

A Big Problem: Where is Har Magedon? An Examination of Revelation 16:16

The more I study certain end-time passages, the more frustrated I become. It's not that reading them confuses me. It's simply the apparent contrast in regard to what I've been taught or encouraged to believe and what the text actually says. Take Revelation 16:16, for example. The text states:

-Now the spirits gathered the kings and their armies to the place that is called Armageddon in Hebrew (Net Bible).

-And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon (ESV).

-And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon (NASB).

Regarding this verse, a note in the Net Bible states,

There are many variations in the spelling of this name among the Greek MSS [MANUSCRIPTS], although Ἁρμαγεδών (*harmagedōn*) has the best support. The usual English spelling is Armageddon, used in the translation. Or “Harmagedon” (a literal transliteration of the Greek), or “Har-Magedon” (NASB).¹

The significance of this note is that translators of the New Testament should transliterate the Greek, which means the text would be printed as “Har-Magedon.” However, to translate one half of the term and transliterate the other half as “the mount of Magedon” (as some do) is confusing and does little to help the reader get the sense of the text. In light of this admission, to transliterate the text as “Armageddon” (which is the traditional way the verse reads) is totally misleading and inaccurate.

On five previous occasions, John utilizes a similar expression:

1. John 5:2 – Bethzatha (A pool)
2. John 19:13 – Babbatha (Stone pavement)
3. John 19:17 – Golgotha (The place of the skull)
4. John 20:16 – Rabboni – (My teacher)
5. Revelation 1:7 – Vai (Amen)

¹ Biblical Studies Press. (2006; 2006). *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible*. Biblical Studies Press.

In only one case is there a similar expression to that found in Revelation 16:16. John 5:2 gives the Hebrew word, but does not give the meaning nor the explanation of it. This is important. The meaning of the Hebrew term is not in question. John only intended to communicate the term itself without necessarily getting into the meaning. Therefore, just as in John 5:2, the real issue is our discovering what actual word is being used in Revelation 16:16.

Most interpreters insist that Revelation 16:16 is referring to Megiddo. In the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, David E. Aune offers the following comments. He writes:

The name “Harmagedon” has never been satisfactorily explained...The most common explanation of the name is that *har* (הר *hâr*) is the Hebrew word for “mountain(s), hill(s),” while *megiddon* refers to the biblical town of “Megiddo,” with the entire construction meaning “mountain(s) of Megiddo. Megiddo was an ancient city located on a plain in the southwest portion of the Valley of Jezreel or Esdraelon, the site of several significant ancient battles....

Now some things ought to be crystal clear as you read Aune’s comments. David E. Aune is a good scholar. I really like his commentary on the book of Revelation because he lists all the possible ways a passage is usually interpreted. However, here Aune and others miss the obvious. He reports that Megiddo is a town. It is located on a plain (flat land) in the southwest portion of the Valley of Jezreel in the land of Israel.

Now you probably are guilty of the same thing that I was until just recently. Did you notice that Aune states that Megiddo is a city located on a plain in the Valley of Jezreel. Get it—a city on a plain (flat land) in the Valley! How in the world can the phrase Armageddon if it is the correct reading of Revelation 16:16 refer to a mountain? On the contrary, nothing about the term Megiddo refers to a mountain.

There is no reference in the entire Old Testament to a *mountain* with the name Megiddo. Not one! There is no mention of a mountain by this name in all the literature known to deal with the ancient Middle East. This is no small matter. Given the level of evidence against the notion that Megiddo is the intended meaning, this should be the last idea to be associated with Revelation 16:16.

There is a huge amount of information in the Old Testament about the city of Megiddo. David E. Aune states that the city of Megiddo was the site of

the battle led by Deborah and Barak against a Canaanite coalition (Judg. 4:6–16; 5:19), the victory of Gideon over the Midianites (Judg. 7), the defeat of Saul by the Philistines (1 Sam 29:1; 31:1–7), the campaign of Shishak in 924 B.C., and the clash between Josiah and Pharaoh Neco in 609 B.C. in which Josiah was killed (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chron. 35:22–24). During the reign of Solomon, Megiddo (along with Hazor and Gezer) was rebuilt as a central fortress city (*Ant* 8.151). During the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, an Assyrian governor who apparently resided at Megiddo, which was used as the name of a newly

