



The Book of Revelation

Revelation 18:1-19:21: The Fall of Babylon and the Coming of the Messiah

Angels have poured out the vials holding the liquid from the grapes of the wrath of God. Their actions have brought to reality the declaration of the angel in 14:8, that Babylon has fallen. The object that wrath appeared in the last chapter with its thinly disguised allegory of Rome portrayed as a whore riding on a beast. The next section of the book (18:1-19:9) celebrates the fall of this new Babylon, relying heavily on passages from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, involving dramatic prophecies and taunt songs celebrating the demise of Israel's oppressors. Then begins the final major section of the book, consisting of seven unnumbered visions 19:11-22:5, each introduced by the formula, "and I saw," like the visions in the central section (chapters 12-14). This week we shall read the first three of those visions, about the coming of the Messiah and his defeat of the powers of evil. Although there is a structural division between the two parts, they substantively overlap in intriguing ways.

Celebration of the Fall of Babylon

Chapter 18 begins with the appearance of another angel, who announces, as had the earlier angelic voice, that "Fallen, fallen is Babylon." Of course, no such fall had taken place when John wrote Revelation and Rome would remain intact until sacked by the Alaric and the Goths in 410 AD. John's celebratory vision of the fall of Rome therefore seems a bit premature. Exactly what readers are to make of the prophetic declaration is a bit mysterious. It is possible that John anticipates a political and military catastrophe in the near future which would overthrow the established imperial order. He might remember the events of the chaotic year of three emperors, alluded to most recently in 17:10. Or perhaps some form of the prophetic vision was already composed in the circumstances of that period in which Roman power seemed to totter on the brink of chaos.

It is also possible that John understands the fall of "Babylon" in a metaphorical sense. The imperial order, and all its components which the rest of chapter 18 will specify, has already fallen in the face of the "conquerers," the witnesses to the truth,

whose “victory,” anticipated in the declarations of the messages to the churches, was celebrated in the hymnic acclamations that accompanied the central images of 11:17 and 12:10-12. The vision of the coming of the “warrior” Messiah in the next chapter (19:11-16) will add to the evidence that this is indeed John’s perspective.

The celebration of Babylon’s fall in chapter 18 develops a more detailed vision of what it is that has fallen. After describing the desolation, real or metaphorical, that follows the fall (18:2), the visionary returns the motive of the “fornication” committed by Babylon. The initial angelic declaration had connected Babylon’s fall with the image of “the wine of the wrath of her fornication” as well (14:8), a symbol for something that the imperial power had forced on “all the nations.” The language of sexual immorality, which has been a part of Revelation since the complaints against some of the churches (2:14, 20), is symbolic of another problem. The prophetic tradition, beginning with Hosea, used sexual immorality as a symbol of the infidelity of the people of Israel to Yahweh, and so it is with Revelation, where the “worship of the beast” that is Rome has been the major sin (13:8, 12, 15). Yet an important part of the indictment of those who worship the beast is that they use the coin of the realm (13:17) with its mysterious “name.” John has thus hinted that he sees an intimate link between the idolatry involved in the worship of Rome and participation in the economic order that the empire nourished. The connection between political and economic spheres continues in a clear and forceful way in this chapter. The next verse (18:3) introduces the theme connecting “kings of the earth” who have “committed fornication with her (i.e., Babylon)” and the “merchants of the earth,” who have been enriched by her.

The rest of the chapter consists of five segments, a voice that cries a warning to the people of God that judgment is coming (18:4-8), a brief lament by the kings of the earth (18:9-10), a much longer lament by the merchants and sailors (18:11-19), another angel describing the desolation of the great city (18:20-24) and a heavenly chorus celebrating the fall (19:1-9).

Echoes of Biblical prophecy resound throughout this section. The call to the people of God to “come out” (v 4) recalls Jeremiah’s advice to the people of Israel to come out of the original Babylon (Jeremiah 51:9, 45). This was a warning that responded to a divine decree that Babylon was to be destroyed (Jeremiah 50:8-9; 51:1-5), a prophecy that inspires much of Revelation’s language about the fall of the new Babylon.

The voice that cries out from heaven calls for vengeance, for Babylon to be repaid for her sins (v 6). The repayment is a dreadful mix of “pestilence, mourning and famine.” Repayment was also part of Jeremiah’s call for the sins of Babylon (Jeremiah 51:24), and he paints an equally bleak picture of the devastation to be administered to Babylon (Jeremiah 50:34-38). This call for retribution is perhaps one of the most disturbing parts of the book of Revelation, hardly compatible, it would seem, with a faith grounded in the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount that those who suffer should “turn the other cheek” (Matt 5:38-42). Yet the followers of Jesus, though committed to a radical ethic of non-violence, believed that it was God, not they, who would set things right in the end. They believed, as the Epistle to the Hebrews 11:30 notes, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, that “vengeance is mine, I will repay.” A righteous judgment was a firm part of most early Christian expectations of God’s eschatological action.

