

Armageddon at the Door

By Jon Paulien

Chapter Four

The Meaning of Armageddon

I decided it was time to get some expert help. I heard that one of the teachers in the Seminary had published an article on Armageddon, so I decided to visit him and find out what Mountain of Megiddo was all about. I made an appointment for the following week and was on “pins and needles” to see what I was going to learn from this interview.

“So, I hear you’re really interested in the word Armageddon!” the teacher said. “I published an article on that in a scholarly journal just a couple of years ago. So what do you think it means?”

“Well, I’m not really sure, yet,” I replied, “But I’ve been looking at parallels in the Septuagint and it looks like the word Armageddon means ‘Mountain of Megiddo.’”

“You think so?” the teacher said skeptically, “I’ve found a lot of problems with that idea.”

“Really?” I said, trying to sound respectful. “But what else could it possibly mean?”

“Well, first you have to determine whether what looks like the obvious reading is really

correct,” he replied. “If that cannot be correct, then you have to look at whatever other possibilities there may be.”

“OK, so I guess I need to know why you don’t think Mountain of Megiddo is the correct meaning of Armageddon.”

“Here’s what I’ve found,” the teacher said, pulling a copy of his article out of one of the drawers in his desk. He handed the copy over to me, with red markings on the places where the argument against Mountain of Megiddo was given. “For one thing, 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 knows of no Mountain of Megiddo.” Over the next half hour we looked at all the above texts together. He did seem to have a point. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any Mountain of Megiddo.

“But I already knew that,” I protested cautiously, having already been “burned” more than once by the stating of a hasty opinion in the matter. “Can’t John take a number of different Old Testament pieces and put them together in a new way? After all, the word Armageddon begins with “Har” which means mountain.”

“True,” said the teacher patiently. “But that is not all. 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. That seems pretty unlikely to me.”

He went on. “Many scholars in the past have explored this issue and nearly all of them disagreed with the Mountain of Megiddo interpretation. If you look at ancient writings outside the Jewish world they often speak of a mythical mountain at the end of the world. But that mythical mountain is never called Megiddo. There is, however, something even more decisive in my mind.”

“What is that?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“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 echos 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.”

Just then the bell rang out in the hall. The teacher looked at his watch and an expression

of horror came over his face. "It's already 11:30," he exclaimed, "I'm late for class! I have to go."

"I'm so sorry," I responded. "I'm sorry to take so much of your time." I hastily backed out of the teacher's office, overwhelmed with the force of his arguments against what I had found in my own Bible study.

A few days later I checked back with the teacher's secretary to see if I could make another appointment to learn what the teacher actually thought Armageddon meant.

"Oh, that won't be possible," she said in a voice that allowed for no protest.

"Why not?" I protested anyway.

"He is teaching an extension class in Africa, and he won't be back in the office for at least a month."

Well, so much for that, I thought. *I guess I'm on my own.* Where to go from here? I checked with another teacher who hadn't done a study of Armageddon, but might be able to help me with my search. He suggested I check the reference to Armageddon in a number of Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. He thought that if I looked at enough of them, I would probably have a pretty good idea of the various ideas on Armageddon that people held.

That sounded like a good idea, since the other teacher wouldn't be back for a month. I was free for the afternoon on Sunday, so I decided to spend the afternoon in Seminary Reference, looking at the dozen or so Bible dictionaries available there. I was looking forward to my wedding in a couple of months, but at the time I was single, and my wife-to-be was almost a thousand miles away, so I didn't have a lot of things going on that would distract me from my

study interests (everyone knew better than to have me responsible for any of the wedding arrangements!).

I went to the library after lunch on Sunday and gathered all the Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias I could find. There were even one or two in German, which I could work through with the help of a German-English dictionary. As I looked through these dictionaries, I found out there were seven major views on the meaning of Armageddon over 1900 years of interpretation. While my journey through these dictionaries would probably not be of interest to you, I think it would be helpful for me to list the seven major options for you here. For a more detailed description of these seven options see “What is Armageddon?” on the following 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.

One thing seemed clear from these hours of reading through Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias: Barring the discovery of additional evidence, the word studies done on *harmagedon* have brought us about as far as they can. All the major ideas on the subject have been around for more than fifty years. While many of the ideas were new to me, they were not new to the scholars who had invested their lives in the Book of Revelation. If a breakthrough was going to come in the study of Armageddon, it would have to come from some other direction than the study of the word and its component parts.

Weary from a whole raft of new-to-me ideas, I leaned back in my library chair, reached back with my hand and rubbed a sore spot on my back. *Was this really worth it? Yes, I thought, It's fun to wrestle with deep biblical concepts, even if the way out of a problem isn't obvious along the way.* But I was starting to get hungry again and, if anything, I seemed further from a solution to my problem than when I began. The abundance of solutions and the great creativity with which they have been developed certainly suggested that it is unwise to be dogmatic about the meaning of the word Armageddon. Yet I wasn't satisfied to settle for a non-answer. There had to be some key to this problem.