created province. During Roman times the site of Megiddo became a permanent Roman camp....The Valley of Jezreel, through which the Kishon River threads in a northeasterly direction to the Bay of Acco, was (and still is) the breadbasket of lower Galilee (Isa 28:1), providing a natural route for the invasion of Palestine. The “Way of the Sea” (Isa 9:1[MT 8:23]), later called the *Via Maris*, ran along the coast north from Egypt and through the Valley of Jezreel to Megiddo across the volcanic causeway north of Mount Tabor, where it then split into two routes, one northwest to Acco on the coast and the other to Hazor and thence to Damascus.

On its face, the phrase Har-Magedon cannot refer to the Hebrew city of Megiddo. There is no sense in which this city is a mountain or hill. It is just the opposite. Rather, there must be some other idea or concept intended.

David E. Aune offers another explanation. He writes,

Loasby...construes the Hebrew underlying Ἀρμαγεδών to be הר מועד *har mô·ēd*, “mountain of assembly” (Hebrew *ṣ* is often transliterated with the Greek *γ*), referring to Mount Zion from where the Messiah will destroy the ungodly (J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, WBC 24 [Waco, TX: Word, 1985] 207).²

Others have come to a similar conclusion. C.C. Torrey published an article seven decades ago that supports this position.³ Meredith G. Kline also takes this position in an article entitled “Har Magedon: The End of The Millennium,” published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.⁴

For our study, let’s say that the Greek phrase *Har-Magedon* is derived from the Hebrew phrase *Har Mô·ēd*. The critical word is *Mô·ēd*. This masculine noun occurs 223 times in the Old Testament. It can be used to designate:

- (1) A determined time or place without regard to the purpose of the designation. It may be the time for the birth of a child (Gen. 17:21; 18:14; 21:2), the coming of a plague (Ex 9:5), the season of a bird’s migration (Jer. 8:7), an appointed time (I Sam. 13:8; 20:35), the time for which a vision is intended (Hab. 2:3), the times of the end (Dan. 8:19), or the time for the festivals (Lev 23:2) and solemnities (Deut. 31:10).
- (2) Once *mô·ēd* is an appointed sign (Jud 20:38) by which men should act.
- (3) The Lord met with Moses at the “tent of meeting” (*’ōhel mo’ēd*). He appeared in the cloud at the door of the tent and spoke to him as “a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:7,

² Aune, D. E. (2002). *Vol. 52B: Word Biblical Commentary: Revelation 6-16*. Word Biblical Commentary (898–899). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

³ C. C. Torrey, “Armageddon,” *HTR* 31 (1938) 237-248.

⁴ *Vol. 39: Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 39*. 1996 (2) (206). Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society. (Sadly, Kline attempts to build a case to support his theological position that amillennialism is the correct biblical position in contradistinction to premillennialism. This is regrettable. Otherwise, his proof for the connection between the Hebrew phrase *har mô·ēd* and the Greek phrase *har-magedōn* is worthy of notice.)

11; Num 12:8). The purpose of Yahweh's meeting Moses and Israel is revelation (Ex. 29:42; 33:11; Num. 7:89).

- (4) *Mô'ēd* also designates an "assembly" in such a phrase as "picked men of the assembly" (Num. 16:2).
- (5) *Mô'ēd* is also the worshiping assembly of God's people, hence Yahweh's foes roar in the midst of his assemblies (Ps. 74:4).⁵

The specific phrase *Har Mô'ēd* is used once in the Old Testament in Isaiah 14:13. There Isaiah puts the words in the mouth of a pagan king who suggests his will is to raise his throne up to the mountain of assembly/meeting. Isaiah 14:13-14 state,

You said to yourself,
"I will climb up to the sky. Above the stars of El I will set up my throne.
I will rule on the mountain of assembly [*Har Mô'ēd*] on the remote slopes of Zaphon.
I will climb up to the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High!"

