

# THE OT BACKGROUND TO *ARMAGEDDON* (REV. 16:16) REVISITED

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## *Abstract*

This study challenges the old view, recently championed by John Day, according to which 'Αρμαγεδών (Rev. 16:16) means the 'Mount of Megiddo' and is a conflation of 'Megiddo' in Zech. 12:11 and the 'mountains of Israel' in Ezek. 38-39. Instead of betraying Zecharian and Ezekielian influence, a closer inspection of the context of Rev. 16:16 points to the Isaian and Jeremian prophecies concerning the destruction of Babylon as a more plausible background of 'Αρμαγεδών. It is concluded that the solution to the riddle of 'Armageddon' is most likely to be found in the etymological approach and that within this approach, an interpretation of the word as a reference to the "cutting down" of the "mountain" Babylon is perhaps more attractive than other alternatives.

Few names or concepts in Revelation have acquired wider currency than 'Armageddon', by which the popular mind usually understands an end-time battle that more or less brings about the end of the world as we know it.\* Unfortunately, the full significance of John's reference to 'Αρμαγεδών is not quite as obvious, as scholars well know. Indeed, as David Aune has recently pointed out, "the name 'Harmagedon' has never been satisfactorily explained".<sup>1</sup> As far as this is true, the import of 'Αρμαγεδών in the context of John's story has not been fully appreciated, either.

If the full significance of this famous name remains veiled, it is by no means due to a lack of proposals, which are many and diverse. Yet while there is no consensus regarding the interpretation of 'Αρμαγεδών, the most common explanation is that it contains a reference or an allusion to the town of Megiddo in northern Palestine.<sup>2</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC; Nashville: Nelson, 1998) 898.

<sup>2</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 898; M. Oberweis, "Erwägungen zur apokalyptischen Ortsbezeichnung 'Harmagedon'", *Biblica* 76 (1995) 305.

version of such a view has been championed by John Day in his influential 1994 article, where he argues that Rev. 16:16 is an interpretation of Zech. 12:11.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this study is to challenge Day's proposal and to promote different interpretive avenues regarding Rev. 16:16 and John's use of the enigmatic word 'Αρμαγεδών. In particular, I will argue that Armageddon has more to do with OT prophecies concerning Babylon's destruction than with the nations' attack against the saints or the Messiah, as is often believed. Before that, however, we will first briefly look at why the word is problematic and then survey various solutions that have been offered to the problem, including Day's proposal.

### 1. *The Problem and Previous Proposals for a Solution*

Though numerous variants are attested for the Greek word 'Αρμαγεδών in Rev. 16:16,<sup>4</sup> it is not the spelling of the word but rather its Hebrew meaning that has exercised the minds of commentators. In Hebrew, 'Αρμαγεδών appears to mean *har mēgiddōn*, 'mount[ain of] Megiddo', yet no such place is known to ever have existed. The question therefore is, How should we construe and interpret the Hebrew word or phrase underlying the Greek word 'Αρμαγεδών?

Solutions that have been offered can be divided into three groups: those that interpret 'Αρμαγεδών as 'mount[ain of] Megiddo' and try to make sense of the reference; those that suggest that 'Αρμαγεδών derives from a different Hebrew word or phrase; and those that consider the Hebrew background of 'Αρμαγεδών to be either unrecoverable or unimportant. Day examines proposals from all three groups, deeming them unconvincing on various grounds.<sup>5</sup> Though quite impres-

<sup>3</sup> John Day, "The Origin of Armageddon: Revelation 16:16 as an Interpretation of Zechariah 12:11", in S. Porter and P. Joyce (eds.), *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 315-26; followed, for example, by R. Rogers (*An Exegetical Analysis of John's Use of Zechariah in the Book of Revelation: The Impact and Transformation of Zechariah's Text and Themes in the Apocalypse* [Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002] 111-14) and cited with cautious approval by G. Osborne, *Revelation* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 560, and G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1999) 841.

<sup>4</sup> Μαγε[δ]ών, Αρμεγηδων, Αρμαγεδδων, Αρμεγεδδων, 'Αρμεγεδων, 'Αρμαγεδω, Αρμαγεδον, Αρμαγεδομ, Μαγεδαδ, Μαγιδων, Μακεδδων (see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2nd ed.; London: United Bible Societies, 1994] 681). 'Αρμαγεδών is clearly the most likely original reading.

