

Commentary on the Revelation

- I. Prologue, 1:1-20
- II. “The Things Which Are”, 2:1-3:22
- III. “The Things That Shall be,” 4:1-22:5
 - A. The divine right to judge and reward, 4:1-5:14
 - B. The divine judgment of God’s enemies, 6:1-19:21
 - 1. The first cycle: the seal judgments, 6:1-8:5
 - 2. The second cycle: the trumpet judgments, 8:6-11:17
 - a. The judgments, 8:6-9:21
 - b. The second interlude, 10:1-11:13
 - c. The seventh judgment, 11:14-17
 - 3. A third interlude: Further Clarifications, 12:1-14:17
 - 4. The third cycle: the bowl judgments, 15:1-16:21
 - a. The bowl-judgments announced, v. 1
 - b. The praise of God for His judgment completed, 15:2-4
 - c. The third cycle: the bowl judgments, 15:5-16:1-21
 - 5. The fourth interlude: the final judgment of “Babylon,” 17:1-19:21

What is found in this rather long section is an expanded explanation of the sixth and seventh bowl judgments (v. 1), the judgments on “Babylon.” The thing that makes this section initially perplexing is that in chapter 17 the judgment of “harlot,” the idolatrous politico-religious-economic system, is the focal point of the vision (v.1) yet it is only mentioned once (v. 16). The emphasis in the chapter is upon the first beast, the antichrist, because the harlot, “Babylon” derived its power from the beast.

a. Judgment on the Great Harlot, 17:1-18

What emerges more clearly as you study Revelation is how John, being deeply enmeshed in the Hebrew Scriptures, uses them typologically to explain the visions he sees. The great oppressing nations in the OT are Egypt and Babylon. While he uses both nations, his focus is more on the latter because that was the most crushing blow to the ancient people. Of course, Babylon, like Egypt, failed to destroy the ancient nation and they are used by John to express the terror of oppression of the people of God, as well as to remind them that God's people will triumph. "Babylon," using it as a picture of religious, social, and political oppression, becomes a model for oppression in any century of God's people that will eventually be destroyed in the coming of the king.

1) The introduction to the vision, vv. 1-3a

a) The "woman," v. 1

"Babylon" is symbolically imaged as "the great whore," a woman, because of its alluring ability to draw people away from Christ (in 18:7 Babylon is described as a queen). "Sitting" denotes authority and power, "water the turbulent, unpredictable, and violent. In John's day, the "harlot" was Rome representing a world system based on falsity and seduction for personal gain over against the righteous demands of a persecuted minority. It is the final expression of world power.

b) The action and motives, v. 2

The nations of the earth align with "Babylon" to procure economic advantage. "Immorality" is symbolic of compromise and cooperation to obtain economic security (in 18:7, 9-19 "immortality" is found with this precise meaning. So here the condemnation revolves around luxury and greed). Idolatry and economics characterized Tyre's

relationship to Babylon (Isa 23:18). Tyre becomes the great image of wealth through commerce.

c. The commission, v. 3a

John is “carried away,” a symbol in the book for commissioning for a task; in this instance, it is to record the vision. The “wilderness” is both a place of danger, that is where the red dragon is found, who persecutes the people of God, and the place of divine protection.

2) The identification of the “woman,” vv. 3b-5

It is clear that the description of the “woman” here is the same as the beast in 13:1, the beast from the sea (also the “woman” is red in color which suggests identity with the red dragon [12:3]). The woman symbolizes the ungodly world, a servant of the state, to socially and economically harass believers.

The clothing of the “woman” suggests the wealth of commerce, the “cup of abominations,” as it frequently in the OT, refers to idolatry; the worship of money!

Upon the forehead of the “woman” is her identity, as in the case of Christians in the book also. “Babylon the Great” is taken from Dan 4:30. Her two other titles, “Mother of Harlots and Abomination of the Earth” describe her dominate role in propagating idolatrous practices and pagan faith.

3) The conduct of the “woman,” v. 6

The nature of the activities of the “woman” is in congruity with her character (“she” is a “beast!”). The havoc she caused in the book included exile (1:9), imprisonment (2:10), and death (2:10, 13), as well as the loss of occupation. Her power was frightening to John.

