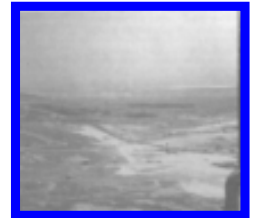




Where and When will it happen?

Many sites have been identified as the future scene of the Bible's Armageddon, but it may be a code-word linking together Old Testament prophecies.



By John Ramsden

Armageddon!!! The very word strikes terror into the minds of many people! It was the description given to the Gulf War: before that to Vietnam, and before that to Hitler's attempted conquest of Europe. Even today media correspondents from the former Yugoslavia talk about a coming "Armageddon" in the Balkans if the current Bosnia crisis is not resolved.

On the other hand, Bible-thumping televangelists, popular preachers, and writers of Christian paper back books warn of a time when the world will come to an end with what Saddam Hussein once called the "Mother of Battles"!

So what, where and when will Armageddon be? Does the Bible have the answer?

What does the Bible have to say?

In order to present what the Bible has to say we must first clear away a lot of misinformation on the subject. Considering that the word "Armageddon" occurs only once in the Bible, it is amazing how well it is known -- whilst at the same time so little understood! This is simply because it has been taken completely out of context and applied to pretty well any major battle in the history of mankind. Popular belief is that it refers to some forthcoming battle involving Russia, Arabs, Israel and others on the plain of Esdraelon in Northern Israel which is also described as Jezreel or the valley of Megiddo. When Napoleon visited the place in 1800 he agreed it would make a fine battle ground for the world's armies. In 1874, Lord Kitchener (the man whose picture adorns the poster which says "Your country needs you!") reported to the Palestine Exploration Fund that "this is the greatest battle field in the world where the last great battle of Armageddon is to be fought". In 1918 it was the site of the British General Allenby's final defeat of the Ottoman Turkish forces which resulted in

the liberation of what was then known as Palestine.



Experts cannot agree

Unfortunately so-called "experts" in linguistics and religious studies seem unable to agree about the location of Armageddon. Some say that it was originally spelt "Har-Megiddo" and therefore means a Hill at the end of the Megiddo valley. The problem with that is that we never read in the Bible of a battle on any such hill. On the contrary the Biblical battles fought at Megiddo were on a plain -- such as when Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho (see 2 Chron 35:22). Meanwhile, another expert assures us that even though in the 1881 Revised Version of the Bible the word Har-Mageddon appears (and it is the only major version of the Bible to carry this description), the earliest known interpretation extant is in Arabic and means "a level trodden place". Nevertheless, the general consensus among popular writers and preachers is that Armageddon refers to the place in Northern Israel where a future battle is to be fought out.

A map shows the location of Megiddo, but is it really where the last great battle will be fought?

So is there another way of approaching the matter? Yes, there is...but it requires careful reading of very many passages of Scripture.

A Bible Based Alternative

Although the word "Armageddon" occurs only once in the Bible, it does so in a very significant place -- the book of Revelation. This is a book of signs and symbols which have to do with the continuous unfolding of God's purpose with -- and management of -- world affairs from the end of the First Century AD (when the book was written) through to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth at the return of Christ.

Here is the reference:

"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. And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue, Armageddon. (Revelation 16:14, 16).

From this it will be seen that God, working through the evil spirit of world leaders(1) draws the nations together for the purpose of executing his judgement upon them. There is nothing new about this: time and time again we read of this future event in both the Old and New Testaments. So the interesting question to ask is: "Why is it in a book of signs written in Greek, that we are told that if we really want to understand what it is about, we must do so in the Hebrew language?" There are a number of possible answers, but they all amount to the same thing in the end, namely the need to realise that Armageddon will focus world attention onto Israel and that it involves God's people and God's land. It refers us back, for further information, to the Hebrew prophets. In short, it is a "coded symbolic signal" to the Bible believer who must now turn to his Bible for further enlightenment. When he does so he soon realises how much the Bible tells us of this future event. Studying the contexts of the following passages leave the reader in no doubt that they apply to that great day of God Almighty referred to in Revelation -- the day when God settles his account with the nations of the world.