What simplified things a little for me was the realization that most scholars basically settled on one of two interpretations. 1) Many scholars agreed 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 were variations on this basic idea. 2) The rest of the scholars

went with some form of the “mountain of assembly” interpretation. In that view, Har-Magedon 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). So, the bottom line was to figure out which of the two basic options was more likely.

I gathered up my notes, put all the reference books on the reshelving cart and headed for my dorm room to get ready for supper. I was thinking about how stupid I felt when talking to the teacher the week before. It turned out, after all, that many scholars agreed with me in seeing Mountain of Megiddo as the most likely meaning, so I was not as stupid as I felt that day. I decided to go over the teacher’s arguments against Mountain of Megiddo once more. Did the arguments really hold up?

What had he said? “There is no such thing as a mountain of Megiddo in the Old Testament or anywhere in the ancient world, for that matter.” That sure sounded convincing at first blush, but the more I thought about it the more I realized it was 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. If the connection made sense to me, on the basis of Scripture, it could have made sense to him as well. But how could one know for sure?

The teacher’s next argument was more troubling, “None of the early fathers of the church interpreted Armageddon as Mountain of Megiddo either. This is true throughout the second, third and fourth century after New Testament times.” This was serious. You would

think 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. Deep in thought, I hardly noticed the falling leaves of autumn around me.

Then my head popped up from my reverie. What had the New Testament teacher said about Paul in class the other day? He had said that the early church was so puzzled by Paul 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. It dawned on me that 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?

It was like the sun popping through the clouds. Mountain of Megiddo didn't sound that farfetched after all! While the final battle is normally located around Jerusalem in the Old Testament, it wouldn't be impossible for a New Testament writer to use the Josiah battle or Deborah and Barak's battle against the Canaanites as an example of the battle at the end of the world. It seemed to me that my teacher's arguments could not be the end of the discussion.

Arriving back at the room I ran into a fellow student I had known growing up in New York City. "What are you doing for supper?" He asked.

"What else?" I said, "Good old Andrews cafeteria." (Back then there were no options like Subway, Taco Bell or Pizza Hut in Berrien Springs.)

He made a face but didn't offer to drive us to South Bend for something more exotic.

“Give me a couple of minutes to put these notes away and wash up, and we can go together.” I said.

“Sounds great,” he replied.

I went to my room and carefully organized my notes on the desk. I headed down the hall to the bathroom and washed my hands. As I reached for a paper towel, I realized that it would be hard to shake the research I had done that afternoon. I might talk about all kinds of other stuff, but in the back of my mind, I’d still be working on the mystery of Armageddon. Stopping by Bill’s door I knocked, and we headed off to the cafeteria for supper.

“What have you been up to, lately?” Bill asked as we headed through line, collecting our food.

“Oh, I’ve been studying the meaning of the word Armageddon in the Book of Revelation,” I answered. “I spent the whole afternoon, and I think I’m more confused than I was when I started!”

“Well, that’s what you get for going where even angels fear to tread,” Bill quipped. Bill was considering ministry as an occupation, but he was definitely not traditional ministerial material. At times he seemed a bit flippant about spiritual things. But he did have a keen mind, and it was fun to discuss issues like Armageddon with him. It dawned on me that he had made a trip to Israel the previous summer, so I asked him about his trip.

“It was pretty cool,” he said. “We went to Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, Galilee, Tel Aviv, Haifa and even Eilat, on the Red Sea.”

“What was your favorite part of the trip?” I asked. We put our trays down at a table

some distance from most of the students.

“ Oh, the Old City of Jerusalem is really cool, of course. They’ve got all these little alleys with shops selling food and souvenirs like sandals, candlesticks, and wooden nativities. But I think my favorite spot was En-Gedi.”

“En-Gedi? Where’s that?”

Bill responded, “It’s the place where David hid out from Saul. It’s a really dry place near the Dead Sea, but every so often you come around the bend and there’s a waterfall, right in the middle of the desert! It must have been 110 degrees, and it felt good to stand under the waterfall and cool down. The water must have been close to freezing! Then we went from there and floated in the Dead Sea for awhile. Really cool!”

I tried to imagine what these places looked like. It would be twenty years before I would get to see them for myself. Then it hit me that Bill might be able to help me with my little project on Armageddon.

“Hey, Bill! Did you ever get to Megiddo?”

“The ruins of the city of Megiddo?” Bill replied.

“Is there any other kind of Megiddo?” I retorted.

“Well, people sometimes talk about the Valley 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. . .”

“Did you say Mount Carmel?” I exploded, almost spraying food in Bill’s face.