4) The interpretation of the beast figure, vv. 7-14

a) The context, v. 7

The inquiry of the angel is cast in the form of a rebuke. He is asking the cause for John's fear in seeing the "woman."

The "mystery (something needing to be interpreted, something unforeseen)" of the "woman" seems to be found in the verses that follow; though strong and magnificent, she is doomed.

b) The interpretation, vv. 8-12

While the Lord is described in a trilogy of verbs (was, is, and is to come), the beast was and is not (apparently the judgment has already taken place through Christ's resurrection), and will come again, but to the final judgment. The parody on Christ is readily observable.

The "woman," the beast, will be amazing to unbelievers because of his resiliency, though defeated he will reemerge (the recovery from the fatal wound of 13:3). The miracle of his recovery is the tool of deception.

The "mind which has wisdom (v. 9a)" is the ability of believers not to be deceived by the beast that was caused by the sealing of the saints, the protective mercies of God, revealed earlier in the book (7:3).

The "seven heads and seven mountains (v. 9)" has caused quite a flurry of interpretative options. Mountains in the OT are often symbolic of kingdoms; John has changed the image from a beast with seven heads (13:1, 17:3) to seven mountains (he does say in the next verse that the seven mountains are kings, so mountains mean kingdoms, not literal mountains). The seven kings and kingdoms

represent the fullness of the oppressive power of evil governments that persecutes the saints.

If the kingdoms are realms through which the red dragon acts, the beast is his minion. These have existed through the centuries (they have come and gone, the many antichrists of which John writes in his first letter (2:18); however, there is always one existing, evil being always present, and a final one will come.

The question in v. 11 is how can the beast be the eighth and yet one of the seven? I take it that these numbers are not to be understood literally so what John is saying is that he is like the rest in character and action though he is unlike the others in that he embodies their spirit but is the last of the them. Believers can be comforted that beasts, opponents of Christ, may look unstoppable but they will all fall.

The “ten horns” are yet-to-come powerful kings in the end of times. It seems that what John is saying is that the beast will form alliances to extend his supremacy. “One hour” seems to indicate a limitation of time, the brief span at the end of time when the last great battle will be fought, the enemies of God banished, and the saints gathered.

c) The outcome, vv. 13-14

The goal of these kings is to facilitate the design of the beast (v. 13), acting through his authority. The end of their evil design to destroy the people of God, to mock the accomplishments of Christ, and prevent his reign will end in failure (v. 14).

4) The interpretation of the women, vv. 15-18

a) The betrayal of the woman, vv. 15-17

The image of the woman sitting upon “many waters (v. 15) is not explained by John; it symbolizes her control over many people-groups and nations (“sitting” is suggestive of power and authority [God is sitting on His throne in 4:2]).

In v. 16 we are told something the “harlot” did not know, apparently being herself deceived by Satan and the first beast. At the end of times, the woman will prove to be a pawn to obtain the designs of the devil in alliance with the beast. They will turn against her; the totalitarian state will turn against the corporate edifice of false religion, and devour her as Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, who was devoured by dogs (2:20-24, II Kings 9:36). The “woman” is symbolic of idolatrous economic power; the first beast political power. The political power will destroy false religion, its usefulness over and then attack God with the design of destroying Him and exalting Satan to supremacy.

V. 17 tells us that God uses and ordains evil to accomplish His purposes. The outcome of evil finds its righteousness in the motive and outcome of the action. All things including, the allowance of evil, work together to defeat evil in the directive mercies of almighty God!

b) The identification of the woman, v. 18

The woman, harlot, the seductress, is a symbolical city. The identity of the city misses the point since it is symbolic of controlling powers that are averse to God, humans attempting to self-construct the new creation that only God can erect. Says Mounce, “... Babylon the Great, source of universal history and abomination (v. 5) is more than first-century Rome, Every great cent of power which has prostituted its

wealth and influence restores to life the spirit of ancient Babylon (320).”

