



## Armageddon

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## Background

The term 'Armageddon' has long been used and continues to be used to refer to a future battle or ongoing war at the end of time or civilization, whether understood generally as a cataclysmic final battle or specifically as a battle at a place called Megiddo (a location in modern Israel), or a more flexible understanding of Megiddo as a coded reference to an alternative location (for an overview of the history of interpretation in the Christian tradition, see, e.g., Kovacs and Rowland 2004, 171–75). The popular use of 'Armageddon' derives originally from Christian scripture, where it appears just once—in Revelation 16:16. Here, Armageddon is alluded to as the gathering place for a great cosmic battle associated with the end times. The English word 'Armageddon' is the traditional rendering of the original Greek term used in Revelation—Ἀρμαγεδών—which is sometimes transliterated as 'Harmagedon,' as in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

*The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ('See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.') And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon. (Revelation 16:12–16, New Revised Standard Version)*

The usual critical explanation of the meaning of the word is that it refers to 'the mountain(s) or hill(s) of Megiddo,' derived from the Hebrew words *הר* (*har*), meaning 'hill' or 'mountain' (or hill/mountain country), and *מגדן* (*m<sup>e</sup>giddon*), referring to the ancient town of Megiddo on a plain in the Valley of Jezreel, now in modern-day Israel. Other suggestions referencing a Hebrew background include 'city of Megiddo' (*עיר מגדן*/*ir m<sup>e</sup>giddon*), 'mountain of assembly' (*הר-מועד*/*har mo'ed*), and ideas relating to 'cutting down' (from the Hebrew root *גדד*/*gdd*). (For discussion of the etymology and the various possible meanings of Revelation 16:16, see, e.g., Aune 1998, 898–99; Jauhainen 2005.)

## History of Interpretation

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The history of interpretation of the significance of Armageddon in Revelation 16:16 is considerable and diverse across Christian traditions, ranging from a literal battle between physical armies under supernatural leadership, through spiritualized and psychologized conceptualisations (e.g., personal struggles against evil), to symbolic or allegorical associations with various historical battles over the centuries. The idea of a battle at Armageddon has developed a particular importance in some forms of contemporary Protestant Christianity drawing on premillennial dispensationalist understandings of history and scripture where it is often understood as one of the events signifying the transition to the final phase of cosmic history and hence the initiation of the return of divine rule to the earth. See, for example, the writings of Hal Lindsey in the 1970s and the *Left Behind* novels of the 1990s and 2000s by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (Shuck 2004).

Armageddon is also prominent among other evangelical denominations and Christian groups with an especial interest in the end times and [prophecy](#), including Pentecostal and charismatic churches, Seventh Day Adventists, and the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#). While the reference to Armageddon as such is not commonly found outside Christian end-times thinking, the idea of a great final battle of cosmic significance appears in different forms across several traditions. In Islamic traditions, the battle of Al-Malhama Al-Kubra at Dabiq against the Christian Roman army is predicted in many hadiths. There has been a linking of broader ideas of holy war and apocalyptic thinking in strands of Muslim thought since the 1970s, with for instance, a high-profile recent manifestation in movements linked to [ISIS](#) (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) (see Beattie 2015; Fealy 2019.) The Hindu Bhagavadgita is itself a dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛiṣṇa of 'socio-cosmic' proportions that takes place at the scene of the final battle, between the two prepared armies (Malinar 2007).

Popular secular uses of 'Armageddon' today regularly involve ideas of great cataclysmic events and conflict; from references to nuclear war to promoting professional wrestling events (see Pypers 2006; Boucher 2019). However, often in popular and everyday reference, connotations of battle or war are secondary or absent, for example in expectations of environmental disaster (see Lilly 2016) and special effects-heavy films (e.g., *Armageddon* [1998])—though some of the latter explicitly draw on and seek to represent biblical notions of cosmic battle and the apocalypse (e.g., *Countdown: Armageddon* [2009]).

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## Article information

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