

THE BATTLE OF ARMAGEDDON
Rev 16:12-16 (28 April 2002)
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Sign, sign, everywhere a sign
Blockin' out the scenery, breakin' my mind
Do this, don't do that, can't you read the sign?

. . . Lyrics from the 1971 hit *Signs* by *The Five Man Electrical Band*. More recently, the song was remade by the rock group *Tesla*. I realize that I am revealing my age, but I remember the original hit.

“Sign, sign, everywhere a sign”—that could be the motto for many interpreters of the Book of Revelation, for they see this book as a book of signs—signs by which we can discern the times and determine the end of time. I ask you to join me as we take a brief journey through history to answer the question, “Can't you read the sign?”

The temptation and tendency to read “the signs of the times” and to declare “the end of the world is near” is nothing new.¹ Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340), the “father of church history,” says that the heretic Cerinthus (died c. 100) was the first to bring the doctrine of millennialism into the church. Hippolytus (c. 160-236), the most important theologian of the Roman church during the third century, believed that the world would end in A.D. 500. During the Middle Ages, wandering preachers were able to win a following by prophesying the imminent downfall of established political order and the beginning of a new reign of justice for the faithful and the downtrodden.

Near the close of the twelfth century, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1130-1202) calculated that the Second Coming of Christ would occur sometime in the years between 1200 and 1260: forty-two generations had passed between Abraham and Christ, and so a new dispensation might be expected forty-two generations after the birth of Jesus. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the sixteenth-century reformer, declared: “The world will perish shortly, the last day is at the door, and I believe the world will not endure a hundred years.”

The nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of date-setters. William Miller (1782-1849), founder of the Adventist movement, predicted that Christ would return March 1, 1843. When this date proved to be incorrect, Miller announced that he had made an error and reset the date to October 22, 1844. Another of the date-setters, Charles Russell (1852-1916), founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, wrote: “We consider it an established truth that the final end of the kingdoms of this world, and the full establishment of the kingdom of God, will be accomplished by the end of A.D. 1914.” Herbert W. Armstrong and his son Garner Ted Armstrong, of the Worldwide Church of God, said in 1966 the Kingdom of Christ would come in ten or fifteen years. Ted Kreege, leader of the Gospel Truth Christian Church, set the date for the beginning of the end of the world for June 20, 1981. When it did not happen, he revised his projections and reset a new date of September 8, 1983, or September 18, 1984. Billy Graham, in his book *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1983), writes: “In

my view, the shadows of all four horsemen can already be seen galloping throughout the world at this moment.”

Hal Lindsey is perhaps best known as the man who popularized the premillennial understanding of the Bible and of history. In his *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), he predicted that Christ would return “within forty years or so of 1948.” The basis for this forecast is the belief that Christ must return within one forty-year generation after the rebirth of Israel as a nation in the year 1948. Following a similar line of thought, in 1979 Colin Deal wrote a book entitled, *Christ Returns by 1988–101 Reasons Why*. Some Christian bookstores in 1988 stocked large quantities of Edgar Whisenant’s bestselling book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* (over three million copies were distributed). Whisenant stated that “the Rapture will occur sometime during the period of Rosh-Hash-ana, between sunset, September 11, and sunset, September 13.” He boasted that he had incontrovertible proof that his date for Christ's return was correct and, only if the Bible was wrong, could he be wrong. When it was obvious that he was wrong, he changed the date to January 1989 and later updated it again to September 1989. His revised edition offered 89 reasons why Christ would come in 1989.

During the brief Gulf War of 1991, about 15% of Americans thought that this conflict was the beginning of Armageddon. Furthermore, most of us—if not all of us—were exposed to some form of millennial madness associated with the year 2000. Y2K has come and gone, and we are still here. One tabloid, the *Weekly World News*, in its December 29, 1998 issue, predicted the world’s end in the year 2000, claiming that 91% of “experts” now “expect the Apocalypse.” Fortunately, this paper also provided practical guidance, such as how one could make it to safety on the ark that was being built by space aliens.

One point should be crystal clear: if there are indeed “signs of the end,” then history dramatically demonstrates that mankind has consistently misread and misapplied all of them! I do not believe that there are such “signs.” I do believe that the words of Jesus on this matter are the final authority. Concerning His Second Coming, Jesus said: “*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*” (Matt 24:36).

Unfortunately, many people see the prophetic books of the Bible as God’s messages of mysteries. Our role, then, is to be good detectives, like Sherlock Holmes, and by doing so we can decipher God’s coded timetable and plot His cosmic calendar. If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that we make absolutely lousy detectives.

Now, let’s read about the Battle of Armageddon² from the Book of Revelation, chapter 16, verses 12 through 16.

^{Rev 16:12}The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. ¹³Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

¹⁵“Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

¹⁶Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon (NIV).

