

“King of Kings” (Revelation 19:11–21)

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Many of the most creative television series are not broadcast on the old television networks, ABC, CBS, or NBC, or even on the newer cable networks like AMC, TBS, or USA. The shows that are the most innovative and expensive are being produced by Netflix, Apple, and Amazon. In fact, Amazon is at work now producing a series based on the fictional realm of Middle-Earth created by J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It is reported that the budget for the first season is \$465 million.¹ That’s a lot of money for a show. But Amazon is spending that money because they figure they’ll get a lot of new subscribers to their service, Amazon Prime. And there’s a reason why they think they’ll do that well. The three *Lord of the Rings* movies, which were released in 2001, 2002, and 2003, are among the top 90 highest-grossing movies of all time.² More than 3 percent of the most lucrative movies feature hobbits, elves, dwarves, orcs, and other fictional creatures, alongside men. The three *Hobbit* movies didn’t do quite as well, but they’re still among the top 310 best-selling movies, according to one website, at least. By any standard, these movies have been enormously successful. And, of course, the novels that Tolkien wrote have been read by millions over several decades.

Why are these stories so popular? Why would Amazon spend a fortune making more stories based on Tolkien’s work? One simple answer is that they’re just good stories. They sweep us away into a fantasy world, taking us away from our humdrum lives. But they’re also epic stories of good versus evil, of evil forces threatening the world, only to be driven back by brave heroes, who sometimes turn out to be the most unlikely heroes.

One of those heroes is Aragorn, a human. He is an heir of Isildur, who had been the king of a realm called Gondor. Isildur had brought an evil being, Sauron, low by cutting off Sauron’s powerful ring, the one ring to rule them all. But Sauron remerged much later in time, and he threatened all of Middle-Earth. Several heroes, including Aragorn, rose up to fight back the forces of evil. And Aragorn does that in part by summoning an army of the dead to fight against the forces of evil. He then returns to Gondor to fight and to heal some characters who had been

¹ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/amazons-lord-of-the-rings-cost-465-million-one-season-4167791>.

² https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross_adjusted/?adjust_gross_to=2019.

wounded, thus fulfilling words that had been prophesied about the king of Gondor: “The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.”³ A king, an heir, comes to reclaim a kingdom, to drive back the forces of evil, and he comes leading an army of those who died. He comes to rescue his people, to crush evil, and to heal. Where do you think Tolkien got this story from? It’s no accident that the book is called *The Return of the King*.

The story of the return of the King is first told in the pages of the Bible. Today, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we’ll read about the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords, who brings with him armies of his people who once were dead in their sins but were made alive in Christ. He comes not only to gather his people and heal them—and the whole world—but also to judge and defeat the forces of evil. We’ll see this in Revelation 19:11–21.

We’ll start by reading verses 11–16:

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.⁴

John, the author of Revelation, has seen a series of images that have been given to him by God. Here, he sees heaven opened, which tells us that something important is going to happen. And out of heaven comes a white horse, bringing a righteous judge with him. When a white horse shows up with a rider, we know this is the hero of the story. And here, the hero is Jesus. There are several clues that reveal to us this fact.

This rider is called “Faithful and True.” Jesus was called “the faithful and true witness” in Revelation 3:14. Unlike all the kings of the earth, who are so often faithless liars, Jesus is faithful; he always speaks the truth. He always does what is right, which is what makes Jesus different from every other person who has walked the earth. Jesus is faithful to the promises that he has made. Since he is not just a man, but also the Son of God, we can say that Jesus’ promises

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 152.

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

are God's promises. God is faithful to his promise to rescue his people from evil and condemnation, and also to punish evil and condemn the wicked.

We're also told that Jesus judges and makes war in righteousness. So many of our leaders have made false judgments. Even the smartest Supreme Court justices have gotten very important matters wrong. But Jesus makes righteous judgments. And he wages a righteous war. Leaders of our nation, and all the nations of the world, have gotten us involved in some very unrighteous wars, and they have made foolish decisions. But Jesus never does that. He wages a righteous war against evil. I should say that he *will* wage that war, and he will win it, on that day when he returns to earth. We don't know when that will be, but Jesus will put an end to all evil.

