Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 21
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REVELATION 14-16
Grain/Grapes and the Seven Bowl Judgments

Judgment in the context of Apocalyptic Language

We've been looking at two series of images that the author uses in chapter 14 to describe the final judgment as it relates to the people of God who persevered and endured in their battle with the beast in chapters 12 and 13. We also looked at the fate of those who gave in or the fate of those who followed and identified with and gave worship and allegiance to the beast.

Two texts that I misread in earlier sections I want to draw your attention back to, the language of the- we said that the 144,000 are called first fruits, but it seems that the first fruit imagery applies to the whole people of God, not a group in anticipation of more to come. I suggested that in the Old Testament we find that, and the place we find that most clearly is Jeremiah 2, 2-3. Jeremiah 2:1-3 is: “The word of the Lord came to me [Jeremiah the prophet]: Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem … ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest.’” So now you find imagery used in the same way in chapter 14. The 144,000 are a firstfruits devoted to the Lord referring to the entirety of God's people at the end of history, not a group in anticipation of a further group.

The other text to draw your attention to is to turn our attention back to verses 17 through 20 of Revelation 14 we said this: here the author uses the image of the grape harvest to describe and depict the judgment of unbelieving humanity, those who had followed the beast rather than the Lamb and the author uses the image of the grape harvest as a symbol of God's judgment. The text I wanted to draw your attention to was actually not Isaiah 62, but Isaiah chapter 63, in the context of end time judgment, in Isaiah chapter 63, verses 2 and 3. I'll back up to verse 1, and read part of verse 1: "Who is this, robed in
splendor, striding forth in the greatness of his strength? `It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.’ Why are your garments red like those of one treading the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, from the nations, no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.”

Revelation 14

So here you clearly have the background for this language of the grape harvest in verses 17-20; that is, God is depicted as treading the winepress of his wrath. The nations are seen, in the wine press. Interestingly, and what results is the blood that comes from them. This text will crop up again in chapter 19 where the rider on the white horse comes with the robe stained with blood, stained with the blood from the winepress I take it. So this is kind of an anticipation of what gets divulged in more detail in chapter 19. So Isaiah chapter 63 and texts like Joel chapter 3, and elsewhere in the Old Testament provide the background for this imagery of a winepress and a harvest of grapes and trampling the winepress as an image or symbol of God's judgment on humanity. But as we said, what flows from the winepress in Isaiah 63 as well as here in Revelation 14 is not wine from the grapes, but instead, what flows from it is the blood of God's enemies. It's described very interestingly as "the blood reaching or going up as high as the horses’ bridles." The horses are not just horses out there kind of cavorting in the pasture, but this is an image of a cavalry-horses that have gone out to do battle, so now the blood flows up as high as the bridles of the horses at the distance of 1600 stadia. We'll talk more about stadia when we get to Revelation 21 and 22. It's enough to know that this is a large and rather significant distance. So you kind of have this rather gruesome language of a complete bloodbath as the result of God's judgment. Now what I think though is going on is, again, John is simply drawing on stock language and imagery. This time it appears specifically from apocalyptic texts to describe the nature and meaning of God's judgment. So we probably should not take this literally as if at some point in future history, as if at some point in history one could actually find blood up to the horses bridle sometime in a
future judgment. In fact, I couldn't even imagine that an army could choose to fight—especially in the 21st century and beyond using horses anyway, so John is simply borrowing common imagery from the Old testament to depict God trampling the winepress and the blood of the enemies flowing, but now he's added apocalyptic imagery, images from apocalyptic literature, to further heighten the impression this makes on the reader of the severity and the extent and awesomeness of God's judgment upon those who have followed the beast.

For example, this text is from 1 Enoch, we've read from 1 Enoch a couple times, it is an important apocalypse, and also 4 Ezra. I want to read two more passages out of those apocalypses, one of them is first Enoch chapter 100, and an image of the final judgment of sinners, the final judgment of the ungodly, beginning with verse 1: "In those days the father will be beaten together with his sons in one place, and the brothers shall fall together with their friends in death, until a stream shall flow with their blood, for a man will not be able to withhold his hands from his sons, nor from his son's sons in order to kill them"

Let me skip down to verse three, so this image of death, judgment, and bloodshed—now verse 3: "the horse shall walk through the blood of the sinners in the blood of sinners up to his chest, and the chariots will sink down up to its top." Clearly the horses being horses of warfare.