A good place to start is with the prophet Zephaniah:

"Therefore wait ye upon me, saith the Lord until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy." (Zephaniah 3:8)

Clearly an echo-in-advance of Revelation 16:14! But the really amazing thing about that verse is that it is the only sentence in the Bible that contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet! Truly the Hebrew tongue is telling us about Armageddon. Even more interesting is that, as v. 9 tells us, the time is coming when God will create a pure language to be used by everybody in the Kingdom of God.

Look at some more ways in which Hebrew prophets speak of the coming great day of God Almighty.

"Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors, and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth." (Daniel 2:35)

"Now also many nations are gathered against thee that say, Let her be defiled and let our eye look upon Zion. But they know not the thoughts of the Lord, neither understand they his counsel: for he shall gather them as the sheaves into the floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion: for I will make thine horn iron, and I will make thy hoofs brass: and thou shalt beat in pieces many people and I will consecrate their gain unto the Lord, and their substance unto the Lord of the whole earth." (Micah 4:12-13)

"Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the fats overflow; for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." (Joel 3:13-14)

The striking thing about these passages (and there are many others we could turn to) is how they all use the metaphor of "the harvest being ripe"; or, "a time of threshing" or the "gathering of nations as sheaves" etc. Other passages which use similar symbology are Habbakuk chapter 3 and Isaiah chapter 63. Indeed, Isaiah in chapter 41 shows how Israel itself will be used as a sharp threshing instrument in bringing judgement on its detractors. One further intriguing point about this particular quotation is how the prophets talk about threshing mountains. Now, how can mountains be threshed? Literally speaking, they can't! But when we realise how often the prophets (e.g. Daniel chapter 2:35 above) refer to nations as "mountains" we can see a beautiful example of the sort of symbology involved.

Appropriately enough, the book of Revelation takes up the same symbology in chapter 14:14-16 and speaking of a time when the son of man will bring about God's judgements on the earth:

"And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap for the harvest of the earth is ripe. And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth; and the earth was reaped."

From these few extracts we can see that the great day of God Almighty involves gathering the nations of the world together. This will be when, in God's plan, both the time and the harvest are ripe: when the time will have arrived for threshing and judgement.

So that would be a simple way of describing this event? Can we think of one descriptive, symbolic word, given in the Hebrew tongue, consistent with what the Hebrew prophets have told us and which adequately describes this event? Yes!...It is *Armageddon*.

The Meaning of Armageddon

Over 140 years ago a Bible student, John Thomas, pointed out the symbolic meaning of the term *Armageddon*. While some

experts were studying the detailed origins and etymology of the word, and others were scurrying around the Middle East looking for a literal battlefield, Thomas, in his exposition of Revelation(2) demonstrated the need to stand back and take an overall view of what was involved, and what lay behind this essentially symbolic Hebrew term. By doing so he was able to perceive what others may have missed, namely that the word *Armageddon* could be broken down into three major components: *Arema-gai-dun*. When put together into a meaningful phrase these Hebrew words could read "A heap of sheaves in a valley for judge-ment". Although this is not the place to do so, a digression to show how these words and ideas are used elsewhere in Scripture is extremely interesting(3). Clearly such an analysis of the word shows how consistent it is with the overall teaching of those prophets who spoke in the Hebrew tongue about things to do with God's land and coming events thereon.