I understand that the idea of Jesus waging war is off-putting to some. There are some people who think any kind of war is wrong. I understand that violence often is only negative, and that some people can be very sensitive to even the thought of violence. But there are times when evil can only be stopped through war, and there is such a thing as a just war. Our great example of this in modern history is World War II. If the Allied Forces hadn't united to fight against Hitler and Germany, evil would have triumphed. It's hard to imagine what kind of world would exist now if Hitler had won. There are times when evil is so great that it can only be stopped through force. Jesus does not tell Christians to wage a literal war now. He doesn't call us to violence. But Jesus will put a forceful end to all evil some day in the future. It is right for him to do that, and it is his prerogative to do so. I'll say more about that later.

For now, let's continue to think about what this passage says about Jesus. In verse 12, we're told his "eyes are like a flame of fire," which means that he sees everything and he will judge everyone.⁵ There is no part of creation that Jesus doesn't survey. There will be no evil that escapes Jesus. We're also told that he wears many diadems on his head. A diadem is a crown. We encountered that word earlier in Revelation when we were told that the dragon, who is Satan, wore seven diadems and the beast, the devil's agent on earth, wore ten diadems (Rev. 12:3; 13:1). These Satanic forces pretend to be the kings of the earth, but the true King is Jesus, who wears many crowns. Perhaps we are to understand that he wears every crown that is to wear. He will come to rule over every authority. In fact, he already does so, though most people don't realize this (Eph. 1:21–22).

⁵ This description of Jesus is also found in Rev. 1:14; 2:18.

We're also told that Jesus "has a name written that no one knows but himself." In the Bible, a name doesn't mean just a literal name, but it refers to a person's identity. It's possible that this name is part of his identity that we will never know. If that's the case, the point is that there is more to God than we can ever understand. That is certainly true. While we can know important things about God because he has chosen to reveal them to us, we can't know everything about him. But we're also told the name is written, and it seems that it might be written on his diadems, just as the beast had "blasphemous names" written on its seven heads (Rev. 13:1). If the name is written for all to see, then the name is revealed. Perhaps the name was and is hidden but will be revealed when Jesus returns. It could be that the name is "Yahweh," the name of God revealed in the Old Testament. If that is so, then the point is that Jesus is God. I suspect that we'll know much more about Jesus when he returns. Perhaps his name, his identity, will be more fully revealed when we see him face to face. I suspect that is the case. Still, there are things about Jesus that only God knows, and God chooses to reveal certain things about himself and his Son to his people (Matt. 11:25–27; Luke 10:22).

In verse 13, we're told that Jesus' robe is dipped in blood. The blood could be the blood that he shed on the cross. We are continually told in Revelation that Jesus is the Lamb. He died for his people, to pay for their sins, for all the evil that they have done. He paid the penalty of their sin at the cost of his own life. Jesus died the death that we deserve to die, suffering not just a physical death, but also the hellish torment that is the wrath of God. So, Jesus shed his own blood. But he also will come to shed the blood of those opposed to him, and that may be what is being depicted here. This, and the reference in verse 15 to him treading the winepress of God's wrath, fulfills what is written in Isaiah 63:2–6.

We're also told that this rider is "The Word of God." This is why we know this is Jesus. Jesus is called the Word in John 1:1, because he is the clearest revelation of God. He is also called the Word because God acts through his Word. God created the universe through his Word (John 1:1–3; Heb. 1:1–2). He sustains the world through his Word (Heb. 1:3). He saves by his Word. And he will judge by his Word. We're told that Jesus will strike down the nations, all who are opposed to him, with a sword that comes from his mouth. He will rule them with a rod of iron. This isn't to be taken literally, of course. But it is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Ps. 2:9; Isa. 11:4; 49:2). Jesus will condemn the wicked through his word, and God's word is likened to a sword, because it is powerful (Heb. 4:12).

We're told that Jesus has a name written on his robe and thigh, which probably means on the part of his robe that covers his thigh. The name is "King of kings and Lord of lords." The thigh is a place where a sword would be. It came to be known as a symbol of power. Jesus is the world's most powerful King, the true King. This message let John's original audience know that it wasn't the Roman emperor, the Caesar, who was the world's true King. Today, it lets us know the true King isn't our president, or the president or prime minister of any nation. The true King will come, bearing a sword that is his powerful word. He will come to speak the truth about good and evil. He will come to reveal the sins of the wicked, those who have not turned to him to find forgiveness, and his powerful, righteous, faithful, and true testimony about the wicked will condemn them.