Armageddon—no place of this name is known. Furthermore, even the meaning of the word is uncertain. John tells us that it is a Hebrew word, and the two most likely suggestions are that it means “the mountain of Megiddo” (in which case the word would be “Harmagedon,” as some translations read) or “the city of Megiddo” (in which case the word would be “Armageddon”). The word “Harmagedon” seems closer to the Hebrew, but there is no mountain called “the mountain of Megiddo.” If we do not take “mountain” literally, but understand it as referring to the mound upon which Megiddo was built, and this mound was about seventy feet in height in John’s day, then these two suggestions—“mountain of Megiddo” and “city of Megiddo”—come to mean pretty much the same thing. It is also possible that when John wrote about Harmagedon/Armageddon³ he had in mind the fact that in Ezekiel’s description of the last struggle against “Gog of the land of Magog,” the final victory is said to be won in “the mountains of Israel” (Ezek 38:8, 21; 39:2, 4, 17).

It seems to me that the best understanding of Rev 16:16 is that the Hebrew word to which John refers describes the region near Megiddo in the Plain of Esdraelon which was perhaps the most famous of all battlegrounds in Jewish history. This battlefield witnessed major conflicts all the way “from one fought by Tuthmosis III in 1468 B.C. to that of Lord Allenby of Megiddo in 1917.” “By the waters of Megiddo” Barak and Deborah defeated the chariots of Sisera (Judg 5:19-21). Ahaziah, wounded by the arrows of Jehu, fled to Megiddo, and died there (2 Kings 9:27). It was on this battlefield that the good king Josiah was killed by Pharaoh-Necho as the Egyptians marched toward Assyria (2 Kings 23:29-30). The tragedy of Josiah’s death burned itself into the memory of the Jewish people, and the mourning for Josiah in the valley of Megiddo was never forgotten (Zech 12:11). It was also at the nearby Gilboa that Saul and his three sons were killed by the Philistines (1 Sam 31:1-6).

Armageddon was proverbial for the scene of decisive contests. At Armageddon, Israel achieved some of her greatest victories and suffered some of her most serious defeats. Armageddon, it is “the classic battleground of Scripture.”

The Battle of Armageddon is not a literal, physical battle. The meaning of the battle and its outcome is John’s concern, not the battle’s location in time or space. *The Battle of Armageddon, as envisioned in the Book of Revelation, is a symbol for the final overthrow of Rome’s evil forces.* The name stands for an event, not a place, and it signifies the destruction of the terrible enemy that had set itself against Christ and His church in the first century. John was not expecting a battle in northern Palestine, but at Rome. There was worldwide chaos and confusion at the time of Rome’s collapse. In spite of the atrocities that she brought upon the church, the Roman Empire was the center of civilization from the first century B.C. until its collapse in the fifth century A.D. Civilization was set back for centuries when that empire fell. When the final nail was driven into Rome’s coffin in A.D. 476, the world was plunged into the Dark Ages.

In the first century, two empires went forth to conquer the hearts and minds of men and women: the empire of Rome and the church of Jesus Christ. This massive conflict is portrayed in the Book of Revelation. It was a conflict between God and Satan, Christ and the Caesars, and all that was right and everything that was wrong. It was a spiritual battle. Do not overlook the fact that in Rev 16:12-16 Satan fights by means of “evil spirits” which proceed from the “mouths” of the dragon, beast, and false prophet; and that in Rev 19:11-16 the one called “the Word of God” (Jesus Christ) fights the forces of evil

with a “sharp sword” which proceeds “out of His mouth.” John knew that the wars waged in and around Megiddo were conflicts arising from moral and spiritual ideologies as also were those conflicts pictured in the Book of Revelation. *John saw the Battle of Armageddon as one between righteousness and evil: a battle fought not with physical armaments, but fought with spiritual, moral, and intellectual weapons used by the hearts and minds of men and women. The Battle of Armageddon conveyed to first-century Christians the triumphant message that God will be victorious over all the forces of evil!*

I would like to suggest that Armageddon is not a single battle but an ongoing campaign of encounters between right and wrong. The Battle of Armageddon was first fought by Adam and Eve when the serpent slithered into their sinless home and seduced them. They lost. Joseph fought the battle in the house of Potiphar and, on that occasion, he won. The battle for David in the case of Bathsheba was lost. In the wilderness of temptation, and most significantly on the cross, Jesus fought the Battle of Armageddon and won. *The Battle of Armageddon is fought daily in the moral and spiritual choices that you and I make. We fight the Battle of Armageddon in the everyday choices of life.*

Choices. We live in a society that preaches pro-choice: we have the right to choose. *Yes, we have the right to choose, but do we choose the right?* Choices. Therein lies the Armageddon that will be our victory or our doom. Which will it be? The choice is yours.

¹Sources used for the following historical survey were Roger Rush, “False Predictions,” *Gospel Advocate* 131 (March 1989): 13-15; Robert P. Lightner, *The Last Days Handbook* (Thomas Nelson, 1990); J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Zondervan, 1978); J. D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, eds., *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Tyndale House, 1992); and Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2000), 23-27, 60-65.

²The following works were particularly helpful: W. B. West, Jr., “The Battle of Armageddon,” *Gospel Advocate* 120 (February 23, 1978): 113, 122; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1989); Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1998); J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (InterVarsity Press, 1997); and Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2000).

³For the sake of clarity, I will use the more well-known term “Armageddon.”

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