

Getting Started:

We have already noted that the last six chapters of Revelation are possibly set up as three concluding statements, 1. Ch.17-18 the final judgement of human power structures, 2. Ch.19-20 the final judgement of evil, the dragon, and the unrepentant, 3. Ch.20-21 the unveiling of the New Jerusalem. Together these chapters wrap up God's dealing with all who oppose him.

In 18:20 the heavens and the saints are called to rejoice at Babylon's destruction, and in Ch. 19 rejoicing breaks out. In Ch. 19 & 20 as well, the other corrupting influences get their due recompense. In fact, by the end of Ch. 20 all creation stands before God's throne for judgement. From near the beginning of Revelation we've encountered more catastrophe than we are comfortable with. But here catastrophe gives way to jubilation. That which has been suppressed for so long now breaks out in unfettered praise and joy.

The structure of Ch.19, 20:

In these chapters our senses are impacted heavily by sound and sight. One of our temptations is to view these chapters as a literal chronological sequence as if John is laying history out a roadmap for his readers. This idea is largely fed by the presence of 6 successive "I saw" statements in this portion (19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11). Michael Wilcock cautions against taking the roadmap approach as it will lead to confusion trying to understand when these events will take place in human history.

He proposes an interesting alternative for the structure of Ch. 19-20. He sees the six "I saws" as 6 interlinked rapid fire visions that function something like the 6 seal, bowl, and trumpet judgements. The difference here is that the final decisive judgement on the dragon, evil, and the unrepentant doesn't begin with immediate destruction as do the other judgement cycles. It begins with Christ's glorious appearing and the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:1-10).

As I understand Wilcock, John's concern is not to create a chronological sequence of when these events will occur. In his view Ch.19-20 highlight the certainty of these visions occurring and that Jesus leads the charge. The slain Lamb is now seen in a totally new light and how Christ and his church are victorious over evil. Here's where the churches faithfully following the slain Lamb understand and see that their faithfulness has a glorious end goal. This approach gives Ch.19-20 a timeless application for God's people as they confront evil.

The core:

19:1-6 SOMETHING TO HEAR: The Hallelujah song

In complete and startling contrast to Babylon's hymn of doom (Ch 18), heaven breaks out in a fourfold Hallelujah. Hallelujah means "Praise Yahweh". And these Hallelujahs' occur in direct response to Babylon's fate in Ch. 18.

19:7-10 The marriage and supper to come

What immediately stands out is the vision of the bride. This is not a new concept. It has

strong OT roots: Isa 54:1-8; Ezek. 16:7; Hos 2:19. But what is core here is the stark contrast between the prostitute just judged and the bride now prepared for marriage supper of the Lamb. In the world of the seven churches there are two women, a whore and a bride. The contrast could not be more profound. Several commentators make the observation that chs 17-19 might be better titled, “a tale of two women”.

Wilcock notes, the whore has been detailed as resplendent in dress, and seductive in relationships. The whore has also received her just reward – judgement. Over against this Ch. 19 presents a bride. Her adornment is simple by comparison, described as fine linen, bright and clean. Her adornment is the righteous acts she has lived out on earth. Her humility compared to the great whore is striking. Remember the angel’s words to the church at Sardis,

“But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments. . . .”

And the churches are urgently reminded about this wedding,

“Write, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

V.10 A little warning

This passage is curious. Who is speaking to John? The speaker is never identified. Since the Hallelujahs are sung collectively by the multitudes gathered around God’s throne we have to assume that the one speaking to John comes from among the gathered voices. This isn’t God’s voice because the voice says, “I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus.” So why does John think it important to include this little portion? Dr. Ed Neufeld observes,

“This sentence presents an example of how easy it is to fall into false worship, for which the judgement of Rev 19 comes into play. It is frighteningly easy to make a mistake of identity, and end up worshipping the wrong being. Be careful. In 22:8, 9, John astonishingly repeats the same offence. It is hard to know how to take these two incidents; it seems a warning about the ease of false worship, but it is still startling.”

