Christus victor: Armageddon and atonement in the Apocalypse

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Though the word appears only once in the Bible (Rev. 16:16), Armageddon is strongly associated with war because it is described as the place where the kings of the earth will gather for the battle of the great day of God Almighty (Rev. 16:14). Based on popular teachings regarding Bible prophecy, many Christians await the fulfillment of the great battle of Armageddon as they watch the military moves of world powers. All eyes anxiously watch the nations, especially those of the Middle East, awaiting the apocalyptic fulfillment of this end-time doomsday prophecy.

Although many exegetical and theological interpretations of Armageddon exist, they can be grouped into two major views: (1) Armageddon is a literal geographical place for a global war in the Middle East; (2) Armageddon symbolizes a spiritual battle between Jesus Christ and the antichrist. Despite the differing views, both agree on the reality and inevitability of the universal eschatological battle of Armageddon.

However, how does this great battle fit into the bigger picture of salvation history? Is Armageddon just a mere prophecy of a global nuclear mushroom, or is there something profoundly more? Does this battle have any spiritual significance? How does Armageddon fit into the plan of redemption, sometimes referred to as the atonement?

Atonement as victory

Atonement is a key biblical teaching that deals with Christ’s work for humanity’s salvation with special emphasis on His death on the cross. In the history of Christian theology, many theories have sprung up to describe atonement. Each one sheds light on a different perspective from which atonement can be understood.

Among the varied models of atonement, the Christus Victor model is noteworthy. This model was proposed by the Swedish historical theologian Gustaf Aulen, who described atonement as divine conflict and conquest. According to this model, atonement is Christ’s victory over the evil powers that hold humankind in bondage, causing separation from God. Atonement (Christ’s victory over these evil powers) brings a new relationship of liberation from bondage for humanity and reconciliation between God and humankind. Based on the Christus Victor model, Christ’s work for humanity’s salvation is described as a victory over all evil. This description of atonement sets the stage for a better appreciation of the relationship between Armageddon and atonement.

The book of Revelation provides both the context of the battle of Armageddon and the basis for its interpretation. Since the book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, Armageddon needs to be understood against the backdrop of apocalypticism—a worldview that the present age is one of despair because it is controlled by evil powers, both spiritual and political, that oppress...
persevere Godâ€™s people. However, the present evil age will give way to the future age of hope, when God will intervene and destroy all evil powers and restore the world to its pristine order and beauty.

The Armageddon passage (Rev. 16:12â€“16) describes the evil powers that constitute the end-time coalition that war against God. They include the dragon, beast, false prophet, unclean demonic spirits, and kings and inhabitants of the earth. These powers in the eschatological battle are further described in the broad context of the apocalyptic.

The first three powers may be described as the false trinity of the apocalyptic. The details of their identity and character are fully portrayed as part of the central section of the book of Revelation (chapters 12 and 13). The dragonâ€™s origin, character, and activities were introduced in Revelation 12:3â€“17 as the mastermind of all deception and evil (Rev. 12:9, 10), giving power and authority to the other beasts described in Revelation 13:2, 4, 11. The second power, described as the beast, refers to the sea beast of Revelation 13:1â€“10, and the third power, the false prophet, refers to the earth beast of Revelation 13:11â€“15. This trinity appears to act together for the first time as allies in the apocalypse in the Armageddon context (Rev. 16:13). As an unholy trinity, they are an imitation of the true Trinity, who are also present in the context of the apocalypse (Rev. 1:4, 5). The dragon counterfeits God the Father, the sea beast imitates God the Son, and the false prophet imitates the Holy Spirit. These three are the ultimate evil powers of the apocalypse.

The evil powers next in line are the unclean demonic spirits. They are sent as agents by the unholy trinity to deceive the kings of the earth (Rev. 16:13, 14). These evil angels are also a triad, parallel to the false trinity, and a counterfeit of the three angels of Revelation 14:5â€“12. While the angels of Revelation 14 preach the eternal gospel to the entire world, the evil angels deceive the world through miraculous signs and wonders. These miracles parallel the activity of the false prophet in Revelation 13:13, 14. These evil spirit beings, therefore, control the kings of the earth and the inhabitants they rule over, gathering them against God and His people. In line with apocalyptic thought, these verses confirm that the political powers of the earth that oppress Godâ€™s people are controlled by demons. Thus, the apocalypse points out â€œthe [evil] powers that beâ€œ in the battle of Armageddonâ€œpolitical powers controlled by demonic powers.

This coalition of evil powers gathers to make war against God by persecuting His people through an end-time global religious-political enforcement of anti-God law (Rev. 12:17; cf. 13:7, 15â€“17). By so doing, they prepare for the eschatological battle of Armageddon.

Since the atonement can be described as victory over evil powers, glimpses of Christâ€™s victory over these powers in the apocalypse will give a better appreciation of the significance of Armageddon in the plan of redemption.