So notice the imagery in 1 Enoch of the blood going all the way up here it's only to the chest of the horses. But, if you turn over also to 4 Ezra, another important apocalypse that we've seen, and one that John appears to draw motifs out of 4 Ezra, whether he read 4 Ezra or not he still seems to draw from motifs that can be found in that book. Chapter 15 of 4 Ezra, again in the context of end time judgment: "Behold clouds"—this is 4 Ezra verses 34 through 36. "Behold clouds from the east and from the north to the south, and their appearance is very threatening, full of wrath and storm, [so it is an image of end time judgment and God pouring out his wrath] They shall dash against one another and shall pour out a heavy tempest upon the earth, and their own tempest, and there shall be blood from the sword as high as the horses’ belly, and a man's thigh, and a camel's back."
So notice although the language is a little bit different and John depicts the blood going up to the bridle of the horses. You clearly have this notion in apocalyptic texts of the final judgment being so severe and so widespread and the bloodshed so great- it can be depicted as blood flowing up to the belly or the chest of the horse. Then John takes it up to the bridle of the horses. So what John is doing is simply drawing on a common apocalyptic motif from apocalyptic text such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, and others, not to depict a literal scene that- as if one were present at this time in history you'd actually see blood flowing to the bellies or the bridles of horses. He is using imagery, stock imagery from apocalyptic texts to try to play on the emotions and response of the readers to try to get them to see the horror and the awfulness and the extent and the severity of God's judgment at the end of time.

Harvest and Winepress

So the imagery then says something both from Isaiah 63 and the language of treading the winepress and the language from apocalyptic texts that John has brought together to depict the end time judgment. These images function to explore the meaning, extent and nature of God’s judgment not necessarily literally, how it’s going to take place; so in chapter 14 through 20, I’ve suggested to you that we see two scenes of end time judgment. One of them is positive, that is, the scene of the harvest of the grain is a positive scene of reaping the harvest of God’s people as firstfruits, probably referring back to chapter 14 verse 4- and now chapter 17 through 20 using the harvest of grapes as a negative image of the judgment of the wicked, or judgment of evil. So verses 14 through 16 correspond to chapter 14:1 through 5, and the grain harvest corresponds to 14 1 through 5, the 144000 standing victorious in Zion with the Lamb, victorious in Zion with the Lamb, victorious in their battle against sin, evil, Satan and the beast. They are now presented as a firstfruit harvest to God, now that harvest is depicted in verses 14 through 16, and then the three messages of the angels, especially angels 2 and 3, proclaiming the message of judgment. Now for those who followed the beast, for those who had the mark of the beast and have worshiped his image, indicating allegiance, worship and identifying with the
beast this idolatrous godless empire, now their situation of judgment is depicted in 17-20 in the form of a grape harvest.

So all in all then in chapter 14 rather than just being an unconnected, indiscriminate series of images, chapter 14 uses different images such as the 144,000 standing victorious on Mount Zion, the firstfruits, Babylon’s fall, the language of judgment in the form of the cup of God’s wrath being poured out, and smoke going up for ever and ever, smoke and sulfur, ascending for ever and ever, the scenes of harvest of wheat or grain, of grapes, John uses different imagery to explore the fate of those in chapters 12 and 13 then who refuse to compromise, who resisted even to the point of suffering and death, those who responded to the battle that Satan wages on the saints, those who refused to compromise who instead endured and maintained their faithful witness. Now they are described with the images of the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion, and also the grain harvest and the firstfruits.

There are those in chapters 12 and 13 who compromised, in the church, and in the world. So we’re not to read this as exclusively the positive images of the church and negative images of the world. No, there are also the negative images are also for those in the church who compromise and refuse to maintain their faithful witness for those the images of God’s wrath poured out in judgment, the destruction of Babylon, God’s wrath poured out in the terms of the cup of wine, unmixed, the smoke and sulfur going up for ever, the treading of the winepress of God’s wrath, all of those images now depict and portray the fate of those who compromise with the beast in chapters 12 and 13.

