

## **Revelation 17:1-6; 19:11-16**

Today we continue with what appear to be two disconnected readings from John's Revelation. The first reading serves as a postlude to the bowls of wrath. It expands our understanding of Babylon the Great, her relationship with the beast, and her final judgment. It is one of the bowl angels that introduces today's scene. This is a way of tying it to the scene that just concluded, closing with a reference to Babylon and her fall.

It has been an interesting journey so far, with plenty of odd, beautiful, and frightening imagery, like something one might find in a science fiction movie - mysterious seals, trumpets, angels, bowls, a dragon, and sea and land monsters.

Today's Revelation reading again uses another picture word in today's instalment. The author pictures the society in which he lives as a harlot riding on the beast that we met last week. The harlot is obsessed with luxury and conspicuous consumption. She is violent and yet alluring. The imagery describes the seductive power of materialism and society's fascination with violence. The picture is designed to startle people into seeing how the currents in society draw people into a web of relationships that are degrading.

Almost all commentators on Revelation assume that when John talks about "Babylon" he means "Rome." "Babylon" is a symbolic name that is to be understood as a reference to the actual city of Rome. Many theologians challenge this interpretation. Considering how easy it is to associate "Rome" with the code word,

“Babylon”, it would not have fooled the Roman authorities as to its identity.

We know that John uses symbols as a means of communicating his message, not making it obscure. Now if someone were to have asked John which city of his day were most Babylon-like, chances are that he would have answered “Rome!” But this is not at all the same thing as suggesting that he wrote his book as a prediction that, at the end of history, the fate of the world would be determined there. Rather, as a *generic* symbol, disassociated with any specific time and place, “Babylon” is the perfect choice. Historically, in John’s own Old Testament tradition, Babylon did represent everything he attributes to her. But at the time John wrote (and ever since) there was no Babylon, that city was long gone. And thus was the symbol freed from any specificity.

So the identity of Babylon has been a subject of some debate. Two options seem viable: Babylon represents the worldly city or centre of wickedness that allures, tempts, and draws people away from God. Babylon is the pleasure-mad arrogant world, with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its anti-Christian philosophy and culture, and with its teeming multitudes that have forsaken God and have lived according to the lusts of the flesh and the desires of the mind. John does not condemn society itself but rather condemns the kind of society that rebels against God - a society where there is no place for God and no room for redemption by Christ. In the first century, Babylon was Rome. Two generation ago it was Berlin. Today perhaps, it is Las Vegas or even a university campus. Babylon can be found everywhere throughout the history of the world. It is the centre of anti-Christian

seduction any time in history.

The second option is that Babylon represents the world in the church, the unspiritual or earthly element that has infiltrated the body of Christ, or even a false church like Jerusalem. Several reasons support this theory. In an earlier chapter in Revelation, John refers to a community that claims to be a congregation of the living God but is really a “synagogue of Satan”. There are several more examples throughout the Old Testament and we could probably find several examples in our own time, churches that allude us into believing they are following the teachings of Christ while accumulating mansions, fat bank accounts and private jets. Who or what do they really worship?

While the identity of Babylon may be uncertain, its future is not: Babylon will be destroyed. Judgment is the predominant message of this scene. God will not forget her sins and Babylon will perish. Before the final punishment arrives, however, believers are encouraged to refuse fellowship with her sins and to turn away from her allurements and enticements. Those who do not leave but set their hearts on the spirit of the world will suffer with Babylon.

So make "Babylon" Babylon; John's picture is accurate – it fell! Make "Babylon" Rome; right again – it fell! Make "Babylon" New York or Washington or Las Vegas or Hollywood (or a combination of all of them); still right – they will fall, you can depend on it! And in the end, worldliness will fall finally and completely. Where? In "Babylon", of course; but how and when and where John doesn't

presume to tell us – that is in God's hands, where it belongs!

Perhaps, most significantly, the prostitute faces the wrath of God because she has persecuted the followers of Christ. John sees the prostitute as drunk with the blood of the saints. He adds that in the great city is found the blood of the prophets and saints and of all who have been killed on the earth. Her judgment is severe because her sins are piled up to heaven and God remembers her crimes.