It is tempting to compare and contrast the two “women” in the Revelation:

The harlot and the bride (Christ), the first a parody of the second.

One is pure (21:9, true religion’s source), the other impure (17:1, false religion’s source)

The description of both is similar (21:9-10, 17:1)

In one the adornment reveals glory (21:2); in the other the adornment hides corruption (17:4)

One is dependent on heaven (12:1), the other on earthly kings (17:15)

One is exalted and triumphs; the other is deceived and crushed.

Applications

1. When John saw the “great whore” image he was aghast and fearful. He saw in his vision powerfully destructive forces whose intent under the direction of the antichrist, inspired by the devil Himself, to destroy the people of God. We live in a world today in which the enemies of God have not been banished, but remain potently destructive threatening God’s people. Are we to be preoccupied with the threat, paralyzed with fear, consumed in discussion about it? While wisdom is born of knowledge and security in pre-emptive action, the proper response is to be focused on something else. We are to be consumed with thoughts of our God and His son, our only savior. Did not the angel say, “Why do you wonder (v. 7)? Why are you preoccupied with such? Do you find that you focus on fears more than on the redeemer? What would the angel say to you?”
2. What is “Babylon,” the great harlot, the grand seductress today in your culture? Well, clearly John used the ancient pagan city as a picture of the potent combination of social, political, and religious designed to deceive and mislead the nations and the people of God. What is it today? Is it not false religion, religion that appeals to the satisfaction of immediate needs and passions promising personal fulfillment without a cross and the demands of discipleship? Is it not

“Wall Street” that worships the God of materialism and temporal prosperity at any cost, a radical humanism? Is it not Babel of God (Gen 10), mankind’s attempt to create access to the benefits of proximity to God, yet a god defined and control on human whim? Do you recognize the “harlot” around you pushing you into its mold?

3. If there is a lesson that stands out in our passage, most likely because it was also the point that John wants to press upon his original readers, it is the power of deception. The devil employing religion is a potent device in his arsenal. The devil has produced a spiritual death-dealing potion, cocaine that looks like candy! What is false religion? It is the embrace of self-management techniques as a substitute for the grace and mercies of God through Christ; it is dependence on self to secure a future happiness rather than dependence on God; it is confusing tomorrow for now. False religion, any supposed claim to religion that leaves out the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and human inability, is the creation of the devil through the agency of the “babylonish whore.” Do you find yourself tricked at times by the attraction of religious falsity? What shape does deception take for you?
4. The “wilderness (v. 3)” metaphor is intriguing in the Revelation. On the one hand, it is a place of danger where predators lurk. In this instance John uses the term to describe the world in which we all live. On the other hand, it is to the “wilderness” that God sends us. It is a place of solitude, but more to the point it is the place where God will protect us as He did His ancient people (that in turn serves as a picture of God’s providential care for us). It is a place where we are exposed to privation and attack, yet it is also the place of divine provision and security. Do you live your life seeing the dangers in your “wilderness” without the more than compensating reality of God’s protective mercies? Are you controlled by fear of what could happen than focusing on the fact that all that happens has a purpose (v. 17) and that no harm can come to you that God does not purpose for good?
5. What is the practical application of the appeal to wisdom in v. 9? What is the nature of wisdom in our text? It is discernment; it is the opposite of deception. Discernment seems to be an increasingly rare commodity in our increasingly secularized culture, a culture that acts on the assumption that the world of our own making is the only

world that can exist, a culture that embrace the possibility of the spiritual realm but defines it within ourselves. Wisdom is found in the knowledgeable rejection of the lies that abound around us (“You deserve a break today,” “Grab for all the gusto you can you only go around once in life”). Are you discerning or is the lure of the immediate overwhelming to you? Do you see the world as “really real” or at its best a shadow that points to the “real?” Why, then, are we so occupied with the “apparently-only real?”

