



A Mormon Concept of Armageddon

Is Nuclear War Inevitable?

By Cole R. Capener

A fundamental theme of Mormon and other Christian eschatology—or the study of the last days—is the occurrence of one last great and horrible battle preliminary to the end of this earth's history. This momentous conflict, commonly associated with a series of events set to transpire before,



during, or after Christ's millennial rule, has been called by one Mormon author, "the most prophesied event in all scripture."

Repeatedly throughout history, a notion of the last days has captured the Christian imagination and has risen to the top of popular consciousness, with followers pointing to contemporary troubles as evidence of impending apocalyptic doom. Such ideas were rampant in the American religious environment at the time of Joseph Smith and throughout the pre-Utah era of the nineteenth-century Church. Similarly, in the past decade so-called popular eschatology has once again attracted a large following. With adherents drawn primarily from conservative fundamentalist Christians, these modern millennialists, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, have sounded a biblical warning cry and are predicting wholesale and unprecedented destruction to be wrought at the battle of Armageddon.

Hal Lindsay's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which describes the future plight of the earth based on the author's interpretation of biblical prophecy, has sales in excess of eighteen million copies, making it one of the best-selling books of the last decade. This and similar books figure prominently in the rise of popular eschatology. The movement itself can be credited, at least in

part, for rekindling interest in the Holy Bible as a source for predictions of the future and as a basis for formulating political positions concerning war generally and nuclear war in particular.

Since existing nuclear weaponry is apparently sufficient to destroy the world many times over, this is a concept we as Mormons cannot afford to overlook. Indeed, our own concept of Armageddon—its timetable, inevitability, and mutability—can have important implications for the way we approach our civil and moral responsibilities.

WHAT IS ARMAGEDDON?

The word *Armageddon*, found in Revelation 16:13, is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew "mountain of Megiddon," or Hill of Battles. Megiddo, an ancient city located approximately sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem, was the site of many great battles recorded in the Old Testament (Judg. 5:19, 2 Chr. 35:22).

According to eschatologists, both Mormon and otherwise, massive armies from all nations of the world will converge in the Valley of Megiddon to lay siege to Jerusalem (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 74; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:45). This belief is based on an interpretation of John's writing in Revelation 16:13-14, 16, which reads:

And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. 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.

From the writings of Ezekiel, eschatologists say that the commander of the attacking forces is to be "Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal" (Ezek. 38:2) and ruler over the land of Magog. Nevertheless, while apparently referring to a particular individual and his army, "Gog and Magog," Elder Bruce R. McConkie writes, is the designation given to the combination of nations which is seeking to overthrow the remnant of the Lord's seed (*MD*, p. 325). Another LDS author, Cleon Skousen, writes that Gog will be a ruthless gentile dictator, governing a single gentile nation, the same nation foreseen by Daniel in his famous dream (Dan. 7:7). The nation will encompass all other gentile nations of Asia and Europe (*Prophecy and Modern Times*, p. 83). This Gog shall come from the North, accompanied, according to Ezekiel, by "Persia," "Ethiopia," "Gomer," and "Togarmah." LDS General Authority Alvin R. Dyer has said that "according to the Apostle John, this great besieging army will number two hundred million (Rev. 9:16) . . . and will have the peoples of other nations . . . by reason of their having been previously conquered and amalgamated into one vast empire. [Gog] will speak evil of the Lord, blaspheming his Holy name, and thus will be an anti-Christ" (Ezek. 38:15) ("The Process of the Second Coming,"

The Mormon perspective lies somewhere in between the extreme literalism of the evangelicals and the allegorical view of the traditional scholars.

address to the Salt Lake Institute of Religion, 16 October 1970, p. 7).

Mormon commentators agree that the writings of Ezekiel, Zechariah, St. John, and Joseph Smith teach that the invading armies of Gog initially will be successful. Zechariah prophesied that "Jerusalem will be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity" (Zech. 14:2). Even a portion of the temple to be built in Jerusalem will be overrun (Rev. 11:1-2). During this time, John foresaw that two prophets will be raised up in Jerusalem and will prophesy and testify to the House of Judah for three and a half years as the battle continues to rage on (Rev. 11:3-12, D&C 77:15). These two prophets will possess great powers sufficient to hold in check the army of Gog during the period of their ministry. Finally they will be killed in the conflict and lay unburied in the streets of Jerusalem for three and a half days until their resurrection before "the very eyes of all Judah" (Dyer, "Process," p. 9).

