

When God Is on the Throne: Discovering the Mysteries of Revelation

Study Guide on Revelation 19-20 Week 11 (Sunday, November 15)

Background: There were many views among the Jews in the first century about what God would do in the future. Most expected that God would re-establish the kingdom of Israel on earth and that it would last forever. Jerusalem would be the capital, the Messiah would be the king, and Israel's enemies would be defeated in a huge battle. Another popular Jewish tradition had given up on this world and did not believe Israel would become a world power in the present age. These people believed that God would bring a cataclysmic end to the present world and would create a new world—a new heaven and a new earth. John seems to have used these ideas as he wrote the Revelation. Some interpreters think that this is why he writes of a 1,000 year reign of Jesus on earth *and* a new sort of existence that would begin after the millennium and last forever. It is often difficult to be sure why the Revelation includes the visions it includes, and it is just as difficult to know whether or not these visions correspond to a future reality. There is certainly room for disagreement on these matters. The following comments will suggest what I (Mark Black) think is most likely. Most importantly, we should look at the big picture and not press the details.

Text: Chapter 19 is relatively easy to understand. Chapter 20 is definitely not. The first part of 19 is called the “Hallelujah section,” because “Hallelujah” is repeated four times (the only times it is used in the New Testament). The multitudes in heaven break out in praise over God's destruction of Rome. They praise God for His justice, for avenging the blood of the martyrs, and for the coming “wedding of the Lamb.” The metaphor of the people of God as the bride of the Lord is common in the OT, and in the NT Christ is understood to be the bridegroom of the church (Matt. 9:15, Eph. 5:25-30).

The bride (the church) is dressed in bright linen, representing her faithfulness in spite of persecution. The members of the church attend the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (19:9), combining the wedding imagery with that of the messianic feast (Isaiah 25:6, Matthew 8:11). John's attempt to worship the angel in 19:10 is unexpected, but perhaps the reader is supposed to be reminded that even the faithful can be lured into idolatry.

God's victory over Rome is worthy of praise, and appropriate worship has been offered. However, the dragon and the two beasts are still roaming free. Therefore in 19:11 the scene changes, and a rider called Faithful and True is seen on a white horse, his army behind him dressed in white linen and also on white horses. The rider is clearly Jesus Christ (the Word of God in 19:13). He has a name on his forehead that only he knows, perhaps a testimony to the wonderful mystery of Christ. His robe is dipped in blood, even before the battle, suggesting that it is his own blood from the decisive victory on the cross. His weapon, the sword that comes out of his mouth, may refer to the Word of God. We are reminded in 19:16 that this rider is the real King and Lord, not the emperor or any other pretender.

There is not only a banquet for the faithful people of God (the wedding supper) but also for the enemies of God. Unfortunately, rather than guests, these kings, generals, and others are the meal. The invited guests are the vultures and other carnivorous birds. Finally, the beast appears with his army (19:19-21), but he and the false prophet (the second beast) are captured and cast into the fiery lake.

Chapter 20 raises many questions, and there are no easy answers. Most importantly, the chapter is about God's victory over the final (and worst) enemy in the drama, the dragon. An angel from heaven descends to earth and chains the dragon, Satan. He is locked in the Abyss for 1,000 years, and the martyrs are resurrected to reign with Christ during this time. After the 1,000 years are ended, Satan is released and gathers the nations of the earth to battle against God's people (20:7-10). They are called Gog and Magog, an allusion to the enemies of God in Ezekiel 38-39. But before they can attack, fire comes down from heaven and devours the evil army, and Satan is thrown into the fiery lake with the beasts.

Since Satan has finally been defeated, it is time for the resurrection and the judgment of all people in 20:11-15. The righteous, whose names are written in the book of life, are saved; and the wicked are thrown into the lake of fire. Along with them, death and Hades (the grave, the place of the dead) are also destroyed. At last, the final victory has been won.

So how do we understand this difficult chapter? Many (probably most) Bible-believing Christians think that this is a prophecy of a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth and that the beast (666) will arise (before or after the millennium)

and lead many nations against Israel and the people of God. Did John intend for his readers to expect Jesus to return to earth for a millennial reign? Probably not, for several reasons. First, hardly any of John's images so far should be taken literally, and in fact, most do not expect this one to take place literally. Second, nowhere else in the NT is there any mention of a 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth, nor is there any other mention of a first resurrection of martyrs that is separate from the general resurrection of all.

It is much more likely that John's vision is a symbolic way of showing that God has not forgotten the martyrs. Divine justice will prevail, even though during this time of persecution it is hard to believe. The martyrs have had to stand before the imperial throne and receive the sentence of death, but now they sit on thrones and deliver judgment. God will have the last word, and those who have paid the greatest price will receive the greatest reward. The 1,000 years, like most of the numbers in Revelation, are symbolic, representing a lengthy yet limited period of time. Many Christians believe that we are living in the "millennium" now, a period in which Satan's power is limited so that we can evangelize the world.

Like the 1,000 year reign of Christ, many take the final gathering of the forces of evil against God's people literally (20:7-9). This final battle, the battle of Armageddon mentioned in 16:16, is believed by many to be a future battle in Israel against God's people, who will include Christians and converted Jews. However, interpreters should probably not take this as a literal battle but rather a symbol of God's final victory.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the reasons that John and other biblical writers compared God's people to a bride, being readied to marry the Lord (19:7-8)?
2. Why do you think many biblical writers used the imagery of a great feast in the future for God's faithful (19:9)?
3. The 1,000 year reign of Christ (and binding of Satan) is difficult anyway you look at it. Does Satan's being bound during this time imply that evil is defeated completely during this time? What do you think is going on with this 1,000 year period?
4. Is it important that one know exactly how the book of Revelation relates to the future? In other words, how important is it that Christians think that Jesus will reign for 1,000 years on earth or not?
5. Why do you think God releases Satan and allows him one last battle (20:7-9)?
6. Does the final judgment scene (20:11-13) teach salvation by works ("the dead were judged according to what they had done")? By grace?
7. What does it mean that "death and Hades" were thrown into the lake of fire along with the dragon, the beasts, and all those whose names were not written in the book of life (20:14)?