6. I think it goes without much comment or argument that false religion prevails in the world and our culture. What is sadly evident is that it is also found in our churches. Religion that made our needs foremost and the solution to our wants a focus is the essence of false teachings. True religion has its primary preoccupation on God and His interests in the world, meaning the gathering of His people and ultimately dwelling with them so that they can behold His beauty in endless praise and adoration. Is religion that kind of otherness to you? Does your religion focus on self-benefit or is it really about something more important than your life? If it is true that your faith is not about yourself, but God, then you will be guaranteed of a rich fulfilling life regardless of its twists and turns, because the very last turn (death) will not be a final defeat but your entrance into the experience that you long for forever!
7. It is evident in our chapter that Satan, the great deceiver, uses his friends for his own purposes and when they have fulfilled his usefulness of them he turns against them. Satan does not befriend to make friends, meaning to enter into a mutually supportive covenant relationship; he befriends to manipulation the accomplishment of his purposes and when he has done so he reveals his friendlessness by returning from them. Satan is the epitome of self-design, self-interest. It is dangerous to befriend those types because you will be used and then abused. Have you met people in your life just like that? Perhaps you have people like that in your life today. People who use you for their own interests and reject you when their interest through you have been met. Such abusers are “Satan” reincarnated? Have you learned to spot these types? Do you live with these types? Are you seeking help?

Commentary on the Revelation

- I. Prologue, 1:1-20
 - II. “The Things Which Are”, 2:1-3:22
 - III. “The Things That Shall be,” 4:1-22:5
 - A. The divine right to judge and reward, 4:1-5:14
 - B. The divine judgment of God’s enemies, 6:1-19:21
 - 1. The first cycle: the seal judgments, 6:1-8:5
 - 2. The second cycle: the trumpet judgments, 8:6-11:17
 - 3. The third cycle: the bowl judgments, 15:1-16:21
 - 4. The fourth interlude: the final judgment of “Babylon,” 17:1-19:21
 - a. Judgment on the Great Harlot: The Religious System 17:1-18
 - b. Judgment on Babylon: The Political System, 18:1-24
- In 17:1, the visionary angel indicated that he would reveal the judgment of the great harlot or Babylon; in this chapter that judgment is detailed (note the similarity of phrases in 17:1 and 18:3) flowing out of 16:14-21 and the declaration in 14:8 that “Babylon is fallen”. In chapter 17 the focus was on the fall of Babylon as it relates to its allies, both political and religious, as a preparation to the actual collapse of the “city” explained here.
- 1) The announcement, vv. 1-3
 - a) The appearance of an angel, v. 1
- As noted previously (4:1), the phrase, “after these things,” does not suggest so much the chronological ordering of events as it does the sequence of the visions. The reference to “great authority” and the illumination of the earth suggests the harbinger of a momentous event. The authority granted from the

throne of God is about to be delivered!

b) The proclamation of the angel, vv. 2-3

[1] Stated, v. 2

“Babylon” the great symbol of godlessness under the authority of the antichrist, the perpetrator of greed of all hues, the minion of the devil incarnate, the center of all that is opposed to Christ, has come to its end. Outwardly attractive and alluring; it is the domain of the demonic (John can surely be graphic!). This world is not a friend of grace.

[2] Reasoned, v. 3

The reason for her judgment is now elucidated. She has seduced nations and kings with her godless materialism. “Babylon” offered security, but the cost was subservience and idolatry. The merchant class consumed her values and became wealthy while the saints of God refused becoming impoverished of opportunity, respect, safety, and wealth, but now they will be vindicated.

2) The consequent exhortation to the saints, vv. 4-8

a) Stated, 4

On the basis of the announcement of the impending doom of the world system, John turns to the encouragement of the believers to persevere through their temporal difficulties. Just as ancient Babylon faced judgment through the instrumentation of Cyrus so the new “Babylon” is doomed.

b) Reasoned, vv. 5-8

The basis of the exhortation is that conformity to “Babylon” is to incur judgment with it (Remember: Daniel was a godly man who refused to compromise; God protected him through the fall of Babylon and the coming of the Persian regime being a model to emulate for all believers of all times).

