

Revelation 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 16 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood.

And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve. And I heard the altar saying, Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments. The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire.

They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness.

People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds. The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

[1 : 3 8] And I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed. And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, It is done. And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake, such as there has never been since man was on the earth.

So great was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.

And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people. And they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

[2 : 5 8] In Revelation chapter 16, the bowls are poured out upon the earth. In contrast to the seals and the trumpets, these proceed relatively directly, without the long drawn out sixth and seventh judgments.

The bowls have a finality to them. As Revelation chapter 15 verse 1 said, With them the wrath of God is finished. The number seven repeatedly appears in the book of Revelation, drawing the minds of its hearers back to the original creation.

The events of the book are both a decreation and a new creation. So it is fitting that there should be so many allusions to the themes of Genesis chapters 1 to 3. Here, as Peter Lightheart maintains, a loose parallel can be seen between the days of creation and the bowl judgments.

The bowls also closely parallel the trumpet judgments. Bowl 1 is poured out on the earth. Perhaps this connects with the undifferentiated creation that existed on the first day.

It also connects with the hail and fire mixed with blood that were thrown to earth in the first trumpet judgment. Bowl 2 is poured out on the sea, perhaps connecting with the below waters of the second day of creation.

[4 : 10] Bowl 2 also resembles the second trumpet, where the great burning mountain was cast into the sea. Bowl 3 is poured out on the rivers and the springs of water, the land waters associated with the division of the land from the sea on the third day of the creation.

It is similar to the fall of wormwood, which made the land waters bitter in the third trumpet. Bowl 4 is poured out on the sun, connected with the creation of the sun, moon and stars on the fourth day of creation.

Bowl 5 is poured out on the throne of the beast. As the beast is a sea beast, this connects with the fifth day, in which the great sea monsters were formed.

The fifth trumpet concerned the fallen star, who was given the key and the authority of the abyss, the bottomless pit. Bowl 6 is poured out on the river Euphrates, opening the way for a heavenly army to enter the land.

Trumpet 6 released the four angels at the Reveuphrates. Bowl 7 is the bowl of completion, the Sabbath bowl, with which the voice from the temple declared that it is finished.

[5 : 22] Following the blowing of trumpet 7 in Revelation chapter 11 verse 19, we read, Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.

There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and heavy hail. Here in chapter 16 we read of similar details. In verse 18, And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake, such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

And in verse 21, All of these pronounced similarities invite reflection.

Some readers of the book have suggested that we are cycling through the same events from different perspectives. However, while at points we do see the same event from different perspectives, more generally there is a clear progression occurring in the visions.

Perhaps we ought to think of a progression similar to that of ascending a spiral staircase, where at each point you are going up, while also going through a spiral that can be mapped onto a lower spiral.

[6 : 33] The angels received their bowls from one of the four living creatures, as we saw back in chapter 15 verse 7. Perhaps the human-faced cherubim is the living creature in view here, associated with Aquarius as the water bearer.

The bowls contain the wrath of God to be poured out upon the earth. The bowls come from the very throne of God, by means of one of the four living creatures and the seven angels. They should be connected with both the blood of the martyrs and the fire before the throne of God.

The first bowl produces painful sores, which might recall the sixth plague, the plague of boils in Exodus chapter 9. This judgment falls upon the bearers of the mark of the beast and his image especially.

The plague of boils in Exodus was, among other things, a defiling plague. It came from the ashes of the kilns and defiled flesh. It is similar in its impact to being struck with leprosy, which would drive one out from worship.

This judgment falls upon the land, upon people in Israel, and there is an inversion that occurs here. Whereas bearing the mark of the beast and worshipping its image were required to be a worshipper, now they led to people being excluded.

[7 : 44] Prior to the civil war, the leadership of the Jews had prostituted themselves with the Roman beast and established the temple itself as a sort of perverse image of the beast, a den of thieves preserved through a commitment to appeasing the sea beast that eclipsed the fear of the Lord.

However, after the outbreak of the war, such compromise, rather than being a prerequisite for participation in the worship of the temple, would exclude people from it. The second bowl is poured out upon the Gentile Sea, killing every living thing in it.

The sea was formerly a realm that was hospitable to God-fearers and other forms of connection with the ships of the Jewish diaspora. These sources of life, however, are now removed or defiled.

The times of ignorance are now completely over, and people must turn to Christ. The third bowl is upon the rivers and springs. Earlier, in discussing the third trumpet and the poisoning of the waters by Wormwood, we saw the connection between such land waters and the waters of the temple.