The king of Babylon is said to want his throne to equal God's. He is seeking to put his throne in a place of honor like God's. Therefore, all the references in Isaiah 14:13-14 must pertain to places where God sits. In our opinion, the key to understanding this text is the phrase "the remote slopes of Zaphon (*yarkētê šāpôn*)." Scholars are not in agreement regarding the exact meaning of this phrase *yarkētê šāpôn*. It occurs four times in the Old Testament: Ps 48:2; Isa 14:13; Ezek 38:6, 15 and 39:2. This is an important detail because each of these passages is referring to God or an enemy who wants to take God's place.

In Psalm 48:2, the writer records:

It (the city of our God = Jerusalem) is lofty and pleasing to look at, a source of joy to the whole earth. Mount Zion resembles the peaks of Zaphon; it is the city of the great king (NET).

Beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King (ESV).

Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King (NASB).

It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth. Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King (NIV).

It should be immediately noticeable to the reader that scholars are not exactly sure how to translate this verse. Concerning its meaning, some regard the phrase "in the far north" or "utmost heights of Zaphon" "as a gloss which has crept into the text. By *gloss* they mean a note put in the

⁵ Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (388–389). Chicago: Moody Press.

margin or between the lines of a text that over time came to be accepted as part of the original text. In other words, it really does not belong in the Bible. Others give a mystical interpretation founded on Isa. 14:15.”⁶ A majority of modern scholars believe the biblical writer was making reference to Canaanite mythology. One such author confidently assures us without equivocation that “Mount Zion is equated directly with the ancient (mythological) Mount Zaphon.”⁷ These as well as other senseless options are a clear indication that scholars are offering their best guesswork concerning the original author’s intended meaning.

The term *šāpôn* is used in the Old Testament to mean “north,” but some scholars believe it can also refer to Zaphon, the mythological dwelling place of the Canaanite god Baal. *Yarkētê* when used in the singular typically means *side*, but in the plural means *remotest part* or *extreme part*.

Thus, the NET Bible puts the emphasis on the most remote or extreme part of Zaphon and uses the verb *resembles* to suggest a comparison is intended. In other words, the Psalmist is comparing the beauty of Jerusalem’s loftiness with that of Zaphon, the pagan dwelling of their mythological gods. This is similar to what the NIV does as well. Just so the reader fully understands what these people are saying, let me make it plain. They believe that the biblical author is using a pagan mythological place (by mythological they mean imaginary – make believe – made up) to teach the Israelites just how great Jerusalem is. In our opinion, this view must be patently rejected.

Sadly, most interpreters are so desirous to reduce the biblical exceptionalism found throughout both Testaments to mere gleanings from the culture of the peoples who surrounded Israel, they often miss the significance of the biblical text. Some conservative scholars, who should know better in order to be taken seriously, condescend to the level of secular scholars and put forth the notion that the biblical writers are echoing concepts and ideas from the pagan culture around them.

Those who allow such reasoning to influence their understanding of Scripture argue that the term *Har Mō.ēd*, which is used in Isa. 14:13, appears to mean “mountain [where the gods] assemble.” To understand what they are talking about here we need to understand what Isaiah 14:13 says. Notice, “You said to yourself, ‘I will climb up to the sky. Above the stars of El I will set up my throne. I will rule on the mountain of assembly on the remote slopes of Zaphon.’”

Zaphon is supposedly the Canaanite version of Olympus, which was the “mountain of assembly” where the Greek gods met. This is pagan mythological dribble from the peoples who lived near the Jews in the ancient times. The king of Babylon supposedly aspires to climb up to the sky and put his throne there. This is equated with the mountain of assembly which is located on Mt. Zaphon. Therefore, Kline and others conclude that “*har magedōn* signifies “Mount of Assembly/Gathering” and is a designation for the supernal realm.”⁸

⁶ *The Pulpit Commentary: Psalms Vol. I.* 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (372). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁷ Craigie, P. C. (2004). *Vol. 19: Word biblical commentary* (2nd ed.). Word Biblical Commentary (353). Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson Reference & Electronic.

⁸ *Vol. 39: Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 39.* 1996 (2) (208). Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society.