Chapter 15: Introducing the Bowl Judgments

So now, chapter 14 leads into one final vision of both judgment and salvation, and that is chapters 15 and 16. Chapter 15 introduces us to what will get unpacked in more detail in chapter 16, and that is the seven last plagues. We’ll see how these images connect. But the seven last plagues will be the seven last judgments of God, but in the midst of that, in chapter 15: 1-4 we find another vision of end time salvation, so we’re going to find another mixture, another alternation of a vision of salvation followed by a vision of judgment. We’ll talk about that, but chapter 15 seems to have a twofold function when we
think about chapters 15 and 16. First of all, chapter 15 functions to introduce the seven the bowl sequence, the sequence of seven bowls of God’s wrath that get poured out in chapter 16.

So, on the one hand chapter 15 functions as an introduction to chapter 16. However, it also depicts God’s people praising the Lamb because of the victory that he has given them in chapter 15:2-4. So, once more we find sort of this interlocking going on, note how verse 15 begins: “I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--last because with them God’s wrath is completed.” Now you could skip down to verse 5, “After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is the tabernacle of testimony was open. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven last plagues.”

So in verse 1 he sees the seven angels with the seven last plagues, now in verses 5 and following he describes the seven angels coming out with the seven last plagues in the form of bowls, about to pour them out on the earth. So you could remove verses 2-4, and the narrative would flow very nicely. But here we find another example of that interlocking that we’ve seen elsewhere in Revelation. Verse 1 begins the narrative of the seven angels with the seven last plagues, but then it’s interrupted by a scene that seems to, in a sense, belong to chapter 14, another scene of final salvation but in different imagery; where once again, we find God’s people standing and singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

So, verse, chapter 15 on one level seems to connect back to chapter 14, another image of salvation, but also it connects with, and provides an introduction for chapter 16 and following. So you have this interlocking feature, the seven angels and their plagues are introduced, it’s cut off by a scene of God’s people standing beside a sea, singing the song of Moses, singing by the Lamb, and it records that song, and then the scene in verse 1 is picked up again, with the angels coming out of the temple, about ready to pour out their bowls. Then chapter 16 narrates the pouring out of the each of the seven bowls.

Now let me read chapter 15 to you, which is a very short chapter. “I saw in heaven
[and notice the word “I saw” again, marking off another segment of the vision] I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last because with them God’s wrath is now completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image” [Again connecting you back to chapter 13 and chapter 14. Now I think this is the same group, the 144,000, those who have been victorious over the beast and his image from chapters 13 and 14 “and over the number of his name” chapter 13 verse 18.] “They held harps given them by God, and sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and they sang the song of the Lamb: ‘Great and marvelous are your deeds Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, in the tabernacle of the testimony—it was open. Out of the temple came seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and they wore gold sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.”

Verses 2-4 not an Interruption

Now just briefly, in chapter 15 what I think is going on is this: the author is about ready to narrate seven last plagues. This is the third cycle of plagues starting with the seven seals, then seven trumpets, now seven bowls are about ready to be poured out. But before he does that, the author gives us one more image connecting back to chapter 13 and 14. It is an image of those who are victorious. But now I want you to notice how the image of those people is portrayed in verses 2-4. This is the key to seeing that this is not just some indiscriminate insertion of verses 2 and 3, into this. Chapter 15 begins the seven last plagues, but you have in verses 2-4 this picture of the saints, standing by the sea, singing
the song of the Lamb. This is not just an interruption. Instead, I think there is a purpose. As
the author is about ready to link, to narrate the final judgments of God, before and leading
up to the final outpouring of God’s judgment in chapter 17 and following, now before he
begins to narrate the pouring out of God’s wrath in terms of the final last seven judgments
in the form of the bowl judgments, the author in one final image wants to depict the people
of God standing before the sea, singing the song of Moses and Lamb connecting back to 13
and 14. Now he’s looking at it from a different picture, he’s using a different image,
chapter 15 describes the same scenes we saw in 14, the 144,000 in Mount Zion, the harvest
of the grain, and the grain harvest of the firstfruits.

Now we see the same scene in different imagery, but what is John doing? The key to
connecting these is the language of the Exodus. John wants to portray the final judgment of
God as an Exodus, that is, in terms of the Exodus plagues, which he will in chapter 16.
Before he does that, he wants to remind us again that in the midst of this that God’s people
will emerge victorious.

