

THE LOCATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ARMAGEDDON IN REV 16:16

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Because the sixth plague of Rev 16:12-16 contains specific references to geographical loci—the Euphrates and Armageddon—it has received more attention than the preceding plagues that deal more generally with sores, blood, heat, and darkness. In view of the great interest in these geographical references, their location and the OT imagery from which they are drawn should be examined in some detail.

1. *Historical Babylon and the Euphrates*

The Euphrates River referred to in vs. 12 is well known and there is no problem in identifying what concerns the imagery it involves. The course of the river brings us to the city of Babylon, and the reference to the drying up of its waters takes us back to a historical event in OT times when the sudden drying up of the river-bed contributed to Babylon's military fall. Forces from Media and Persia in the east were on the march to conquer Babylon in Tishri (or October) of the year 539 B.C., and they entered the city by way of the bed of the Euphrates River.

According to Herodotus (*The Histories*, 1. 189-191), the Persians diverted the Euphrates into canals they had dug for this very purpose, and then they gained access to the city by way of the river-bed. While the Persians probably did come into control of Babylon through this avenue, it is unlikely that they did so by carrying out the grand hydraulic engineering project that Herodotus describes. The dates in the Nabonidus Chronicle argue against a project of this magnitude. Cyrus attacked the Babylonian army in Opis on the Tigris early in Tishri.¹ Sippar fell next, on the 14th of Tishri; and Babylon was conquered by another division of his forces only two days later.

Not only do the dates connected with this campaign indicate that the Persians did not bother with so elaborate a scheme as that described by Herodotus, but the month in which it occurred indicates why such a scheme was unnecessary. The Euphrates is at its lowest ebb in Tishri;

¹For the text see A. L. Oppenheim, "Babylonian and Assyrian Historical Texts," in ANET², p. 306.

hence nature had already prepared the river route into the city for the Persians. Thus a king from the east—Cyrus—gained entrance to, and victory over, Babylon through the drying up of the waters of the Euphrates. This led to the deliverance of the people of God, for Cyrus was the one who allowed the Jews in exile to return to their homeland (Ezra 1-2).

The picture of these events was painted prophetically in Isa 44:24-45:6. There it was Yahweh who spoke to the waters on behalf of Cyrus: "Be dry, I will dry up your rivers" (44:27). Not by Persian engineering, therefore, but by decree of the God who is sovereign over nature was this accomplished. Thus Cyrus served as Yahweh's agent in these events, and for this reason he was designated as Yahweh's anointed shepherd. Yahweh also promised to "open the doors before him that the gates may not be closed. . . . I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron" (45:1-2). The question of how the river gates were opened for the Persians has never been determined. Since Nabonidus was an unpopular king in Babylon, it has been suggested that disloyal forces inside the city opened the gates for the conquerors. Another possibility may present itself from the perspective given in Isa 45:1-2, so that the question may be asked, Could the hand that wrote on the wall of the palace that very night of Babylon's fall (Dan 5:5, 25) also have opened the city gates for the Persians?

When consideration is given to the analogy of Rev 16:12 with the historical drying up of the Euphrates River, a central fact stands out: the phraseology in Revelation refers to the coming of a Messianic figure who, by virtue of his victory, will deliver God's people.

2. *The "Waters of Megiddo" and "Mountain of Megiddo"*

An actual battle is not described in this sixth-plague passage; only the preparation for it is noted. In preparation for the coming battle "on the great day of God Almighty" (vs. 14), the forces of the threefold coalition of evil are to assemble "at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon" (vs. 16). The difference between the imagery drawn upon here and that employed in the case of the drying up of the Euphrates at the beginning of this plague passage should be noted. The river which ran down the Jezreel Valley and past Megiddo to the sea was not the Euphrates, but the Kishon. Conversely, it was Babylon, not Megiddo, which was located on the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. This mixing of historical metaphors appears to be intentional and should tell us something about the nature of

the battle on the great day of God Almighty which is to follow this plague. It should caution the commentator against excessive literalness in interpreting these references in terms of modern-day political entities in the Middle East or elsewhere.

The prophetic analogy or lesson which is to be drawn from the historical setting of Armageddon can only be determined after having located this place. Unfortunately, this has not been easy, and there has been considerable disagreement among commentators on this point, as G. E. Ladd has noted:

The word "Armageddon" is difficult; the Hebrew equivalent would be *har megiddon*—the mountain of Megiddo. The problem is that Megiddo is not a mountain, but a plain located between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean, part of the valley of Jezreel (Esdraelon). It was a famous battleground in the history of Israel. At Megiddo, Barak and Deborah overthrew the Canaanite Jabin (Jud 5:19); Ahaziah was slain by Jehu (II Kings 23:29; II Chr 35:22). Why John calls it the mountain of Megiddo is not clear; R. H. Charles says that no convincing interpretation has yet been given of the phrase, it is unknown in Hebrew literature. . . . Whatever the derivation of the name, it is clear that John means by Armageddon the place of the final struggle between the powers of evil and the Kingdom of God.²

Closer attention to Palestinian geography would have aided in avoiding the pitfall into which Ladd and other commentators have fallen here. While Megiddo was not a mountain, it was not a plain either; it was a city. As such it was located in the plain or valley known as the Jezreel or Esdraelon. The valley was not named for the city, and this city did not derive its name from the valley in which it was located. It is possible to identify different aspects of the topography around ancient cities by naming them after those cities, however, and this was commonly done in Hebrew by using a construct chain to express a genitive of possession. This is the case in Judg 5:19, which locates the battlefield where the forces of Jabin and Sisera met those of Deborah and Barak in the vicinity of the "waters of Megiddo."