<sup>5</sup> Here we can only present a short summary of the proposals examined by Day (for details and bibliographic references, see Day, "The Origin of Armageddon", 315-

sive already, his survey by no means includes all the proposals ever put forward with regard to the significance of Ἀρμαγεδών, for he chose to leave out “patristic and other pre-critical Christian views”.<sup>6</sup> We will return to some of these later. First, however, we will evaluate Day’s own proposal, which belongs to the first group.

#### a. Day’s Proposal

According to Day, by coining the expression Ἀρμαγεδών, John has combined two important OT motifs: Ἀρ is an allusion to the eschatological battle on the mountains of Israel, depicted in Ezek. 38 and 39, and Μαγεδών is an allusion to Megiddo in Zech. 12:11, where it is mentioned in the context of the eschatological battle against Jerusalem. While these connections have been made before,<sup>7</sup> Day is the first to spell out fully the reasons why this is how Ἀρμαγεδών ought to be understood.

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22). According to him, Armageddon (a) is not Mt Carmel, for it is too far from Megiddo and is never called ‘mountain of Megiddo’; (b) does not derive from Ὑεσεμυγαδών, name of the husband of Ereshkigal (the Babylonian goddess of the underworld), for there is nothing in Revelation to suggest a connection; (c) does not come from Hebrew *har mō’ād*, ‘Mount of Assembly’, for it is too remote in form to be a source of Armageddon; (d) does not come from Hebrew *har migdō*, ‘his fruitful mountain’ (i.e., Mt Zion), for it is never employed of Mt Zion or anywhere else; (e) does not mean, ‘mount of (the) Macedonian’ (i.e., Alexander the Great), for this proposal has nothing to commend it; (f) does not come from Hebrew *‘ār mēgiddōn*, ‘the city of Megiddo’, or *‘ar hēmdā*, ‘the desirable city’, for *‘ar* is never attested for *‘ir* (‘city’) in Hebrew and *‘ār* only for a Moabite place name Ar; (g) does not come from *‘āra’ mēgiddōn*, ‘the land of Megiddo’, for the vocalization tells against ‘land’ and there is even less reason to call Megiddo a land than a mountain; (h) is not a code name for Jerusalem or Rome, for such suggestions are “far-fetched”; and (i) is not a name, whose meaning is unknown and which derives from apocalyptic tradition, for such a view is “a counsel of despair”. As for the first proposal, there is some force in Day’s objection, yet if Kishon can be referred to as ‘the waters of Megiddo’, or if it is possible to speak about ‘Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo’ (Judg. 5:19-21), then Mt Carmel as ‘Armageddon’ is not completely impossible, for the mountain range where Mt Carmel is located is only about 2km farther from Megiddo than Taanach.

<sup>6</sup> Day, “The Origin of Armageddon”, 315n1. Also left out are—obviously—the views of later commentators. Beale, for example, considers Armageddon to symbolize the whole world (*Revelation*, 835). In addition to his unqualified acceptance of this view, Beale is cautious not to completely rule out other possibilities. Thus, he also considers it possible that Armageddon symbolizes Jerusalem and Mt Zion, or that it is referring to the ‘city of Megiddo’, or that it is associated with Mt Carmel. Furthermore, he deems Day’s argument “probable” (841).

<sup>7</sup> E.g., I. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1919; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 685.

Assuming that the Hebrew phrase underlying Ἀρμαγεδών is *har mēgiddōn*, ‘mountain of Megiddo’, Day gives five reasons why John must have taken up the reference to Megiddo from Zech. 12:11.<sup>8</sup> First, prior to Revelation, Zech. 12:11 is the only place where Megiddo appears in an apocalyptic context. Second, Zech. 12:11 is the only instance of the MT spelling Megiddo with a final *nûn*, i.e., *mēgiddōn* rather than *mēgiddô*. Third, not only has Zechariah “exerted a pervasive influence throughout the Book of Revelation”, but also the verses immediately preceding and following 12:11, i.e., 12:10 and 12:12, are clearly alluded to in Rev. 1:7. Moreover, Rev. 16:16 is sandwiched by verses that show “evidence of influence” from Zech. 12-14, i.e., 16:13-14 and 16:18-19. Fourth, the reference to the ‘valley of Megiddo’ in Zech. 12:11 naturally suggests the presence of a mountain also. Finally, the author of Revelation may have read Zech. 12:11 as implying that the nations of the earth will mourn in Megiddo in the context of an eschatological battle against Jerusalem and thus arrived at the idea of an end-time assembly for battle at Megiddo.