So, verses 2 and 4 do not happen chronologically, in other words, chapter 15:2-4,
the vision of the saints before the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb
does not happen first, and then the bowls get poured out. I think it’s the opposite. But what
John does is that before he narrates the pouring out of the final Exodus plagues, he wants to
show you the outcome of the saints. In the same way that in the Old Testament the people
of God went to the Red Sea, emerged victorious, and sang the song of Moses; that’s what
will happen after these plagues will be poured out. God’s people will not be harmed; they
will not suffer the wrath of God, but instead in Exodus language as part of this Exodus
story in chapter 15 and 16 the author right up front, before he ever narrates the Exodus
plague judgments in the form of the seven bowls in chapter 16 he wants to portray God’s
people, that after that time, they will emerge as victorious, standing by the sea, having
crossed the Red Sea, standing by the sea and singing the song of Moses.

Glassy Sea

Now it’s interesting that, in verses 2-4 the author draws on a number of images that
refer to and clearly recall the Exodus. Two things are interesting about this account, number one, the sea is described as the sea of glass. This is apparently the same sea as back in Revelation chapter 4. The sea of glass that stood before the throne. Interestingly though, in some Jewish literature, the Red Sea is described as “the sea of glass,” there are a couple of Jewish texts outside of the Old Testament where the Red Sea was described in some rabbinic literature as a sea of glass.

Also we’ve already noted too that in a text like Isaiah 51 verse 9, the Red Sea was depicted as a sea of chaos, the home of the sea monster. So that what you might have here then is a picture of the sea of chaos, the home of the sea monster, that which threatens God’s people starting with the first Exodus, that sea has now been calmed by God’s sovereignty. Now we find that it is a sea of glass, God showing his sovereignty over the sea of chaos and evil, the Red Sea of chaos and evil, now God’s people are described as having emerged through that, now they stand victorious. The sea of chaos and evil probably reflects the events of chapter 12 and 13. Satan’s attempt to pour out his torrent of water on the woman, his attempt to kill her offspring, that sea has now been calmed with God’s sovereignty. Now they have emerged through that period of tribulation, and they stand beside the sea like the ancient Israelites did, and they sing the song of Moses.

Song(s) of Moses

The other interesting thing about this psalm is the song of Moses was sung in Exodus chapter 15, after they emerged from the Red Sea but there’s another Song of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy as well. This song doesn’t resemble those, especially the song in Exodus chapter 15. What John has apparently done is in hearing this song, and also recording this song, he has drawn in a number of other Old Testament texts, from Isaiah chapter 60 and elsewhere. They all celebrate God’s holiness, and his mighty just acts, on behalf of his people; in judging evil but also in providing his salvation for his people.

But the song of Moses here does not really closely resemble the song in Exodus 15 if you go back and compare it. That’s because John, in a sense, by calling it also the song of the Lamb is constructing a new song. He hears a new song being song, and so he brings in
other Old Testament texts that celebrate God’s victory in providing salvation for his people and also in judging the kings of the earth, and displaying his glory, and his name. So what this also does then is it indicates the reason for God’s judgment. God’s judgment is to vindicate not only his people, but also his name, and his holy character.

Interestingly, this psalm also anticipates what is going to get developed in more detail in chapter 21. We’re seeing snapshots of the end that will lead up to a fuller disclosure in chapter 21. When this hymn ends and nations come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. We’ll see that nations will come to the New Jerusalem to worship, in chapter 21. So this is kind of looking forward to the fuller disclosure in chapter 21.

