



# Armageddon

*Armageddon was never meant to inspire fear about the end of the world; rather, it was meant to give hope to persecuted Christians that forces of good would eventually win.*

## Introduction

Mention the word “Armageddon” and people perk up. Even people who have never read the Bible seem to know this word, and no doubt they associate it with the end of the world or “the final judgment.” Armageddon is the topic of hellfire and brimstone sermons, and it has entered popular culture in books such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle* (from the Chronicles of Narnia series), Hal Lindsey’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), and Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LeHay’s *Left Behind* series (begun in 1995). All of these books describe events that will take place before/when Jesus Christ (or a Christ-figure named Aslan) leads a battle against the forces of evil for the final victory of the kingdom of God. A popular film from 1998 with the title *Armageddon* was a science fiction thriller that played out an end-of-the-world theme with a giant meteor on a trajectory to slam into the earth. People sometimes speak of nuclear annihilation as Armageddon. We cannot escape the terminology and the dread it inspires.

Where does the concept of Armageddon come from? Is it really something we should expect and fear, or is it largely the invention of certain Christians or movie-makers who enjoy a good scare? How can Christians understand these end-time visions?

## Origins of Armageddon

The word “Armageddon” is found in the book of Revelation in a passage in which the prophet John, who is

writing down his vision, says that he sees demonic spirits who “go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. . . . And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called *Harmaged’on*” (Rev. 16:14, 16). In Hebrew, “*har-megiddo*” means “the mountain of Megiddo” (*har* means mountain, and Megiddo was the name of a famous battleground in Israel). When the term “*har-megiddo*” was written in Greek, it was spelled

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Harmagedōn. Subsequently, in some English translations (like the KJV), the Greek symbol for the “h” was dropped, resulting in “Armageddon.” Incidentally, the same thing happens when “Hallelujah” becomes “Alleluia” in Latin and English. In Hebrew, *hallel-u-yah* means “let us praise God,” and a psalm of praise is a *hallel*. In translation, the “h” is sometimes dropped.

Megiddo is a site mentioned in Joshua 12:21; 17:11; Judges 1:27; 5:19; 1 Kings 4:12; 9:15; 2 Kings 9:27; 23:29–30; 1 Chronicles 7:29; 2 Chronicles 35:22; Zechariah 12:11; and 1 Esdras 1:29. It was one of the Canaanite cities that Joshua was to conquer, and it is the site where King Josiah of Judah fought a battle with the Egyptians. The ruins of this site are located on what was called the Plain of Sharon, south of Nazareth (where Jesus grew up) and northwest of Jerusalem. It sat on a north-south

road that was much-traveled in ancient times, and it was a frequent gathering place for troops and the site of many battles. At the archaeological site of Megiddo, scholars have discovered the ruins of stables for chariot horses and the remains of weaponry from several hundred years' worth of warfare.

## How Armageddon Was Originally Understood

The first people who read the book of Revelation were mostly Jewish converts to Christianity and well-steeped in Old Testament Scriptures. They would have instantly associated Megiddo with epic battles; they knew that the kings of the world typically assembled there (Rev. 16:16).

Megiddo was also symbolically important to these readers, because it was the site where King Josiah of Judah was killed in battle while fighting the Egyptians (2 Kgs. 23:29–30) in the sixth century BCE. Josiah's death was a blow to Judah. He was considered to be a model king, one who brought reforms to Judah's religious and political life after many years of idol worship practiced by his predecessors. The Old Testament prophets warned the people repeatedly that such apostasy was a breach of covenant, and that God surely would allow foreign nations to conquer Israel and Judah and carry away the people as captives. This is why, when Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo, it was a devastating shock. Not only had they lost a beloved king, but they might lose traction on the reforms he had instituted. They must have felt much the same way many Americans felt when John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated. All the dreams they had and the changes they had begun seemed in danger of dying along with them.

Though another king would continue Josiah's reforming efforts, his actions were too little, too late. Not many years later, the Babylonians swept through Judah, conquered it, took Jerusalem, burned the Temple, and drove many people into exile in the land of Babylon. To the people of Judah it must have seemed like the end of the world.

But the people did not give up hope in God. They reasoned that God had not abandoned them; rather, they had abandoned God. They had brought this fate upon themselves. While they were in exile in Babylon, they dreamed of a time when they might return to their

land and reestablish a king in the line of King David. They recalled the reforms of Josiah and lamented that he was killed in battle at Megiddo before society had a chance to completely turn itself to God. Messianic hopes grew up around the memory of Josiah. When the people dreamed of returning, they hoped to anoint a king that would follow in Josiah's footsteps and restore righteousness to the land.

