

Revelation, Session 6

Seven Plagues, the Beast and the Whore

Revelation 15:1-17:18

Plagues from the Temple

Revelation 15:1 provides the good news that frames all the destructiveness of the plagues. “seven angels, with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.”

Again we are reminded that it is most helpful not to read the account of the seals, the account of the trumpets, and the account of the plague filled bowls as if they represented a timeline for the end days. They are better read simultaneously as symbols of the fierce judgment of God. Each symbol builds on, clarifies, and corrects the last.

Readers of our time are often convinced that the Old Testament presents a wrathful God and the New Testament a gentle God, revealed by the gentle and loving Jesus of Nazareth. We are reminded, though, how often God shows mercy in the Old Testament, and we are reminded, not only in the book of Revelation, that a stern God can promise judgment through a demanding Son. There is a strong distinction between the New Testament understanding of real judgment and real grace on the one side, and the benign assumption that everything is all right all the time on the other.

Nonetheless the judgment of Revelation is always qualified by mercy. There is mercy in the call to repent. There is mercy in the promise that those who suffer will conquer. There is mercy in the blood of the lamb, his own blood surely, not that of his enemies. There is mercy in the vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

At the end (at The End) they are all still symbols. This is not an elaborate code to be cracked but a dramatic poem that points to actual events in the first century world but also resonates with the visions of God's judgment in all times and places—and finally with the vision of God's triumphant mercy, too.

Before the depiction of the seven plagues we are given the dramatic setting. Gathered in heaven are the saints and presumably still the beasts and the elders. Heaven is separated from earth by a sea of glass. Despite the hymnist's delight in the possibility of throwing down our golden crowns around the crystal sea, it is not altogether clear that the sea represents a beneficent scene.

The image of the sea is multifaceted in meaning and in the possibility of interpretation. (Revelation is poetry not code; there is not an Enigma machine that can translate everything from symbolic language to more prosaic explanation.) On the one hand the sea marks the boundary of the heavenly doxology; here it is not only glassy (something to be desired or not) it is mixed with fire (almost certainly not to be desired.) We remember that the sea separates John of Patmos from the land, from his former life; it imprisons him. God will establish God's reign by overcoming the barrier suggested by the sea. On the other hand the portrayal of the sea in Revelation resonates with ancient myth. The sea is chaos calmed by the activity of the creator God. In this reading of the vision the glassy sea is the sea tamed by the power of the one on the throne; presumably it reflects the divine light. In any case the sea is what separated for the children of Israel and destroyed the troops of Pharaoh. It provides a fitting backdrop for the saints to sing Moses' song.

Again the setting for God's activity is set by song. The song of Revelation 15 does echo the song of Moses in Exodus 15 as the plagues that follow will echo the plagues God sent on

Egypt. The penultimate lines of the hymn sing what chapters twenty and twenty one will show: “For you alone are holy; all nations will come and worship before you.” (Rev. 15:4b) The final line is an apt description of all that we have seen in this book so far, and will see in the next two chapters as well. “For your judgments have been revealed.”

What John sees in heaven is the “temple of the tabernacle of witnessing”—Zion, Jerusalem, the martyred saints all signified in the heavenly building. What comes forth from this temple is plagues, but the plagues are carried in bowls by angels dressed in white. Servants of God dressed in redemption clothing bring the instruments of judgment that must precede the general redemption. This is perhaps why no one can enter the temple until the judgment is complete.

We have seven angels of course. Seven plagues; seven seals; seven trumpets; seven churches, and as we have suggested, perhaps seven heavens leading to the highest heaven of them all.

The Bowls are Emptied (Revelation 16:1-21)

The voice that cries from heaven is presumably either the voice of God or the voice of the Son of Man. As throughout this book it is clear that all these terrifying portents and the angels who carry them are under the direction of the sovereign God and of his Christ.

One striking feature of this vision is found in 16:11 where the recipients of the fourth plague “cursed God because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.” Hidden beneath the obvious prophetic language of doom and destruction here, once again, there is the reminder of the latent prophetic hope. If I preach the judgment that I see perhaps they will yet turn and be saved.

The seven plagues wreak destruction cosmically—on earth first and then on the sea and then on the rivers. When the rivers turn to blood we have a brief liturgical interlude where the angel congratulates the Holy One on the poetic justice of his wrath. Those who have spilled the blood of the saints and prophets now choke on blood. “It is what they deserve” in verse 6: “It is what they deserve” might better be translated: “They got what they had coming.”

Then the plagues reach to the heavens, turning the sun dark, recalling the darkness that encompassed Egypt (Exodus 10:22-29), as well as predictions in Isaiah 13:10 about the sun being darkened in a time of judgment, a passage cited in New Testament prophecies about the end (Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; cf. Luke 21:25)..

The sixth angel dries up the Euphrates, and we catch the allusion to Babylon set on that great river. We will soon note other allusions and suspect that the kings of the East bring judgment not on Babylon alone but on the new Babylon, Rome. The dragon and the beast are by now familiar figures of both cosmic and imperial evil. The false prophet reminds us that these visions are sent to real churches who have known something of false prophecy themselves. (See Rev. 2:14-15 and especially 2:20 where “Jezebel” is linked both to false prophecy and (like the whore of the next chapter) to “fornication,” probably idolatry. The frogs remind us of Exodus (Exodus 8:1-15) and the demonic plague somewhat of the gospels’ exorcisms and somewhat of a violent video game.