“Babylon” will be paid back for her evil in double proportion to her evil (it minds me of a once famous sermon by the old-time evangelist, Gipsy Smith,

“Payday Someday”). “Babylon has shed the blood of the of prophets and saints (vs. 24) and is about to receive in kind the reward for her cruelty. Not divine revenge but just requital is the issue. The martyrs of chapter 6 need not wait any longer for God, holy and true (6:10), to avenge the death of all whose faith has conquered the sword,” writes Mounce (325).

Pride and arrogance (v. 7) seem twins in the family of the world. However, in due time, unrighteousness will not endure and the punishment of it will be swift. The ground of the judgment is found in the phrase, “the God who judges her is strong (v. 8).”

3) The sorrow of the forsaken, vv. 9-19

With the collapse of the antichrist system, those who gained support through it will be without hope and comfort. The voice from heaven announcing judgment is followed by voices of lament from the earth.

a) Kings, vv. 9-10

The powerful will suddenly become powerless, the mighty will become weak and the prideful humbled. Sadly, all that they can say is the obvious “woe, woe, woe [repeated to emphasize the horror of it all] (v. 10).” Devastation and hopelessness merge where once selfishness and self-aggrandizement reigned. Kings suddenly are revealed to be powerless puppets of a damned monarchy. While chapter 17 emphasized religious idolatrous grip of the antichrist through the false beast, the harlot, this chapter emphasizes the materialistic hold of the quest for luxury in the same system.] through compliance with the beast.

b) Land merchants, vv. 11-17a

The merchant, the traders in commerce, grief also because of the political framework that support their economic prosperity; it is all gone in a moment! The commodities market is dissolved; “wall street” is no more. Their wealth turned to an ash heap; markets vanished.

The items in v. 11a, precious stones and linens have been noted as the symbolic clothing of the harlot (17:4) suggesting that the religious and political agencies of the worldly system of values and actions have combined.

The trade goods listed in vv. 11b-14 were considered luxury items in the first century.

c) Sea merchants, vv. 17b-19

Those who engage in the transportation of the luxury items, those enriched but at the cost of compromise, will endure the same disappointment and loss of everything they prided in and self-confidently cherished; everything that brought them security will prove empty, but it will be too late.

4) The ground of joy: vindication, v. 20

This is truly an amazing and insightful verse. It tells us that justified judgment is something the saints of God and the angels of heaven should exalt in with multitudinous praise. Observe that it is a command; the godly, the redeemed and the heavenly hosts should find the judgment of evil, the banishment of evil, a matter of great delight.

The cause of the rejoicing is that the saints have been vindicated; God has acted in justice to crush Satan and his empire. The saints that cried out for vengeance in 6:9-11 and now exhorted to rejoice because their prayers have been answered.

5) The final judgment, vv. 21-24

a) Declared, v. 21

The finality of Babylon's demise is haunting; it will be sudden, catastrophic, and irretrievable.

b) Detailed, vv. 22-23a

The judgment of God is horrific and is here repeated in various ways to mark the gravity of it.

Music: ceased

Craftsman: gone
Manufacturing: silenced
Light: extinguished
Celebrations: ended

c) Reasoned, vv. 23b-24

“Her sins have found her out,” is an old saying yet true. Her deceptive and violent ways have brought her to the tribunal of justice! Why was Babylon judged? The unwarranted pursuit of wealth by the merchants, the deception she practiced, and the treatment of the saints of God are sighted as causes.

Applications

1. It might be helpful to ask ourselves this question: What would the author of Revelation say was the purpose in writing the book and how does that inform how we are to read it? Would John say that his primary purpose was to help us to understand how God will triumph over his enemies or is the purpose a consequence of understanding Christ's victory? I think that Christ's ultimate victory is revealed for a very practical purpose, to encourage believers to persevere in their testimonies to Christ regardless of the cost because the time of suffering is brief, and His protective mercies will never depart from us regardless of the circumstances of life. The end of the world is meant to encourage us in the world. Do you see life through the lens of your future or does this world seem overwhelming to you and you have thoughts about giving up?
2. Things that look permanent by virtue of their size and grandeur can be utterly deceiving, things that come across evidencing the potential for the things we most desire, give impression of durability. This is true when it comes to the world in which we live, a world that the Bible says has been given for a limited time and degree over to the restricted authority of the devil. The many good things in the world can be deceptive, creating the impression that all is good. However, at the appointed time, in a split second, and great destruction the world and all its allurements will become smoke and ashes. While this is a wonderful world, proscribed in the manifestation of evil, by the protective, preserving mercies of God. Do you live your life as though this world is all the world that will ever be? How does the

realization that in a sudden moment of divine judgment this world will melt away affect the way you live today?