Bowl Judgments: Background

So, this scene then sets the scene for the further development of the plague sequence which the author returns to in verse 5. Here now instead of seals or trumpets, we did see that trumpets could be used as an anticipation of judgment in the Old Testament, a call to judgment; the bowls here primarily at one level indicate priestly service, the bowls are another feature of tabernacle or temple language. Let me back up. What is interesting is in verse 5 begins, “after this I looked and in heaven the temple that is the tabernacle of the testimony” that is intriguing because “the tabernacle of the testimony” was used especially in Exodus. In Exodus through Deuteronomy it refers to the tabernacle that was set up in the wilderness. So this reference to the temple as the “tabernacle of testimony” I think is the author’s way of further continuing the Exodus motif by identifying the temple as “the tabernacle of the testimony,” “the tent of the testimony,” that accompanied Israel in the wilderness. Now the plagues that are about to be poured out in correspondence with the Exodus plagues are identified with bowls. In Isaiah chapter 51, I think we find the language of bowls in terms of the cup of God’s wrath. So if that’s part of the background, bowls being associated with the cup of God’s wrath, pouring out the bowls as instruments of God’s wrath, bowls would be a fitting instrument for pouring out God’s wrath on the earth. Now this is associated with two other interesting terms: one of them is smoke filling the
temple, and the other is the fact that no one could enter until the judgments were complete. Probably the language of smoke filling the temple not only recalls Exodus language, but also Isaiah chapter 6, and verses 1 and 4. Isaiah 6 is an important scene, a throne room vision that has influenced John’s depiction of the throne room back in Revelation chapter 4. But in Isaiah chapter 6 we read, “In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Now skip down to verse 4: “At the sound of their voices, [the sound of the winged creatures from verses 2 and 3] At the sound of their voices the doorposts and threshold shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

Most likely in view of Exodus 40 as well where this seems to indicate God’s presence filling the tabernacle. The image here is of God’s glorious presence and power filling the heavenly temple, now to issue judgments on the earth.

Why is it that no one can enter? Probably just a description of the fact that God’s presence is so all encompassing, so awesome and terrible in pouring out judgment that no one could withstand it, no one could enter until this act of judgment takes place.

Exodus Imagery Again

So now the people of God are seen as having, before the plagues are poured out in Exodus imagery, kind of jumping ahead after the time of the plagues. God’s people are first depicted as having crossed through the sea, the sea calmed by God’s sovereignty standing beside the sea, emerging victorious, singing the song of Moses, worshiping and praising God because of the salvation he has provided. This then prepared for the opening of the tabernacle in an Exodus-like event where smoke fills it. Now we are prepared to be introduced to the seven Exodus-like plagues that follow in chapter 16. Chapter 16 now is going to narrate those seven plagues and all of them even more so than back in chapters 8 and 9, where we saw that most of the plagues were modeled after the Exodus.

Now even more clearly all seven of these plagues that are narrated are modeled after one or more of the ten Exodus plagues from the original Exodus event. Once more we should read the number seven not as a series of seven exact plagues that will occur in this
order, but seven indicating perfection, indicating completion, and the whole point of this is that the plagues here are meant to recall the Exodus. So once more we see that John is using language that is not so much meant to help us identify the precise nature of the plagues and what they look like, but more to help us explore the meaning and significance and certainty of God’s judgment. It’s as if John is saying in the same way that God judged a wicked idolatrous oppressive people, certainly he will once again judge another, and any other idolatrous oppressive people that oppose him and set themselves up over God.

Increasing Intensity

The other thing to recall is I think here we now get an even more close up perspective of the Day of the Lord. Remember I said that it appears what’s going on, in each of the sequence—seals, trumpets, and bowls--each of them end with the Day of the Lord, or bringing you right up to it only to back up and narrate more material. But what I think is happening is that when you compare the seals, trumpets, and bowls, while there appears to be some overlap especially between the trumpets and bowls in reference to the Exodus plague imagery there’s some overlap but there appears to be a progression, especially of intensity. The plagues become more severe; they become more intense. Seals affected a fourth of the earth with the seals, the trumpets affected a third, and now with the bowls there is no limit. They apparently are all encompassing and affect all people and affect the entire earth. So I take it that with the bowls you are now at a closer perspective, you are now looking at the judgments that will lead immediately into the final Day of the Lord and up to the final judgment. In fact, the author says, “These are the last judgments.” These are the final judgments of God before unleashing his end time judgment that again gets narrated in chapter 17 through chapter 20 of Revelation. So here we’re brought to the end.

Revelation 16

Let me read chapter 16. “Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying [and I want you to notice the connection with the Exodus plagues from the book of Exodus] to the seven angels, ‘Go, pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.’ The first angel
poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned to blood like that of a dead person, and every living thing in the sea died. The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the water say: ‘You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged: for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.’ And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’ Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given the power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by its intense heat, and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and give him glory.” [Just as pharaoh refused to repent in the original Exodus.] The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and they cursed the God in heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of a false prophet. [This is a very strange image indeed, only three frogs but somehow coming out of the three mouths at the same time, a clear indication of the symbolic nature of this.] They are the spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God almighty. ‘Behold, I come like a thief!’ Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.’ [Then they gathered the Kings together in the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.] The seventh angel then poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is finished, it is done!’ Then there came flashing of lightning, rumbling, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. No earthquake it has occurred since man has been on earth, so
tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plagues of hail because the plague was so terrible.”

