

"The Battle Over the Battle of Armageddon"  
Jon Paulien, Andrews University

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One of the most significant of all the *hapax legomena* in the Bible is the word *harmagedôn*, found in Rev 16:16. Research into the etymology and theological significance of the term *harmagedôn*, which is usually translated "Armageddon," has come upon relatively hard times in recent years. The most fruitful time for the examination of this topic occurred over a fifty-year period running from the mid-1880s to around 1940. While Jeremias and others considered the author's intention with regard to the term an exceedingly intractable problem, a number of creative proposals for a solution were developed during this period.

Over the last fifty years, however, there have been few significant new suggestions regarding the origin and significance of word *harmagedôn*. To make matters even worse, articles in journals and dictionaries have an increasing tendency to offer only a selective overview of the issues. As a result, there is no single summary of all possible solutions to the problem. This paper presents research in progress to encourage a more complete tabulation of the reasonable options and to offer some suggestions that are intended to stimulate further research toward a solution of this, as yet unsolved, exegetical problem.

The term *harmagedôn* functions in Rev 16 as the location of the final battle of earth's history (v. 16). The text explicitly indicates that the word is Hebrew in origin. The most natural understanding of the Greek is "mountain of Megiddo." This is derived from a combination of a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word har, which means "mountain," with a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew for Megiddo. While the Greek spelling *magedôn* differs considerably from the Hebrew word "Megiddo," it is identical to the Septuagint transliteration in three passages: Josh 12:21 (according to the RSV versification), 2 Chr 35:22, and manuscript

"A" of Judg 1:27. Another transliteration of Megiddo in the LXX, found in 4 Kgdms 9:27, parallels the manuscript variant *mageddôn* (with a double "d"). For this reason Nestle,<sup>1</sup> in 1909, argued that an allusion to Megiddo was the most probable explanation of the term Armageddon. It is interesting, however, that at the only place in the OT where the Hebrew adds a final "n" to Megiddo, Zech 12:11, the LXX does not transliterate, instead it translates "Valley of Megiddo" as "valley of slaughter" (using the Greek word *ekkoptomenou*).

The region of Megiddo was an ancient battleground. There the armies of Israel under Deborah and Barak defeated Sisera and his Canaanite army (Judg 5:19). Later, it was the scene of the fatal struggle between Josiah and Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23:29,30; 2 Chr 35:22). This 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, its significance for ancient Israel made it an appropriate background to his description of the final battle between the forces of good and evil.

Bousset, however, pointed out in 1906 that the phrase "Mountain of Megiddo" is problematic.<sup>2</sup> While the OT 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." Therefore, a number of solutions to this problem have been offered over the centuries, and will be surveyed briefly here.

1. The first attempt to explain the etymology of Armageddon was shared by Early Church Fathers such as Hippolytus and Jerome. They sought to locate Armageddon in Palestine, offering suggestions such as the Valley of Jehoshaphat (cf. Joel 3:2,12) or Mount Tabor (cf. Judg 4:6,12). But the first proposal to gain wide currency was advanced by the

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<sup>1</sup>Eberhard Nestle, "Har-Magedon," *A Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 2: 305.

<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906), p. 399.

earliest commentators on the book of Revelation, Oecumenius early in the 6th Century<sup>3</sup> and Andreas of Ceasarea around 600 AD.<sup>4</sup> These commentators appear to have taken their cue from the LXX translators of Zech 12:11. The LXX translators apparently understood *magedôn* to be derived from the Hebrew root *gadam* which means "to cut" or "to gash." Therefore, Oecumenius and Andreas argued that the kings of the earth are gathered in Rev 16 to the "Mountain of Slaughter" to be exterminated. Supported recently by LaRondelle,<sup>5</sup> this view has never been refuted, yet does not attract wide support among scholars.

2. F. Junius, to whom the marginal notes in the *Geneva Bible* of 1599 are attributed, associated Armageddon with "the mountain places of Megiddo."<sup>6</sup> To him the battle of Armageddon was understood as God's reversal of the reproach His people suffered with the defeat of Josiah. Several 19th Century scholars<sup>7</sup> sought to overcome the absence of a "mountain of Megiddo" in the OT by linking the battles at Megiddo with Ezekiel's description of Gog being defeated on the "mountains of Israel." They found support in the fact that Ezekiel 38 and 39 are alluded to in Rev 20:8-10). In 1926 Lohmeyer added a new twist to the "mountain of Megiddo" interpretation by associating Armageddon with Mount Carmel, an allusion to Elijah's confuting of the prophets of Baal.<sup>8</sup> He appealed for support to *Ginza*, a

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<sup>3</sup>See H. C. Hoskier, ed, *The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1928), pp. 179-180.

