *magedon*. There were three references! Bingo! At last I was getting somewhere! The references were Joshua 12:21; Judges 1:27; and Second Chronicles 35:22. I let out a quick yelp, and then flushed with embarrassment as several sets of eyes glared at me out of the tomb-like silence of the reference room. Mouthing a quick apology, I grabbed my Bible and began looking up the three passages. I started with Josh 12:21. I found it was part of a list of all the kings of city-states that Joshua killed in the conquest of Canaan, after crossing the Jordan River:

“The king of Taanach, one; the king of *Megiddo*, one.”  
Josh 12:21 (ESV)

A quick glance at the Greek of the Septuagint showed me that *magedon* was a translation of Megiddo! 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. It was

also clear that 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 *magedon* here was not a reference to a mountain, but to a city! It was not a list of cities conquered, but a list of cities whose king was killed in battle. Not sure what to do with this information, I went on to the next text in my list:

“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. These are the cities in the territory of Manasseh which the members of the tribe did not conquer. Evidently, the kings of those cities were killed, but the cities themselves were not occupied. Once again *magedon* is the Greek word used to translate Megiddo, the name of one of the cities. So for my purposes, this text yielded the same basic information as the previous one.

The third text I looked up was 2 Chr 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.”

This text sounded real interesting, so I looked up this battle in a Bible history book. I found out that Pharaoh Necho (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 I found interesting in 2 Chr 35:22 was the phrase “plain of Megiddo.” For the writer of this verse, the name Megiddo could be applied to the whole valley as well as the city. So I learned that the name of a city could be applied to the geographical area around the city. Not knowing whether that was an important insight, I filed it away in the back of my mind.

One thing I noticed in all of these texts. The Greek *Magedon*, with one “d,” consistently translated the Hebrew Megiddo, 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 can just sense it based on how the particular letter is related to the other letters in the word. Perhaps the translators of the Septuagint worked from Hebrew texts that didn’t have the dot. That might explain why translators of the English Bible translate *Har-magedon* with two “d”s: Armageddon. The original translators must have understood *har-magedon* to mean “Mountain of Megiddo,” and Megiddo has two “d”s.

Then I discovered something even more interesting. When my eyes went back to the Septuagint concordance I noticed just above *magedon* a reference to *mageddon*. Evidently, in 2 Kings 9:27 the Septuagint translates Megiddo with a double “d,” as *mageddon*! So the English term Armageddon definitely seemed to be based on the concept “Mountain of Megiddo.” I wasn’t sure where the “n” in *mageddon* came from, but the word clearly seemed based on the Hebrew word Megiddo. The English translation goes as follows (2 Kgs 9:27 NIV):

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.

So in three of the four cases of *magedon*/*mageddon* 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. As I looked up Megiddo in a number of Bible dictionaries I found that 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 Zech 12:11. Thus, if John 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.

When I combined the conclusions of my study it seemed clear that the most natural understanding of *har-magedon* in Rev 16:16 is "mountain of Megiddo," a compound word derived from the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word har, which means "mountain," with the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew for Megiddo. But I was still troubled about one thing. While the Bible can talk about the Valley of Megiddo and the City of Megiddo, nowhere in the Bible is there any mention of a Mountain of Megiddo. And no matter which atlas you use you won't find a Mountain of Megiddo anywhere on this earth! So I seemed to have found the meaning of Armageddon and yet it didn't tell me anything important. I still had no idea what "Mountain of Megiddo" had to do with the sixth plague of Revelation 16.