Day solves the traditional problem, i.e., the absence of a mountain in or near Megiddo, by taking the prefix Ἀρ in Ἀρμαγεδών as an allusion to Ezek. 38-39. He considers this likely for the following three reasons:<sup>9</sup> (1) Ezek. 38:8, 39:2, 4, 17 “predict that the eschatological conflict will take place ‘on the mountains of Israel’”; (2) not only is Ezekiel’s general influence throughout Revelation obvious, but chapters 38-39 have specifically influenced John’s portrayal of the conflicts in Rev. 19:17-21 and 20:7-10; and (3) John often conflates themes from different OT books and elsewhere in Revelation we find examples of other conflations of Ezekiel and Zechariah.

## b. Evaluation of Day’s Proposal

There are some weaknesses with Day’s proposal, however. First, it rests on the assumption that the Hebrew phrase underlying Ἀρμαγεδών is indeed to be translated as the ‘mountain of Megiddo’. While this is possible, other possibilities exist as well, as we will see below. Second, Day seems to take it for granted that there is a single eschatological conflict which John narrates and to which he alludes. However, as I have argued elsewhere, John does not collapse different OT ‘end-time conflict’ traditions into one but alludes to at least three different tra-

<sup>8</sup> Day, “The Origin of Armageddon”, 319-26.

<sup>9</sup> Day, “The Origin of Armageddon”, 323.

ditions in the course of his narrative and uses them for different purposes.<sup>10</sup> Third, the appeal to the apocalyptic context of the word 'Megiddo' in Zech. 12:11 is not very helpful, for the use of the OT in Revelation is by no means limited to apocalyptic passages. Moreover, if a name or motif appears in more than one place in the OT, there is no evidence that John prefers the apocalyptic context simply because of the perceived similarities in the genre.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to demonstrate that out of a number of possible background texts featuring a motif, John ever alludes to one specific text rather than to the motif in general, unless there are clear indicators to the contrary. In other words, if John intends to allude only to the Megiddo of Zech. 12:11, that needs to be established on other grounds. Fourth, the fact that Zechariah has influenced Revelation is equally unhelpful, for so have a number of other OT books as well. Furthermore, a closer analysis of the proposed allusions to Zechariah around Rev. 16:16 reveals that Day has somewhat overestimated the Zecharian influence on John's portrayal of the last two bowls.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, while the argument from the final *nûn* has some force, it ultimately remains unconvincing. The fact that the same Hebrew word 'Megiddo' (מגידו) has been transliterated by the translators of the LXX in seven different ways should make one at least cautious regarding the opposite process.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, if the Greek word Μαγεδων in the OT translates or transliterates in three occasions מגידו in Hebrew,<sup>14</sup> how do we know that in Rev. 16:16 the same word must come from מגידון instead? After all, the only place where מגידון appears, i.e., Zech. 12:11, has apparently been read by the LXX translator as a participle form of גרע, 'to cut', 'cut down', 'cut off', or גרד, 'to cut', rather than as a proper noun.<sup>15</sup> It is also worth asking whether John's audience would have been aware of, and able to recall, the different Hebrew

<sup>10</sup> M. Jauhiainen, "Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective", *NTS* 49 (2003) 543-59.

<sup>11</sup> If this were the case, one would expect to see more allusions to Zechariah, for example (see further M. Jauhiainen, *'Behold, I am Coming': The Use of Zechariah in Revelation* [Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2003]).

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough analysis of the use of Zechariah in Revelation, see Jauhiainen, *Behold*.

