

Revelation 16-17

Up until now emphasis has been on:

1. Christ's victory already won, chs 1, 4-5, 7
2. The state and context of the Church, represented by the 7 churches in Asia Minor, chs 2-3
3. The cycles of seven seals and trumpets, unleashing woes whose purpose is to bring world to its senses and lead to repentance and worship of the true King, in chs 6-11
4. The identity and destiny of the martyrs and faithful who have conquered by the blood of the Lamb, esp. chs 7 & 14
5. A climax in ch.11 when it is seen that it is only the faithful, prophetic witness of the church, even to death, which will lead many to repentance
6. Chs 12-13 marked a turning point with introduction of Satan/dragon, thrown out of heaven after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The demonic trinity of Satan, the beast from the sea and the beast from earth is revealed as the power behind and over those who oppose the Lamb.
7. In 14.8 the last warning is issued to the earth by an angel: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come..."
 - First the earth is judged, depicted as a great, harvest (14.14-20)
 - Then a final 7 plagues are announced, which will be poured out by 7 angels from 7 golden bowls.
 - Especially close correlation between trumpets and bowls: 1st = earth, 2nd = sea, 3rd = rivers, 4th = sun, 5th = pit/throne of evil; 6th = Euphrates.
 - They "are the last, *for with them the wrath of God is ended*" (15.1). NB. At 16.17, after the outpouring of the 7th bowl, God announces "It is done!"
 - Yet there is still opportunity for repentance, as noted after outpouring of 4th and 5th bowls.

Ch 16. The seven bowls full of the wrath of God

After the first four plagues the focus is on the destruction of the heavenly powers which are opposed to God, and their followers – “the destroyers who destroy the earth” (11.18).

Again, remember purpose of the **Revelation**: to encourage and strengthen the saints to endure and stay faithful. Like the Israelites in Egypt, God will deliver them from the principalities and powers that oppress them. Their prayers/cries (5.8; 6.10; 8.3-5) are heard and will be answered.

16.1-21

- Recapitulation and intensification (scope now total) of the wars, plagues and famines unleashed by the opening of the seals (1/4) and blowing of trumpets (1/3).
7 bowls = from perspective of the heavenly *temple/throne* of God
- Again, many parallels with Exodus plagues. Yet even here there is evidence of God’s mercy, e.g. while the wicked are afflicted when the first four bowls are poured out, they are not killed; though they shed blood, their punishment is limited to drinking blood (3rd bowl). Even when God’s wrath is poured out on the throne of the beast, he is not destroyed, rather his kingdom is plunged into darkness (5th bowl, 16.10). NB. God’s goal remains repentance. His wrath is firstly to bring repentance, only when people refuse to repent are they finally destroyed. His wrath isn’t always a consuming wrath!
- Differ from seals and trumpets in that, while the first four bowls affect people/the earth (as with seals and trumpets), the 5th bowl marks a turning point: this bowl is poured on the throne of the beast. From here on, through to the end of ch 20, the focus of the visions is on the destruction of the evil forces and their primary agent (Rome) and the triumph of the Lamb and the saints over them: the beast, the false prophet and finally Satan himself. But a 4th image is added to the demonic trinity: the great whore. She represents Rome (though some argue Jerusalem) who serves the beast.
- TF Torrance, noting the 7 angels = clothed in linen, clean and bright, and girded across their breasts with golden girdles: “The wrath which the angels are about to pour out upon the earth is a pure and sinless wrath, priestly in its function and golden in its integrity. No bestial

passion, no spite, no hate, no anger of sin at all in it." God's judgments are always "true and just" (16.7).

6th bowl, drying up of Euphrates (eastern boundary of Roman empire), probably allows the feared Parthian kings to join the fray against the Lamb. Thus the beast is seen to muster all the kings of the earth.

Frogs = unclean and therefore appropriate symbols of demonic creatures, and of course second of Egyptian plagues.