“Whoa!” he shrieked, “Get a muzzle on that food cannon! You almost knocked me out

with that one.”

I laughed a bit but refused to be deterred. “Did you say Megiddo is near Mount Carmel?”

“Of course,” Bill said. “Mount Carmel is actually a ridge along the southern edge of the Valley of Jezreel. It starts right on the coast in Haifa and runs sort of southeast for a dozen miles toward the Jordan Valley. The best way to cross it is a pass that feeds right into Megiddo at the base of the mountain. In fact, we visited the site where they think Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal. It is the highest point on the ridge, just overlooking Megiddo.”

I was in shock. I don’t remember anything else Bill said or anything that happened that evening. All I remember is that I was captured by the idea that Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal by calling fire down to earth from heaven. 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. It reminded me of one of the key elements of the final events in the Book of Revelation:

(The land beast) performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

Rev 13:13-14 (ESV)

Could it be that “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. There were competing claims as to who was the true God, and the showdown on the mountain settled the

issue by fire. This sounded an awful lot like the scenario in Revelation, chapters 13 through 17! What if Armageddon was a symbol of Mount Carmel and the decisive events that happened there? At that moment, the solution to the whole problem seemed to open itself up to me.

The various word studies had taken me as far as they were likely to go. All of the solutions to the problem were possible, but only the Mountain of Megiddo interpretation was based on a straightforward reading of the Greek text of both Revelation and the Old Testament. Still, by itself that was not good enough. The key would be to examine the larger context of the Battle of Armageddon in Revelation 13-17. Whatever reading fit best with that overall context should be the correct one.

The next day I was walking down the hall on the third floor of the Seminary building. I saw one of the Hebrew teachers standing in front of his office. He greeted me and asked whether I had learned anything interesting lately.

"Well, I'm studying the meaning of the word Armageddon in Rev 16:16. The text says that it is based on a Hebrew word, but no such word occurs in the Old Testament. I've drawn the conclusion that har-magedon probably means Mountain of Megiddo, but many scholars think it should actually be Mountain of Assembly."

"Actually," he replied, "I've done a little study on the meaning of Armageddon myself. And I share some of your concerns about the 'mountain of assembly' interpretation. 'What do *you* think Armageddon means?' I asked, putting the teacher on the spot.

"Actually, I think it is a reference to Mount Carmel," he replied.

"No way," I exclaimed, "I just came to that same conclusion yesterday!"

“Great minds think alike!” he grinned. “You see, the name Megiddo is not limited to the city of that name. It is often used to speak of something else in the geographical area. For example, the phrase “waters of Megiddo” is a reference to the Kishon River in Judges 5:19. And while Megiddo is not the name of a mountain, it isn’t really a valley either, the ruins of the ancient city are located on an elevation overlooking the Plain of Jezreel. Since the city was located at the foot of the Carmel range, “mountain of Megiddo” could easily be a reference to Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:19,20; 2 Kgs 2:25; 4:25).

“This is so exciting,” I said. “That is just what I was thinking!”

He went on. “The different possibilities for the word Armageddon kind of leave us at an impasse. So the best way to decide how Armageddon is being used in Revelation is to see how each of the options plays out in the rest of the book. 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.”

“That gives me a lot to work with,” I said with some excitement.

“You’ll have to take it from here, because I don’t have time right now to fully investigate the ideas I’ve just shared with you. But if you study the last half of Revelation carefully, I think you will find that the Mount Carmel theme lies behind a lot of the descriptions in the second half of the book.”

“Thanks so much for your time,” I said as I began to back out of the room. I didn’t want

to seem rude, but I was so excited by what he had told me that I couldn't wait to get back to my room and get my Bible out to investigate for myself. Fortunately, I had no classes on Monday, so I hurried back to the dorm, closed myself in my room, dug out my Bible and began to carefully examine Revelation 12-20, looking for hints of the Mount Carmel story there. Although my Greek was still pretty basic, I kept the Greek text handy, along with a Greek-English lexicon.

The first clear reference to the Carmel episode in these chapters was the one that first triggered my imagination, Rev 13:13-14. There the land beast calls fire down from heaven 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, the creation of Adam, and the death decree of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. All four incidents were challenges to 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.

Reading on I found a further reference to Mount Carmel in the immediate 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 har-magedôn 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, as we will see in future chapters. 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 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 on har-magedôn that the dragon, beast and false prophet of Rev 16:13 meet their fate.

Reading on, I noticed that the fate of the beast and the false prophet is the same as that of prophets of Baal in the Old Testament account. As in the original instance, 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 provided the assurance that the most obvious reading of har-magedon is also the one that best fits the overall story of the Battle of Armageddon. This will become even clearer after the detailed study of Revelation 13-18 in the chapters to come. The larger context becomes 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 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!