Exodus Connections

And that brings us to the end of the bowl plague sequence. Hopefully you picked up some of the connections with Exodus. One interesting thing to mention before that—note that there is no interlude between seal six and seven. Again, this is the final outpouring of God’s judgment that will lead immediately into the Day of the Lord and into the end time judgment. But, for example, bowl number one, the bowl of sores, resembles the plague of sores in Exodus chapter 9. Bowls 2 and 3 resemble Exodus 7, turning the water into blood. In bowl number 4 the sun scorches people, Exodus chapter 9; bowl chapter 5 there is darkness over the kingdom of Egypt, Exodus chapter 10: that’s where there is darkness over the kingdom of Egypt. Here the beast’s kingdom is darkened, unlike in chapter 8 where there was partial darkness; now the entire kingdom of Satan is darkened. Bowl number 6 contains three frogs resembling the frog plague in Exodus chapter 8. Bowl number 7, thunder, lightning, hail, and earthquake resemble Exodus 9 verse 23. And like pharaoh, the people still refuse to repent in chapter 16:11. So clearly the author wants us to recall the Exodus plagues. To repeat, I’m not sure I can identify exactly what these plagues might look like, and exactly what John has in mind, once more as I’ve said John may be more interested that we explore the theological significance of the plagues and the meaning of God’s judgment by drawing us back to the Exodus. Altogether though over all, this chapter may, much like chapters 8 and 9, be God’s judgment upon idolatry, upon evil, upon a godless empire, the suffering could be both spiritual and physical, but here clearly this may be another way of demonstrating how complete the futility of relying on the world’s resources and the complete darkness into which humanity is plunged, when they give in to and follow the worship and the allegiance of a pagan godless idolatrous empire.
Seventh Bowl Goes Until the End

But the point is now there is no more warning, this is the final pouring out of judgment, before the final judgment, the end time judgment, this is the final express of God’s wrath in this threefold seals, trumpets, and bowls, now there will be no more delay, now the end will come very quickly.

Five Features of the Bowl Judgments

The seventh bowl brings us right to the end. Bowl number 7 is clearly the final judgment, and clearly brings us to the end. I want us to simply focus on a couple of unique features, instead of going through all of these bowls in detail, because we’ve mentioned some of them in connection with chapters 8 and 9, but what I want to focus on is a couple of interesting features, five interesting features of this plague sequence and the bowls.

Number one is, intriguingly you find a hymn situated and introduced into the third bowl. The third angel pours out his bowl, but before you get to the fourth one you have a hymn. We’ve seen in Revelation the hymns throughout the book often function to interpret the scenes that John sees in his vision. Now, this hymn includes a hymn sung in response to verse 5, and I think what it mainly does is affirms the justice the God. It affirms the justice of God in pouring out these plagues; maybe it’s not only just this one, but all the plagues it’s meant to encompass, in demonstrating that. Even the altar chimes in and responds, “Yes, O Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.” It’s interesting the altar chimes in, I don’t know if this is maybe another reference to the two or three witnesses needed to establish a testimony, but not only does the angel say, “True and just are your judgments” but now a second witness, the altar, chimes in and says “Yes, Lord, true and just are your judgments” Whether that’s intentional or not, drawing on that Old Testament theme of two or three witnesses, I’m not sure. But the function of this hymn is to draw attention to the justice of God’s judgment. Note that particularly, the connection with the third plague, of water turning into blood, verse 6 says, “For they have shed the blood of saints now you give them blood to drink.” Now this hymn is modeled specifically to vindicate God and demonstrate the justice and righteousness of the judgment, the blood
judgment he is pouring out and here. Again we see the principle: the judgment fits the crime. The wicked evil empire, the beast, shed the blood of the saints, now in return; God gives them blood in the form of this bowl, this plague, of blood on the earth.