<sup>13</sup> Μαγεδων (Josh. 12:21); Μαγεδδω (Josh. 17:11); Μαγεδω (Judg. 1:27); Μεγεδδω (Judg. 5:19); Μαγεδω [?] (3 Kgdms. 2:35 LXX/1 Kgs. 9:15 MT); Μεκεδω (3 Kgdms. 4:12); and Μαγεδδων (4 Kgdms. 9:27).

<sup>14</sup> Josh. 12:21; Judg. 1:27 (A); 2 Chr. 35:22.

<sup>15</sup> גרע is normally favoured (T. Jansma, *Inquiry into the Hebrew Text and the Ancient Versions of Zechariah IX-XIV* [Leiden: Brill, 1949] 199; W. Rudolph, *Haggai/Sacharja 1-8/Sacharja 9-14/Maleachi* [KzAT XII 4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Mohn, 1976]

spellings of Megiddo, and, on the basis of the final ם in Zech. 12:11, been able to make a connection. It seems more likely that John's point regarding Hebrew was not to draw attention to the paragogic ם in Zech. 12:11, but rather to the fact that in Hebrew, Armageddon is a conflation of 'mount[ain]' and something else.

Sixth, while the Hebrew word מַעְרָב in Zech. 12:11 could have the sense 'valley' or 'plain', why would the author of Revelation, usually thought to be a Palestinian Jew, read it as 'valley' if there is neither a valley, nor mountains, in Megiddo? Again, the LXX lends no support to Day's argument, for the translator has chosen πεδίων ('level place', 'plain', 'field') rather than φάραγξ ('valley', 'ravine') or κοιλάς ('a hollow', 'deep valley'), both of which would have more readily connoted a high, elevated area—such as a mountain—bordering the מַעְרָב. In any case, even if πεδίων can be used to describe a proper valley surrounded by mountains, no such connotation is necessary, especially in the context of Zech. 12:11.

Seventh, Day's otherwise interesting reconstruction of how John must have read Zechariah is weakened by the fact that he leaves the role of 'Hadad-Rimmon'—clearly very prominent in Zech. 12:11—unexplained in John's reading, merely stating that John may have understood it either as a place name or as a personal name.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, even if correct, Day's reconstruction would merely supply a motive for alluding to Zech. 12:11 in Rev. 16:16 and not function as evidence that John has actually done so in the first place.

Eighth, Day's reasons for invoking Ezekiel 38-39 as the source of the mountain in the phrase 'mountain of Megiddo' are not adequate to explain why that passage should be preferred over other OT passages that connect an eschatological conflict with a mountain or mountains. Indeed, John had better traditions available, as we will see below.

Finally, together with most commentators, Day fails to explain why, in the context of the summary description of the fall of Babylon, John would have a passing reference in 16:16 to a chronologically subsequent conflict described three (19:11-21) or four (20:7-10) chapters later. Thus, while Day's proposal remains the best defence of the tra-

218; J. Lust, E. Eynekel, and K. Hauspie, comp., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* [Part II: κ-ω; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997] 183), though some seem to accept נַד instead (T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint: Twelve Prophets* [Louvain: Peeters, 1993] 71). It is impossible to say whether the translator (a) misread [ן]ע for נ, (b) was confounded by the hapax and groped for something that was close enough, (c) considered both נַד and נַע to have 'to cut down' as one of their senses, or (d) had a Hebrew *Vorlage* different from our MT at Zech. 12:11.

<sup>16</sup> Day, "The Origin of Armageddon", 323.

ditional 'mountain of Megiddo' position, we must conclude that, in the final analysis, its many weaknesses render it unsatisfactory.

## 2. *Alternative Possibilities*

As an alternative to the 'mountain of Megiddo' perspective, I would like to present an approach to interpreting Rev. 16:16 that both takes its context in John's unfolding story seriously and is more sensitive to its OT background. Let us begin by looking at the context of Rev. 16:16. One of the interesting features of 16:14-16 is the fact that no enemy is mentioned, nor a battle narrated, so that the audience need to fill in the gaps themselves. The information provided by the context is therefore crucial. The seven bowls, beginning in 16:1, are part of the process described as "destroying the destroyers of the earth",<sup>17</sup> 16:12-16 portraying the pouring out of the sixth bowl, together with the accompanying events. This is immediately followed by the seventh bowl, as "God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath" (16:19b). The next section, 17:1-19:10, focuses almost entirely on the description of Babylon and her fate, elaborating on the summary statement in 16:19b. The placement of 16:16 thus suggests that the gathering of troops to Armageddon has something to do with the destruction of Babylon.

