

Revelation 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 10 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire.

He had a little scroll open in his hand, and he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice like a lion roaring.

When he called out, the seven thunders sounded, and when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.

And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land, raised his right hand to heaven, and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll, and he said to me, Take and eat it.

[1 : 21] It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey. And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter.

And I was told, You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings. As we reach Revelation chapter 10, it might be worthwhile to step back from the text briefly to consider why the book is written in the way that it is.

Why doesn't God just say what he means directly? If, for instance, God wants to talk about the bringing of judgment upon diaspora Jews as the gospel goes out into the wider empire or of the corruption of the temple, why doesn't he say so expressly and explicitly?

Why present these things in such obscure symbolic language and with almost hallucinogenic imagery, which the overwhelming majority of people won't be able to understand?

Indeed, it seems to be written in a way that almost invites misunderstanding. Many modern readers of the text of Revelation, for instance, have seen Apache helicopters in the Scorpion Locus and an immense army from an Asian block of nations in the twice 10,000 times 10,000 of the preceding chapter.

[2 : 38] Although such readings of Revelation have countless problems, they do at least relieve some of the questions about the symbolism, believing that much of it should be taken more literally or as more impressionistic representations of future realities for which John and the first heroes of Revelation would not have had any words, such as four Apache helicopters.

Other commentators have suggested that the book of Revelation is closer to a sort of code, adopted in order to hide the true reference of its prophecies in a context of persecution.

The authorities would only perceive strange and fantastical imagery from a weird Eastern cult, but the informed Christian reader would know that it was foretelling the downfall of the Roman Empire or something like that.

Reading the book of Revelation as if it were a sort of code, we will tend to look for one-to-one correlations between its images and real-world reference. However, as we have been working through this book, we have consistently seen that its symbolism and imagery establishes multiple connections, associations, juxtapositions and the like.

The imagery has the effect of transposing events into, or mapping events onto, frameworks offered by such things as the temple and its sacrifices, by the festal calendar and the great events of redemptive history, or by the fundamental patterns of the created order, sun, moon, stars, sea, land, etc.

[4 : 05] In this way, the imagery does a lot more than communicate events that are going to occur. It communicates their deeper meaning and significance. It reveals the connection between heaven and earth, presenting seemingly chaotic events in history in terms of a profoundly ordered process of worship in heaven.

By revealing these processes behind the events of history, we are instructed in deep mysteries, not merely concerning events in the first century AD, but also concerning events throughout history, down to our present day.

By mapping these events of history onto the feasts and the worship of the temple, something about their covenant significance is also disclosed. These are the events that bring the age of the old covenant to its close, an age that overlapped with the new covenant for about 40 years, but which is finally to be dismantled.

While many think of the events recorded in Revelation, primarily in terms of events that make a huge splash in human history, Revelation teaches us to view things from a different perspective. From a human vantage point, the rejection of the early church's message and persecution by the Jews in the diaspora may be felt to be a discouraging setback. From a heavenly perspective, however, it is a great burning mountain being cast into the sea, turning a third of the sea to blood, killing a third of the living creatures and destroying a third of the ships.

[5 : 29] Whatever it might seem like from an earthly vantage point, the events occurring are truly of cosmic importance, an epoch-defining significance. This is not code, but it grants struggling and persecuted Christians a very different vantage point upon their situations.

In Revelation chapter 10, we are still in the sixth trumpet part of the book. As in the case of the open seals, a number of preparatory events must occur before the blowing of the climactic seventh trumpet.

Remarking upon the description of the mighty angel descending from heaven, a number of commentators argue that it seems to be a divine figure. Greg Beale claims, for instance, that he is given attributes that are given only to God in the Old Testament, or to God or Christ in Revelation. Furthermore, this would not be the first or the only time in Scripture more generally, or in Revelation in particular, that the figure of the one like a son of man is presented as an angelic one.

We see a similar association in Revelation chapter 14 verses 14 to 16, and also in the book of Daniel, where the one like a son of man is closely related to, or even identified with the figure of the archangel Michael.

[6 : 39] The mighty angel comes wrapped in a cloud, like God himself, and the figure of the one like a son of man. The rainbow over his head, and the description of the mighty angel's feet, also recall the rainbow of chapter 4 verse 3, in addition to the vision of Ezekiel chapter 1, especially the description of verses 27 to 28.

And upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him.

Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

The background of Ezekiel's vision in chapters 1 to 3 of the book of Ezekiel will continue to be important in what follows. The mighty angel's face, shining like the sun, recalls the description of Christ, both at the transfiguration on the mount, and also in the vision at the beginning of the book. Matthew chapter 17 verse 2, And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And Revelation chapter 1 verse 16, In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun, shining in full strength.

[8 : 08] The description of Jesus' legs in Revelation chapter 1 was as of burnished bronze refined in a furnace. Now they are described as like pillars of fire, recalling the means by which the Lord led Israel in the wilderness, as if the pillar of cloud and fire by which the Lord went before his people were vast legs by which he walked with them.

He calls out with a loud voice like that of a lion, by which we are reminded that Jesus is the Lion of Judah. Peter Lighthouse presents all of the parallels between the angel and Jesus, but does not directly identify the two.

Rather, he reminds us of the first verse of the book, The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

The mighty angel is not Jesus himself, but his angel, and the angel or the messenger of Christ is the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sends to his people. Perhaps a clue to this identity can be seen in the glory phenomena of the cloud, fire and rainbow involved.

In this figure in chapter 10, we are finally told about the angel that Jesus Christ sent to John, that is mentioned in the first verse of the book. With the delivery of this book to John, we are also finally reaching the point of the revelation of what is going to take place.

[9 : 26] What has been revealed to this point has largely related to events from the ascension onwards, all leading up to the opening, heralding and delivery of the prophetic book. The angel stands with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land.

The sea, as we have already seen, is associated with the Gentiles and the land with the Jews. In the descent of the spirit angel, heaven and earth are connected, and land and sea are connected, as the kingdom of Christ is stretching out beyond the land.

Seven thunders sound when the spirit angel calls out, and John is about to write down their contents. However, rather than having their word dictated to him, John will bear the word in a very different way.

He is instructed not to write down the words of the seven thunders, which, we should presume, are the contents of the book that are open in the angel's hand. The identity of the book in the spirit angel's hand should be considered.

The book is open, and would most naturally be related to the book or the scroll that has been at the heart of the prophecy to this point, the book that was opened with the opening of the seven seals, and that is being heralded in the seven trumpets.

[10 : 35] The book, which is now opened, can be delivered. The fact that it is described as a little book need not imply that it is a different book, although it might be an earthly book that is a counterpart to the heavenly book that the Lamb opened.

As usual, the keys to the meaning of the book of Revelation are largely found in the rest of the scripture. Recognising those passages that provide the backdrop enables us to unpack the meaning of what is taking place.

Without great familiarity with the keys that the scripture provides, however, we will be baffled by much within the text. Here, the end of the book of Daniel is the key background.

Daniel's revelation was sealed up in a book, which wouldn't be open until the time of the end. Daniel chapter 12, verses 4 to 9. But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end.

Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. Then I, Daniel, looked, and behold, two others stood, one on this bank of the stream and one on that bank of the stream.

[11 : 37] And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, How long shall it be till the end of these wonders? And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, He raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be finished.

I heard but did not understand. Then I said, O my Lord, what shall be the outcome of these things? He said, Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.

The man clothed in linen was earlier described in Daniel chapter 10 verses 5 to 6. I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist.

His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.

This description closely resembles the vision of Christ in Revelation chapter 1, and of the mighty spirit angel in this chapter. In Daniel, this figure swears by him who lives forever, that the opening of the book and the fulfilment of its prophecies awaited the time of the end, a time that will come after

a time, times and half a time.

[13 : 01] Now a similar figure makes a similar oath, but the oath now is that the time of the end has come. The time is up and the mystery of God would finally be fulfilled. The long-awaited kingdom would finally be established.

John is instructed by the voice from heaven, presumably the voice of Christ, to take the open scroll from the angel. Rather than having the contents of the book dictated to him, John is instructed to take the book and to eat it, so it will become part of him.

There is a similar account in the book of Ezekiel chapter 3, verses 1 to 3. The description of the book given to Ezekiel is found in chapter 2, verses 9 to 10 of the book.

And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it, and he spread it out before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

The sealed book was described in a similar way in Revelation chapter 5 verse 1. The bitterness of the words of the book might recall the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, where curses were written down in a book, scraped off into a drink of bitter water, which had to be drunk by the woman accused of adultery.

[14 : 33] If she were indeed unfaithful, the ingested words would poison her. The words of the prophecy given to John is just such a test of jealousy, as we will see with the judgment upon the whore of Babylon later in the book.

The loud voice of the spirit angel, connected with the seven thunders, will now be expressed through the prophetic ministry of John and the church. A question to consider, how might John's eating of the book help us as we think about our relationship with the word of God as the people of God?