Literary Function of the Euphrates

Another interesting feature is found in verses 12 and following in the sixth angel. The rest of my comments will relate to the sixth and seventh bowl. Once more the author finds or mentions the Euphrates River. We saw reference to that back earlier in chapter 9 in connection with the plagues of the locust, or the plagues of the end time army. So there might be a connection, John may be envisioning the same thing here. But the mention of the Euphrates we suggested recalls sort of the eastern boundary of Rome itself from which their attackers such as the Parthians would come. But also we find the Old Testament idea of the army from the north coming, that this, John is now drawing on that language to recall or to bring to mind an invading army. So we shouldn’t take John suggesting there’s a literal Euphrates river that’s going to literally be dried up, in fact who wouldn’t need that for today’s modern army, you don’t need to dry up a river to get across, you fly over it. But John is drawing on stock imagery from the Greco-Roman background but also the Old Testament to invoke the notion of an invading army. So when he says he pours out his bowl on the Euphrates the reader is going to think, “Here comes an invading army.”

But what John sees though are the kings of the East. In other words, the waters dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. And I don’t think we’re to try to identify specifically who these armies are; it’s simply invoking the notion of an invading army.

Frogs

So now you have the kings of the earth who cross the Euphrates, but then you are also introduced to three evil spirits in the form of frogs. The reason they’re identified with frogs (there may be a number of reasons) but one of them is to evoke the Exodus plague of frogs but now you have three frogs and the author could not be any more clear as to what these frogs signify. He calls them demonic beings, but he also says they come out of the mouth of the dragon, beast number one, and beast number two that he calls the false
prophet. So it couldn’t be any more clear that this is a scenario of a demonic onslaught. But interestingly, what these three frogs do is they are able to deceive the nations and gather them for battle. Now, that’s interrupted by verse 15 that we’ll look at in a moment, and the battle is resumed in verse 16.

Now the question is what is the relationship between these kings of the earth and the nations, kings of the whole world? So you have the kings of the East, crossing the Euphrates, then the kings of the whole world, in the end of verse 14. What’s the relationship between the two? Some conceive of them fighting together but I wonder if instead this is simply an image of an end time evoking the notion of all the kings of the earth, but also evoking the notion of the invading forces from the East. The author is constructing a picture of all the world gathered together for an end time battle. That is to do battle against God himself and his people as I think we see later. But the point is not to depict some battle between kings of the earth and kings of the East, but to draw on images, to depict the collaboration of the kings of the earth and the kings of the East and the all-out end time assault, end time battle, that the author calls the battle of Armageddon.

Nature of Armageddon

Before I mention that, let me say something about the term Armageddon, but also to say something about this battle. First of all, the difficulty with the term “Armageddon” is trying to identify precisely what John has in mind. Some have tried, as Grant Osborne in his commentary suggests, many commentaries have tried to identify this by dividing it up into two possible categories of explanation. Some have tried to interpret this geographically, often quite literally, as to suggest somewhere, and the problem is Armageddon comes from two Hebrew words, har for mountain, and Megiddo, that refers to a plain, an expanse or a plain that you find playing a key role in Old Testament battles, such as in Judges chapter 5, 1 Kings 18, 2 Kings 23, 2 Chronicles 35, also Zechariah chapter 12 mentions this end time battle. You find the plain of Megiddo, as a place of warfare in the Old Testament. So, some have literally tried to describe Armageddon, the mountain of Megiddo. The problem is that there doesn’t appear to be a mountain, right
there at the plain of Megiddo. So scholars have struggled to describe geographically where this might take place. So that’s geographical explanation.

The second set of explanations that Osborne highlights are etymological interpretations, such as seeing Armageddon, as “the mount of assembly,” and not referring to some geographical location in relationship to Megiddo. I wonder though if Armageddon, the mountain of Megiddo is John’s own construction using mountain imagery but also drawing on Megiddo from the Old Testament as a place of well-known battles. It would be a little like using the word “Waterloo” or “Vietnam” to refer to a struggle or a battle or a war. You might refer to someone’s personal Vietnam or something like that not referring to a battle or literal location, but taking a well-known battle as a symbol or image of a well-known conflict. So I wonder if John is not taking using Megiddo, a place of famous battles in the Old Testament, and now adding the term “mountain,” Mt. Megiddo, as now a place, a symbol for an end time battle. Now all the nations of the earth gather at Armageddon, at this symbolically, at the mountain of Megiddo, in preparation for an end time battle.