3. “What goes around comes around” is an old adage. It is certainly true when it comes to the storyline of the Bible. The Bible began telling us how God created a garden and made all that He put in it so that He might dwell in it to be glorified by His people. The Bible ends with the recreation of the garden and God dwelling among His people once more. “What goes around comes around!” Sin twisted and blighted the garden, but it will not exist in the garden forever because the recreated garden cannot come around unless the twistedness be removed and extinguished. If twistedness cannot last forever because it is antithetical to God’s purposes, then it must come to an end. Since such twistedness is contrary to God’s character, it must stand in judgment by God’s standard which is His character. God’s character and purposes are the ground of our hope. Does this not excite you that you will not always be in a blighted-garden existence?
4. Reading our passage that focuses upon the judgment of God upon all that opposes Him and the magnitude of the numbers that will be swept away in the destruction should cause us to pause, not only to be thankful that God has allowed us to experience the redemptive mercies of Christ, but that the destiny of the deceived will be as devastating as it will be certain. All that the unbelievers in our passage could say when everything they found for their personal sense of security was “woe, woe, woe!” This should truly break our hearts and cause us to cry out for God to have mercy in sending them someone to tell them of Jesus. Could it be that you know someone that you have been sent to as Jesus’ messenger?
5. If God is love, how do you explain the fact the He is also a God of wrath and judgment? Is wrath and compassion antithetical? If not, as the Revelation persistently asserts, what are we to say? The place to begin is with two observations about God: first, God is perfect in all the qualities of His character including love and justice and, second, God cannot act in any way disproportionate to His many attributes. The love of God for Himself demands the assertion that all that He does He never violates or diminishes any attribute in the manifestation of all of them. God acts in wrath, not because He is wrathful, but because He is just. His justice demands that He punish sin and to act in justice expressing abhorrence for sin is to act in love

for Himself. It is God's just character that demands conformity to His character. Are you not glad that God in grace gave us a substitute who is worthy and acceptable because He shares in all the attributes of God?

6. There are two kingdoms in this world; one exists within the other. They share some of the same characteristics, but they are invisible to the eye. These two invisible kingdoms are radical opposites in origin, nature, characteristics, and destiny. Both have people in them that belong to the other; both are made perceivable through the lives of their citizens. One operates under the direction of the devil and emulates his character; the other operates under the direction of God and His citizens share in His character. One seems to be at a grave disadvantage, weak and tenuous; the other seems to be in control of things, possesses considerable strength, and is vastly the view of the majority. Out of weakness one shall be made strong; in its veneer of strength the other is actually weak. One will endure the presence of God forever; the other will experience the absence of His blessing forever. Which kingdom do you belong? Is there any sense in making the wrong choice?
7. Revelation 18:5 tells us that "God has remembered her iniquities." What a horribly frightening statement to make of the citizens of any kingdom? What a remarkable statement, "God has remembered her iniquities." There is another verse in the Bible that is quite the opposite of this one and equally stunning to think about. It is Hebrew 8:12, "...I will remember their sin no more." In the content of both, the verb "remember" is not the opposite of forgetting; God is incapable of forgetting. So, what is the wonderful truth of 8:12 for those who have come to life in Christ? It is that God will never mention it to us, that God will remind us of it. The God who is all knowing, who knows the depth of our sinning against Him far more than we do, will never bring it up. Wow! Why? The answer is that the guilt, the debt, the price has been paid. Christ paid that price for you; God sees you in His son, His perfect son. Does this not bring joy and delight to you? Have you ever been loved so deeply and truly before you met Him? I can assure you that the answer is a resounding NO!