19:11-21 – 20:15 SOMETHING TO SEE: 6 interlinked rapid-fire visions

Here is the pattern of 6 visions that Wilcock observes.

Vision 1 – 19:11-16 A white horse and rider

This vision stands in stark contrast to the first rider described in the opening of the first seal (6:2). But who is the one sitting on the white horse? Although not named it isn’t hard to identify the rider. Merely by the description offered we can clearly see Jesus. He is being unveiled in a way not seen before in the New Testament. Now we see him for who he really is! And the message contained in the description is unmistakable. This rider conquers in a way like no other. Note that his robe is “dipped in blood”. He is the slain lamb who has been sacrificed for the sin of the world. And in addition to himself as a glorious conqueror, he comes with an army that is resplendent as well (v.14). Imagine for a moment the impact of

this vision on each of the seven churches. The babe in a manger who died on a cross and ascended into heaven is now a living reigning judging king!

Vision 2 19:17, 18 Another supper

In total contrast to vv. 9 – 10 there is another feast. This one however is not attended by the same people in v.9. This is God's supper and it's attended by birds of prey. Birds have been featured in at least two other places in Revelation, 8:13; 18:2. Here they symbolize messengers of judgement as scavengers that eat the flesh of those opposing God. The OT also provides some graphic images of birds of prey at work, Jer. 7:33; Ezek. 39:17-20. Long ago when someone received the due reward for their action, especially negative, it was said that "the chickens were coming home to roost." Here it's not chickens who roost, it's birds of prey that feast on the flesh of those who oppose God!

Vision 3 19:19 – 21 The beast and his followers seized and killed.

Gruesome as this vision is, we now know the end of the beast and his followers. The end of the beast who has held sway since Ch. 13 is now portrayed in graphic imagery. In addition, remember Ch. 14:9. It's not the beast alone who suffers eternal defeat and torment, those who follow him and receive his mark also suffer the same end.

Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

19:19 - 21 is a source of great controversy among a growing number of theologians today. They view the eternal torment of unbelievers as too horrific to contemplate. It's too "unchristian". Their alternative is to say that unbelievers do not suffer eternal torment in hell, but are instead annihilated. Unbelievers don't suffer eternal torment, they are just gone. In view of what John says here, annihilation is not God's judgement on unbelievers, eternal torment is.

Vision 4 20:1 – 3 a heavenly angel manhandles and locks up Satan for 1000 years

This vision is puzzling and has been the source of much debate among believers. Is the 1000 years literal or figurative? Numbers in Revelation tend to be symbolic in nature. But they can also be taken literally. For example, there were 7 literal churches to whom Jesus wrote, but symbolically the 7 churches also represent the whole church of Jesus Christ. We can debate the literalness of the 1000 year period without coming to a satisfactory conclusion. Justo Gonzalez provides a helpful perspective on this matter,

. . . John's vision does not provide a clear calendar. What is important for him, and for the Christians to whom he writes, is that a time will come when evil apparently will be overcome. Yet the ultimate source of that evil – the dragon, or Satan is not completely destroyed. There is no thought here that God could not have overcome evil all at once. It somehow serves God's purposes to permit this interlude of peace, this time without evil, and then allow evil again to hold sway.

The millennium is pictured as part of the history of this world, here on earth. The vision implies that the new will not become a reality until there is a redeemed old earth, which is what occurs during this 1000 year break in the power of evil. The power of evil lessens, and redemption begins its work, to be completed by the transformation of the world at the end of history. This is a much more optimistic view of history than one that sees evil having full sway until the end, with no time on this earth when evil is in abeyance.

Two things stand out in Gonzales' thought

- a. God does not intend for what occurs here to be thought of as a roadmap.
- b. God's purposes are served in halting evil for a time, and then to release it for a short time.

We can speculate the details all we wish, but we must hold our speculation with an open hand as God doesn't reveal anything to us beyond what is stated.

