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Armageddon

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Armageddon (Megiddo)

Armageddon tends to conjure thoughts of horrific battles and natural disasters, specifically in relation to the “end of the world.” Numerous movies, books, and art have capitalized on the theme of Armageddon, enticing audiences with, for example, life-threatening asteroids and far-reaching alien invasions. The term is often used descriptively, conveying the idea of universal, cataclysmic destruction, such as “nuclear Armageddon.” The word *Armageddon* originates from Revelation 16:16—its only appearance in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament—in reference to the location of the battle between God and the world, or between good and evil. It is generally understood that this battle will consist of many nations who fight against Israel and are ultimately defeated by God. The events of Armageddon also include major natural disasters and chaos, making it an all-encompassing event that culminates in the destruction of the wicked. The Armageddon motif has become an integral part of Christian eschatology. Although the Battle of Armageddon has been connected to a particular location (“Megiddo,” an ancient site in northern Israel), many end-time discussions and theologies use Armageddon as a major event in the chronology of the last days. Other references to end-time battles in the Hebrew Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls, Quran, and other religious texts are often syncretized with the term Armageddon.

The Armageddon passage in Revelation 16:16, “And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon” (NRSV), appears within the context of seven plagues. Revelation 16 describes seven vials, filled with the wrath of God, in possession of seven angels. As the angels pour out the contents of the vials onto the earth, various plagues are released, including darkness and the ocean turned to blood. Armageddon comes from the sixth vial. In the sixth vial, but preceding Armageddon, the Euphrates River is dried up “in order to prepare the way of the kings of the east” (Rev. 16:12 NRSV). Demonic spirits then perform signs and gather all the kings of the world to “battle on the great day of God the Almighty” (Rev. 16:14 NRSV). Following these events, the contents of the seventh vial bring hail, earthquakes, and the destruction of many great cities. Armageddon is a battle of the first phase of the end conflict between good and evil when God will fight the armies of the nations, and the righteous will be victorious.

The term *Armageddon* is derived from the Hebrew, *Har Megiddon*, most likely referring to Megiddo, an ancient city in northern Israel that sits at the base of Mount Carmel at the western edge of the Jezreel Valley. The origin of the name “Megiddo” is associated with armies, sometimes translated as “the place of troops.” Though it was originally a Canaanite city, it later became a stronghold for Israelite kings. Due to its strategic location along the major trade routes (particularly the

Via Maris or “Way of the Sea”)—between nations such as Israel, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Phoenicia—Megiddo was the site of many ancient battles. At least 34 battles have been fought at Megiddo or in the surrounding area, some of which were of great historical significance and involved prominent figures such as Saul, Jezebel, Ptolemy, and Napoleon. Thus, Megiddo became a site associated with conflict—a prime setting (according to Christian exegetes) for an end-time universal battle.

Much debate has surrounded the meaning of *Har Megiddon*. The common view is that it means “mountain of Megiddo,” from *har*, meaning “mount,” and *Megiddon*, the place name of “Megiddo.” Some have questioned this interpretation, primarily because there is no mountain at Megiddo, which sits on a plain. Further, no “mountain of Megiddo” is mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament texts. An alternative suggestion is that *Har Megiddon* means “his fruitful mountain,” possibly referring to a location near Jerusalem. Another viable translation is “mountain of assembly” (referencing Isaiah 14:13). In defense of “mountain of Megiddo” some have suggested that Megiddo’s location at the base of Mount Carmel warrants this translation. Others propose that *har* is a reference to the manmade mound that is Megiddo. The mound itself rises 70 feet above the plain and would have been higher during Hellenistic and Roman times. Current scholarship tends to support the translations of “mountain of assembly” or “mountain of Megiddo.”

Despite the fact that *Armageddon* occurs but once in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (Rev. 16:16), it has become associated with several prophecies in other biblical books (e.g., Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah). These other prophecies describe universal battles in the End Times but their locations and events vary. Phrases such as “gather all nations” (Joel and Zechariah), “shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations” (Zechariah), and “against the mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel) have contributed to the connections between these prophecies and Armageddon. Though these prophecies do not refer to the same battle (e.g., the battle of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel is thought to take place 1,000 years after Armageddon), some have suggested that the author of Revelation used phrases and images from battles in other prophecies for literary purposes. Regardless of whether or not the original authors intended to refer to the same universal battle in their end-time prophecies, later interpreters have often conflated these battle prophecies and broadly referred to them as *Armageddon*. Other Christian interpreters have strung these prophecies together, creating the chronology for Christian eschatology, with Armageddon being the first major conflict followed by significant events like the reign of the Messiah, the battle of Gog and Magog, and the Day of Judgment. Some scholars have also suggested that the description of Armageddon in the book of Revelation is a retelling of a Jewish tradition recorded in earlier texts of the Dead

Sea Scrolls, specifically the “War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.” This battle, however, lacks intervention by the divine, which is a major component of the Battle of Armageddon.

