

Re-Reading the Apocalypse

Lesson 2: “A Judgement of Justice”

Overview:

Shifting focus from week one, we now look towards the back of Revelation, particularly chapter 16. Here we encounter much of the symbolism the work is known for, as well as questions of justice related to God’s impending judgment. However, rather than focusing on individual actions, we will look behind the symbolism and see what is really going on here in the depths of the book.

1. What image is most tied to your reading and understanding of Revelation?
2. Why do you think the imagery is so complex?
3. Following up from last week, how do you see hope in today’s passage?

(Open with prayer)

Background on our Passage:

It is important to note that the writer of Revelation knows the Hebrew Bible in a very in depth way, constantly making reference to the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), to the writings in Daniel, and to the plague stories in Exodus. This is laid bare in chapter 16 as much of the language used and incidents cited seem to reflect passages in the Law and Torah. Today’s passage (in its entirety, 1-20) lines up with the afflictions faced by the Egyptian people as the Hebrew people try to leave. This retelling or sorts emphasizes the nature of justice in relation to God’s judgment.

The writer emphasizes God’s judgment upon the world (particularly Rome) is one not of callousness or arbitrary decision, but one of justice. Just as the Egyptians oppressed the Hebrews and suffered God’s judgment, the Romans will suffer God’s judgment as well due to their treatment of the people of God.

1. Why do you think the writer wants to connect Revelation to the Hebrew Bible? To the Exodus from Egypt?
2. How does this address the overall message of hope present in the book?
3. What does it mean to have “justice”?

Scripture lesson: Revelation 16:1-20

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”² So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image.³ The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.⁴ The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.⁵ And I heard the angel of the waters say, “You are just, O Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things;⁶ because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!”⁷ And I heard the altar respond, “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and just!”

⁸The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch them with fire; ⁹they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory. ¹⁰The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.

¹²The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵(“See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.”) ¹⁶And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon.

¹⁷The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” ¹⁸And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. ¹⁹The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found;

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What imagery is most difficult to read?
3. What stands out most in this passage? What gives you hope?

Discussion

To the quick read or surface reading, chapter 16 can seem as though there is no hope to be found. For the third time in Revelation there is an “outpouring” or God’s judgement upon creation. Like the scrolls and trumpets before, the imagery is difficult and troubling. However, when we look behind the imagery, we still see a sense of lingering hope. Connected back to the plagues of Egypt, the writer sees the current situation of the people as a temporary one. Those who have acted as the oppressor will face judgment. This (slightly) lightens the passages tone and reemphasizes the nature of God’s judgment: it is against those who have oppressed and not cared for neighbor.

1. How is this view of God’s judgment different than how we normally consider it?
2. In looking past the initial imagery, what hope is found?
3. What do you think is the most important aspect of this passage?

Conclusion

Looking past the difficult passage to the intent behind it can be trying. Here in chapter 16 we found judgment and anxiety as the people see the trials they have faced. However, the writer remembers the stories of the Hebrews in Egypt and finds hope. God will deliver them from their oppressor. They will find peace and grace, despite all they have already been through.