The Valley of Jehoshaphat

But what about that word *valley*? How does this fit into the picture? As we have already seen the prophet Joel describes this event of God's judgement as taking place in a valley:

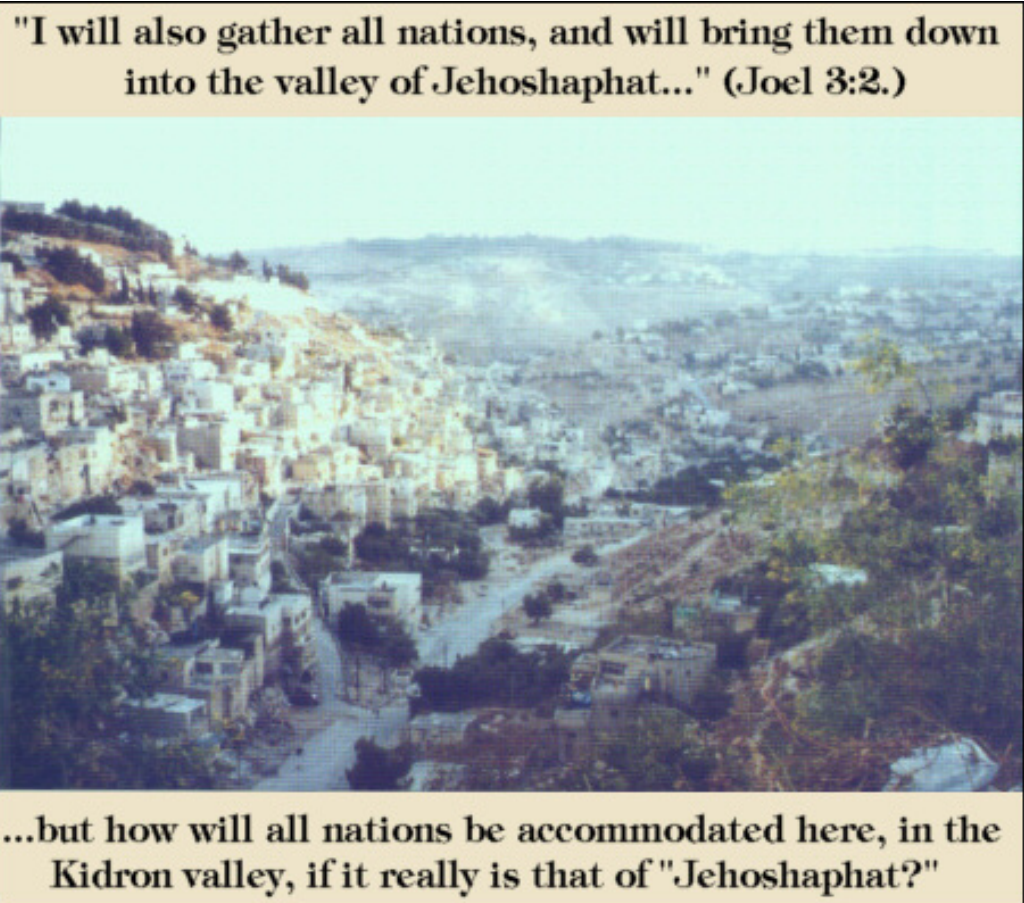
"Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision." (Joel 3:12, 14)

To understand what the prophet Joel is getting at we need to find out more about Jehoshaphat. The story of his encounter with the nations round about him way down south of Jerusalem near the Dead Sea area (BC 860) is

contained in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, to which the reader is referred for a full report. The salient point is that the people of the good king Jehoshaphat were delivered from defeat by the intervention of God. He brought His judgements to bear upon those who were invading the land, and this was a blessing upon the people of Israel. As a result, the valley of God's judgements upon these invading nations became known as *Berachah* -- or the Valley of Blessing (see v. 26 and margin). All-in-all a very satisfying story! But the point is that in some ways it provided a "type" of a future event when God would again rescue His people from foreign forces invading Israel's land by once again bringing His judgements to bear on them. What is so significant is that that is just what Jehoshaphat's name means! "The Judgements of Yah".(4)

So when Joel talks about the location of Armageddon being the Valley of Jehoshaphat, clearly he does not have in mind the valley of Berachach down near the Dead Sea, but rather a symbolic place of the "threshing judgements" of God. Nowhere does the Bible describe such a valley, nor does the Jewish historian Josephus who lived near to the time of Christ. That is not surprising because that identification was not known until Empress Helena (the mother of the Byzantine emperor, Constantine) wrongly applied the description, to what we know today as the deep-sided ravine of the Kidron Valley which runs down between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives.