But this Babylon is a great whore – and with that, John intends to say a great deal. She seduces people into promiscuity, into giving their love and attention to things other than Jesus Christ. And who is first in line among her customers? Again, the kings, rulers, and leaders of the earth. Undoubtedly what they love in her is power, authority, and glory; they are continually drunk on the stuff.

Her garb speaks of wealth, luxury, glamour, sophistication, and culture. She also seduces men with, and to, these values. She is a sex-hungry drunkard; pleasure, sensuality, and wantonness are other of her attractions.

In addition to the prostitute imagery, John draws from the ancient city of Babylon, well-known for materialism and immorality. Revelation combines the images of the great city of Babylon with that of a prostitute to describe a centre of pagan power. John's focus is on God's judgment of the prostitute. She has aligned herself with the beast from the sea and demonic spirits. Her own idolatry and immorality have corrupted the nations around her. Her wealth and power accelerate her corrupting influence.

Last week we saw that the dragon uses two beasts to attack the church: the beast out of the sea who keeps dying and rising and persecutes the church; and the beast out of the earth, who performs signs and miracles and deceives the church. Those who worshipped the dragon and the beast asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" The unstated answer: "No one. No one is like the beast. No one can stand against the beast. The beast has no equal." So, this is a *boast*. This is admiration and worship and honour. This is supposed to make God's people despair and give up on Jesus and forsake the Gospel.

The second part of today's reading brings John all the way inside of heaven. It has taken him a while to get there. First he saw "heaven standing open". Prior to this, John saw "a door standing open in heaven." Then John saw God's temple standing open. Now, he sees heaven itself standing open. Gradually more is being opened and more is being revealed. At first, John peered in through the open door; then, he entered in and looked around the temple; now, all of heaven itself is revealed to him.

With heaven opened to him, John sees God's answer to the boast, admiration, and worship of the dragon and the beast. "Who is like the beast?" God's answer: Jesus! "Who can make war against him?" God's answer: Jesus! John now sees that Jesus is so far above the beast, that the beast does not stand a chance. In spite of the boasts about the dragon and beast, Jesus is going to win. In spite of the doubts and questions raised in the minds of God's people, Jesus is going to win". So, God's people – as they face persecution and deception – need not despair, they

need not give up on Jesus, they need not forsake the Gospel. In fact, they should be filled with hope and confidence and optimism. They can cling to the Gospel and the Gospel promises. But, what is it that makes John so confident that “Jesus is going to win?”

The four things that convince John are: Jesus' appearance, Jesus' names, Jesus' works, and Jesus' army. Jesus rides a *white horse*. What is the big deal? We need to look at the *white horse* from the perspective of Roman culture. It was the practice of triumphant military commanders – like Julius Caesar – to enter Rome riding on a *white horse*. In the Roman Empire, white horses were a symbol of victory, of triumphant military achievement.

With heaven standing open, John sees Jesus riding on a white horse. The message this gave to the followers of the dragon and the beast was that Jesus – not the beast, not the dragon – was triumphant. They were backing the wrong rider. Babylon, the harlot, was pictured as a woman riding the dragon. This woman used riches and money and materialism to seduce and allure people to follow the dragon. She was so successful that kings and peoples followed her. But now they all find out they backed the wrong rider – it is Jesus who is on the white horse of victory.

This is in contrast to Antichrist, the faker, the deceiver, who also came on a white horse, but he carried a bow, a symbol of Israel's destructive enemies, and leading the other horsemen - war, famine, and death. In *this* battle there is no ordinary weaponry. Only the power of the word, the power of Christ's truth, which

brings victory over the destructive forces of falsehood.

We are told about Jesus' appearance: "His eyes were like flames of fire." Three times this expression is used in the Revelation. His eyes are laser-like. They penetrate beneath the surface. They miss nothing and see everything. In other words, He knows everything, including the thoughts and intentions of every heart. Isn't it God Who is omniscient, all-knowing and all-seeing? So the dragon and the beast and the harlot don't stand a chance because opposed to them is Almighty God Himself.

