

The Seven Bowls

In Revelation 15 and 16 seven bowls are poured out bringing plagues to the Earth. These chapters have allusions to Israel's experience with Egypt. As found earlier in Revelation, Pharaoh and Caesar are identified with one another, showing how all nations that rise against God's people face judgment, and once again there is a repetition of the plagues. The sea is mirroring the Red Sea, as the Euphrates being dried (6:12) is like the parting of the sea, and the smoke mirrors the smoke on Mount Sinai. Rather than creating one to one comparisons though, the effect is to evoke the Exodus and show that God will once more bring his people out from oppression while bringing judgment on the oppressors.

As we see the similarities in the stories of the Exodus and the prophecy of chapters 15 and 16, two important differences become important to highlight.

- 1) In the Exodus account, the Israelites rejoice at the death of the Egyptians singing of the horse and rider thrown into the sea. But here the song of rejoicing focuses only on God's greatness and the revelation of God's judgment, without exulting in death that comes to enemies of the Christians.
- 2) In the Exodus account, Miriam's song of victory comes only after Israel gets through the sea on dry land, and Pharaoh and his armies are drowned. In Revelation, the song of victory comes prior to the victory itself knowing that this heavenly reality can already be relied upon on Earth where success is promised, but has not yet occurred.

No matter how severe the judgment may seem to us, John's vision tells that it is just. The ways of our world are unjust and the coming age will be completely just. In between comes the wrath of God, which as we will see comes in self-destructive evil.

Kings of the East—Rome had a near pathological fear of their eastern neighbors, the Parthians (borders in modern Armenia and between the Tigris and Euphrates were the historically most contested). The fear of an army from the east conquering the west had become almost a cliché from the time of Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. Hostile invasions were sometimes the instruments of God's judgment in the Old Testament (Isaiah 10:5, Jeremiah 50:25 and Lamentations 3:1) Palestinian Jews had looked hopefully toward the Parthian King Vologases I as a means of salvation unrealized in the Jewish War of 66-70 A.D.

Armageddon—the text says this is a Hebrew word. The word could be HarMegiddo from Har (meaning "mountain") and Megiddo, which is a valley in Israel. While there is no mountain at Megiddo, the nearest is Mount Carmel on which the Prophet Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal in a memorable duel of calling down fire on their altars (II Kings 18:20-46). This can evoke yet another connection between the idea of Good being associated with worshipping the one true God and evil being connected to idolatrous worship of creatures and the creation itself, rather than the Creator.



The Fall of Babylon

Rome and Babylon combine into one in Revelation. Just as Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., so too did Rome destroy the Holy City and its Temple in the Jewish War of 66-70 A.D. We see this identification of Rome with Babylon in I Peter 5:13 in which Peter refers to the Roman Christians as “your sister church in Babylon.”

This imagery and its depiction of judgment coming against Babylon fit into the larger purposes of the vision in a way worth noting. Recall that John is writing to a church in persecution that will suffer even greater distress in the future. In this setting he identifies the powers of the imperial cult as demonic power,



casting the struggle against oppressive Rome as a struggle of God against Satan in reminding Christians that God will have the ultimate victory.

The ongoing effect of this identification of Rome with Babylon is described by Bruce Metzger who writes, “Babylon is allegorical of the idolatry that any nation commits when it elevates material abundance, military prowess, technological sophistication, imperial grandeur, racial pride, and any other glorification of the creature over the Creator.”

Putting all your trust in Empire is a form of idolatry. God’s justice requires that all such empires will fall and be judged. The enemy was defeated in the cross of Christ, even if the ultimate victory is yet to be realized. As Eugene Boring writes in his commentary on Revelation, “John is afraid his fellow Christians will surrender to an enemy already defeated.”

The Whore of Babylon—it was common in Jewish prophecies to refer to a city as a woman. Certainly Jerusalem was identified as both a Virgin (Isaiah 37:22 and Lamentations 2:13) and a faithful wife and mother (Isaiah 66:7-14) as well as an unfaithful wife (Ezekiel 16). Likewise Nineveh and Tyre were described as prostitutes (Nahum 3:1-7 and Isaiah 23). Here it is Rome who is the alluring prostitute, which taps into a Jewish tradition of equating idolatrous practices to being an unfaithful spouse (as in the prophet Hosea). The goddess Roma, who was seen by Romans as their mother providing blessings is here revealed to be the reverse, not the faithful wife, but the prostitute tempting others to unfaithfulness.

Self-destructive Evil—in Revelation 17:12-18, the whore is defeated by the ten kings. God’s wrath comes as evil destroys evil. This repeats the pattern found in the prophet Habakkuk where Israel’s judgment comes in the form of the hated Chaldeans (Babylonians). The evil of Israel is cleansed by an evil nation, who was the first Babylon.