The problem here is there’s no battle narrated. We’re not told that any fighting takes place; we’re not told what happens. In my opinion this text prepares us for the end time battle that will be narrated later on in Revelation, Revelation chapter 19 and the rider on the white horse, and then also Revelation chapter 20, at the very end. In the very end of chapter 20, you find Satan being released from the Abyss, deceiving all the nations of the earth gathering together for battle. They surround the camp of the saints, and God himself destroys them with fire coming out of heaven. So you find references to several battles, you have an end time battle here called the battle of Armageddon, you have a battle in chapter 19, where the son of man comes out on the white horse to defeat the enemies and then you have another battle at the end of chapter 20 in Revelation where Satan gathers together the armies and they go out and do battle against the saints yet they are devoured. I would suggest to you that all of these battles probably refer to the same one. In other words, we do not have three separate battles, but instead we have the exact same battle. It’s interesting in
all three of them you have the language of the armies being gathered for warfare. Also,
chapter 20 and chapter 19 we’re going to see draw on the same imagery from Ezekiel
chapter 38 and 39, God and Magog. But we’ll look at this in more detail when we get to the
actual battles themselves in chapters 19 and 20. All three of these battles are different ways
of referring to the same one. So we don’t have a battle narrated here, because we only see
the preparation for it. The final battle is going to come, in chapter 19 and chapter 20, where
Jesus Christ and God simply come and defeat their enemies. When we get there we need to
ask, what is being portrayed in these battles? How are we to take those and understand
them as some literal battle, some spiritual battle, or something else?

Parallels with the Letters to the Churches (Rev 2-3)

The last thing I want to say then, in verse 15, notice this, another kind of interruption
into the plague sequence: “Behold, I come like a thief, blessed is he who stays awake and
keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”
What I think is going on here is once more this is an indication that chapter 16 is not for the
purpose of trying to determine a sequence of events in the end time or charting the end
times, or simply to satisfy our curiosity as to what’s going to take place in the end. In the
middle of all of this, John inserts a call for his readers to respond, his readers in chapters 2
and 3. I want you to notice that what I think is happening is because of the gravity of this
situation in view of this final battle that’s going to come upon the earth, John is calling his
readers to vigilance, by drawing on chapters 3 and 4. Notice the language of “Behold, I
come like a thief.” So before the battle’s going to break out, John wants to warn his readers
to be prepared. I think the call here is to be faithful and refuse to compromise. That’s how
they prepare. But notice the language of coming like a thief. That comes right out of
chapters 2 and 3, where Christ warned the church at Sardis that he would come like a thief
if they did not repent in chapter 3 and verse 3. Also Sardis is told to stay awake, to stay
vigilant. Do you remember the church that was told not to go about naked but to clothe
themselves with true white clothes?--the church of Laodicea. So this language recalling the
language from chapters 2 and 3 is simply John’s way of saying, due to the significance and
gravity of the battle, the end time judgment of God, that demands vigilance on the part of the people to refuse to compromise, to maintain their faithful witness, lest this battle ends up being like Christ coming as a thief, lest this battle catches them unprepared, catches them unaware. Instead, they should be vigilant, faithful, and wake up, and they should clothe themselves so they should not find themselves naked and ashamed at the Day of Judgment. So verse 15 is an insertion that reminds us that chapter 16 has a hortatory function. To get the readers in chapters 2 and 3 to maintain faithfulness, to refuse to compromise, to resist compromise with pagan Rome, and to maintain a faithful witness, no matter what the cost.

Babylon

Now the next section of Revelation is chapter 17 and 18, the detailed description of Babylon and it’s destruction. But what I simply want to note in ending chapter 16 is notice that it is already prepared for in the seventh and last bowl that brings you to the final Day of the Lord, the final judgment. Note the language of islands being removed. But note Babylon the great, God remembered Babylon the great and gave her a cup filled with the wine of his wrath. Chapters 17 and 18 will be a further expansion of that bowl, that final plague of God remembering Babylon the Great. Now chapters 17 and 18 are going to develop that in more detail with the further description of Babylon, her true nature, and a description of her final judgment.

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