Vision 5 20:4 – 10 The resurrection of the saints

The images here bring back much of what John has already said about the followers of Jesus, particularly 5:9 – 10; 6:9 – 11; 7:3 etc. It must be remembered that John is not looking to answer all our questions concerning this passage, or about the millennium. He has a point of view to present and proceeds to give it to his readers. What shall we make of this?

Dr. Ed Neufeld suggests that regardless of how one interprets the notion of the millennium, one thing is certain. The primary purpose of this vision is to alert the reader to the reward of the martyred saints. He notes,

“When they (the saints) were on earth, Satan was in a rage, and the beast and the false prophet had all the power. Now Satan is in a cage, and the faithful believers are honored. When they were on the earth, judges and rulers did with the believers whatever they wanted. Now the faithful believers receive their reward, and their public vindication: they are the judges and rulers.”

Vernard Eller makes an interesting proposal. He suggests that one possibility for the 1000 year reign is to offset the terror believers experienced during the 3 ½ year reign of the dragon and the beast. He sees in this time period a symmetry that was important to John,

The beast and his people got a 3 ½ year period on earth when they pretty much had things their own way, while the Lamb and his people had to take it in the neck (the Lamb in his crucifixion, his people in their faithful martyr-witness). Yet, even with the Lamb's eventual victory, that period cannot be allowed to stand unanswered; history would not have come out “right”, full justice would not have been done, and the “the very truth of things” would not have been manifested. The Lamb and his people deserve a thousand years (a large, full, complete number as over against the broken 3 ½) of reign on earth to put that end-time nightmare in to proper perspective, if for no other reason.

V.7 Satan released:

John began the story of Satan's final judgment in 20:1-3. But he then breaks away from Satan's story in vv.4-6 to highlight the destiny of the martyred saints. In Vv.4-6 the martyred saints experience complete reversal of position given their previous suffering. And now in v.7 John resumes Satan's judgment. But why is Satan released for a short period following the

1000 year reign? Why is he allowed to interrupt the sheer bliss of the first part of this vision?

Justo Gonzalez notes that at least one possibility is that John is depicting just how slowly and hard evil and sin die. It is a formidable enemy.

V.8 Gog and Magog:

John draws on Ezekiel's imagery to make a very specific point. As Craig Keener observes,

John draws on the image from Ezekiel, but whereas in Ezekiel Gog is the ruler of Magog, here Gog and Magog together merely symbolize all the nations, the nations, "in the four corners of the earth. . . . The point in Ezekiel is that God will be glorified through their destruction (Ezek. 38:16, 23) and will defend his people (38:14-16). . . . This reminds John's audience that even during the thousand years God's people must remain vigilant until their final victory, a reminder that invites greater vigilance for the saints in the present time.

Vision 6 20:11 – 15 The white throne (final) judgement

The end has come. Justo Gonzales makes several observations worth noting about this portion,

- 1. There have been so many almost-final struggles, after which evil has come back to plague this world. When the real end comes, however, it is described in very brief terms.**
- 2. All that John sees now is God on throne, radiant in purity. Gone are the 24 elders and the four living creatures. . . . Only God on the throne remains.**
- 3. All the dead come before the throne**

Note as well that earth and heaven have fled away. There is nowhere for anyone to hide.

V.12 The books and the book:

Two sets of books are opened. What kind of books are these? Some suggest that the first set are the ledgers in which God keeps track of the deeds of believers. Paul says,

For we shall all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Cor.5:10)

2 Cor. 5:10 doesn't have to do with the question of heaven/hell. Here believers are rewarded for how they have worked in the body of Christ. This is possibly the content of the books in Rev. 20:12.

But another book is also opened. This is the book of life. This is the one that contains the names of those who belong to the body of Christ. What's missing in this book are the names of those who completely rejected Christ.

The book of life isn't about deeds done by people. This book is about believing faith in Jesus as saviour. 1 Jn. 5:11-12 is very clear and very specific,

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

This is why Jn. 3:16 is so meaningful

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

All creation is judged by the decision they have made to respond to God's call to life in Christ.