However, this conclusion seems to be confounded by 17:14, which says that the beast and the kings "will make war on the Lamb". As this verse clearly refers to the events in 19:11-21, most commentators have concluded that 16:14-16 therefore refers to the same battle. Yet the picture is not quite that simple, as the following five considerations suggest. First, the immediate context concerns the destruction of Babylon, which makes it very difficult for the audience, at least at the first reading of the document, to perceive 16:14-16 as a description of something that follows three chapters later, especially if there are any reasons to connect the passage with its present context. Second, if 16:14-16 refers primarily to the confrontation narrated in chapter 19, the way the story is shaped gives the odd impression that the kings of the earth were gathered to Armageddon before the seventh bowl, presumably waiting there while Babylon was being destroyed.

Third, the activities of the beast and the kings are described not only in 17:14, but also in 17:16-17, according to which the coalition

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<sup>17</sup> R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) 21.

will make Babylon “desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire”, “for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while God is ultimately responsible for Babylon’s fall, the actual work is done by the beast and the kings and their forces, who attack and destroy Babylon. Moreover, according to John, this takes place before the confrontation between the beast and the Lamb in chapter 19. This fits the biblical pattern whereby God uses one evil nation to punish another, which in turn is punished by yet another nation, and so forth, until God or his Messiah slays the final enemy.<sup>19</sup>

Fourth, our interpretation is consistent with the legend of Nero’s return, to which John appears to allude in his description of the beast and its activities.<sup>20</sup> One of the aspects of the legend portrays Nero as returning from the East, allied with the Parthians, and destroying Rome.<sup>21</sup> If John understood Babylon to symbolize Rome or some aspects of the Roman Empire, then the sixth bowl is best understood as a preparation for the seventh bowl, which in turn is expanded on in chapters 17 and 18.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, some of the key OT texts behind Rev. 16:14-19:5, particularly Isa. 13 and Jer. 50 and 51, envisage the destruction of Babylon at the hands of foreign armies and many kings.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the great gathering of kings for war in 16:14-16 is, at least in the first instance, for the purpose of attacking and destroying Babylon,<sup>23</sup> rather than to attack the Lamb and his forces, which is narrated later.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The “kings from the east” (16:12) and the “kings of the whole world” (16:16) are usually understood to be the same kings that “receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast” (17:12); see, e.g., Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 429; and Beale, *Revelation*, 878.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947) 327.

<sup>20</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 407-31.

<sup>21</sup> It is also worth noting that according to Herodotus, the historical Babylon was conquered in 539 B.C. by Medes and Persians, who entered the city by way of the dried-up bed of the Euphrates River (Herodotus 1.191; cf. Jer. 50:38).

<sup>22</sup> See especially Rev. 16:14 // Isa. 13:4 (cf. LXX); Rev. 17:1b // Jer. 51:13; Rev. 17:2, 4 // Jer. 51:7; Rev. 17:16 // Jer. 50:13, 41, Jer. 51:25, 29; Rev. 18:2 // Isa. 13:21, Jer. 50:39, Jer. 51:37; Rev. 18:5 // Jer. 51:9; Rev. 18:6 // Jer. 50:15, 29, Jer. 51:24, 49; Rev. 18:8 // Jer. 50:34 (27:34 LXX); Rev. 18:9 // Jer. 50:46 (27:46 LXX); Rev. 18:20 // Jer. 51:48; Rev. 18:21 // Jer. 51:63; Rev. 18:24 // Jer. 51:49.

