

Revelation:

It's Not What You Think It Is [Part 4]

Revelation can be broken up into seven scenes. We will look at an overview of each of them over the next few weeks but here is an overview of the entire book:

Scene 6—A Tale of Two Cities: Babylon the Fallen, Ch 17-20

Chapter 17: The Whore of Babylon—[1] Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls spoke with me. “Come, he said, I will show you the judgment upon the great prostitute, who is seated on deep waters. [2] The kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on earth have become drunk with the wine of her whoring.”

[3] Then he brought me in a Spirit-inspired trance to a desert. There I saw a woman seated on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names. It had seven heads and ten horns. [4] The woman wore purple and scarlet clothing, and she glittered with gold and jewels and pearls. In her hand she held a gold cup full of the vile and impure things that came from her activity as a prostitute. [5] A name—a mystery—was written on her forehead: “Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and the vile things of the earth.” [6] I saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the saints and the blood of Jesus’ witnesses. I was completely stunned when I saw her.

NOTES: Revelation culminates in a tale of two cities, with a call to make a choice between them. Like a tour guide, John leads the audience on contrasting tours of the two rival political economies. The same angel issues the invitation "Come, I will show you" and carries John "in a Spirit-inspired trance" to a location where he is shown each city. Readers must make the urgent choice to come out of the imperial system of Babylon [i.e. Rome] so they can come in to God's new Jerusalem, the city of blessing and promise.

Both cities are personified metaphorically as feminine figures, reflecting the grammatically feminine gender of the noun "city" [polis] in Greek, a trait of the Hebrew Bible as well. The city of Babylon is labeled as a whore or prostitute, whereas new Jerusalem is called a bride. John may have borrowed this from Proverbs 5-9's Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom, or from the familiar story of the choice between Pleasure and Virtue posed to Hercules.

Babylon represents Rome's seductive economic system and triggers biblical memories of the hated Babylonian empire that destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE, which is also analogous to Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The charge of "fornication" against Babylon/Rome is metaphorical, of course. The offense is economic exploitation which we have seen elsewhere in Revelation.

Chapter 18: Babylon's Fall— [1] After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was filled with light because of his glory. [2] He called out with a loud voice, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a home for demons and a lair for every unclean spirit. She is a lair for every unclean bird, and a lair for every unclean and disgusting beast [3] because all the nations have fallen due to the wine of her lustful passion. The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth became rich from the power of her loose and extravagant ways.” [4] Then I heard another voice from heaven say, “Come out of her, my people, so that you don’t take part in her sins and don’t receive any of her plagues.

[21] Then a powerful angel picked up a stone that was like a huge millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “With such violent force the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, and it won’t be found anymore. [22] The sound of harpists and musicians, of pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard among you again. No craftsman of any kind will ever be found among you again. The sound of the hand mill will never be heard among you again. [23] The light of a lamp will never shine among you again. The sound of a bridegroom and bride will never be heard among you again because your merchants ran the world, because all the nations were deceived by the spell you cast, and because [24] the blood of prophets, of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on the earth was found among you.”

NOTES: With powerful Exodus language, echoing Jeremiah 51:45, John calls on the community to “come out” of the empire before it’s too late. Their exodus is not to be a physical departure but rather an economic and social departure. John portrays the fall of Rome’s unbridled economy system through a series of funeral dirges voiced by three groups who profited by Babylon’s wealth: kings, merchants and seafarers. Each group cries “Oh, the horror!” lamenting their fallen city.

Rome’s crimes extend beyond the crimes against humanity even into crimes against creation. Deforestation, erosion, the silting of rivers, and extinction of animals and habitats were significant problems caused by the Roman extractive economy, as evidenced by archaeology and by numerous ancient sources. With the cargo list of 18:12-13, John connects the overconsumption of the empire with ecological devastation of lands and peoples.

Chapter 19: Victory Celebration in Heaven—[1] After this I heard what sounded like a huge crowd in heaven. They said, “Hallelujah! The salvation and glory and power of our God! [2] His judgments are true and just, because he judged the great prostitute, who ruined the earth by her whoring, and he exacted the penalty for the blood of his servants from her hand.” [3] Then they said a second time, “Hallelujah! Smoke goes up from her forever and always.”

[6] And I heard something that sounded like a huge crowd, like rushing water and powerful thunder. They said, "Hallelujah! The Lord our God, the Almighty, exercised his royal power! [7] Let us rejoice and celebrate, and give him the glory, for the wedding day of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. [8] She was given fine, pure white linen to wear, for the fine linen is the saints' acts of justice."

[9] Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Favored are those who have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb." He said to me, "These are the true words of God."

NOTES: Joy breaks out in heaven and on earth when the sentence is announced and the judgment scene closes with a heavenly liturgy [19:1-8]. This victory celebration also includes a brief introduction to the bride of the Lamb, wearing the righteous deeds of saints. The invitation to the Lamb's marriage feast will be fulfilled in the new Jerusalem vision of Revelation 20-21, when the bride is transformed into a city.