**Christâ€™s victory: Objective atonement**

One of the first mentions of Christâ€™s victory in the apocalypse is found in Revelation 5. Though described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, He appears as a Lamb that had been slain. The Lamb is the most prominent Christological name in Revelation. On the basis of biblical theology, the picture of Jesus as Lamb in Revelation 5 shows the reader a symbol of His death on the cross. The context of the chapter further implies that His sacrificial death demonstrates how He conquered.

What did the Lamb conquer at the cross? The victory hymn in Revelation 12:10â€“12 answers the question. This victory song describes the fall of the dragon out of heaven and declares a new point in salvation history beginning with the temporal adverb â€œnowâ€œ (KJV) or â€œâ€œ (NLT) it has happened at lastâ€™s â€œ (NLT). This celebrates the establishment of Godâ€™s kingdom overthrowing Satanâ€™s usurping rule. In addition to the dragonâ€™s first fall from heaven, presented in military imagery (Rev. 12:3, 4, 7â€“9), this hymn points out a legal or judicial expulsion of the dragon out of heaven. Satanâ€™s banishment from heavenly places as earthâ€™s ruler-representative and the incessant accuser of Godâ€™s people was made possible by Christâ€™s victory on the cross as the Lamb (John 12:23, 31, 32). The Lambâ€™s victory on the cross was confirmed by His resurrection, ascension, and enthronement (Rev. 5:5â€“7, 12; cf. 12:5). These events, which make up the Christ-event, forever settled and sealed the dragonâ€™s destiny of doom and destruction. Therefore, Christâ€™s objective victory on the cross became the basis for the victory of Godâ€™s people over the dragon as well.

**Christiansâ€™ victory: Subjective atonement**

The victory of Christ, manifested in the Christ-event, provides continuous victory to be an experiential reality for Christians. Revelation proclaims glimpses of the objective胜利 of Christ applied to and experienced by His saints. Through this victory, they overcome the evil powers: the dragon, unclean demonic spirits, beast, false prophet, kings, and inhabitants of the earth.

In the judicial setting of the hymn of Revelation 12, the dragon seeks to defeat Godâ€™s people by pressing accusations against them (Rev. 12:10). By personally accepting, claiming, and identifying with the blood of Christ through His death on the cross, the saints win victory over the dragonâ€™s legal charges (Rev. 12:11). In addition, they defeat the dragon through their faithful witness in living in sacrificial obedience to God. They do this through a lifestyle of faithfulness to Christ and a sharing of the
In addition, the saints of God maniâ€”fest Christâ€™s victory over the unclean demonic spirits by refusing to yield to the deceptions of the spiritsâ€™ false gospel. They heed the warning of spiritual vigilance given in the heart of the Armageddon passage (Rev. 16:15, cf. Rev. 3:2, 3, 18) to avoid spiritual compromise and apostasy.24 Under the influence of these demonic spirits and the false truth, the kings and inhabitants of the world create an ever-increasing anti-Christian environment of deception and persecution of the saints. Bearing in mind the Apocalypticâ€™s charge â€œthe one who continues to overcome,â€ the saintsâ€™ victory is a continuous one. The saints demonstrate a personal and communal victory over self-deception (2:4, 5; 3:1â€“6, 14-22) and doctrinal deceptions within and without the church (2:6, 14, 15, 20â€“23), and persecution and fear of death by martyrdom (2:8â€“13; 3:8â€“10) among others.25 Under great temptations and pressures of the world, they resist and refuse to give up their faith even in the face of death (Rev. 12:17; 13:7, 15â€“17). In so doing, they have victory over the beast, the false prophet, the kings, and the inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 15:2, 3; 20:4). The saints will overcome in this great time of trouble because of the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14).26 They experience the same victory over evil powers that He experienced. Christâ€™s victory becomes their victory.

**Armageddonâ€™s victory: Ultimate goal of atonement**

The battle of Armageddon takes place on the great day of God Almighty (Rev. 16:13, 14, 16). This brings to mind the day of the Lord, a recurring theme in the Old Testament Prophets, the Gospels, and the Epistles. This is a time when God intervenes and fights for His people who have been oppressed by evil powers. This again relates with apocalyptic thought as earlier mentioned.

The second half of the book of Revelation (15â€“20) describes Godâ€™s final victory over evil powers.27 The Lamb appears again, not as one slain, but as King of kings and Lord of lords. He appears to defeat the kings of the earth who make war against Him and those who are with Him (Rev. 17:14). This comprises the day of the Lambâ€™s wrath (Rev. 6:17) and one glimpse of final victory over the kings of the earth.

Another glimpse of victory portrays Jesus Christ as the Divine Warrior who comes to make war in righteousness and justice (Rev. 19:11â€“16). He defeats the beast, false prophet, kings, and inhabitants of the earth (their armies) with the sword of His mouth, leaving them as food for the birds (Rev. 19:17â€“21).

Godâ€™s ultimate victory and the end of sin are seen as coming at the end of the millennium when the dragon, and His entire host, are finally destroyed in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10â€“15).28 This final victory will bring an end to all evil powers, human and superhuman. According to the Christus Victor theory, this victory fulfills the ultimate goal of atonement.

