

# Concordia Theological Monthly



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## Armageddon

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THIS name was heard a good deal about forty years ago; the late Theodore Roosevelt used it in his speeches, calling his followers to join him in a holy political crusade; a decisive battle was going to be fought at Armageddon. He mentioned that the trusts, and capitalists in general, had overreached themselves and that an energetic campaign had to be waged against forces destroying the economic and political freedom which our country had been enjoying. "We stand at Armageddon," he shouted, "and battle for the Lord." Evidently the term had a symbolic significance as used by him.

Armageddon is a Bible term occurring Rev. 16:16: "And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon" (A. V.). The name means "Hill of Megiddo." It is true that other derivations have been proposed. Bousset in his commentary on Revelation, while admitting that the etymology just given had up to this time been almost universally accepted by exegetes, rejects this explanation, stating that there is no mountain of Megiddo and that the town of this name is situated in a plain. He contends, furthermore, somewhat naively, that battles usually are not fought on mountains. That his objections have no weight will become clear as we go on. Megiddo was a place famous in Israelitish history. Here the great battle against Jabin, King of Canaan, that reigned in Hazor, and his general, Sisera, had taken place. The prophetess Deborah and Barak had led the small forces of the Israelites against the mighty hosts of the Canaanites from the north and had utterly defeated them in the plain of Megiddo. If you will look at an atlas, you will find, not far from Mount Carmel in the west, the place called Megiddo. It

was distinguished by a hill, which formed the southwestern bastion, as it were, of the fertile plain called Esdraelon or Jezreel, a plain that stretches to the northeast, for about fifteen miles, till it touches Mount Tabor. Through this plain flows the river Kishon. Barak and Deborah had gathered their forces on Mount Tabor, that peculiar cone rising quite abruptly out of the plain, and from there they had rushed down upon the enemy and with the help of the Lord had completely defeated Jabin and Sisera. In exalted poetical language the Song of Deborah speaks of this victory, Judg. 5:19-21: "The kings came and fought, then fought the kings of Canaan in Taanach by the waters of Megiddo; they took no gain of money. They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon." There are several other passages in the Old Testament where Megiddo is mentioned. A sad event for the Israelites took place there when, after the foolish challenge of good King Josiah extended to Pharaoh-nechoh of Egypt to meet him in battle, the clash occurred at Megiddo and Josiah was mortally wounded and died. At Megiddo there is a pass leading from the plain of Sharon along the Mediterranean to the plain of Esdraelon. The hill of Megiddo governs this pass. And it was at this strategic place that Josiah with his inferior force opposed Pharaoh-nechoh and suffered the defeat brought on by his presumptuous action. Cf. 2 Kings 23:29, 30; 2 Chron. 35:20-24. We see how wrong the criticism of Bousset is. Armageddon need not mean mountain or mountain range of Megiddo, it may well designate what we call a hill, and whether or not battles are fought on mountains, they are frequently fought at the foot of and around hills.

The hill of Megiddo, or Armageddon, rising probably one hundred feet above the plain, has been excavated and its various strata laid bare, first by German scholars and then, since 1925, by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, which in 1947, when the Church Craft Pictures expedition visited the mound, still had caretakers on the spot. The excavations have been remarkably fruitful. The whole history of Canaan, or Palestine, here receives illustration, so to speak. Altars have been found representing the early Canaanitish worship. At some time before the exodus of the

Israelites from Egypt the Egyptians under their mighty King Thotmes III had conquered the territory around Mount Carmel, and the archaeologists have come upon the Egyptian sections of the remains on this hill. Further sections have been uncovered, and by and by scholars found buildings that go back to the reign of Solomon. They have brought to light the stables where this king kept some of his many horses; you are shown the hitching posts made of stone. With sadness one sees next the altar or altars erected by Ahab and Jezebel in their worship of Baal. Thus one stratum succeeds the other, till the Greek and Roman times are reached. One thing is certain: Megiddo occupied an important strategic position, and to be in possession of the hill of Megiddo, the Armageddon, was a requisite for any king or leader who conspired to lordship over northern Palestine.

What has all this to do with Rev. 16:16? We have to look at the context of that passage. Ch. 16 of the Book of Revelation tells about the seven angels that poured out vials of the wrath of God upon the earth. The terrible plagues and disasters that came as a result of such pouring are described. About the sixth angel and his activity, this is the recital of the holy seer, vv. 12 f.: "The sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty." V. 15 is a word of warning, "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame." V. 16 I translate thus: "And they, that is, the evil spirits, gathered them at the place called in Hebrew Armageddon." The King James Version says: "He gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon." The verb form is the singular, and hence the King James translation is grammatically altogether possible. But in the preceding verses the evil spirits have been spoken of as the beings which are engaged in activities, and since spirits is a neuter noun (πνεύματα), the predi-

cate normally likewise is singular. Hence I take "spirits" to be the subject of the verb "gathered together."

What does the vision mean? As I see it, simply this, that the forces of evil led by Satan and his special adjutants will gather for battle against God in the terrific conflict of the last days.

There is something peculiar about the sixth vial. All of the preceding vials of wrath bring on terrible physical suffering, according to the picture language employed. But this sixth vial does not usher in bodily pains and torments. It is an announcement of the coming of unclean spirits which work signs and lead the rulers of the earth to oppose our great God. Are we here dealing with an outpouring of God's wrath? Certainly there can be no greater visitation of a community or nation than an invasion by spirits of falsehood and deception. We recall that Paul writes 2 Thess. 2:11 f.: "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie, and that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Of course, this must be correctly understood. God desires the salvation of every human being—that is a truth which the Scriptures set forth with glorious clarity. But if men persistently reject the truth, it may happen that divine patience ends and the judgment sets in: the Lord declares that the time of grace is ended, His Spirit is withdrawn, and the lover of error and wickedness is turned over to the powers of darkness. Such evidently is the condition obtaining in the sections of mankind where the evil spirits make their invasion and are permitted to reign triumphantly.