While it is possible that pagans living in close vicinity to the Jews would have created a mythological explanation to respond to what Jews claimed regarding their God and his control of the universe, we don't believe the biblical writers would have enshrined those beliefs in Scripture as if they were true or that they accepted the statements made about pagan gods. It is certainly possible that a pagan king would have believed in the mythological dribble of his culture. And it is true that biblical writers might refer to those beliefs. However, we do not believe that the writers truly believed in the validity of myths. Nor do we believe that the Babylonians would aspire to, or even think of honoring the Phoenician gods in ancient Canaan. We offer three points in support of the comments above:

First, the idea that the Jewish writers knew about and/or believed in a mythological dwelling place for the Canaanite gods is pure conjecture. There is no biblical basis whatsoever for such a claim. How significant Zaphon was to Canaanite mythology when Psalm 48, Isaiah, and Ezekiel were written cannot be determined from Scripture or ancient history. A mountain less than a mile high, having little to commend it as the home of the gods, fails to offer the stimulus required to be admired by a Hebrew writer in this author's opinion.

Second, it is inconceivable that the Jews would use a mythological mountain home of false and imaginary gods to emphasize how beautiful and wonderful Jerusalem is. In my mind the whole argument falls on its face. What Jewish person would be inspired to think better of Jerusalem by comparing it in a favorable sense to a pagan mythological center? Perhaps if the text were praising Jerusalem while disparaging the pagan city, we might be open to see the possibility of a reference to a mythological worship center. But to suggest that the Jews should look up to that pagan center as being a worthy comparison to Jerusalem is absurd.

Third, the traditional interpretation of the mystery phrase *yarkētê šāpôn* in Psalm 48:2 is meaningless. There is no sense in which Jerusalem is in the extreme north of anything. In the midst of a celebration of the great things that can be said about Jerusalem, to all of a sudden declare the city to be "in the extreme north" makes no sense whatsoever. Perhaps if the author was speaking of the temple area only, it would make sense to refer to the northern part of the city, which would be true. However, there is no sense in which Jerusalem (the city) is in the extreme north of anything.

The writer of Psalm 48 calls for the celebration of the "lofty elevation of Jerusalem." The city is "pleasing to look at." It is "a source of joy to the whole earth." Mt. Zion is "in the extreme north." It "is the city of the great king (NET)." Do you see how this phrase does not make sense in this verse? It really seems out of place.

The first part of the verse celebrates the joyful uniqueness of Jerusalem in relation to the whole earth. However, in the second half the emphasis widens to embrace the city's exalted owner. It is

the city of the Great King. It seems logical that the reference in the second half has something to do with the ownership of the city.

A Possible Solution

As you are probably aware, the original Old Testament scrolls were written without punctuation or vowels. The scrolls utilized only the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, Psalm 48:2 originally looked like this:

יפהנוףמשושכלהארץהרציוןירכתיצפוןקריתמלךרב

The Hebrew scholars had to make decisions about the text regarding what vowels would be used with the consonants. Speaking the language every day made it much easier for the rabbis to read the text without vowels and punctuation. By sight they could divide the words into units based on their familiarity with the language. Of course, they could memorize passages of Scripture and thus remember how the passage goes. If we break the verse into units, it looks like this:

יפה נוף משוש כל הארץ הרציון ירכתי צפון קרית מלך רב

Now looking at the script above, we see that the four letters צפון appear near the end of the verse. A great majority of Hebrew words have three letters as their root. Depending on which set of vowels are used with the three basic root letters will determine which word is suggested. צפן (which stands for the Hebrew letters “s” “p” and “n”) can in Hebrew represent two different words depending on which set of vowels are used. If צפן is pointed צָפֹן it can mean *north* or possibly *Zaphon*. If צפן is pointed צִפֹּן it can mean “to hide or treasure up.” So the difference is the little dot in connection with the third letter. Whether the dot goes over the letter or in the center of it is the question. The men who initially pointed the text decided to follow the more popular notion that צפן refers to the direction *north*, which is true. It occurs more than thirty times in the Old Testament in this sense. However, by taking this position in Psalm 48:2, the intent of the author seems to be lost. There is no sense in which Jerusalem is in the north. The only way to decide is to study the context.

After an exhaustive study, it is our conviction that the scribes misunderstood the point Psalm 48:2 was making – so they incorrectly pointed the word. We believe “to hide, treasure, or cherish” is the correct understanding of the text. In other words, the dot goes inside the letter and not above it. When used to mean “to hide,” this term has the sense to keep something unknown or secret, which does not seem to be the issue in Psalm 48:2. If taken to mean “to store up,” the sense seems to be to gather and collect objects or entities into a repository, implying great value.