<sup>23</sup> This is recognized only by few commentators, e.g., Kiddle, *Revelation*, and G. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (2nd ed.; BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> The presence of the definite article with πόλεμος in 16:14 may be explained as



Having established the close connection of Rev. 16:16 and its context with the destruction of Babylon, we can now turn to the OT texts that John is primarily drawing from and see how they can illuminate John's use of Ἀρμαγεδών. A brief analysis of Isa. 13 and Jer. 50-51 reveals four significant links with Rev. 16:14-16 that affect the interpretation of the latter. First, in these OT passages, many kings and nations are gathered together (Isa. 13:4; Jer. 50:9, 41-42; 51:27-28). Second, the purpose of their gathering is for battle. Third, the battle is against Babylon, whom the kings will make desolate (Jer. 50:13; 51:29, 37), burn (Jer. 51:25), and devour (Jer. 51:34-35). Finally, not only is the gathering of the kings and nations on the *mountains* (Isa. 13:4), but also Babylon itself is called a 'destroying *mountain*' which "destroys the whole earth" and which will therefore be made a 'burnt *mountain*' (Jer. 51:25). Thus, if John's purpose in Rev. 16:16 is to draw attention to the fact that in Hebrew, Armageddon is a conflation of 'mount[ain]' and something else, then these references to the mountains in the oracles regarding the destruction of Babylon clearly provide a better contextual and thematic match than the mountains found in Ezek. 38-39.

Contrary to the traditional view, then, the difficulty in the word Ἀρμαγεδών is not with Ἀρ but with μαγεδών. While the association of a mountain with the destruction of Babylon can be explained, as we saw, the alleged connection to Megiddo is less obvious, unless 'Megiddo' is understood merely as a symbol for a 'significant battle site'. However, if that were the case, then there would be no allusion to Zech. 12:11 in Rev. 16:16 as Day suggests, as the references to the battles at or near Megiddo occur in Judg. 5:19, 2 Kgs. 23:29-30, and 2 Chr. 35:22. Moreover, if John had 'the mount[ain of] Megiddo' in mind, he could have said it equally well in Greek without losing any of the significance attached to the phrase by Day and others who follow the same line of interpretation. In other words, if the name of the town in Greek appears as Μαγεδών in the LXX, why draw attention to the Hebrew behind Μαγεδών? Or are we to assume that John merely wanted to provoke the imagination of his audience by making them translate Ἀρ?<sup>25</sup>

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a reference to a well-known gathering for war against Babylon, envisaged both by Isaiah and Jeremiah. Alternatively, if one wants to see a reference in v. 14 to the conflict in ch. 19, the assembling at Armagedon in v. 16, and the subsequent destruction of Babylon, can be understood as an intermediate phase leading up to the battle in ch. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Oberweis ("Erwägungen", 316-24) has suggested that Ἀρμαγεδών is a transliter-

If there is a solution to the conundrum, it is more likely to be found in the etymology of the Hebrew word or phrase transliterated by John as Μαγεδών, than in seeking a connection between the destruction of Babylon and the city of Megiddo in northern Palestine. As already mentioned, the LXX of Zech. 12:11 suggests that מַגְדוֹן was read as a verbal form deriving from נָדַד or נָדַע. In addition to the meaning 'to cut', נָדַד can also mean 'to band together' or 'to attack'.<sup>26</sup> These possibilities have given rise to a number of views which were left out of Day's survey, the earliest well-known proposals coming from the sixth century. In their commentaries, both Oecumenius<sup>27</sup> and Andreas of Ceasarea<sup>28</sup> argued that in Hebrew, Ἀρμαγεδών means 'mountain of slaughter' and that the kings of the earth are gathered to this mountain in order to be exterminated. This view has been followed by some modern scholars as well. Hans LaRondelle, for example, understands Ἀρμαγεδών as the 'mountain of the cut down', which is the apocalyptic name for the place where Babylon, the beast, and the kings of the world will be destroyed.<sup>29</sup> Another variation of this view has been offered by Caird, who interprets 'Armageddon' as 'the marauding mountain', an allusion to the 'destroying mountain' in Jer. 51:25.<sup>30</sup> Alan Johnson, on the other hand, favours the sense 'to band together' of נָדַד, suggesting that Ἀρμαγεδών in Hebrew means 'the mountain of

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ation of the Hebrew phrase הַרמַגְדוֹן rather than הַרמְגְדוֹן. If reversed and properly divided, this would give the names Nod (נֹד) and Gomorrah (עֲמֹרָה). These, in turn, would allude to the fates of Cain ('Nod' appears in Gen. 4:16) and Gomorrah, which would help to illuminate the destruction of Babylon and certain other details of Revelation. Though Oberweis's full argument is ingenious, it fails to convince. It is unlikely that those hearing Revelation being read would somehow have been able to actualize an allusion by means of Ἀρμαγεδών to Cain (via 'Nod') and Gomorrah, given that they could have discerned—with less effort—allusions to traditions that are more closely related to the present context and the flow of John's story.