Curiously enough, however, Joel also refers to the place of God's judgements as the "Valley of Decision". What can this



mean? A very simple study with the aid of a concordance or a computerised Bible programme will soon reveal that the original Hebrew word for "decision" is *charuts*. It occurs only 12 times, and only twice here in Joel is it translated decision. On the 10 other occasions it carries meanings typical of sharp edged instruments used for threshing! How wonderfully consistent the Bible is!

But which Valley?

Some further simple work with a Bible concordance will reveal that in the original Hebrew text there are several words for "valley". The significant thing is that when the Bible refers to deep-sided valleys or gorges such as Kidron or Tophet/Gehenna/Hinnom etc, it used the word *gay*, but in Joel the word used to describe the "valley" of God's threshing judgements upon the nations who invade the land is *emeq* a word which also means *vale* or *open country* -- a word which in no way can be applied as the Empress Helena did to the Kidron Valley! Thus to paraphrase Joel, he is warning of an event, when the time is ripe and the harvest is ready, that God will bring his threshing judgements to bear in the open space of his threshing floor.

So all we have to do now is to locate God's threshing floor, And where is this? Jerusalem! Where was it that Herod's Temple stood in the time of Christ? And before that Zerubbabel's Temple? and before that Solomon's Temple? and before that the Altar of David? Why, it was, as 1 Chronicles 21:18-30 tells us, a threshing floor to be dedicated to God's service. Furthermore, a comparison of 2 Chronicles 3:1 and Genesis 22:2 soon reveals that this was the very place God tested Abram's faith in the matter of sacrificing Isaac. Besides which, of course, it is the very centre of the land God promised to Abram.

The Open Space for Threshing

Anyone who has stood on that tourist viewing platform on the southern approaches to Jerusalem soon appreciates the significance of Joel's *valley* or wide open space centering on the city itself as compared to the narrow ravine of Kidron. So bearing in mind how all nations are to be drawn to Jerusalem (Zech 14:2) for the great day of God Almighty, one thing becomes quite clear, ***Armageddon is an event -- not just a place***. It is not a hill or a plain 60 miles north of Jerusalem or even a deep sided gorge one mile East of the city, nor is it only a set piece battle between competing rival blocks of nations. It is the ***event of God's judgement upon the nations***, when he will settle His controversy with the nations (Jer. 25:31) and when He will start His long programme of judging the world with righteousness (Acts 17:31).

Having then see *what* and *where* Armageddon is, there remains a further question: when can we expect Armageddon to occur?

So when will Armageddon Occur?

To be frank, we do not know! The wise student of prophecy is happy to live with both what the Lord *has* revealed and what He has not! For although as Amos tells us (3:7), "The Lord God will do nothing but he revealeth his secrets unto his servants the prophets" nevertheless and perhaps almost paradoxically Moses tells us in Deuteronomy 29:29 that certain things still remain as the undisclosed secrets of the Lord. The important point is for us to realise that what God *has* revealed is sufficient for us to do His will.

The real reason, however, why we do not know when Armageddon will take place is because it involves not just a war between nations but the return of Christ himself. We have seen this in the earlier extract from Revelation chapter 14. We have also seen that it is *not* just another Middle East war between Jews and Arabs: it is the Great and the Terrible Day of the Lord (Joel 2:31). It is indeed the same event as we read about in Ezekiel (chapter 38), Daniel (chapter 11), Zechariah (chapter 12-14) and elsewhere. A careful reading of those chapters and the contexts in which they occur make it quite clear that they refer to the event described in Revelation 16:14-16 as Armageddon, or, the time when the nations of the earth are gathered together for the battle of that great day of God Almighty. That being so, and as Christ and the saints are involved,

it suggests that Armageddon must take place sometime *after* the return of Christ, *after* the resurrection and subsequent judgement of the baptized believers (or saints). It is only after this that the work of re-establishing the Kingdom of God on earth can begin.