Just as Israel appears doomed to destruction at the hands of the surrounding armies, a great earthquake will occur, and Christ will appear on the Mount of Olives, causing it to cleave in two and allowing an avenue of escape for the beleaguered Jews. The Doctrine and Covenants records that the Jews will look upon Christ and say: "What are these wounds in thine hands and in thy feet? Then shall they know that I am the Lord; for I will say unto them: These wounds are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. I am he who was lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified. I am the son of God." (D&C 45:51-52.)

After this miraculous appearance, the Jews will believe in Christ and, being thus revitalized, they will destroy the armies that are besieging them, thus ending the battle of Armageddon.

The battle, however, will take a heavy toll. Interpreting Zechariah 14:2 and Ezekiel 39:1-6, Mormon writers state that two-thirds of the people of Israel will be slain and over 165 million of the attacking army will perish in the battle. It will take seven months just to bury the dead, and seven years to burn the discarded weapons of war. (MD, p. 324.)

Although one Mormon author writes that Gog will perish in the great battle (Duane Crowther, *Prophetic Warnings*, p. 335), the alliance of Gog and Magog apparently will reunite after the Millennium—in numbers as numerous as the sands of the sea (Rev. 20:8)—to fight in what Joseph Smith called the Battle of Gog and Magog or the Battle of the Great God as is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 280, D&C 88:110-16). Once again the forces of good will triumph, and, as section 88 recites, "the devil and his armies shall be cast away into their own place, that they shall not have power over the saints any more at all"

(88:114).

Mormon writers generally seem reluctant to extrapolate from biblical text to provide further details concerning the battle of Armageddon. Even Duane Crowther, Mormonism's popular eschatologist and author of *Prophecy: Key to the Future and Prophetic Warnings to Modern America*, sees little value, for example, in trying to identify the participants in the battle because he believes that two world wars, greatly altering the boundaries and stature of the nations as we know them today, will transpire before the battle of Armageddon (*Prophetic Warnings*, p. 335, n. 2). Ironically, in one of the few references to Armageddon by early Church leaders, Joseph Smith reportedly identified one of the combatants. On 6 May 1843 in the unauthenticated "White Horse Prophecy," Joseph is said to have prophesied, "The last great struggle that Zion will have to contend with will be when the whole of America will be made the Zion of God. Those opposing will be called Gog and Magog. The nations of the world led by Russia and their power will be great but all opposition will be overcome and this land will then be the Zion of our God."

Some evangelical eschatologists have exhibited no similar qualms in describing with specificity Armageddon's participants. Thus, for example, in both Lindsay's best-selling book and fundamentalist author David Wilkerson's *Twenty-One Amazing Predictions*, the armies that will surround Israel are specifically identified as the Russians (from the north), and the Arabs and the Chinese (from the east). Wilkerson further notes that the United States will defend Israel from this attack by Russia and China.

Without examining all interpretations of this apocalyptic biblical scripture, it should be noted that the eschatological interpretations by both evangelical and Mormon writers largely ignore traditional biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jurgen Moltmann, and Johannes Metz generally eschew these literal interpretations. Pannenberg, for example, contends that the imagery of Daniel, Revelation, and similar biblical scriptures should be seen not as depicting actual future events but as affirming the fact that God will eventually bring history to consummation and will reveal its meaning, which has been hidden from human wisdom.

Because such scholarship may seem to downplay if not disregard the role of prophecy, it is not well received among mainstream Mormon writers. In truth, the Mormon perspective seems to be somewhere in between the extreme literalism of the evangelicals and the purely allegorical view of the traditional scholars, albeit the Mormon view is probably closer to the evangelicals.

JUST AROUND THE CORNER?

Shortly before the bombing attack on the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut, President Reagan told a pro-Israel lobbyist, "You know, I turn back

to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're the generation that's going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through."