Between the sixth and seventh plagues we have another brief interlude where Christ himself speaks the meaning of these events. He echoes the Gospel assurance (Matthew 24:43; Mark 13:35), echoed by Paul (1 Thessalonians 5:2), that the Kingdom will come like a thief in the night, one of the few places where a link is made between these visions and the gospel tradition.

The plagues are embellishments of the plagues of Exodus—blood, darkness, frogs.

The seventh angel is in fact an evangelist. Here is the good news; see, it is done.

No one is sure where Armageddon was. The best guess takes the Hebrew root and claims it as the “Mountain of Megiddo” but Megiddo has no mountains. We may discover that Armageddon is a bigger battleground than that; and the war a greater battle.

The Whore, the Beast, the Explanation Revelation 17:1-18.

Uniquely John not only presents the vision he has received from one of the seven angels, in the last verses of this chapter he provides a kind of explanation direct from the angel. The explanation, fortunately or not, is about as metaphorical and elusive as the original vision, but you can’t blame an angel for trying.

What seems dramatically and poetically clear is that the whore of Revelation 17 is contrasted to the woman clothed with the sun in chapter twelve and the “bride of the Lamb” who will appear in 21:2. The woman surrounded by sun reminds us of redemption, Eve, Mary the Mother of the Lord, the church. She fights against the satanic dragon. She is waiting for the end. (Rev. 12:6)

The whore reminds us of idolatry and fornication. She is Babylon and Rome but also dwells in Babylon or Rome (this is poetry not geometry). She is not only drunk, she is drunk with the blood of the saints whom she murdered.

She sits on a beast with seven heads, which are both the seven hills of Rome and seven (or eight) emperors. There are ten horns who are somehow related to the kings whose power will threaten the hegemony of Rome until she (we use the pronoun deliberately) is destroyed.

William Blake



The commentaries search at some length to decide how to count emperors, wondering whether the present emperor is Nero or Domitian or someone else entirely. The attached table shows a likely reading of the chronology of this picture (Option 1) along with two other options for identifying the “kings” with Roman emperors. Any attempt to date the book of Revelation exactly is complicated by the fact that John of Patmos (like other New Testament writers) may have incorporated images and themes from earlier Christian material. There is no way to be sure. The beast was and is not and is to come. That may give a first century inhabitant of Asia minor an important clue about the beast’s specific identity. It gives readers and hearers of every generation a contrast between the beast and the God who was and is and is to come.

Seven “kings” or emperors	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Augustus (31 BCE – 14 CE)	1	1	1
Tiberius (14 – 36 CE)	2	2	2
Gaius [Caligula] (36 – 42 CE)	3	3	3
Claudius (42 – 54 CE)	4	4	4
Nero (54 – 68 CE)	5 & 8	5 & 8	5
Galba (68 CE)	6		
Otho (68 CE)	7		
Vitellius (68 CE)			
Vespasian (69 – 79 CE)		6	6
Titus (79 – 81 CE)		7	7
Domitian (81 – 96 CE)			8

The beast has its home in the bottomless pit from which it shall ascend. God has his home in heaven from which he will descend to make new heaven, new earth.

Rome is Rome and also Babylon and therefore metaphorically more than Babylon; every age has a Babylon or two. In the history of Israel (so essential to our author's reading of his own history) Babylon was not only the great power but the power that destroyed and exiled. Now Jerusalem is destroyed; John of Patmos is exiled.

For us the picture points ahead to any power that wreaks havoc and sends people into exile. The heads of the beast may represent particular emperors but they represent empire now and then.

All these are the symbols and surrogates for the kingdoms of this world. They will be subsumed by another Kingdom altogether.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Revelation was written long before our modern awareness of the ecological crisis, but in his vision John of Patmos warns us of the possibility of the reversal of creation, the virtual destruction of heaven and earth. Does his insistence on the judgment of God and the hope for repentance shed any light on our anxiety about the future of the earth and its resources?
2. From the first century until now people have worked very hard to identify the number of the beast and to assign that number to some individual or power that seems particularly threatening. If, as we suggest, the number made sense in its original context do we still have an obligation as faithful people to try to identify forces that

strive against God's justice, or should our faith be purely private and reticent? If we need to name injustice, how might we start?

3. We tend to think of evil deeds, evil decisions and even evil people. What we do not much talk about in many of our American churches is the idea that Evil is larger and stronger than particular evils—like a ravening beast. Is this just a childish notion best discarded, or might it point to a truth about the extent and endurance of evil?

Focus Texts: Rev 15:1–8; 17:3–18

Basic Reading

Gonzalez, *Revelation*, 98-115.

Further Reading

David L. Barr, "Towards and Ethical Reading of the Apocalypse: Reflections on John's Use of Power, Violence, and Misogyny," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 1997* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 358-73.

W. H. Shea, "The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16.16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 18 (1980) 157–62.