I read in one source that there is a statue dating to AD 151, over fifty years after Revelation was written, that was found in ancient Parthia, which corresponds roughly to modern-day Iran. Parthia was an enemy of Rome and had defeated Rome in battle. There was a myth that one of the Caesars, Nero, who had committed suicide in 68, hadn't actually died and would come back to Rome from Parthia. On this statue's thigh is written "King of kings." Though the statue came later than Revelation, perhaps the statute reflected an idea that a conquering king would be known as King of kings. The Parthian king was a threat to Rome. Apparently, the Parthians rode white horses, and their kings wore diadems, whereas the Roman kings did not.⁶ If this is true, then Jesus is being depicted as an enemy of Rome. He is described as their worst enemy. Jesus is a threat to all earthly powers that are opposed to God. He is a threat to dictators and totalitarian governments. He is a threat to all who think of themselves as kings and queens, who see themselves as the center of the universe. He is a threat because dictators know that Jesus' people give their ultimate allegiance and obedience to the true Lord, not the false lord of the government. Jesus will come against such people, and he will condemn them.

But notice that Jesus isn't alone. He comes with "armies of heaven," those who are "arrayed in fine linen, white and pure." They also ride white horses. White is a symbol of victory but, more importantly, it's also a symbol of purity. A few verses earlier, in verse 8, we were told that Jesus' bride is given "fine linen, bright and pure." Jesus' bride is the church. Those who

⁶ This information comes from James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 361. Hamilton credits David Andrew Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context*, Studies in Biblical Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 140.

wear white linen are Christians, those who have been redeemed by Jesus' sacrifice (Rev. 3:5; 7:9, 13–14). So, Jesus returns to earth with Christians following him. I believe that what the Bible teaches as a whole is that when Jesus returns, Christians will first be raised from the dead (or, if they're alive at that time, they will be transformed) and then caught up into the air to greet their returning King (see 1 Thess. 4:13–18). Then, they will accompany him back to earth. In the Roman empire, that is what would happen when a conquering king returned to his city after a victory. Here, Christians follow Jesus. Like him they ride white horses. But, interestingly, we are not told that these armies fight. Perhaps they do on some level, though it's not clear. The fact is that Christians cannot ultimately defeat evil. Only Jesus can. We Christians can bear witness to the truth. We can testify against evil. But only Jesus can crush evil. Sometimes, Jesus works through his people to mitigate evil, to lessen evil in some way. We should fight against evil if we can do so in a manner that befits Christians. But even our best efforts will not remove evil from the world. Only Jesus can do that. And he will. He fights for us. He is our champion. Only he can remove our sin and our guilt, rescuing us from condemnation. And only he can bring about final and eternal justice on earth.

We'll see a rather gruesome depiction of Jesus crushing evil in the last verses of this chapter. Here are verses 17–21:

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹ And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

I said in previous week that towards the end of Revelation, we see contrasts. There are two cities, Babylon and the New Jerusalem. There are two women, the prostitute and the bride. There are two animals or creatures, the beast and the Lamb. And there are also two suppers. Last week, we talked about the marriage supper of the Lamb. When Jesus returns, there will be the greatest party ever, an eternal feast of the finest foods. But here, there's another, horrific supper, where what is

being served is not the food we would want to eat, but the flesh of all men. Those being judged are not just wicked kings and their armies. All people who are not united to Jesus will be judged, as will be the beast and the false prophet, who are Satan's instruments of power and deception on earth.

The description of the birds devouring flesh is graphic, but it doesn't come out of nowhere. This kind of judgment is described in Ezekiel 39:4, 17–18. But it comes first from warnings that God gave Israel. Before leading Israel into their own land, God gave them laws. He told them that if they obeyed his law, they would be blessed. But if they disobeyed, there would be curses. God told Israel that he would give them over to his enemies, who would defeat them. And then he said their bodies would be eaten by “all birds of the air” and “beasts of the earth” (Deut. 28:26). Jesus will defeat all who wage war against him. And that's what verse 19 says: these people are waging war against Jesus and his army, his people. This is a war against our Creator. If we are opposed to Jesus, we are opposed to the ultimate reality. People today talk about those who deny science. Such people are backwards, anti-intellectual Philistines. Or so our culture says. But those who deny the one true God are reality deniers.

