

Rejoicing in Heaven

Revelation 19:1-8

November 21, 2021

In Chapter 19 we come to another episode of worship in heaven. The occasion is rejoicing over the fall of Babylon, representing the powers of earth. That isn't the final act, but it is an important pause prior to the final battles, 19:11 to 20:10. "Babylon" represents Rome. Babylon is represented as "The Great Whore," appearing in Chapter 17. The identification is explicit in 17:18, **"The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."** That is about as explicit as John can get without saying, "Rome!" To Rome/Babylon/The Great Whore is attributed all of the sinful ways in which men have rejected God and followed after their self-centered ways, heedless of those hurt. John focuses particularly on how Rome/Babylon/The Great Whore have become **"drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus"**(vss. 17:6, 18:24).

Interestingly, Rome itself was worshiped as a goddess well before there were any emperors. As the city of Rome gained power, Italian cities which had allied with Rome, and later Greek cities as well, made a cult of worshiping "Roma." This goddess was a personification of a divine element in the increasingly powerful Rome. When Roman power came to the east, there was little resistance to this state cult. In the polytheistic world, new gods presented no great moral issue. Maybe one needed to be alert to the latest and greatest object to worship! The city of Smyrna boasted that they had erected a temple to Roma even before Carthage fell. When the emperors began to reign, the worship of Roma and emperor worship came together. There was a temple to Dea Roma in Ephesus, and to Divus Julius at Nicaea in Asia Minor, both erected by Augustus. By the time of John, this Roman cult was thought of as emperor worship. But all of that emperor worship revolved around Rome, or the goddess Roma. That is what the woman/Babylon represents.

Interestingly, God does not act directly against Rome. The woman (representing Rome/Babylon) is pictured seated on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads represent both seven hills (sound like Rome?) and seven kings. The ten horns are ten more kings to come. But these are going to destroy the woman/Rome/Babylon. The Fall of the Roman Empire, particularly the various sackings of Rome by the Vandals and others, come to mind. Of course, by then, Rome was Christian! But no doubt still corrupt in various ways. Things often don't happen the way we, as limited humans, envision.

Our lesson book has a good bit of discussion over “women’s issues” concerning this metaphor of Rome/Babylon being portrayed as a whore, a female role. This is a metaphor that reaches way back in Israelite history. (Interestingly, the RSV uses the word “harlot,” while the NRSV returns to using the word “whore” as does the KJV. I think “harlot” is closer in meaning to “prostitute,” a disreputable way of making a living, whereas “whore” seems to imply more of a chosen pathway motivated by licentiousness. So, I do think “whore” is the better word in this case.)

This imagery was used for the breaking of God’s Covenant with Israel, most explicitly in Hosea, but also elsewhere the prophetic writings. In these cases, faithless Israel is personified as an unfaithful wife. Since it was the men of Israel who were in control of things, it is mostly they, and most especially their kings, to whom this metaphor applied. (Jezebel and Athaliah did their part to ensure that both sexes are represented. Interestingly, whatever their other faults, these two ruling women are never mentioned as being unfaithful wives. That’s quite a contrast to the kings, even, maybe especially, David.)

Here it is not Israel, but the kings of the earth, specifically the Roman emperors, that are portrayed as a whore. In *The Revelation of John*, I just don’t see any women’s issue in this personification of Rome, and especially the deified emperors of Rome, as a wanton, corrupt, luxury loving, evil, God defying whore. It was imagery of his own time that John is using. The abominations and evil done by Rome, as described in chapters 17-18, are not particularly associated with being female. They are the sins of those who hold earthly power, and exercise it wantonly and ruthlessly.

Chapter 18 is poetry that reflects on the fall of Babylon/Rome. Included is a dirge over Babylon/Rome by the kings that “**lived in luxury with her**” (v. 9), and even more so by the merchants who were enriched by trade with her (v. 11 ff.). The rich are brought to mourning. That, then, gives a contrast to the rejoicing in Heaven that follows in Chapter 19.

The Rejoicing in Heaven

**19 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying,
“Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power to our God,**

**2 for his judgments are true and just;
he has judged the great whore
who corrupted the earth with her fornication,
and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”^[a]**

**3 Once more they said,
“Hallelujah!**

The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.”

**4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and
worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying,
“Amen. Hallelujah!”**

**5 And from the throne came a voice saying,
“Praise our God,
all you his servants,^[b]
and all who fear him,
small and great.”**

**6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound
of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,
“Hallelujah!**

**For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.**

**7 Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;**

**8 to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.**

You may recall that the martyrs appeared in John’s vision as early as Chapter 6 at the fifth seal, calling for justice and vengeance (6:9-11). Well, now that moment has come. God’s judgements are **“true and just.”** The destruction of “Roma,” the Roman imperial system that pretended to be the greatest of gods on earth, and persecuted those who disagreed, has been accomplished. The multitude in Heaven said, “Halleluiah!”