Chapter 19: Christ Defeats the Beast—[11] Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse. Its rider was called Faithful and True, and he judges and makes war justly. [12] His eyes were like a fiery flame, and on his head were many royal crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. [13] He wore a robe dyed with blood, and his name was called the Word of God. [14] Heaven's armies, wearing fine linen that was white and pure, were following him on white horses. [15] From his mouth comes a sharp sword that he will use to strike down the nations. He is the one who will rule them with an iron rod. And he is the one who will trample the winepress of the Almighty God's passionate anger. [16] He has a name written on his robe and on his thigh: King of kings and Lord of lords.

[19] Then I saw that the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies had gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. [20] But the beast was seized, along with the false prophet who had done signs in the beast's presence. (He had used the signs to deceive people into receiving the beast's mark and into worshipping the beast's image.) The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake that burns with sulfur. [21] The rest were killed by the sword that comes from the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds ate their fill of their flesh.

NOTES: Revelation 19-20 presents multiple visions of the defeat of evil. The purpose of these scenes is to show that God's justice wins in the end. Systems of oppression must be brought to judgment. Babylon/Rome's economic system has been tried and sentenced in the divine courtroom [Rev 18]. Other aspects of Rome and its systemic oppression, represented as Satan and his other agents, must also be defeated. Each different vision begins with "I saw." The multiple visions are symbolic, defying any literal chronology.

The picture of the return of Jesus as a heavenly warrior has led to the idea of Christ's second coming, or parousia. But the second coming is not a biblical phrase, nor does Revelation use the Greek word parousia. The picture of Christ's arrival on a white horse resembles a post-battle "triumph," a well-known Roman celebration after a victory in which the victorious general and his army parade home with the spoils of war. If this is the model, the triumph may celebrate the judgment and defeat of Babylon that already took place in Chapter 18, or the defeat of Satan that happened in Chapter 12, rather than a future end-times return of Christ for war.

Chapter 20: Satan is Defeated—Chapter 20—[1] Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the abyss and a huge chain. [2] He seized the dragon, the old snake, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. [3] He threw him into the abyss, then locked and sealed it over him. This was to keep him from continuing to deceive the nations until the thousand years were over. After this he must be released for a little while.

NOTES: The defeat of oppression and evil culminates when Satan is tied up and imprisoned in the underworld, completing the expulsion from heaven begun in Chapter 12. Satan symbolizes all the forces of evil in the world, represented by his many names. This is the same list as Revelation 12:3.

Chapter 20: The Final Judgment—[11] Then I saw a great white throne and the one who is seated on it. Before his face both earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. [12] I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Another scroll was opened too; this is the scroll of life. And the dead were judged on the basis of what was written in the scrolls about what they had done. [13] The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and Death and the Grave gave up the dead that were in them, and people were judged by what they had done. [14] Then Death and the Grave were thrown into the fiery lake. This, the fiery lake, is the second death. [15] Then anyone whose name wasn't found written in the scroll of life was thrown into the fiery lake.

NOTES: Only the final scene of judgment focuses on the judgment of individuals rather than judgment of systems of oppression. Much scholarly debate focuses on how to interpret the violence and judgment of these final scenes. Whereas Jesus has been depicted as a Lamb since Chapter 5, here he is depicted as a warrior, wielding the sword of his word as a weapon. The question is whether Jesus now uses violence to kill

his enemies—a departure from the non-violent Lamb—and how John employs the violent imagery of Isaiah 63.

Scene 7—A Tale of Two Cities: The New Jerusalem, Ch 21-22

Chapter 21: New Heaven and New Earth—[1] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. [3] I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” [5] Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” [6] Then he said to me, “All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring. [7] Those who emerge victorious will inherit these things. I will be their God, and they will be my sons and daughters.

Chapter 21: New Jerusalem—[9] Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues spoke with me. “Come,” he said, “I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” [10] He took me in a Spirit-inspired trance to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. [11] The city had God’s glory. Its brilliance was like a priceless jewel, like jasper that was as clear as crystal. [12] It had a great high wall with twelve gates. By the gates were twelve angels, and on the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel’s sons. [13] There were three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. [14] The city wall had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the Lamb’s twelve apostles.

[22] I didn’t see a temple in the city, because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. [23] The city doesn’t need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God’s glory is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24] The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. [25] Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there. [26] They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it. [27] Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is vile and deceitful, but only those who are registered in the Lamb’s scroll of life.

Chapter 22: The River of Life—[1] Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, [2] through the middle of the city’s main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree’s leaves are for the

healing of the nations. [3] There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. [4] They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. [5] Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

NOTES: The promise of a new heaven and new earth offers the most earth-centered end times picture of the entire Bible, a counter vision to Babylon/Rome. Contrary to the escapism of some interpretations today, the picture of Revelation promises god's future dwelling with people in a radiant, thriving cityscape located on a renewed earth. Heaven is not mentioned again 21:2. Repetition of the word "new" underscores the distinction between God's renewed world and the Roman imperial world that has gone before it.

Revelation 20:3 tells us that God will "dwell" or "tabernacle" with God's people. This recalls God's tabernacling with Israel in the wilderness [Lev 26:11-12; Ezek 37:27; Zech 2:10-11]. This time, however, no building or temple is necessary.