Thus far the vision of chapter 18 has echoed Jeremiah’s prophecies about the fall of Babylon. After the perfunctory lament of the kings (18:9-10), the cries of the merchants and sailors (18:11-19) recalls another vivid prophetic passage, Ezekiel’s description of the fall of the Phoenician merchant city, Tyre (Ezekiel 26-27). The list of merchandise (18:12-13) parallels the roster of wares traded by Tyre (Ezekiel 27:12-22). The reaction of the merchants to Babylon’s fall (18:15) resembles the reactions of merchants to the Tyre’s demise (Ezekiel 27:36). The “shipmaster, seafarers, and sailors” (18:17) were also part of Ezekiel’s scene (Ezekiel 27:29).

Following the description of the laments of kings and merchants, there is an exclamation (18:20) that sounds as if it is coming from the voice of the seer himself. Whatever its source, the call to “rejoice over her, O heaven” sets the tone for the remaining verses of the section.

Ezekiel continues to be the inspiration of much of the next section, in which an angel casts a millstone into the sea and paints a scenario of the dreary barrenness that follows divine judgment. Ezekiel had described a similar bleakness in the fallen Tyre (Ezekiel 26:11-13, 20-21).

The heavenly chorus that concludes this segment of the book brings familiar characters back to the stage, the voice of a great multitude (19:1, 6; cf. 7:9), the twenty-four elders (19:4; cf. 4:4, 10; 11:16). Their acclamations resemble the acclamations at 11:15-18 and 12:10-12), celebrating the victory and righteous judgment of God, whenever that takes place.

An unnamed divine voice, perhaps of the last angel that had appeared, tells the seer to write down the vision affirming that they are the “word of God.” The seer falls down in worship, in what might be a fitting ending for a “book of prophecy” (19:9-10). But in fact, the book does not end there. John reports yet another sequence of visions. The first is of a rider on a white horse (19:11). The horse recalls the conquering rider on the first horse of the four horsemen (6:1-2). The details of his appearance are significant. His fiery eyes connect him with the Son of Man whom John saw at the start of his vision (1:14). Jesus, who for Christians is the Son of Man, has been at the heart of the whole book, either in his glorious heavenly attire or in the form of the lamb that was slain. In fact, the connection of those two perspectives, heavenly glory and patient witness, coincide for our visionary, as they will here.

The rider of the white horse has on his head “many crowns,” more impressive than the crowns on the heads of the Roman beast (13:1). More important than the trappings of royalty is the name that he bears, rather like the name of Yahweh inscribed on Aaron’s turban (Exodus 28:36-38), or, in the words of an early Christian hymn, the name that is above all names (Philippians 2:9) bestowed on the exalted Jesus. The Messiah does indeed bear the name of God as he had borne the characteristics of the Ancient of Days in his first appearance (1:14).

The most important feature of the horseman’s appearance is the fact that his robe is dipped in blood (19:13). For those who read Revelation as a prophetic depiction of a warrior Messiah, who will come and exact bloody vengeance on the unrighteous, the blood here is the blood of his victims. But the visionary does not tell us explicitly whose blood it is, and given what has been said about the slain lamb, it is much more likely that the blood here is the rider’s own, the blood that has been shed on behalf of a sinful world, by the one whose name is “The Word of God,” a possible allusion to John 1:1.

The author continues to play with the imagery of a warrior Messiah, but he subverts that imagery at every step. Yet another characteristic of the rider on the white horse is that he bears a “sharp sword” with which to “smite the nations” (v 15). This is the same sword that appeared at 2:16 and it plays the same metaphorical role, describing the incisive words of prophecy that issue from the sword-like tongue of the chief witness. This rider will be ruler, ruling with “an iron rod,” the same iron rod, inspired by Psalm 2:8-9 that appeared at 2:26-27 and 12:5. This is not; however, a mace or club that a warrior uses, but it is precisely the implement of a “shepherd” concerned for his flock.

The vision of the coming Messiah sketched here is of a piece with the remarkable imagery of the rest of the book. It embodies the hopes of early Christians for future deliverance, but it firmly embeds those hopes in the character of the one whom they follow, the slain lamb, who is also the good shepherd. The “king of kings and Lord of Lords” (v 16) who exercises his rule by his testimony, his witness to the truth. It is that prophetic witness that overcomes the powers of evil embodied in political and economic spheres and that witness is victorious, even in what appears to be defeat. John will continue to play with imagery of eschatological warfare, judgment and vindication as he moves through this final set of visions, but always with an eye to the reality that is already in place, a reality that will be lavishly celebrated in the final vision of chapter 21.

Here two brief visions move the process along, the first appeals again to the prophet whose visions had dominated chapter 18, Ezekiel. First (19:17-18) John turns to Ezekiel 39:17-20, where the prophet had called upon the birds of the air to feast on the “flesh of the mighty.” The subject of the bizarre eschatological banquet is described in the final vision, where the characters of chapter 12 and 13 appear once more. Here they are described as “the beast” (vv 19-20, cf 13:1-10) i.e., the beast from the sea = Rome, and the “false prophet” (v 20), the local aristocracy who supported Roman rule (v 20, cf. 13:11-18). Victory over them precedes a final victory over the ultimate power of evil, which will be described in the next chapter.

Focus Text: Rev 18:11-16; 19:6-10; 19:11-16

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