In the course of this worship, the viewpoint shifts focus from looking backwards, on the abominations committed in the name of Roma, and justice for those who were oppressed, to looking forward. Again, we see a female metaphor, with “the Bride” representing the Church, those who have been faithful.

Compare the descriptions of the Great Whore with that of the Bride:

Whore: “clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup ...”

Bride: “clothed with fine linen, bright and pure ...”

All of the colors and jewelry indicate riches and royal position (especially the purple). The Bride is, in contrast, simply clothed in fine linen, bright and pure. That’s similar to the garb that the countless multitude wears in earlier scenes. Now, later on the New Jerusalem (also representing the Bride) is described in terms of gold and gemstones in Chapter 21. But, that is more like the gems on the High Priest’s breastplate (ephod), indicating a similar closeness of the believers to God. (See Exodus 28:17-21, 39:10-14.) This closeness would be comparable, or even surpassing, what only the High Priest enjoyed in the temple worship on earth. So, the Bride is the more richly adorned, but without the taint of sin that colors the evil goddess Roma.

You may be wondering, “Why linen?” At the time, linen, especially from Egypt, was the finest of fabrics. Wool was being spun from sheep or goat hair, but it was not up to the standards of Egyptian linen, which could be made with a very fine, tight weave. The arid climate yet plentiful Nile water made conditions for flax and linen close to ideal in Egypt. Some linen was woven in other places, including Jericho. Cotton was known in the middle east from the time of the Assyrians (about 700 B.C.) but it was of much poorer quality than modern cotton. Silk seems to have been unknown at the time. In poorer areas, especially early on, animal skins or felt made from animal hairs were used quite a bit. So, here, fine linen is the best of the best when it comes to clothing. It represents the **“righteous deeds of the saints.”**

Again, you may be thinking, “This is the final scene. Next is the New Jerusalem.” Well, not quite. Next we get the rest of Chapter 19 in which the beast and its armies are defeated by the rider of a white horse whose name is “The Word of God.” The beast and the false prophet are then cast into “the lake of fire that burns with Sulphur.” The serpent/Devil/Satan is cast into the (bottomless) pit. Then there is a 1000 year “Millennium.” After that, the Devil is let out of the pit, causes chaos, and is defeated in yet another battle. Then he too is thrown into the lake of fire and Sulphur. That is the end of the fighting and destruction. Then there is the Judgment, and all are judged **“according to what they had done.”** Those whose names are in the book of life are saved. That ends Chapter 20.

The rest of *The Revelation*, Chapters 21 and 22, are the “Good Part!” We have there John’s vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth. Notice that John does not envision the survival of the earth as we know it. “... **For the first things have passed away.**” (21:4) He does not see continual improvements of conditions on earth, looking towards making earth heaven-like, as some of the prophets seem to. He, in the midst of worsening persecutions, sees only the early coming of the apocalypse, the “second coming” of the Messiah, where God will make things right in decisive and dramatic fashion. Then the persecuted will find rest and peace.

Well, as it has happened, the Second Coming is still something we are waiting for. Conditions on earth are better than they were in John’s time. That’s true in that people live with more liberty and under (at least on the average) better governance and conditions than ever before. The idea of government by the people, or even their representatives, was pretty much inconceivable back then. Tribal governments could be benevolent within their own tribes, but didn’t work in more complex situations, as can be seen in Judges. The other alternative was Monarchy in some form or another. Rome, for all its faults, was probably the best that could be managed at the time. In our modern world, there are many countries with governments that actually work most of the time. Not perfect, but closer.

Yet, we seem to be still very far from heaven on earth. People are still people, sin is still ever present in its many varieties, and that doesn’t seem likely to change. But we can make a difference, just as John and his readers did in their day. Under those conditions, surviving oppression while being faithful signs of God’s love and purpose was all that could be done. With the freedoms and resources we have today, we can at least do that, and perhaps more, as God may lead each one of us. In this season of Thanksgiving, let us give thanks to God for what has been accomplished to the benefit of humanity on earth, largely through the efforts of Christians.

Prayer: Great God, we always depend on you to reveal your truth and wisdom to us when we study your word. We pray that we will better understand who you are for us. Amen.

P.S. We are not going to be having class because of the luncheon after the worship service. I do hope that this mailing will at least partly make up for the loss of our time together after the service. We also won’t expect to meet on the 28th. Cindy and I expect to be away visiting our relatives in Virginia.