<sup>26</sup> F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs (eds.), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979) 151; L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm (eds.), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson; 4 vols; Leiden: Brill) 1:177.

<sup>27</sup> H. Hoskier (ed.), *The Complete Commentary of Oecumenius on the Apocalypse: Now Printed for the First Time from Manuscripts at Messina, Rome, Salonika, and Athos* (University of Michigan studies, Humanistic series, vol. XXIII; Ann Arbor, 1928) 179-80.

<sup>28</sup> J. Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes, 1. Teil: Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisarea, Text* (Munich: Karl Zink Verlag, 1955) 175.

<sup>29</sup> H. LaRondelle, "The Etymology of *Har-Magedon* (Rev. 16:16)", *AUSS* 27 (1989) 69-73.

<sup>30</sup> Caird, *Revelation*, 207.

his place of gathering troops', which would allude "to the prophetic expectation of the gathering of the nations for judgment".<sup>31</sup>

These examples show that even within this etymological approach, there are at least three different paths one can follow, all of which receive support from the passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah we examined earlier. First, it may be possible to interpret Ἀρμαγεδών as 'the mountain of [his place of] gathering troops together'. The weakness of this interpretation is that it repeats much of the information given already two verses earlier, i.e., that armies are gathering together.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, if this is what John intended, then it could perhaps still function as a reference to the mountain where the destroyers of Babylon are gathered before they execute God's judgment (Isa. 13:4). Since Babylon herself is called a 'mountain' (Jer. 51:25; cf. Rev. 17:9), Ἀρμαγεδών could also refer to her. Contrary to Johnson's view, however, the primary purpose of the gathering is to destroy Babylon, not those gathered against her.

A second possibility is to take Ἀρμαγεδών as 'the attacking/marauding mountain'. Unlike in the case of the first alternative, the name itself would not contain a direct hint to Babylon's fate, though it would still be an allusion to Babylon and invoke the traditions concerning Babylon's destruction (Jer. 51:25). This option would be even more attractive if the preposition εἰς could be read as expressing disadvantage, i.e., "They<sup>33</sup> gathered them against the place that in Hebrew is called 'the marauding mountain'". While συνάγω more frequently takes the preposition ἐπί to express the idea of 'gathering against', there are a couple of examples in the LXX where εἰς is used instead.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of our interpretation of εἰς, however, the allusion to the OT traditions of Babylon's destruction and the context of Revelation make clear that the first target of the gathering armies is Babylon, as we have noted already.

<sup>31</sup> A. Johnson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with The New International Version: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 156.

<sup>32</sup> In Hebrew, we often find puns involving a name which somehow repeats something else from the verse, e.g., Mic. 1:10 (Q), בְּבֵית לַעֲפֹרָה עָפַר הַחֲפֹלֶשֶׁת, or Hos. 1:9, וַיֹּאמֶר קָרָא שְׁמוֹ לֹא עֲמִי כִי אוֹחַם לֹא עֲמִי. However, in order for a similar pun to be present in Rev. 16:16, the whole verse should be in Hebrew and instead of συνάγω there would be a form of דָּד.

<sup>33</sup> Συνήγαγεν is 3 sing., but ἃ ἐκπορεύεται in v. 14 suggests that the antecedent is the "spirits" rather than "God the Almighty".

<sup>34</sup> Deut. 32:23; Judg. 20:11; Odes 2:23. Of course, one of the basic uses of εἰς itself is to express disadvantage, 'against' (see, e.g., D. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 369).