But waging war against Jesus is more than denying truths. It's denying a person. It's a personal rejection of the greatest being. We were made to know God, to love him, to worship and obey him. To reject God is to go against our purpose. And this rejection of God, sin, is what is wrong with the world. Sin is why there is division, racism, theft, rape, murder, and everything else that destroys peace. That's why Jesus must destroy sin. He laid down his life for sinners, and all who come to see that they have sinned against God and run to Jesus in humility and faith will be forgiven. They will be clothed in white, made pure in God's sight. They will be invited to a feast. But those who reject Jesus in pride will be feasted on. I suppose this gory picture is just a metaphor for something infinitely worse, some horror that we can't fully imagine. The point is that we don't want to be on the wrong side of Jesus.

We're told that Jesus will capture the beast, Satan's instrument of brute power, and the false prophet, who represents all who deceive people through religious lies. He will take them and throw them into the lake of fire, which we would normally call hell. Later in Revelation, we're told that everyone will be judged by Jesus, and those who remain in their sins will also be cast into this lake of fire. Again, this is not where we want to be.

But God is right to judge evil. In fact, Jesus is right to judge evil. Some people don't like this idea. They like the picture of Jesus that we get in the Gospels. When Jesus first came to earth, he was not violent. The closest that he came to violence was driving people out of the temple. But he never physically hurt anyone. He came as someone who was gentle, a lamb who would rather be sacrificed than defend himself.

Jesus did come first as a lamb. And that is good news. If he came first as a judge, there would be no hope for any of us. That's because we're all sinners. The good news is that Jesus came to lay down his life.

Yet when Jesus returns, he will come as a roaring lion, who will protect his people fiercely, who will destroy evil, who will remove all proud sinners who refuse to put their faith in him. And it is right for him to do this. Some evil needs to be confronted and destroyed. That was true of Hitler and his Nazi regime. It's true of the Taliban. We would love to see these people repent, to turn away from their wickedness. But some will refuse. Some people will refuse to change and stop doing what is wrong even if they were given all the time and opportunities in the world. God will not put up with evil and evildoers forever.

In his great book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller quotes Miroslav Volf, a theologian from Croatia. Volf was familiar with the violence of the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. He writes about the idea of Jesus coming to judge, realizing that this idea strikes some today as wrong. This is what he says:

If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship. . . . The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes to God. . . . My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many . . . in the West. . . . [B]ut it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die . . . [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.⁷

This is what he is saying: There is injustice in the world, and if God did not judge it, he wouldn't be God. But that doesn't mean that we should be violent. If we thought God didn't judge evil in the end, we would be tempted to become vigilantes, seeking final justice ourselves through

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 303–304, quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 76–77.

violence. Only if we understand that God will bring about justice, and that he has the prerogative to bring it about violently, can we be non-violent. God's judgment may strike some as wrong, but that's only because they've lived in piece. But those who have experienced real violence cry out for justice, and that justice will come.

As Keller says, "If I don't believe that there is a God who will eventually put all things right, I *will* take up the sword and will be sucked into the endless vortex of retaliation. Only if I am sure that there's a God who will right all wrongs and settle accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain."⁸

Jesus, the Son of God, will come to make everything right, to settle all accounts, to destroy all evil. And that's good news. It means the world will be purged of evil. It means that the evil that is within us will be destroyed. But the only way to have that evil destroyed without being ourselves being destroyed utterly is to turn to Jesus in faith now. The only way to be spared God's righteous sword is to fall on our knees and plead for forgiveness.

We don't want anyone to receive God's condemnation. But we know that even if God granted some people a billion years to repent, they won't. God could give some people infinite opportunities to come to Jesus for forgiveness and they would reject him infinitely. God is patient, but he won't wait forever. There will be a judgment day.

The message for non-Christians is simply this: Turn to Jesus now. He may come in our lifetime. If not, you will die in your sins, and you will stand before him someday in judgment. You do not want to be stand in front of Jesus on that day without being covered by his sacrifice. Put your trust him.

For Christians, the message is this: Trust in Jesus and know that one day he will right all wrongs. The returning King will come with armies to defeat all evil and to heal all wounds. Wait for the Lord of lords, the King of kings. He is coming.

⁸ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 77.