Har-megiddo (Armageddon) = no real place but symbolic of the place of battles (plain of Megiddo). **SLIDE #**

There is a warning inserted here, v.15:

"Behold I am coming like a thief (i.e. when not expected)! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!" i.e. be ashamed.

The language is taken from the letters to the two most endangered churches, **Sardis (3.2)** and **Laodicea (3.18)**." cf. 2 Cor 5.4.

The final plague - of hailstones **SLIDE #** - is horrendously fearful. Osborne" It completes the judgment on the four basic elements of the natural realm according to Greek science: earth (vv.1-2), water (vv.3-4,12), fire (v.8) and air (v.17).

The hailstones are c.450mm in diameter and weigh about 45kg. The largest hailstones recorded in history fell on Bangladesh in April 1986, weighed just over 1kg and killed 92 people.

There are no more opportunities to repent.

All that remains now is to recount the destruction of the evil empire and the final judgment.

Chapter 17 The judgment of the great whore – Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations. A lot of imagery is drawn from Jer 50-51, Jeremiah's extensive prophecy of the fall of the historical Babylon (fulfilled in mid 6thC BC).

Cf. the mother of the Messiah in ch.12, who was pursued by the dragon/Satan. She was Israel -> church. Hint that this woman = parody of the Church, the bride of Christ.

Just as the devil, the beast and the false prophet are a parody of the Trinity, so the whore is a parody of the church, the bride of Christ.

NB. The fall of Babylon was described in 16.19ff. The reason for her fall, "the judgment of the great whore" (17.1), is now described. Her 'funeral' will be recorded in ch.18.

Babylon/the great whore:

- Rides the 7-headed beast of Rev 13.1-10, the second member of the demonic trinity
- From a distance, may appear to be an elegant lady, dressed in a purple (= royalty/royal power) and scarlet gown (= wealth/luxury), adorned with gold, jewels and pearls.
- BUT "she sips sewerage from the golden cup in her hand and clings to her grotesque mount in a drunken stupor... a debauched courtesan... the pretentious lady is in fact a contemptible buffoon" (Koester)
- She's drunk not with wine but with blood: an evil parody of the Lord's Supper?? (i.e. The saints drink Christ's blood, the whore drink the saints' blood)
- She's the mother of whores, i.e. there are plenty more whores (evil empires) to come
- Her hallmarks (from chs 17-18) are opposition to the living God, sensuality, injustice, hedonistic materialism, violence, deception and counterfeit (parody of Jesus' resurrection), idolatry.

Babylon = a type - of ostentatious wealth and power used to oppress and plunder/exploit and make proud and arrogant.

Babylon here = unmistakably Rome, the city built on seven hills (17.9), and "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17.18).

- The original Babylon destroyed the first temple (587BC), Rome destroyed the second temple (70AD)

- The goddess Roma = depicted as a noble woman draped in battle dress reclining on the 7 hills of Rome. In this picture the 7 hills become 7 snarling heads. Her sword becomes a gold goblet

But the whore is also a type of all evil empires and rulers.

v.7 John is told by the angel *not to marvel* at the beast. This is something “the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life do” because they are fooled by its false “resurrection” (v.8; cf.13.4,8). John and believers are not to marvel because they see the beast for what it is and know it will be destroyed by the Lamb.

In v.9 wisdom is called for with regard to understanding the beast’s 7 heads, which signify both 7 hills and 7 kings.

- 7 hills = Rome
- 7 kings = as described, do not correlate with any sequence of 7 Roman emperors, given that the 6th is the current emperor and the 7th will rule only a short while. The keys are that 7 = the number of fullness (in this case, of human rule/kingship), so the ‘seven’ represent all Roman emperors (‘kings’). The 8th is the beast himself, “who belongs to the 7” in the sense that all these kings share the characteristics of the beast, as laid out in ch.13.1-10: haughty, blasphemous, making war on the saints and demanding worship. This fits with Roman emperors, but also with all human powers which exercise the authority of the dragon/Satan.
- The beast is the power that ‘comes back to life’, seemingly resurrected, and will do so again (“is to come”, v.8). It has manifested himself through many rulers down through the centuries. NB. It is the whore, Rome, who is destroyed first. The final destruction of the beast comes later.