By invoking Megiddo as the location for a universal battle, the author of Revelation would be using a site already associated with momentous, bloody battles that were known to most of the contemporary readers. Moreover, Jewish eschatology places some of the end-time battles near Megiddo, thus making it a poetic and evocative location for such a momentous event. Consequently, some have posited that the location itself is a literary device in Revelation and not actually a reference to a specific location. This was the case during the Middle Ages, when the events at Armageddon were not associated with a specific place. Rather, the legends and ideas surrounding the event grew independently of any location and was understood as a spiritual representation of the conflict between good and evil with the promise that good would triumph. Only later as scholars began examining the text and archaeological data did Megiddo begin to play an important role. Vast amounts of legend and theory have since developed around the idea of a battle at Armageddon. Some believe it will be a single event of an unknown date in the future, while others maintain that it is already happening in a slow process rather than a single cataclysmic event.

Jewish interpreters of biblical prophecies tend to focus, not so much on grand, universal apocalyptic battles in the End Times, but on the role of the Messiah in restoring Israel and building the temple, which may include some conflict. Note that the book of Revelation is not a sacred text to Jews, as it is to Christians and Muslims, and thus it is expected that Jews would not have a highly developed eschatology regarding Armageddon. Islam, on the other hand, does contain many interpretations of Armageddon. For example, in the mid-1990s, many Muslim commentators viewed the Gulf War as a step toward Armageddon when the “West” (Christianity) would start to gather to war against Muslims. Other commentators more recently identified the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq as a precursor to the battle of Armageddon. After the West goes to war against Muslims in the final battle, Christians will finally realize their error while being massacred, according to some commentators. It is expected that interpretations of Armageddon among Christians and Muslims will not only continue with creative imagination, but also with a hostility toward their fellow “biblical” or “Abrahamic” religions, since they share some of the same biblical prophecies and are currently in conflict with one another.

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Further Reading

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Art

Western visual artists have long drawn inspiration from the apocalyptic imagery found in Daniel and Revelation as well as from noncanonical writings dating from the few centuries before and after the time of Jesus. The visions that Daniel, John, and other apocalyptic authors relate are fantastic and surreal and so lend themselves to expression in a visual medium. At the same time, artists have often deviated from explicit descriptions in the biblical text and borrowed heavily from Greek and Roman mythology as well as from contemporary events as they interpreted the Bible's teachings on the Last Days.

There is little extant Christian apocalyptic art from the early period of the Church until the medieval period. A 9th-century fresco in the so-called Church of the Snake in Turkey and a 12th-century Last Judgment mosaic at the Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral in Torcello, Italy, are typical in their use of the motifs of Byzantine iconography to tell the Doomsday story. In addition to these paintings on church structures, medieval artists employed apocalyptic imagery in tapestries such as the aptly named *Apocalypse Tapestry*, commissioned by the Duke of Anjou in the late 14th century. Much medieval apocalyptic art appears as illustrations in biblical manuscripts, with some of the most famous being a picture of a *Woman Clothed with the Sun* from the *Queen Mary Apocalypse* and the *Woman and the Beast* from the *Silos Apocalypse*. Because of their close proximity to the text, these pictures were clearly meant as both decoration and interpretive aids to the reader.

The Renaissance provides some of the most striking and well-known examples of apocalyptic art. Although not depicting strictly apocalyptic scenes, at least some thought that Ghiberti's sculpted golden doors that have come to be known as *Gates of Paradise* (1401) resembled the entrance into the heavenly state. As for more explicitly apocalyptic artwork, Albrecht Dürer forcefully etched darker images of the Last Days with *The Apocalypse*. In these 15 engravings, published in book form in 1498 along with explanatory text, Dürer stayed closer than most to the scriptural