The evil spirits call the kings of the earth together for the battle against God Almighty on the Great Day of the Lord. The Great Day is undoubtedly the Day of Judgment, the last day of the present universe. The place of battle is Armageddon. It is clear that we are not to think of one special geographical spot. Since the Armageddon in Palestine many a time in the past has been the scene of important battles, the term here in Revelation has taken on the general significance of field of decision, as we today speak of Waterloo or Verdun, saying, for instance, that Hitler found his Waterloo at such and such a place. Armageddon then points to the time and occasion of the last great conflict between the forces of evil and our Lord, the exalted Christ. This is the

view taken of the use of Armageddon in Revelation 16 in the excellent brief commentary of C. H. Little which has recently appeared; he says, "The battle itself is not here described; but the name of the place of this gathering together is given in the Hebrew as Armageddon. This does not denote a geographical location, but refers to the great battlefield against all the forces of evil in which will occur their final and utter defeat." The description of the battle is placed before us in Rev. 19:11 ff.: "And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and He had a name written, that no man knew, but He Himself. And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations; and He shall rule them with a rod of iron; and He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Then comes the battle. The beast and the false prophet are thrown into a lake of fire. And the remnant are slain with the sword of Him that sits upon the horse, which sword proceeds out of His mouth.

This is but another way of describing that dread hour of which Jesus in Matt. 13:41 f. says: "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and they which do iniquity, and they shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." It will be a day of punishment for the wicked and, God be praised for it! of deliverance for the believers in Jesus Christ, for the Lord continues, v. 43: "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

There is a question which has to be answered here. Does Armageddon really refer to the end of the world, that is, to what will happen on the Last Day? We recall that Revelation 19 is not the last chapter in that apocalyptic book, but that after ch. 19 comes ch. 20, with its announcement of the binding of Satan for

one thousand years, and the thousand years of peace, and the final struggle between Gog and Magog and Satan and all his forces on the one hand and God and the saints on the other, and the final victory of the Lord. It might seem, then, that the battle of Armageddon is not the last, but probably the second-last great battle. My reply is that the impression created by Rev. 16:16 and Revelation 19 is that here the final struggle is described. The hosts of evil are gathered, and they are utterly vanquished. All the remnant were slain, says Rev. 19:21. No followers of Satan were left. Where could Satan get another army? This reminds us that the Book of Revelation is constructed in a peculiar way. The various scenes and events throughout the book are not meant to be viewed as following one the other in a long endless chain, but some of them, probably many of them, are synchronous. We are here dealing with paintings which describe the Last Times, and the end of the world is placed before us repeatedly. Cf. e.g., ch. 6:12-17; 11:15-19. Hence, as I view it, ch. 20 is simply another painting of the Last Times, setting forth the truth that had not been emphasized in what preceded—that there would occur a period of calm, of comparative peace, when Satan would be bound.

There is another question which requires consideration. The Book of Revelation, as we have seen, speaks of a great final battle between the forces of Satan and those of God. We do not find that our Lord in His long and stirring eschatological discourse, Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21 has anything to say about such a battle. What Jesus prophesies is that in the Last Days there will be a falling away of many, false prophets will arise and deceive great multitudes; love will grow cold, His disciples will be persecuted, in the world there will be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines. The picture apparently is altogether different from that given in the Book of Revelation. Is there a contradiction here? Not at all. Jesus depicts in more or less literal language what the Book of Revelation describes in highly symbolical and picturesque terms. The whole Book of Revelation is shot through with such metaphorical descriptions which we have to translate back into normal speech to obtain the intended significance. The Last Times, with the wickedness which will be widely practiced, will resemble a field of battle, where, as it were, Christ enters

the conflict against all the iniquities, the errors, the blasphemies, the worship of the golden calf, and of the sinful flesh as these evil factors loom larger and larger the more closely the end is approaching.

But are we here dealing so much with trees that we do not see the forest? Do exegetical and historical minutiae occupy us instead of the great issues of the kingdom of God and the conditions about us? The term Armageddon must remind us that we are still on earth, in a vale of tears, that a terrific final conflict is either coming or is in progress even now, when Satan and all his cohorts will once more exert themselves to the utmost to bring about the apostasy of God's children. We do not say that Armageddon will be here in a year or two, because it is not for us to fix the time and occasion of the final decision. But can we deny that when we look at mankind endeavoring to destroy itself in wars, in class struggles, embracing at the same time ever more widely the tenets of unbelief and moral turpitude, can we deny that from the point of view of the Bible Christian it is definitely toward evening and the day is far spent? Are we as a Church warning our people sufficiently against the evil tendencies and practices of the Last Times? Armageddon is coming. Do we mention it often enough? It is true, the enormous tidal wave of the final apostasy we shall not be able to stop, it will relentlessly roll forward to the final consummation. But we should at least do our duty as watchmen and cry out to the world, Take heed! Repent! Let that be the lesson which we learn from Revelation 16.

May God grant us His Holy Spirit that at the final Armageddon we shall stand on the side of our heavenly Lord even if this means the suffering of ridicule and persecution in the days preceding the Judgment. May Jesus Himself keep us faithful for His love's sake.

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