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.¹

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.² This interpretation apparently traced magedōn back to the Aramaic stem gēdad, meaning “to cut down, to hew down,” or the Hebrew root gādad, meaning “to cut, to break in upon, to penetrate.”


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 Magedddō (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.” 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.”

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

The conjecture that harmagedōn would be the Greek transliteration of har mōʾēḏ, “Mountain of Assembly,” a reference to the celestial “mountain” of God in Isa 14:13 (and indirectly to Ps


48:1-8), is mentioned by most commentators, but favored by few.\(^5\) 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 \(\text{י ב} \) by \(\gamma\)” in \(\text{magedôn}\).\(^6\) G. R. Beasley-Murray today judges likewise that this “speculation must be viewed as dubious.”\(^7\) For the same reason The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary calls the assumption that \(\text{har môêd} \) is the Hebrew original improbable.\(^8\) In Hommel’s view, \(\text{Har-Magedon}\) refers to the world mountain of the gods in Babylonian mythology.\(^9\) 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 \(\text{en pediô ekkoptomenou}\), which may be translated literally into English as, “in the plain of the cut down [pomegranate grove].”\(^10\) This unique Greek paraphrase of Megiddo suggests that the Jewish translators responsible for the LXX perceived in Megiddo, not the Hebrew stem \(\text{yāêad}\) (“to assemble”), but

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\(^{8}\) *SDA Bible Dictionary* (1979), s.v. “Armageddon.”


\(^{10}\) 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 גָּדַד and Aramaic גֵּדַד, meaning “to cut down.”
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); 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).
In response to the literal application of Armageddon in the future to the geographic location of a "Mount Megiddo" in Palestine, 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.