**Armageddon and Atonement: The Victory of the Cross**

To emphasize again: the eschatological battle of Armageddon is the end-time culmination of Christâ€™s victory on the cross. While Christâ€™s sacrificial death broke the power of evil forces over humanity, His death did not annihilate them.29 However, â€œthrough His death, Christ fixed the ultimate fate of evil powers.â€ At the cross the final future eradication of evil and its powers was made certain, and complete victory was made sure.31

This can be better understood through an illustration from World War II. After the victory of the Allied forces at Normandy on D-day, the outcome of the war was assured.32 Though D-dayâ€™s victory did not end the war (since battles continued after it), D-day pointed forward to the time when the enemies would finally surrender on V-day. Christâ€™s death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation defeated the evil powers and gave Him authority over them (Col. 2:15; Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9â€“11; Eph. 1:20â€“23; 1 Pet. 3:22), but this has not yet brought about the complete subjection of evil forces or of all rebellion in the universe (Heb. 2:8).

However, the Christ event was the D-day of the cosmic conflict between good and evil, giving assurance of the V-day that Armageddon will bring.

Armageddonâ€™s ultimate victory over evil is anchored in and assured by the victory of the Cross. Therefore, Armageddon in the book of Revelation is not really about political military battles among international world powers but about the final victory of Christ over all evil powers assured by the Cross. â€œis in His death that Christ overcomes His enemies . . . not on a bloody eschatological battlefield. . . . Â For him [John the Revelator], there is only one victory of Christ; it was won in the past and it has resulted in the debilitation of all enemy powers once and for all.â€33

**Conclusion**

The Christus Victor model describes atonement as Christâ€™s victory over evil powers. Though these powers were broken and defeated by the Cross, they were not destroyed. Armageddon will bring Christâ€™s victory on the cross to its logical culmination.
when all these evil powers that alienated humanity from God are completely and ultimately destroyed. This destruction will result in the perfect reconciliation (at-one-ment) between God and redeemed humanity, and the perfect restoration of peace and harmony in the whole universe: God dwelling with His people, with sin and sinners no more (Rev. 21:3, 4).³⁴

Thus, Armageddon must not be located in world events marked by terrorism, continual wars fought with ferocity, smart bombs, and threats of mushroom clouds—important as these are as signs of the end. The Scriptural understanding of Armageddon expects us to refrain from speculation but look forward to the ultimate triumph of God in the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan. The biblical focus of Armageddon is Christus Victor.

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References:

1 These include the substitution model, satisfaction model, moral influence model, governmental model, and exemplary model among others. These models have been divided into two major categories: the objective and subjective theories of the atonement. See Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 800–817; Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 384–391; Norman R. Gulley, Growing in Christ: Atonement and Christus Victor, Ministry, June 2007, 17–20, endnote 1.


5 Apocalypticism is one â€œamong three distinct but frequently confused categories. They include â€œapocalypseâ€™ as a literary category, â€œapocalyptic eschatologyâ€™ as a theological category, and â€œapocalypticismâ€™ as a comprehensive worldview. The apocalyptic worldview includes the literary and theological apocalyptic elementsâ€€ (Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 174). Though there are Jewish and Christian apocalypses that are noncanonical, there is a need to understand this worldview because it is the background of the New Testament writers (Boyd, *God at War*, 173, 174). This worldview is consistent with and not contrary to the historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation.


10 Ibid., 76, 151â€“165.


19 The Apocalypse resounds with â€œthe objective decisive victory of the Lamb over the powers of darkness which He won when He shed His blood on the Crossâ€œ assuring all â€œthat Christ has defeated Satan and will one day destroy him altogetherâ€€ (John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986], 250, 251).

20 â€œInstead of defeating the followers of Christ by accusing them, Satan suffers his own defeat. Their victory over him comes by virtue of what Christ has accomplished on the cross. Christâ€™s blood produces the victory. . . . In the Lambâ€™s blood we find sure victory. Christâ€™ s death in the Apocalypse is an event of the past as well as a present reality that every believer in Him can experience.â€€ *Lichtenwalter, Revelationâ€™s Great Love Story*, 106, 107.


25 Ibid., 95, n. 335.


27 Oluikpe, Armageddon, 95, n.337, and 155, n. 548.


30 Ibid.


Christus Victor is a more developed version of the Ransom Theory of the atonement. Various versions of it were expressed in the writings of the early church fathers, such as Origen, Irenaeus and Athanasius. C.S. Lewis is probably the most famous of its more modern proponents, and you see it especially expressed in The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe. In a nutshell, God makes a bargain with the devil. Jesus is the ransom price on Satan’s claim to humans, who became his through the fall. The Christus Victor theory doesn’t really say that Jesus’s death on the cross paid off either God or the devil, rather it was just God doing whatever it took to release us from the Satanic bondage of sin and death.