The people did return to the land some 70 years later, but they never had their own king again. When they spoke of "the Lord's messiah" (the Lord's anointed king), the phrase began to take on something of a symbolic meaning and futuristic hope. Megiddo, the place where Josiah died, also took on symbolic meaning as the place where a model king, Josiah, the Lord's messiah (anointed king), was killed. Because he fell in battle at Megiddo, a place long associated with epic battles, Megiddo became in Revelation a symbolic meeting place between the forces of good and evil. The author of Revelation hoped that the next time such forces met, the good would win.

The original audience would also have been familiar with the terminology the "Day of God" or the "Day of the Lord" (Rev. 16:14), which describes the time of this assemblage of opposing forces. "The Day of the Lord" is a phrase frequently found in the Prophets of the Old Testament to refer to various times of judgment, specifically when Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721/22 BCE and Judah to the Babylonians in 586/87 BCE (e.g., Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14). From the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, the Day of God or Day of the Lord was not an event in the distant future, but something they predicted would happen relatively soon, even within their own lifetimes. People then may have used it like we use the "day of reckoning" today. In this context, the Day of God or the Day of the Lord was a prophetic warning of what would befall Israel and Judah in the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, respectively, if they did not repent and adhere to the covenant with God established at Sinai. It is likely that Revelation uses "the Day of God" in the same way, to refer to a struggle that was happening during the time in which the book was written. The author of Revelation lived in the Christian community of the late first or early second century CE, in modern-day Turkey, during the time of the Roman occupation of that region. For the author and his fellow Christians, the "Day of God" would have been God's victory over their oppressors.

# Interpreting Armageddon Today

Popular Christian speculation on Revelation 16:16 supposes that there will be an epic battle between the powers of good and evil in the “end times” (when the world ends), at Megiddo. For Christians, the Lord’s Messiah is, of course, Jesus Christ.

The problem with this speculation is that it over-reads what Revelation 16:16 actually says. Revelation is a highly symbolic vision that speaks about good conquering evil, but not necessarily at a particular geographic location or a particular time. For one thing, there is no “har-megiddo,” no *mountain* of Megiddo—the ancient site lies on a vast plain. In fact, the Bible actually mentions the “*plain* of Megiddo” several times (2 Chron. 35:22; Zech. 12:11, also in the apocryphal book 1 Esd. 1:29). The archaeological site shows that Megiddo was built up into a mound from years of fortification, but it is in a flat area, nothing at all like a mountain. The term “Harmageddon” or “har-Megiddo” never occurs elsewhere in the Bible. Thus, it is likely that John, the author of Revelation, uses the term “mountain” to sig-

in Revelation 19:11–21 and 20:7–10, but it is a symbolic description of events that are taking place around the early Christians in their time and place (imperial Rome, in the late first century CE), when some Christians were suffering horribly at the hands of the Romans. There is historical evidence outside the Bible that the emperor Nero blamed the Christians for a terrible fire that burned much of the city of Rome (some historians have conjectured that Nero himself ordered the fire be set, to clear out the tenements of the poor, so that he could build on that land). Many Christians were rounded up and crucified or burned to death as scapegoats. John, the author of Revelation, writes to encourage these suffering people and assure them that even though it might seem like the end of the world, God ultimately is in control, and good will win over the persecutors’ evil. Even as John describes the struggle between good and evil in terms of a battle between Christ’s heavenly army and the specters of evilness (depicted in Revelation as dragon, beast, false prophet, and whore of Babylon), he can say with absolute conviction that Christ has already won.

Of course, we can argue that if John reinterpreted the death of Josiah at Megiddo in 2 Kings as a symbol of

events in his own time (Rev. 16:16), then Christians should be permitted to interpret John’s vision for modern times and to speculate about

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nal the symbolic nature of Harmageddon. He is drawing on the concept of Megiddo, a place his readers would recognize as a place of conflict, the site where Josiah died, and the association between God and the mountains, to create a symbolic idea about the forces of good ultimately overcoming the forces of evil. He wants to assure persecuted Christians that this time around, the “good guy” would not die (as Josiah did), but would triumph. In Revelation, the “good guy” is Christ, and his armies are the legions of heavenly hosts.

