

The Book of Revelation
“The Blast of the Trumpet”
a wake-up call to the churches

Appendix I: Armageddon Notes

Rev: 16:16 “Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”

Introduction

“Armageddon” is a much-banded word these days, and in fact gave its name to a film in which the earth is threatened by the collision of asteroids and meteorites. Bruce Willis plays an oil-driller, who saves the world! He leads a mission into space, lands on the moving asteroid, drills into its surface and plants nuclear bombs in the holes. The film doesn’t just make use of the Bible in its choice of title: the power of the message of the gospel also reappears as Bruce pays the ultimate price to save the world. He is left behind on the asteroid to die when he detonates the bombs himself.

“Armageddon!” The word is guaranteed to thrill and chill! How funny, that like the number 666, its presence in the Bible only adds to its ominous quality, especially among those who are quick to dismiss the Bible’s validity for today when it speaks of moral issues or claims divine activity 2-3,000 years ago! Let’s be consistent!¹

As the new millennium approaches, the interest and fantastic speculation surrounding such words will only increase. As it is a Bible word, we as Christians should understand what it means and be able to answer questions definitively and accurately. Who knows what conversations and even conversions could result from interest in these things?

This study will attempt to unravel the passage by looking first at the context of the passage and then the meaning of key phrases, including Armageddon. Only at this stage will we be ready to answer the all-important question in all Bible exegesis - “What’s the point?!” - and be able to take something away to apply to our own lives.

Context

Revelation is an unmasking of the present world in 22 chapters. The unmasking of the world actually forms the meat in a sandwich of a letter sent by God to the Church Universal through a representative seven churches in Asia Minor.² Chapters 6 to 16 form the longest part of this unmasking. The tale is hung around three series of sevenfold judgments. Chapter 16 contains the final set of seven judgments, each of them given by an angel. The gathering of the kings to Armageddon is in the sixth of these judgements. The seventh will be the final judgment in the final set, and is full of powerful imagery.

The sixth angel in fact begins by pouring out his bowl of God’s wrath on the River Euphrates, the river to the East of Israel and the East of the Roman Empire over which invaders would come. The threat to the Eastern border in the first century was the Parthians, and ominously the angel’s bowl dries up the river “to prepare the way for the kings from the East.” (v. 13) This is as worrying as the Germans invading Poland and then Belgium in the second World War.

Is this China or Russia being described? Neither! In these days, they would most likely come by sea to a port. The geography is not important! It could equally well be the States, and African or European

¹ I became a disciple while at school, and was known to read and believe the Bible. I don’t remember this adding to my popularity except on one occasion – after a screening of the film “Omen.” At once I was treated with great respect. I was called upon to confirm that 666 did occur in the Bible and to explain its meaning! I remember noticing the irony at the time. “Why do you want to know?”, I asked. “I thought you were telling me that the Bible was just a story book! If it is, why should it bother you that this number occurs there? At least be consistent!”

² For the structure, see *The Blast of the Trumpet*, p. 9

nation. In fact, this is all the wrong approach. John simply wants us to feel the fear of an imminent conflict.

But who is the conflict between? After drying up the Euphrates, the kings of the whole earth are gathered together for battle. It is generally assumed by the speculators that they will do battle with each other, but the Bible never tells us battle is joined. The key to what happens will be in understanding the terms in this passage and their O.T. significance.

Terms etc. that need explanation

“They” are defined in vv. 13 and 14. They are the spirits of three demons given the appearance of frogs by John. Their sinister significance is shown by (1) the use of the frog motif (not harmless amphibians, but one of the ghastly plagues of Egypt), (2) their coming out of the mouth of the unholy trinity of dragon, beast and false prophet³, and (3) their ability to perform miraculous signs with which to deceive the nations.⁴

“the Kings” are mentioned in v. 14, and are the kings of the whole world. The purpose of the gathering is battle (v. 14), and the occasion “the great day of God Almighty”. Is this world war? Not with one another. This is war with God, the final showdown between the spiritual world and the best the world can muster. Interestingly, no armies are even mentioned, although this does not rule out their presence in the picture John paints.

“Armageddon” is a word with a great ring to it, but what can we say about it?