This portion is essential for what it says about God's final judgement on humanity. But it also leaves open the question of believers who have reneged in their allegiance to Jesus. For example, Jesus says to the church at Sardis,

The one who overcomes will be clothed the same way, in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

My notes on Revelation 2 & 3 contain the discussion of the debate on this issue.

Suffice it to say that here in vv.11-15 the question of the fate of believers unfaithful in their allegiance to Jesus is left open. Perhaps this is so because God through John wants believers reading this portion, particularly in churches like the one in Sardis, to seriously rethink their testimony as representatives of Jesus.

This is not the only time that a serious spiritual/theological matter has been left as an open question. Think about the ending to the Book of Jonah.

The final element of the judgement cycle pattern

All the other judgement cycles involve a series of 7. This is the number of completion. So, you may ask, where is the 7th element in this cycle of judgements? The 7th vision is the most glorious to come. This is Ch. 21, 22 and the unveiling of the New Jerusalem.

Making it real:

So what shall we make of all this as a practical application? Listen to Peterson's thought,

"Salvation comes into being, the vision informs us, in the face of furious opposition. Much of the opposition is hidden and does its work obscurely. One function of the vision is to train our perceptions so that we will never again overlook it. At the same time the vision raises our adrenalin level, so that we bring our energetic best to the high spiritual drama that we participate in every day as we confess the Lordship of Christ. Once having seen this, we are not likely to fight a half-hearted war against a wholehearted enemy. We do not live in a neutral world. There is malign opposition, an evil will at work to deceive and destroy us. Salvation attacks the enemy."

Jesus said to Peter at Caesarea Philippi Matt 16:18,

“I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

D. Elton Trueblood says of Matt 16:18, the church is not to take a defensive posture as it ministers to the sin broken world around it. Jesus meant that Hades would not be able to keep the kingdom out. Hades is the gated community that heaven is storming. Hades is not storming our gates. What is most encouraging is that,

“... hell cannot always be impervious to the Christian attack. The redemptive fellowship, Christ seems to say, is on the offensive, and it is so strong in its penetration that even the very gates of hell cannot keep it from entering.”

Quite simply put, the church is at war. At war, “not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). And we fight with the appropriate weapons (Eph 6:13-17). Ch 19 reminds the churches not to lose heart in their struggle, they in Christ will prevail.

2. Some people think death releases them from responsibility, or hides them from the consequences, of their actions. Ch 20 provides a sobering reality check. Nobody gets away with anything as far as God is concerned. I am reminded of the many millions of people who died at the hands of the Nazis during WWII. Add to this all the other world powers over the millennia who tortured good and godly people and put them to death for their own twisted purposes. Those who have suffered at the hands of these earthly power brokers, and those who are power brokers, ought to pay equal attention to ch 20. For those who have suffered, ch 20 reminds them that no injustice will be missed by God. Those who have caused suffering and thought themselves above accountability ought to think again. Their deeds will not be missed. God will open the books and reward each according to their deeds.

Rev 20 reminds me of Psalm 1. The blessed stick by God’s word and avoid the one who opposes God. The one who does this will find themselves as a refreshing and useful tree planted by rivers of water. Those who oppose God are like the chaff left over after the harvest. Psalm 1:5, 6 gives good reason for avoiding God’s opposers,

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

Here in Rev 20 we see the final end of all God’s opposers.

For Smyrna and Philadelphia this has to be a source of significant encouragement in that not only spiritual enemies, but all God’s enemies are dealt with. There is good reason for them to continue on and flourish in faithfulness regardless of cost.

For Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea this has to be a significant source of warning. God will not only deal with his enemies, but he will also deal with his people.

Remember that the letters to these seven churches contain warnings about the relationship between their obedience and works, and God's recompense for what they did in his name. God's people are not immune from being dealt with.

Paul is clear in 1 Cor 3 that each believer's works will be tested by fire so as to burn off the useless and reveal the valuable. The fire that tests each believer's works is not as the fire that meets God's enemies. The fires that test the believer's works may actually reveal the works as having nothing of value, but the believer will still see heaven, though empty-handed.