When צפן is used to mean “treasure” it pertains to what is strongly desired. It is used in the passive sense to mean “treasured, be cherished.” It can also be used to “ambush, lurk, or waylay” in the sense of hiding oneself, and proceed in secret to attack an object. Finally, the term can mean to hinder or restrain in the sense of preventing an event from happening or to determine when an event is to occur.

Given the history of Mt. Zion as it relates to God and his desire to have it as his own possession, we believe a strong case can be made that צפן probably was intended to mean “treasure” in Psalm 48:2 with the sense of that which is strongly desired, i.e. treasured or cherished. We would therefore suggest the following translation: “It is lofty and pleasing to look at, a source of joy to the whole earth. Mount Zion is extremely cherished; it is the city of the great king.” Taken in this way, the verse makes perfect sense. It helps explain why Mt. Zion is worthy of such praise and honor.

If this position is taken with respect to Isaiah 14:13-14, we offer the following translation:

You said to yourself,

I will ascend to the sky.

Above the stars of El, I will set up my throne.

I will sit on the mountain of assembly, in the most cherished spot.

I will ascend over the cloudy high place so I can resemble the Most High.

Instead of a reference to pagan gods and their assembly, the text makes reference to the one true God and the pagan king’s ambition to be like him up to and including going to live in his abode. The desire of a pagan king to sit among his pagan gods would be of very little interest to Isaiah or God’s people. However, if the king is making reference to the one true God of the Jews then his remarks are of interest.

This rather novel way of understanding Isaiah 14:13-14 and Psalm 48:2 has a direct bearing on how we understand Revelation 16:16. *Har Mō.ēd* makes the most sense in Revelation 16:16, given the context. The mountain of assembly is a gathering place. With respect to the God of Scripture, it is Mt. Zion. The last great battle between the forces of evil and God will occur near Mt. Zion just as Scripture indicates.

Zechariah 12-14 locates this battle at Jerusalem, and Micah 4:11-12 makes reference to it also. There is a real possibility that Joel 3:2 and 12 also refer to this specific city. The valley of Jehoshaphat refers to the place of the judged – thought by many to refer to the Kidron valley located on the east side of old Jerusalem. This seems to make good sense.

It is clear in the book of Revelation that the final battle of Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophet will be their attempt to take back Jerusalem. After the bowl judgments, and particularly after the seventh and final one which will destroy all the cities of the Gentile nations (Rev. 16:19), there will be only one city left – Jerusalem. Since the Lord Jesus will take back the city near the end of Daniel’s final week, He will defend it from Mt. Zion (Rev. 14:1).

It will be evident that Mt. Zion is the scene of the final battle between Satan and his armies and the Lord Jesus and His armies when we examine Ezekiel 38-39 in our next study. However, that Jerusalem is the most cherished place on the earth can be seen in Revelation 20:9. At the end of the temporal (millennial) kingdom, Satan will be given one last chance to take back rule over the earth. He will gather unbelievers from the four corners of the earth and bring them up “on the broad plain of the earth” and encircle “the camp of the saints and the beloved city.”

The beloved city is a unique phrase used only by the apostle John in the New Testament. *Beloved* is used throughout the New Testament, mostly to refer to people, however, it can refer to objects also. The verb ἀγαπάω (agapao) means to have a warm regard for and interest in another, *cherish, have affection for, love* or to have high esteem for or satisfaction with something, *take pleasure in.*⁹ It carries the same sense as יצד does in Psalm 48 and Isaiah 14. It confirms that Mt. Zion is God’s most cherished place on earth, which both Psalm 78:68 and 87:2 declare explicitly.

This explains why Antichrist will defile the temple in Jerusalem. Of all the cities in the entire world, why Jerusalem? There is New York, London, Moscow, Prague, Paris, or Rome. But he will take his seat in the temple in Jerusalem. There is only one reason: it is the most cherished place on earth by the one true God. Antichrist hates God. So he will try to take that which God loves the most. This explains why the armies of the East will come.

⁹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (5). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.