What are these "waters of Megiddo"? A quick glance at the topography of the Jezreel Valley and the Song of Deborah is sufficient to identify them. Megiddo was located on the south edge of the Jezreel Valley; and the body of water that coursed through this valley, and hence by Megiddo, was the Wadi Kishon. Indeed, the identification of the "torrent Kishon"

²G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972), p. 216.

with the “waters of Megiddo” is clearly made in the Song of Deborah itself (Judg 5:21 compared with 5:19).

The point here is that Yahweh, as the God who controlled and used the elements of nature to serve his purposes, brought the rainstorm which filled the Kishon full to overflowing. The rain and the overflowing river turned the area of the Jezreel valley into a quagmire in which the chariots of the Canaanite foes bogged down and were unable to maneuver. In this way Yahweh gave his people a great victory that day by the “waters of Megiddo.”

By analogy with this historical setting and with the construct chain “the waters of Megiddo,” the “mountain of Megiddo” should be located near that city. Megiddo was located at the foot of the northern slope of what modern geographers of Palestine commonly have called the Carmel range of mountains. This specific kind of terminology, however, never was used for Carmel in the Bible. The place name Carmel occurs twenty times in the OT, and sixteen of those times it appears as a place name without being connected with a determinative like “mount” or “mountains.” In three of the sixteen occurrences it is paired poetically with Bashan in Transjordan (Isa 33:9; Jer 50:19; and Nah 1:4), and in one instance it is paired with Sharon, the plain which spreads out south of it (Isa 35:2).

In four instances Carmel is identified by a determinative, which always is in the singular: “the mountain of Carmel” or “Mount Carmel” (never “the mountains of Carmel”). Two of these references relate to the experience of Elijah (1 Kgs 18:19, 20), and two come from narratives about Elisha (2 Kgs 2:25; 4:25). Just as the expression “waters of Megiddo” refers to a river which ran by Megiddo but was known by another name—the Wadi Kishon—so the “mountain of Megiddo” should be identified with the mountain which lies close to Megiddo but was known by another name: Mount Carmel. On the basis of geographical proximity as well as historical and textual analogy, therefore, the “mountain of Megiddo(n)” in Rev 16:16 should be identified as Mount Carmel.

3. The Ancient Battle of Mount Megiddo and Analogy with Rev 16:16

Not only should Mount Megiddo in Rev 16:16 be identified with Mount Carmel geographically, but the connection should also be made historically. Just as the image of the drying up of the Euphrates is drawn from a historical battle for Babylon in the time of Cyrus, and just as the battle by the waters of Megiddo refers to a specific and famous battle in the Jezreel

Valley, so also Mount Carmel was the site of another famous battle in Scripture: the battle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). This battle was not fought with the force of arms, however; instead, it was an intensely spiritual conflict. It is from this battle that we should draw the imagery upon which the "battle of Armageddon" in Revelation depends. All of the main elements of the latter are paralleled in 1 Kgs 18 in historically concrete form.

If the dragon of Rev 16:13 represents the power of the civil state in one way or another, then that power was represented by Ahab in the contest on Mount Carmel. If the beast of Rev 16:13 is connected with the beast of Rev 13 and the impure woman of Rev 17-18 as an apostate religious form, then that element was represented by Jezebel in the encounter on Mount Carmel.³ It is granted, of course, that Jezebel was not personally present at the contest according to 1 Kgs 19:1, but it was she who, as a Phoenician princess and Israelite queen, inculcated the cult of Baal into the warp and woof of the life of the northern kingdom. The third element that will gather forces to Mount Megiddo according to Rev 16:13 will be the false prophet. This is the first time the term "false prophet" occurs in the book of Revelation. False prophets were generously represented on Mount Carmel, there having been 850 of them in attendance (1 Kgs 18:19). (Elijah, as might be noted in passing, came from the east—from Tishbe in Gilead.)

Finally, the contest on Mount Carmel was settled by fire which came down from God and consumed Elijah's sacrifice and everything that was around it. The prophets of Baal were then put to the sword at the Wadi Kishon. Once again it should be emphasized that the sixth plague does not describe the actual fighting of a battle; it only portrays the preparation for that battle. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet call all of their followers together at Mount Megiddo, just as Elijah had Ahab summon all Israel to Mount Carmel for the contest. The battle which is prepared for under the sixth plague, however, is actually fought in Rev 19:11-21. This is the battle of Armageddon, or more properly, the "battle on the great day of God Almighty" (Rev 16:14). This battle is to be fought when Christ shall ride forth from heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords with the army of his heavenly host following him. The victory will be gained in a similar way, by fire over the beast and false prophet (Rev 19:20), and by the sword over their followers (vs. 21). This is not a sword like the one used

³Cf. the reference to Jezebel also in Rev 2:20.

in the time of Elijah, however; it is the sword which issues from the mouth of the King of kings (vss. 15, 21).

4. *Conclusion*

On the basis of analogy with the historical setting in the OT from which the imagery of Rev 16:16 is drawn, this final conflict should be seen ultimately and essentially as a spiritual conflict in which the principal contending personages are supernatural, even Christ and his arch-antagonist, "the great dragon, . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9). The issue for the people of God in such a time will be the same as that about which Elijah prayed before the assembly, "O Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, . . . that this people may know that thou, O Yahweh, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back" (1 Kgs 18:36-37). And their response of allegiance at that time will find fitting expression in the acclamation of the assembly on Carmel: "Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God" (vs. 39).