

## RESEARCH NOTE

### THE ETYMOLOGY OF *HAR-MAGEDON* (REV 16:16)

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Although the linguistic origin of biblical terms may prove to be uncertain and need not necessarily determine theological meaning, such terms may still carry some religious significance. This is apparent from Rev 9:11, where the name of the angel of the Abyss is given both in Hebrew (*Abaddōn*) and in Greek (*Apollyōn*). The phrase *harmagedōn* in Rev 16:16 deserves attention for its possible theological frame of reference. *Harmagedōn*, usually given in English as "Armageddon," occurs only once in all of Scripture, and it is accompanied by the added clue that the name is given "in Hebrew," the language of the OT. From a linguistic standpoint, biblical scholars are divided in their assumptions as to the original Hebrew word lying behind *Har-Magedon*. In fact, they generally regard the etymological problem as being unsolvable.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Patristic View*

The oldest view set forth by Christian commentators concerning *Har-Magedon* was that the term meant literally "Mountain of Slaughter," as evidenced, for example, by Andreas of Caesarea and Oecumenius.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation apparently traced *magedōn* back to the Aramaic stem *g<sup>e</sup>dād*, meaning "to cut down, to hew down," or the Hebrew root *gādād*, meaning "to cut, to break in upon, to penetrate."

<sup>1</sup>See listings of the various conjectures in R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1920), 2:50-51; *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, 1899 ed., s.v. "Armageddon," by T. K. Cheyne.

<sup>2</sup>Josef Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des Griechischen Apokalypse-Textes*, part 1, *Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisareia*, Münchener Theologische Studien, vol. 1 (Munich, 1955), p. 175; H. C. Hoskier, ed., *The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse*, University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series, vol. 23 (Ann Arbor, MI, 1928), p. 180.

### *Har-Magedon Connected with Megiddo*

A second view is that *Har-Magedon* is somehow to be connected with Megiddo, a city in the Esdraelon plain, near Mount Carmel. Holding basically to this view can be reckoned all those who see *magedōn* as the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Megiddo. It is a notable fact that the LXX has transliterated Megiddo once by *Magedōn* (Judg 1:27) and also by *Mageddō* (2 Chron 35:22). In addition, Megiddo was the historic site of a victorious war of Yahweh against the Canaanite kings, celebrated in the famous Song of Deborah (Judg 4 and 5; see especially 5:19). Many exegetes refer further to Ezekiel's apocalyptic portrayal of the final war against Yahweh on "the mountains of Israel" (Ezek 38:8, 21; 39:2, 4, 17) to strengthen this as a typological taproot of Armageddon in the OT history of Israel. The nearest mountain to Megiddo is Carmel, which witnessed Elijah's dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal and where these prophets also were put to the sword (1 Kgs 18).

For linguistic and theological reasons of the foregoing kind, the identification of *magedōn* with Megiddo has found "the widest acceptance with scholars."<sup>3</sup> After reviewing the theories that have been set forth, E. Nestle concludes: "Upon the whole, to find an allusion here to Megiddo . . . is still the most probable explanation."<sup>4</sup>

### *Har-Magedon Connected with Mount Zion or the Mountain of God*

The conjecture that *harmagedōn* would be the Greek transliteration of *har mō'ēd*, "Mountain of Assembly," a reference to the celestial "mountain" of God in Isa 14:13 (and indirectly to Ps

<sup>3</sup>Ishon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, (London, 1919; reprint Grand Rapids, 1979), p. 685; cf. Charles, 2:50; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3d ed. (London, 1909), p. 209; *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979 ed., s.v. "Armageddon," by W. W. Buechler ("the generally accepted view"); *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Har-Magedon," by R. J. A. Sheriffs; *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, 1970 ed., s.v. "Har-Magedon"; Edward Robinson, *A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament*, new ed. (New York, 1858), p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>James Hastings, ed. *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 1909 ed., s.v. "Har-Magedon," by Eberhard Nestle.

48:1-8), is mentioned by most commentators, but favored by few.<sup>5</sup> Introduced as a suggestion by F. Hommel in 1890, it was rejected by most scholars as linguistically untenable (cf., e.g., H. Gunkel), because, as stated by Joachim Jeremias, it “does not show how we are to explain the rendering of  $\text{ע}$  in  $\text{מוֹרְךָ}$  by  $\gamma$ ” in *magedōn*.<sup>6</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray today judges likewise that this “speculation must be viewed as dubious.”<sup>7</sup> For the same reason *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* calls the assumption that *har mō‘ēd* is the Hebrew original improbable.<sup>8</sup> In Hommel’s view, *Har-Magedon* refers to the world mountain of the gods in Babylonian mythology.<sup>9</sup> Others think of Mount Zion.

### *Har-Magedon and the Septuagint Version of Zechariah 12:11*

It seems that another linguistic phenomenon should be considered: the generally overlooked fact that the LXX in one instance actually paraphrases (not transliterates) the name Megiddo in its Greek version. In Zech 12:11, the LXX renders the phrase referring to the plain of Megiddo as *en pediō ekkoptomēnou*, which may be translated literally into English as, “in the plain of the cut down [pomegranate grove].”<sup>10</sup> This unique Greek paraphrase of Megiddo suggests that the Jewish translators responsible for the LXX perceived in Megiddo, not the Hebrew stem  $\text{yā‘ad}$  (“to assemble”), but

<sup>5</sup>The best defense of this application seems to be Charles C. Torrey, “Armageddon,” *HTR* 31 (1938): 237-48.