Like President Reagan's statement, the non-LDS evangelical writings seem to possess an air of great urgency. Lindsay speculates in *The Late Great Planet Earth* that the Israelis' attempt to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem on the site where the Dome of the Rock Mosque—sacred to Islam—now sits, will trigger an invasion of Israel, culminating in Armageddon. Such speculation may lead to a more imminent date based on news reports revealing that Zionist Jewish groups were recently arrested in an attempt to blow up the Mosque. Significantly, their attorneys' fees, somewhere in excess of fifty thousand dollars, were paid by fundamentalist Christian groups from the United States. Such groups also take interest in the election of Meir Kahane to the Knesset because Kahane favors moving the Mosque five hundred yards to allow the construction of the temple.

Contemporary Mormon commentators generally disagree with the President and various evangelicals on this point and tend to place the Battle of Armageddon further in the future. Elder McConkie, for example, told a group of students at Brigham Young University that he believed the Second Coming would not take place during his lifetime, nor the lifetime of his children and maybe not during the lifetime of his grandchildren. The Second Coming, and hence the Battle of Armageddon, is near in the Lord's perspective of time, Elder McConkie said, but as we measure time, it is a long way off.

Similarly, Crowther asserts that before the Battle of Armageddon, several events must occur including a third world war between the Soviet Union (and her allies) and the United States (and her allies), and even a fourth world war (*PW*, p. 337). Likewise, Elder McConkie writes that there will be a series of wars leading to a final great holocaust. (*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3:511).

Of course, Mormons believe that the actual time of the battle has not been nor will be revealed. This caused some Church members in the early 1940s to question whether World War II was the great war to precede the Second Coming of the Lord. In the *Church News*, 29 November 1941, Joseph Fielding Smith stated:

We may answer this question by saying that we truly hope that it is; but the Lord very definitely informed his disciples that not even the angels in heaven knew the day nor the hour when he should make his appearance, but his Father only. . . . Let us hope and pray that it may be the last struggle before permanent peace and righteousness shall be sent down from heaven.

NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST

Is this great prophesied battle of Armageddon, a prelude to the Lord's return, the unthinkable nuclear holocaust of which so much is being written today? If Armageddon is to be a conventional war and not a nuclear war, is a pre-Armageddon nuclear war still possible? Fundamentalists authors generally answer these inquiries with a macabre portrayal of nuclear doom. Interpreting biblical scripture, Wilkerson writes that despite a powerful, worldwide peace movement which shall gain momentum (1 Thes. 5:3; Jer. 8:11, 15), the Mideast will explode into a cataclysmic nuclear war in which one-third of the earth's population will be destroyed. Wilkerson relies on several scriptures ostensibly portraying nuclear carnage: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). And, "Their face shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongues shall consume away in their mouth" (Zech. 14:12). And finally, "by these three wars the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone" (Rev. 9:18).

Other evangelicals even insist that developing nuclear weapons is part of God's plan and that nuclear conflagration may well be the Lord's way of bringing history to an end for a people who stubbornly refuse to accept his will.

To the contrary, the Mormon concept of Armageddon seems to reject the notion that nuclear weapons and war are part of God's workings. Thus, Brigham Young taught, "Of one thing, I am sure; God never institutes wars: God is not the author of confusion or of war. They are the results of men's foolish acts of policy." (*Journal of Discourses*, 13:149.)

But the Mormon concept does not reject the possibility of nuclear war initiated by man. The First Presidency's statement on the MX missile noted that it is the sad experience of history that men have rarely failed to use the weapons that they develop. Crowther confidently writes that such weapons will surely be used in a third world war fought before Armageddon. Similarly, at a general conference of the Church in 1979, Elder McConkie said, "It may be, for instance, that nothing except the power of faith and the authority of the Priesthood can save individuals and congregations from the atomic holocaust that surely shall be" (Conference Report, Apr. 1979, p. 133).

However, other statements, such as the First Presidency's 1980 Christmas message, suggest that nuclear war may be avoidable. The Mormon concept of Armageddon, then, is uncertain on the question of nuclear involvement, and on the

Unlike the evangelical view, the Mormon concept of Armageddon seems to reject the notion that nuclear weapons and war are part of God's workings.

question of a pre-Armageddon nuclear war as well.