Perhaps the biggest dividends in the context of Rev. 16-18 would be paid by the third alternative, according to which Ἀμμεγδών is interpreted as 'the mountain of slaughter' or 'the mountain of the cut down'.<sup>35</sup> This reading would also have the advantage of having a partial precedent in the translation of 'Megiddon' in Zech. 12:11 LXX.<sup>36</sup> Again, the one slaughtered or cut down in the first instance would be Babylon rather than her destroyers, as commentators usually assume. As the prophets of old prophesied, instead of ascending to heaven and sitting on the mount of assembly, she will be "cut down" (נָרַע; Isa. 14:12-13); she was "the hammer of the whole earth", but will now be "cut down" (נָרַע; Jer. 50:23) when the attacking kings and their armies destroy her (Jer. 50:15, 29, 40-41).

If this approach is correct, then the toponym coined by John would function as an ironic hint to the fate of the pompous and wicked mountain, whose final hour is about to be described and explained, first briefly and then in some detail in chapters 17 and 18. After the summary statement in 16:19, "God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath", John declares that "no mountains were to be found". Given our earlier observation regarding the association of a mountain or mountains with Babylon in the OT, it is tempting to see v. 20 as a confirmation that Babylon has indeed been successfully "cut down".<sup>37</sup> This would also fit well with John's tendency to bring explicit closure to unfulfilled OT prophecies.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> In Hebrew, the literal 'mountain of [the] cut down', can have the semantic force of the 'cut down mountain'. In Greek, this type of genitive is sometimes called 'Hebrew genitive'.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. n15 above. If, at Zech. 12:11, John and his audience shared a consonantal Hebrew text identical to our MT, and a Greek text resembling our LXX, then the translation of מְגִדּוֹן as ἐκκατομέδου in the LXX may well have suggested a partial semantic overlap between the senses of נָרַע and נָדַר, regardless of how the translator viewed מְגִדּוֹן.

<sup>37</sup> If one wishes to see an allusion to Zechariah in Rev. 16:16, perhaps a better candidate would be the prophecy concerning the levelling of the 'great mountain', which stands in the way of the building and the completion of the temple (Zech. 4). Insofar as the prophecy is and was understood as a reference to the glorious eschatological temple that was to be built, there is a direct parallel in Revelation, where the great and destroying 'mountain', Babylon, needs to be destroyed before God's eschatological dwelling place in the midst of His people can become full reality.

<sup>38</sup> On the general concern of Jewish prophetic teachers and apocalyptic writers to close divine predictions that had remained unfulfilled, see, e.g., M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 465; and D. S. Russell, *The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC-AD 100* (London: SCM, 1964) 178-202.

In sum, while absolute certainty regarding the precise import of 'Αρμαγεδών or its constituents may elude us, explanations connecting it to the kings' attack against Babylon are in any case more likely in the context of Rev. 16-18 than understanding it as an allusion to the 'plain of Megiddo' in Zech. 12:11 or the 'mountains of Israel' in Ezek. 38 and 39.

### 3. *Conclusion*

Even as 'Armageddon' has invaded the popular consciousness, its specific import in John's narrative continues to be a matter of some debate among the scholars. The view that the name is connected to Zech. 12 and Ezek. 38-39 is attractive on the surface, yet we saw that it ultimately remains unsatisfactory.

As an alternative, I proposed that rather than assuming that Rev. 16:16 refers to the conflict in chapter 19, our interpretation should be guided by the immediate context and by John's unfolding story. Thus, in his description of the destruction of Babylon in chapter 16, he is evoking the same OT traditions to which his portrayal of Babylon in chapters 17 and 18 is heavily indebted. As for the first part of the toponym 'Αρμαγεδών, I pointed out how 'Αρ can be connected to Babylon and its fall: not only are her destroyers assembling on the mountains, but she herself is called a 'destroying mountain', which will be made a 'burnt mountain'. As for the second part, I followed the etymological approach, noting various possibilities and suggesting that μαγεδών is probably best understood as an ironic reference to Babylon, who is about to be cut down from her lofty place. This approach does not deny that her destroyers will later also rise to make war on the Lamb, but emphasizes that this is not John's concern in Rev. 16:16. Perhaps the popular understanding of Armageddon as the final battle where the "baddies" fight it out amongst themselves may not be so far removed from John's perspective after all.