<sup>4</sup>See Josef Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des Griechischen Apokalypse-Textes* (München: Karl Zink Verlag, 1955), 1: 175.

<sup>5</sup>Hans K. LaRondelle, "The Biblical Concept of Armageddon," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28/1 (March 1985): 23; idem, "The Etymology of Har-Magedon (Rev 16:16)," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27 (1989): 71-73.

<sup>6</sup>F. Junius, "Annotations on Revelation," *The Geneva Bible* (London: Christopher Barker, 1599).

<sup>7</sup>See Bousset, p. 399.

<sup>8</sup>Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Handbuch Zum Neuen Testament, vol. 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck],

much-later Mandaean work, where demonic powers gather on Mount Carmel to plan their final assault on the forces of God. Shea, in 1980 (pp. 160-162) carried the argument a step further by seeing a multitude of allusions throughout Revelation to Elijah's experience on Mount Carmel, with the dragon, beast and false prophet being the latter-day counterparts of Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal.<sup>9</sup>

3. While the first two explanations are based on how the translators of the LXX understood the Hebrew Bible, a number of attempts at emendation have also come into play. Many 19th-Century scholars (summarized by Nestle and Bousset) noted that the difference between har and ar is a simple breathing mark, and such markings are generally omitted in the earliest manuscripts. Thus *ar-magedon* could be the equivalent of the Hebrew "city of Megiddo" (*îr-megiddô*), an allusion to the fortress city which guarded ancient Israel's most critical mountain pass.

4. Other scholars, beginning with an unsigned 1887 article in ZAW,<sup>10</sup> gave attention to emendations of *magedôn*. In unpointed Hebrew *megiddô* is identical in form to *migdô* which means "fruitful." Thus, Bowman suggested in 1962 that Armageddon means "fruitful mountain," a reference to eschatological Jerusalem (Joel 3:17, 18--Heb 4:17, 18 cf. Zechariah 14).<sup>11</sup> This would parallel the allusions in Rev 14:14-20 and 20:7-10. Charles, however, had already in 1920 gone beyond Bowman by combining both emendations (vol. 2, p. 50); Armageddon to him means "fruitful city" which recalls John's title for the heavenly city in Rev

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1926), pp. 133-134.

<sup>9</sup>William H. Shea, "The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 18/2 (Autumn 1980): 160-162.

<sup>10</sup>Anonymous, "Die hebräische Grundlage der Apokalypse," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1887): 170-171.

<sup>11</sup>J. W. Bowman, "Armageddon," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1: 227.

20:9 (*tên polin tên êgapêmenên*).<sup>12</sup>

5. One of the most popular emendations of *magedôn* was proposed by Hommel in 1890.<sup>13</sup> He suggested that the Greek *gamma* in *magedôn* is a transliteration, not of the Hebrew *gîmel* but of the Hebrew *ayin*. Thus *har-magedôn* could be a corruption of the Hebrew *har-mô'êd*, or "mountain of assembly." Torrey argued in 1938 that Armageddon is a reference to Isaiah 14:13 where the "mountain of assembly" is the heavenly court in which God's throne is located.<sup>14</sup> In Isaiah 14 the King of Babylon is called the "Day-Star," a term applied to Christ in Revelation. Thus, *har-mo'ed* recalls Hebrew mythology, where Mount Zion is the earthly counterpart of the heavenly throne-room (Ps 48:3--Eng 48:2). Armageddon, then, is Babylon's final attempt to usurp the throne of God in its attack on end-time Jerusalem.

6. Gunkel, writing in 1895, understood Armageddon to be a name with mythic origins, probably based on 1 Enoch 6 where the evil angels gather on Mount Hermon to prepare for their assault on the daughters of men.<sup>15</sup> Bousset follows Gunkel in suggesting that behind this reference lies an ancient myth, preserved in Mandaean works, which described the assault on the holy mountain of the gods by an army of demons, which army is gathered by evil spirits, then destroyed by the gods of light.<sup>16</sup>

The abundance of solutions and the great creativity with which they have been developed suggests that it is unwise to be dogmatic about the etymology of Armageddon. Nevertheless, current scholarship generally settles on either some version of the Mount Carmel

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<sup>12</sup>R. H. Charles, *Revelation*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 2:50.