AN INEVITABLE EVENT

But is the Battle of Armageddon—nuclear or otherwise—inevitable? If so, what use are our efforts to prevent such a war? Why work for peace if war is a sign of Christ's coming? Why try to save the environment if its destiny is to be destroyed by nuclear war? The evangelical response seems to suggest that "you shouldn't" is the only appropriate response to these questions. Indeed, the proper action according to this view may be epitomized by a fundamentalist church in California which reportedly sent a \$250,000 contribution to Israel to help buy weapons of war.

The Mormon church leadership's approach to such questions is less disconcerting. Typically, Mormons are warned that bad or worse times will come, that the signs of the times leading up to the Lord's millennial rule, including Armageddon, must take place. That man is incapable of altering this inexorable process through secular means is often noted in Church addresses. For example, President Marion Romney said in the April 1977 conference, "Now all the acts of governments, all the armies of the nations, all the learning and the wisdom of man together cannot turn these calamities aside" (*Ensign*, May 1977, p. 53). As a result, heavy emphasis is placed on personal preparedness: "There is no security in any course except the course of obedience and conformity and righteousness," writes Elder McConkie (Conference Report, Apr. 1979, p. 133).

While this view is typical of many Mormon leaders and writers, others have responded with more optimism. David O. McKay, for example, taught that "man makes war—man can end war if he will" (*True to the Faith*, p. 276). Too, President Romney, despite his other comments, has stated that latter-day calamities *can* be averted by an acceptance of and conversion to the gospel. And Presiding Bishop Vaughn J. Featherstone recently told those attending a Brigham Young University peace symposium that unified prayer by Church members can change scriptural predictions of increasing war and violence.

Perhaps the most significant statement on this question was given by the First Presidency of the Church in their 1980 Christmas message. While this statement expressed dismay over the build-up of nuclear arms, it also suggested that a nuclear Armageddon may be avoidable. The presidency declared that if men of good will will sit down and reason together in good faith to resolve their differences, they may save the world from a holocaust, the depth and breadth of which we can scarcely imagine.

In making these statements, LDS General Authorities seem to indicate that the fulfillment of prophecy is conditional upon our faith and actions. This doctrine is also taught in the scrip-

tures. Jonah, for example, in preaching to the wicked inhabitants of Nineveh, prophesied that their city would be overthrown. But when the Ninevites heeded the message of repentance and changed their ways, God spared them from destruction. (Jonah 3.) Thus, the apocalyptic scriptures foretelling wholesale destruction may be viewed more as a warning of what can occur if we do not act rather than what will occur regardless of our actions.

In this regard, the message of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" is particularly illustrative. In this Dickens classic the antagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, is visited by three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. During the third spirit's visit, Scrooge foresees his own death and other misery afflicting those about him. As Scrooge approaches the tombstone which bears his name, he implores the spirit to answer one question: "Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they the shadows of the things that may be, only?" he inquires. Then he adds: "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which if persevered in, they must lead. . . . But if the courses be departed the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!" In this story there is a change in behavior with a corresponding change in results.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Thus, Mormons need neither to be resigned to the fatalistic determination held by many of their evangelical brothers and sisters nor embrace their pessimistic views of prophetic scriptures. Such fatalism runs contrary to Mormonism's faith in humankind and in the capability of people to change and effect change. As the First Presidency has observed, when there is enough of a *desire* for peace and a *will* to bring it about, it is not beyond the possibility of attainment. This means that the prophesied Armageddon need not involve nuclear weaponry, or perhaps that it need not occur at all. It may also mean that a pre-Armageddon nuclear war, while possible, can be averted altogether.

President McKay taught that peace will come and be maintained if and when the "principles of peace triumph over the enemies of peace, which are hatred, ill-gotten gain, and the exercise of unrighteous domain" (*True to the Faith*, p. 227). Although the complete eradication of such ills may seem forlorn, I believe we are morally and physically responsible for earnestly striving for peace and making a difference in the world's final outcome. If, as Bishop Featherstone has taught, unified prayer may prevent a nuclear holocaust, then actions consistent with that prayer may also be efficacious. For if faith without works is dead, are not faith and prayer without works similarly lifeless?

COLE R. CAPENER holds a juris doctorate from George Washington University and practices law in Salt Lake City.

**LDS
General
Authorities
seem to indicate
that the fulfill-
ment of
prophecy is
conditional
upon our
faith and
actions.**