<sup>6</sup>Joachim Jeremias, “*Har Magedon*,” *TDNT* 1:468; see also, idem. “*Har Magedon*,” *ZNW* 31 (1932):77; *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 ed., s.v. “*Har-Magedon*,” by W. Ewing; *Biblich-Theologisches Handwörterbuch zur Lutherbibel und zu neueren Übersetzungen*, 1964 ed., s.v. “*Harmagedon*,” by Gerold Jaspers; *Funk and Wagnall’s New “Standard” Bible Dictionary*, 1936 ed., s.v. “*Har-Magedon*,” by Andrew C. Zemos; James Hastings, ed. *Dictionary of the Bible*, 1963 ed., s.v. “*Armageddon*,” by S. Mathews and F. C. Grant; *Calwer Bibellexikon*, 1959 ed., s.v. “*Harmagedon*,” by Rudolf Borchert.

<sup>7</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, The New Century Bible Commentary (London, 1974), p. 245.

<sup>8</sup>*SDA Bible Dictionary* (1979), s.v. “*Armageddon*.”

<sup>9</sup>Fritz Hommel, “*Inchriftliche Glossen und Exkurse zur Genesis und zu den Propheten*,” *NKZ* 1 (1890): 406-408.

<sup>10</sup>The English bishop, Charles Wordsworth discovered this fact in the LXX version of Zech 12:11. Commenting on Rev 16:16, he states, “The word *Armageddon*, then, signifies a *Mountain of slaughter*; like that valley of *decision* or

rather Hebrew *gādād* and Aramaic *gēdad*, meaning “to cut down.”<sup>11</sup> This conclusion supports the interpretation of Armageddon by the first Christian expositors (Andreas and Oecumenius) mentioned above.

### *The Theological Significance of Har-Magedon*

*Har-Magedon*, “Mount Megiddo,” is the apocalyptic name in Rev 16:16 for the place where end-time Babylon and her worldwide kings will receive the divine judgment because of their ultimate rebellion (i.e., war) against God (Rev 16:19-21). It stands in direct contrast to Mount Zion in Rev 14:1 as the place of divine deliverance for the 144,000 faithful saints of the Israel of God. Both Megiddo and Zion are symbolic places, to be defined *theologically* in the full perspective of Israel’s history in the OT (“in Hebrew”). It needs to be recounted that the environment of Megiddo has witnessed the dramatic defeat and destruction of the Canaanite kings through the flooding of the river Kishon in the days of Deborah (Judg 5:19-21); the slaughter of the false prophets of Baal in the Kishon Valley in Elijah’s time (1 Kgs 18:40);<sup>12</sup> and the untimely death of the misled, pious king Josiah fighting on the plain of Megiddo, which caused the annual mourning of all the tribes of Israel (2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chron 35:20-25; cf. Zech 12:11). Austin Farrer has summed up the theological significance of *Har-Magedon* most comprehensively:

So in sum, Mt. Megiddo stands in his mind for a place where lying prophecy and its dupes go to meet their doom; where kings and their armies are misled to their destruction; and where all the tribes of the earth mourn, to see him in power, whom in weakness they had pierced. For there the stars in their courses fight against princes, and the floods of destruction sweep them away (Judges v. 19-21).<sup>13</sup>

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*cutting off*, described by the Prophet Joel (iii. 14), and it is a figurative expression similar to that in the same Prophet, namely, the valley of *Jehoshaphat* (Joel iii. 2. 12), or *judgment of God*,” *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the Original Greek* (London, 1872), 2:248.

<sup>11</sup>For an extensive review of the views of the older commentaries, see Hans K. LaRondelle, *Het Bijbelse Toekomstbeeld* (Brussels, 1962), pp. 280-311, 390-392.

<sup>12</sup>See W. H. Shea, “The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16,” *AUSS* 18 (1980): 157-162.

<sup>13</sup>Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford, 1964), p. 178.

In response to the literal application of Armageddon in the future to the geographic location of a "Mount Megiddo" in Palestine,<sup>14</sup> two remarks can be made: First of all, a literal "Mount Megiddo" is *never* mentioned in the OT and does not actually exist. Consequently, the earliest Christian interpreters (including Origen and Eusebius) did not see in *Har-Magedon* the name of a place at all. A second, and decisive, argument against interpreting the reference in Rev 16:16 with geographic literalism is the fact that the OT prophets had already clearly designated the locality of the apocalyptic struggle: namely, on the mountains and valleys *around Mount Zion* (Joel 2:32; 3:1-17; Isa 29:1-7; Ezek 39:11; Dan 11:45; Zech 12:2, 3, 9; 14:1-4; cf. also 4 Ezra 13:35-39). The book of Revelation *continues* this uniform OT eschatology (Rev 14:1, 20; 20:9), with but one theological modification: *The Lamb of God* determines the new-covenant fulfillment and consummation of all of God's covenant promises and curses (see Rev 7:9-10; 12:17; 14:12; 15:1, 2; 17:14; 19:11; 21:9, 22, 23; 22:1, 3; cf. 2 Cor 1:20). Just as "Mount Zion" (Rev 14:1) is defined by the gospel as the place of Messianic salvation (Heb 12:22-24), so "Mount Megiddo" must be similarly defined as the place of curse and doom for the antichrist.

<sup>14</sup>C. I. Scofield and E. Schuyler English, eds., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York, 1967), pp. 1368, 1372.