<sup>13</sup>Fritz Hommel, "Inscriptliche Glossen und Exkurse zur Genesis und zu den Propheten," *NKZ* 1: 407-408.

<sup>14</sup>Charles C. Torrey, "Armageddon," *The Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938): 244-248.

<sup>15</sup>Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895), pp. 263-266.

<sup>16</sup>Bousset, p. 399.

hypothesis or on the *har-mô êd* emendation as the best explanation of *harmagedôn*.

The major difficulty with the *har-mô'êd* interpretation is the great linguistic distance between *mô'êd* and *magedôn*. While it is true that *gamma* is the only Greek letter that could correspond to the Hebrew *ayin*, there is no external evidence that *mô'êd* was ever transliterated as *magedôn* or even *moged*, whereas LXX evidence exists for the Mount Carmel and Mountain of Slaughter interpretations. Furthermore, the strength of Torrey's argument is largely diluted if one doesn't accept his theory that the Apocalypse is the translation of a Hebrew original.

The "Mountain of Megiddo" interpretations are, however, not without numerous detractors, particularly Jeremias in 1932<sup>17</sup> and Torrey. Four main points are offered in refutation. (1) There is no Mount Megiddo in pre-NT literature. (2) The earliest exegetes never interpreted it in this way. (3) The mythical world mountain was never associated with Megiddo in apocalyptic. And (4), in Hebrew eschatology the final struggle is fought around Jerusalem (Zechariah 12 and 14; Joel 3--Heb 4; cf. Revelation 14; 20:7-10) not Megiddo. These are, however, basically arguments from silence. They do not preclude the possibility that the author of Revelation saw elements of the ideological battle on Mount Carmel as decisive in the final battle between good and evil.

In fact, as Shea points out, Megiddo is often used to speak of something else in the geographical area.<sup>18</sup> The phrase "waters of Megiddo" (Jdg 5:19) is a reference to the Kishon River. And while Megiddo was not a mountain, it wasn't a valley either, it was located on an elevation overlooking the Plain of Jezreel or Esdraelon. 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). It was on Mount Carmel that fire was called down from heaven to

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<sup>17</sup>Joachim Jeremias, "Har Magedon (Apc 16:16)," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 31 (1932): 73-77.

<sup>18</sup>Shea, pp. 158-160.

prove that Yahweh was the true God, a scene that probably serves as the source for Rev 13:13,14. It was on Mount Carmel that the false prophets were defeated, it is on *harmagedôn* that the dragon, beast and false prophet of Rev 16:13 meet their fate. As in the original instance, the issue is settled in Revelation 19:20,21 by fire and by sword.

Whether intentional or not, Shea's helpful elaboration of the Mount Carmel hypothesis points the way to the resolution of this difficult problem. Barring the discovery of additional evidence, etymological studies have brought us about as far as they can, which may explain the paucity of advances in understanding over the last 50 years. From here on the understanding of *harmagedôn* can best be advanced by a comprehensive search of the larger context within Revelation to discover which Palestinian location best fits the theological thrust of the book. Four major candidates emerge from the etymological research. Several of the options imply the city of Jerusalem itself is the place of the final battle. The Mountain of Slaughter approach suggests the Kidron Valley east of the city on the analogy of Joel. The other two major options are the city of Megiddo and Mount Carmel. The theological implications of each place would have an impact on the theology of Revelation as a whole.

What is the larger context of the battle of Armageddon? 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 whole passage parallels the sixth trumpet plague in chapter 9 where military imagery is combined with descriptions of demonic beings. The drying up of the Euphrates River in verse 12 is a central issue in the following chapter (Rev 17:1,15,16). The reference to the demonic trinity in verse 13 connects this passage with chapters 13 and 19, where the same characters are at work. The gathering effected by the three unclean spirits in verses 13 and 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. The spiritual nature of Armageddon is confirmed by the spiritual challenge of verse 15, just prior to the mention of *harmagedôn*.

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 accomplishes the fall of Babylon, and is outlined in the seventh bowl plague (16:17-21), in 17:12-17, and in chapter 18. It is in its relation to this larger context that correct understanding of the cryptic term *harmagedôn* will eventually be brought to light.