1. The kings are gathered at a place in Hebrew called Armageddon. Even if it is a physical place, Armageddon may just be its nickname. If so, what is its common or popular name in Greek or Latin? We have no clue where this is if this is the case, and the name is just symbolic (like referring to Rome as Babylon)
1. Armageddon, or “Har-mageddon” literally means the Mount of Megiddo. If you look in a Bible Atlas, you find one very interesting thing about Armageddon (in either spelling). It does not exist! This is because Megiddo is a city built on a pass. There is no Mount Megiddo.
1. The city of Megiddo, the plain below (the plain of Megiddo) and the surrounding countryside would be full of meaning for a first century Jew. “Waterloo”⁵, “Austerlitz”, “Somme”, “Galipoli” are all places, but their real significance comes from the historic battles fought there. The Plain of Megiddo was also known as the Great Plain or Plain of Esdraelon⁶. The heartland of Israel was a ridge of mountains running North-South from this Plain to the hills around Jerusalem in the South, and Megiddo overlooked this plain from this position. The following are some of the historical events from the area.
1. In the period of the Judges, Deborah and Barak chased the forces of King Jabin of Hazor down Mount Tabor and NorthWest all the way along the Plain of Megiddo where the River Kishon runs into the Mediterranean. (Judges 4:6,7) Part of the battle appears to have taken place in Taanach⁷, the next city to Megiddo in the mountain range overlooking the Plain. (Judges 5:19-21) Gideon’s men gathered at the Spring of Harod, to the East of the Plain and chased the Midianites out of a valley at Moreh a couple of miles to the North. They fled to the East into Transjordan, with Gideon’s men in pursuit.

³ For possible meanings of this trinity, please see The Blast of the Trumpet, Lesson 3. They are a parody of God, Father, Son and Spirit, and the personification of Evil.

⁴ The possibility of genuine miracles being performed and deceiving the world is not just a real one, but was also anticipated by the apostle Paul. He predicted that the “coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (2 Thess 2:9ff)

⁵ The battle of Waterloo in 1815 was where the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon Bonaparte and effectively ended the French Empire, leaving Britain “top nation” for a century. Many Frenchmen object to the unfortunate choice of Waterloo station as the London Terminus for the Eurostar service from Paris!

⁶ Bible Atlas p 12,13, although the Old Testament Survey identifies the Plain of Esdraelon with the smaller valley to the East, Jezreel. The valley of Jezreel runs East from Mount Gilboa down to the Jordan.

⁷ The city of Taanach occurs in this humorous exchange between Egyptian (?) tomb-workers living in Deir-el-Medina in Egypt and working in the Valley of the Kings between 1550 and 1050 B.C.E. “To Meryre: Now really! Plesae go to Seti and fetch the goat (which came) from Taanach (in Palestine). But if he doesn’t give it to you, you shall bring me his underpants.” *Letters from Egypt*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), quoted in BAR, Vol 25 no. 1 p. 38

1. In Saul's reign, the Philistines were on the ascendancy, topographically speaking as well as politically. Like survivors huddling on high ground in a rising flood, Saul had his last stand against them on Mount Gilboa, at the head of the Plain, where he died (1 Sam 31). The extent of their power is shown by their hanging his body on the walls of Beth Shan, one of their cities, which lies to the East of Gilboa down the Jezreel valley near where it joins the Jordan.
1. Under David and Solomon the Kingdom was unified and spread. Solomon built chariot cities and storerooms in three key cities: Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer (1 Kings 9:15ff)⁸. These were all key cities strategically for the Kingdom. Megiddo's significance requires knowledge of the geography, for which you are advised to consult a map. The city lay on the pass of "Wadi Ara" over which lay the best trade route from Egypt to Damascus. Traders from Egypt would follow the Mediterranean coastline North until the ridge of Mount Carmel. As they turned to head North East, the best route was to cross the ridge at Megiddo. From there, they would descend into the Great Plain and then head up into the Galilean hills, past what was in N.T. times to be the city of Nazareth, and then down to cross the Jordan North of the Sea of Galilee. From there the route led North East to Damascus. This route was called the "via maris", the "Way of the Sea"
1. After Solomon, the kingdom divided and prophets arose in Israel. The place names in the area surrounding Megiddo could well bear the graffiti "Elijah was 'ere" or "Elisha was 'ere"! Jezreel lies 9 miles to the East of Megiddo across the Great Plain. Shunem is a few miles North of Jezreel (where the Shunammite woman came from). Mount Carmel is the nearest mountain to Megiddo, and if any mountain could deserve the name "Armageddon", this would be it. For it was on this mountain that Elijah brought about one of the greatest victories in the Bible over idolatry when he called down fire from heaven on the sacrifice and the prophets of Baal were slaughtered in the Great Plain beneath (the Kishon valley) (1 Kings 18:19, 40) The choice of this region as the site for the battle of the Kings works well with John's other symbolism in Revelation; the prophets of Baal were those who ate at Jezebel's table.
1. Towards the end of the Kings, Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt in the Plain of Megiddo⁹ (2 Chron 35:22) as he tried to intercept Neco on his way back from battle with the Assyrians.
1. Zechariah makes mention of weeping at Hadad Rimmon (location unknown) in the Plain of Megiddo. He prophesies similar weeping in Jerusalem, (Zech 12:11,12) and his choice of the Plain may show that by the end of O.T. history Megiddo had come to be a byword in war, bloodshed and bereavement.
1. In summary, the gathering of the kings at "Mount Megiddo" simply means the kings gathered to meet their destiny. If world history was a game of poker, they were gambling all their winnings on one last hand. The problem was that past victories in this case were no cause for confidence. Their opponent was God himself. The effect of John's use of "Mount Megiddo" would have had the same effect on his readership as if a modern writer had spoken of the kings "meeting their Waterloo." They were going to come to a sticky end.