A close reading of Revelation 16:16 shows that no battle actually happens at Harmageddon. This is because the author of Revelation assumes that the victory of God has *already been won* by Jesus’ death and resurrection (see Rev. 5:1–14; 12:7–12). A great battle is later described

what Armageddon might be today. We look around and see that Christ’s victory does not seem to be complete in our world. Evil is rampant, the poor suffer, and powerful people continue to exploit the weak. Christians find in the book of Revelation and the writings of Paul a promise that Christ’s victory will be completed on Christ’s return, called the *Parousia* or second coming. What should we expect? The Bible itself is not clear, and the texts leave a great deal of room for interpretation. Christians in the first century also speculated about when Christ would return, and the answer was that no one knows for sure (e.g., Matt. 24:36, 44). In Revelation 16:15, just before mentioning Harmageddon, the author gives an aside about Jesus coming like a thief in the night, at a time no one knows or suspects (see also Luke 12:39).

## The End of Times

Modern speculation about the end times, rooted in early Judaism and Christianity, was developed during a nineteenth-century movement called Dispensationalism. John Darby was a nineteenth-century evangelist who taught that history is divided into seven ages or “dispensations,” a term that refers to portions or divisions. During each period, humans failed to live up to their responsibility to God. Darby interpreted Revelation 20:2–7 to mean that there would be a final dispensation, a 1000-year reign of Christ when Satan is locked away (the 1000 years are sometimes called a *millennium*, because “mille” is the Latin word for 1000).

But Revelation is not clear when or in what order these events will occur. Because of this uncertainty, more than one scenario has developed as people have tried to interpret the last book of the New Testament:

- *Postmillenarian belief*: Christ’s second coming (*Parousia*) and last judgment will occur *after* the millennium, the 1000-year reign of Christ.
- *Premillenarian belief*: there will be a great tribulation (Rev. 20:7–8), followed by the second coming, the millennium, and the last judgment (Rev. 20:11–15). A variation is that a “rapture,” (from the Greek word meaning “a snatching up,”) of the faithful will take place before the tribulation and second coming, the millennium, and the last judgment.

It is tempting to read Revelation as a prediction of the future; however, so far, all attempts to link symbols in Revelation to modern events have proven false. Periodic predictions of the date of the “rapture” or final judgment all have been wrong. People have tried for centuries to ascertain whose name fits the “number of the Beast, which is 666” (13:18). Though candidates have included various popes, Adolph Hitler, and even Ronald Wilson Reagan, the number 666 is most likely a reference to Nero and the imagery of the “beast” parallels Daniel 7.

## The Value of Studying Revelation Today

What value does Revelation have for us today, if it is not a prediction of the future? We read and study Revelation for the same reason we value the prophetic texts of the Old Testament. The words and warning and wisdom still apply. Just as God still calls us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (e.g., Micah 6:8), Christ still calls us to be faithful even when evil is all around us. The admonitions and promises of Revelation are still valid. We align ourselves on the side of God, whose victory is already won, as we await with joy the fulfillment of the kingdom.

Christians value the message of Revelation today as a reminder that God is always in charge, that things are never hopeless. We misread Revelation if we try to find in its pages a prediction of future wars and cosmic battles—instead, Revelation assures us that God has already achieved victory. Yes, Christians believe that Jesus will come again (Rev. 22:20), and that when this happens, God’s kingdom will be manifest to us in its fullness.

Revelation is closely related in theology and shares a vocabulary of faith with the Gospel of John. Traditionally, these writings are attributed to the same author. Throughout these books, we find a theology of “realized eschatology,” meaning that the kingdom of God is already here among us. At the end of the Gospel of John, there is no apocalyptic warning or promise of a future return. Rather, the resurrected Jesus continues to walk with his disciples by the Sea of Galilee, teaching them to love one another (John 21). Revelation follows the same pattern—after the tumult, fear, and chaos comes renewed relationship with the One who has triumphed.

To capture the sense of joy and hope that Revelation offers, we need to read it through in one sitting. When we read Revelation in bits and pieces, we lose the sense of its entire message. We frequently become stuck in the mire of weird symbols and grotesque visions. This may sound like a tall order, because Revelation is indeed a wild and strange ride through apocalyptic visions and symbols that do not make much sense, especially when taken literally. However, when read as a whole, Revelation becomes a beautiful liturgy that takes the reader

and worshiper through a period of turmoil to a call to repentance, and ends with an assurance of forgiveness and a benediction of peace. The liturgy of Revelation tells us that every tear will be wiped away, and that death will be no more (21:4). Admittedly, this takes away all the suspense, but that's the point.

Revelation ends with a wedding scene between Christ and the church, and with their invitation for everyone

to come drink from the water of life (22:17). The victory is won, and the promise of new life is already ours.

## About the Writer

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