The 10 horns: There were 10 Roman provinces, so some argue another allusion to Rome. Unlikely as the horns are extensions of the beast, not the whore, and “will hate the prostitute” and destroy her (v,16). So, more significantly and consistently with the use of symbols in Revelation, 10 too is a number of fullness/completeness and horns a symbol of power/strength. Therefore the 10 horns represent all the kings of powerful nations/peoples (apart from Rome/Babylon) who will be “*united* in yielding their power and authority to the beast” (until they eventually turn against

her, v.16) i.e. they make up the fullness of human rulers who will serve and side with the beast against the Lamb and his followers.

V.14 The angel reminds John of the great truth that pervades all Revelation: The Lamb will win the final battle ('Armageddon) simply *because of who he is* – the Lord of lords and King of kings (17.14). “The battle will be over in a millisecond when the sword comes out of the mouth of Christ (19.15a) and annihilates his enemies (14.20; 19.15b,21)” (Osborne)

The end of the story of the great whore, representing corrupt human rule, is clear and important: evil self-destructs. “The beast and its allies begin by waging war against the Lamb (17.13-14), but they end up by destroying the harlot (17.16)” (Koester)

- They will hate her
- Make her desolate and strip her naked
- Devour her flesh
- Burn her up with fire

The imagery is drawn from Ezek 23.25-29 where Samaria and Judah are cast as two whores, turned over to Babylon for stripping naked and destruction.

This time though it is 'Babylon' which is destroyed.

NB. Even when God's wrath is poured out (in 7 bowls) few are killed. What destroys the whore is the beast itself. Evil is self-destructive, destroying its followers, then God finally destroys the powers themselves, for the time has come to “destroy the destroyers of the earth” – 11.18

In fact even the self-destruction of evil is the outworking of God's purposes and words (17.17). God is in control!

Osborne: “In short, in the earthly sense they are in complete accord with their own wicked plans, but in the cosmic sense they are forced to “do God's purpose.”

In truth, Rome fell very quickly – not quite in one hour but suddenly, within one week in August 410 when Alaric and his hordes of Goths sacked it.

In the final analysis this chapter is about the judgment of all evil earthly powers, which worship and ride on the beast. But the Roman empire is the basis for the imagery used.

Challenge

Big question in Revelation: toward which city is your life orientated – Babylon or the new Jerusalem. Do you drink from the cup of the great whore (participating in some way in hedonism, exploitation, idolatory, persecution of the saints), or do you drink the cup Christ drank, of suffering for obedience to the Fatehr?

Cf. Yad vaShem: are you going to stand petrified before the images of Nazi genocide on the first wall when you go in, or are you going to progress through the horrors to the vista of the new Jerusalem?

Suggested Discussion Questions

NB. You will probably need to reread chs 16-17 before answering these questions.

1. Why do you think the angel needed to affirm God's justice in 16.5-6? What might the seven churches have been thinking at this stage?
2. What do you think Jesus means by the warning in 16.15? Compare the messages in 3.2 and 3.18. How might it apply to us/the church today?
3. John is told not to marvel at the great whore and the beast (17.6bff.). Why is there always a danger that Christians may marvel at evil powers?
4. What evidence is there that evil self-destructs, whether it's an individual being destroyed by their own sins, or one evil power turning against another (as Germany did against Russia in WWII)?
5. How might you respond to Christians who hold to a literalist interpretation of the kings in ch.17, identifying them with modern rulers? Or interpreting modern conflicts in relation to Armageddon (esp. when Israel is involved)?
6. How do we as Christians live in the world but not of it?