"On his head are many crowns." Are we to picture Jesus balancing dozens of crowns on his head while riding a horse? No! This is apocalyptic literature, in which meanings are communicated by way of symbols. Again, we need to understand the time and place and culture. According to the 1st Maccabees, the Greek King, Ptolemy, wore two crowns on his head. Why? To signify his sovereignty over two kingdoms – the kingdom of Egypt and the kingdom of Asia. The rider of the white horse wears many crowns. Why? To signify His sovereignty over all kingdoms, all powers, all authorities, and all realms. To signify He is King over heaven and earth and everything in them.

"He wore a robe dipped in blood." Is this the blood of the cross? We are way past that point because the Lamb has now become a Lion, the Prince of Peace has now become a Mighty Warrior. So whose blood or what blood is this? We read: "He will release the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty, like juice flowing from a

winepress.” When grapes are stomped, their feet, their ankles, their robes become splattered with juice. When enemies are stomped on in the same way as wine makers stomp on their grapes, they become splattered with blood.

The second thing that convinces John that “Jesus is going to win”,and comforts us, is Jesus' names. "Faithful and True" – a title. The words "faithful" and "true" basically mean the same thing – that Jesus is reliable, altogether trustworthy, and dependable. From our earthly point-of-view, we can rely and trust and depend upon Jesus. From God's point-of-view, as a witness, Jesus is faithful and true to God; as a judge, Jesus is faithful and true to God. He is faithful and true in carrying out God's judgments against the dragon, the beasts, and the unbelieving.

"Word of God" is how John the Gospel writer starts his book: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* The word coming a second time to make God known to a people who refuse to repent and believe. The first time, Jesus made God known as Saviour. The second time, Jesus will make God known as Judge.

"KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" – a name is written on His robe and on His thigh. This title needs no explanation. It reinforces the message of the many crowns – that He is sovereign. While the saints may suffer for a while, God is on their side and is faithful to his promises. Christ, the rider on the white horse,

triumphs, though one foe remains.

The fourth name will leave you frustrated. "A name was written on him that no one understood except himself." It is like the time of the second coming whose day and hour is known only to God. Whatever the name, it is so holy, so majestic, so awesome, that we mortals are not worthy to hear it or to know it.

John is convinced that "Jesus is going to win" in Jesus' works. "... *for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war*" is the first work listed. The second work is: "*From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations.*" His weapon is a sharp, broad, double-edged sword which is not found in his hand but coming out of His mouth. So the instrument used to destroy his enemies is the spoken Word – the same Word that called all of creation into being – the Word that said "*Let there be light*", and there was light. This is a Word of power, a Word that is instantly fulfilled.

The third work: "*He will rule them with an iron rod.*" This is a quote from Psalm 2, a Messianic psalm that compares the nations to pieces of pottery that are shattered to pieces. And, the fourth work: "*He will release the fierce wrath of God.*"

"Jesus is going to win." The fourth thing that convinces John of this and comforts us is Jesus' army. "*The armies of heaven, dressed in the finest of pure white linen, followed him on white horses.*" Who is this army? A couple of earlier verses in the chapter make clear to us that it is the bride of Christ, the church, the people of God, who wears "fine linen, bright and clean".

What does this army do? Does it fight? First, "he judges and makes war"; "out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations"; "He will rule them with an iron sceptre"; "He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." He. He. He. He. He does it all. What do we do? Nothing. What does His army contribute? Nothing. We aren't even wearing armour. And, His army possesses no weapons. There are no swords in our hands.

So why are we there? We are there to watch. And, then, to worship and praise and glorify and honour. When the last battle is fought, Jesus will not appear by himself but he will triumph by himself.

John has finally reached the time in his Revelation in which his readers actually must make their decisions and live out their Christian lives, so he has given it considerable space and attention. His treatment has been relevant to our problems regarding the relationship of Good and Evil, the nature of the church and the Christian life, the meaning of the time in which we live.

"Jesus is going to win." Jesus' appearance, Jesus' names, Jesus' works, and Jesus' army all tell us there is absolutely no doubt about this and offers us much comfort in this life and on this earth.

Amen.