The significance of the passage

Psalm 2:1 "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one."

This Messianic Psalm was well-known and well-used by the early Church as they went about proving that Jesus was the Christ. John would have been extremely familiar with it. The nations plotting, the kings gathering together – these words came readily to mind whenever the church was persecuted.

In fact, this passage was quoted by the early Christians in Acts 4 as they prayed for boldness. They had just had their first serious brush with the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which was potentially discouraging event. You see, the Sanhedrin were not just a powerful governing body in Jerusalem; they were, almost man for man, the very same group that signed Jesus' death warrant.¹⁰ This was a group which it paid to be on good terms with.

⁸ For Notes on Archaeological discoveries at Megiddo, see Biblical Archaeological Review

⁹ Although 2 Kings 23:29 has Josiah killed in Megiddo itself. Most likely he was wounded in battle in the Plain and withdrew to Megiddo where he died.

¹⁰ The Sanhedrin was not a religious organisation so much as a political one. It was constituted of leading members of Jewish society, notably the Sadducees. The characters should be explained here. The Pharisees could be considered the evangelicals of the day. They were "Bible people", to borrow a phrase from John Stott. Their sins were those of self-righteousness (Lk 18), lack of forgiveness (Lk 15), lack of concern, materialism, creating

I believe the “kings of the earth” (Psalm 2:1), “kings of the whole world” (Rev 16:14) and “kings” in the text we are studying is a kind of shorthand in the early Church for all the worldly institutions around them with which they found themselves in conflict. They represent worldly power. The church’s motto was “In God we trust” – not in gaining acceptance and approval of worldly powers. Students of church history will recognise this as being the downfall of the Church in the fourth century when the State got involved in Church affairs, and once bought, the comfort of social legitimacy was too dear to lose. The purity of the Church was lost, the Bridal gown tarnished, and members of this “church” wouldn’t be walking down the aisle of Revelation 21 to meet Christ at the last day.

The significance of Rev 16:16 is that God is more powerful than all worldly powers and the day is coming when all of them will be called to account.

The lessons are:

1. For the disciple, this should give us great confidence in the face of the authorities
2. For the world, if it is wise, it will give respect and space to disciples.¹¹

It is a sign of the arrogance of worldly institutions when they seek to take on the people of God. And yet, sadly, this is what is happening all over the world. Universities, the media, para-church groups who are the self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy are all threatened by the lives and growth of true disciples.¹²

As disciples, let us take courage from the message of John to the churches. Armageddon should ring bells of jubilation for the disciple as it knells the judgment day for the institutions who attempt to check the kingdom of God. The message of Rev 16:16 is the same as that of Psalm 2:1,2: the kings of the earth have gambled one time too often and are going to lose it all. And guess who’s playing my hand – God is!

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petty rules - not a lack of devotion to the scriptures, fasting, tithing or even prayer.) The Sadducees on the other hand lacked much of a personal faith, in my opinion. They certainly did not believe in the afterlife, angels or heaven, in contrast to the Pharisees (Acts 23: 1ff) It is often mistakenly believed that the Pharisees were responsible for the death of Jesus. In fact, while Jesus often challenged them on their hypocrisy, their position to him was ambivalent. Some sought to protect him from Herod (Luke 13:31), while others joined forces with the Herodian (Mark 3:6). On more than one occasion, Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner. In the culture, this was a sign of acceptance on a deep level, although there might have been an agreement to disagree. No, Jesus’ number was up not when the Pharisees decided; the rubicon was crossed at a crucial meeting of the Sanhedrin following the raising of Lazarus. It was convened at the Pharisees’ request, and led by Caiaphas (John 11:47-53). They were persuaded that the interests of the status quo in Israel were best served by Jesus’ execution, and this effectively signed Jesus’ death warrant. At a later (unofficial) meeting of the Sanhedrin convened at dead of night in the House of Caiaphas in the South-Western corner of Jerusalem that he was tried on trumped-up charges and condemned to death. One reason we know this is that the rules for a blasphemy trial were not followed (assuming the second century rules of procedure, which we know, reflected first century practice). What is the significance of this? Simply that the Sanhedrin was not a body to be messed with! If they did not like you, you were history! They were not a well-meaning, sincere religious body so much as a political body which served the interests of the ruling elite in Israel,

¹¹ See U.S. Court judgement in legal action against ICOC campus minister at SUNY (KNN 32 Mi Familia) and Supreme Court of Singapore judgment (KNN 26 The Good Earth)

¹² See the article “Is Church hazardous to students’ health?” reprinted from the Manchester Union Leader, U.S.A. in *L.A. Story* 4/9/95 p. 3