So it is very simply because we do not know when Christ will return that we cannot say precisely when Armageddon will occur.

So How will Christ Return?

Why is it that some people look for Armageddon to occur prior to Christ's return, or believe that his return will be prompted by some such disturbance? We do not know for sure, but if you asked some Bible readers: "From whence did Christ ascend, *and to what place will he return?*", they might well say "The Mount of Olives", but they would be wrong! Where does the Bible provide that information? Curiously enough, it doesn't! So let us read what it does tell us about Christ's ascent.

"And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."

Where was Bethany? John supplies the answer: "Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off" (John 11:18).



The rather unromantic village of Bethany today -- far out of sight of Jerusalem!

So now we turn to that familiar passage in Acts:

"...Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey."

A careful re-reading of the above passages reveals an interesting fact. Jesus ascended from Bethany down on the far side of the Mount of Olives --

about 15 furlongs from Jerusalem, well out of sight of the city and its worldly rulers. The disciples returned for the task of choosing a replacement for Judas from a place only 6 or 7 furlongs away, or what is described as a "sabbath day's journey"! We frankly do not know why this was so, and it is not relevant to pursue various and speculative ideas here. Our main point is to emphasize that when Christ ascended to heaven he did so quietly, probably surprising his disciples. What is more, there is no way that having done so, far away down at the bottom of Mount Olives, that His departure would have been witnessed by the Roman or Jewish (political or religious) "worlds"!

Christ to Return... "in like Manner..."

Now the important part about Acts 1:11 is that it says he will come in *like manner* as he went. There is no reference to place or specific time. It is the *manner* to which we should give our attention, and for which we should be prepared.

Thus we have to say that it seems inconceivable that Christ will descend to some pre-determined and fully publicized place, to a world that neither expects him, nor wants him, nor is looking for him, and who in any case will oppose him, rather than coming to his own faithful ecclesia who have been praying for his return, and looking for the signs of his coming for almost 2000 years!

So why is it, then, that so many Christians seem to favour the ideas of that same lady, the Empress Helena, who in AD 325 apparently was the first to promote the idea that Christ ascended from and will return to the top of the Mount of Olives -- a spot marked today by a Catholic church?

We do not know for sure but it may well have to do with the way they understand Zechariah chapters 12-14. Ironically those chapters DO make it clear when we can expect Armageddon. When is it to be? More than 15 times we are told it will be "in that day..."! What day? The great day of God Almighty described in Revelation 16:16 as Armageddon!

"In that Day"

So there is no doubt at all that the time is coming when Christ will reveal himself to the world from the Mount of Olives, as the following sequence of extracts from Zechariah chapter 14 makes perfectly plain:

v.1 Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and...

v.2 ...I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle...

v.3 Then shall the Lord go forth and fight against those nations...

v.4 ...His feet shall stand *in that day* upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof, towards the east, and towards the west, and there shall be a very great valley.

Such a wide open space -- will, in the confusion created by the Lord as part of his "battle plan" (see panel on page 15) following these events, provide the very arena centered on Jerusalem for the judgements of God when the time of harvest and threshing arrives. So, for the events of Zechariah 12-14 to take place, Christ must already have returned.

The message is clear: Believers will not have to wait until they see these momentous events take place on television -- for by then Christ will have returned. Will he take you by surprise? Are you ready for his return to baptized believers? Are you ready for the judgement that must first begin with his household (1 Peter 4:17)?

Footnotes

1. Just what the three evil spirits were can be explained fully on another occasion - the general way we have used the term here is sufficient for our purpose.

2. Eureka Vol. 3.

3. Consider for example the use of sheaves. Similarly the use of the word heap. How it can apply to Daniel's expectation of a mountain etc (2:35).

4. As found in Young's Concordance, Unger's Bible Dictionary etc.

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