Elsewhere, at the end of the book of Ezekiel, the temple is presented as the source of living water, which flows out from God's presence. With the rivers and springs of water, the source of life in the land is cut off.

[8 : 57] Blood is spilling out into all of the formerly habitable realms and rendering them uninhabitable and polluted. The third bowl, the judgment upon the springs and the rivers, represents a development beyond the previous judgment on the waters in the third trumpet, where only a third of the waters were made into Wormwood.

The worship of the temple had been made bitter, but now it is utterly poisoned. In response to the third bowl, the water-bearing angel praises the justice of God in bringing the judgments.

There is a poetic justice to it all. They shed the blood of saints and prophets, and now they are given blood mixed with the fiery wrath of God to drink. If they reject the new waters flowing from God's presence, the rivers of living water flowing from Christ, this blood is what they must drink.

There is a response from the altar, perhaps here the golden incense altar. In chapter 6 verse 9, In chapter 8 verse 3, an angel, possibly the spirit himself, brought the prayers of the saints from the bronze altar in the land to the golden altar in the heavens, presenting them an incense before the Lord.

Now, in the voice from the golden altar of incense, we hear the response of the martyrs to the Lord's answer to their prayers and his avenging of their blood upon the people of the earth. Perhaps we should see in the second and third bowls a sort of expansion of the first Egyptian plague, where the Nile and its waters were turned into blood.

[10 : 30] The fourth bowl strikes the sun, which scorches people with fire. Whereas in the fourth trumpet, the sun, moon and stars were dimmed, now the sun is turned up to an unbearable heat.

Previously, powers and authorities had been weakened within the land. However, now the sun, perhaps the sun of Roman authority, becomes scorching in the land, causing life to wither before its blazing heat.

Roman authority turns upon the land in devastating power as the Jewish war heats up. The response of the people is not to repent, but to reject God even more forcefully.

The fifth angel pours out his bowl on the beast's throne and kingdom. The beast here is the sea beast, and the judgment referred to here is likely that, around AD 68-69, as after Nero's suicide, Rome was struck with civil war, and went through four emperors in a single year.

The Jews had not repented when Rome's heat had started to scorch their land, and now the Romans fail to repent when their kingdom is plunged into darkness. The sixth bowl brings two great forces into conflict.

[11 : 38] Here we should think back to the fifth and the sixth trumpets, with the scorpion locusts and the corresponding army restrained by the angels at the river Euphrates. Revelation chapter 9 verses 13 to 17 read, Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand.

I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision, and those who rode them. They wore breastplates, the colour of fire, and of sapphire, and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lion's heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths.

The kings of verse 12 are literally from the rising of the sun, perhaps associated with Jesus himself, who declares that he is coming like a thief. The water of the boundary of the land is dried up, so that a heavenly invasion force can pass over into the land.

We might think back to Israel crossing the Jordan under Joshua. As the Jews become corrupt like Canaanites, a new river crossing occurs. It is a new conquest.

[13 : 01] It is perhaps also a new exodus, associated with the promises in Isaiah chapter 44, verses 27 to 28. The god who says to the deep, Be dry, I will dry up your rivers, will prepare the path for Cyrus.

Cyrus was the king from the east who diverted the Euphrates, crossing over and defeating Babylon, releasing the Jews. A similar thing is occurring here. A new Babylon is about to be defeated, and the Lord is preparing the way.

The triad of dragon, sea beast, and land beast are here described as the dragon, beast, and false prophet. The description of the land beast as the false prophet connects to the way that his speech was important, and the way that the signs that he performed that misled people was also part of his power.

They produce demonic frogs from their mouths, reminiscent of the second plague of the Exodus, when the frogs came up from the Nile. The frogs go everywhere, spreading more direct demonic conflict to all parts of the empire, doing battle with the heavenly army that has been released against them.

They all gather together at Armageddon, the mountain of Megiddo. This reference is complicated by the fact that Megiddo does not have a mountain. Megiddo was the site where King Josiah was killed by the Egyptians in battle, an event that extinguished much of the hope of the southern kingdom prior to its exile in Babylon.

[14 : 24] This event is reversing that. It is also placing the church more directly in conflict with the powers of the Gentiles, as the Jews are no longer the prominent adversaries of the church after this.

Lightheart notes another possibility, an allusion back to Zechariah chapter 12, which refers to the mourning of the nation after the death of Josiah, and connects this with the mourning that will occur for the messianic shepherd figure.

Revelation already alluded to this passage in chapter 1 verse 7. Zechariah chapter 12 verses 8 to 11. On that day the Lord will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the Lord going before them.

And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem, and I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and weep bitterly over him as one weeps over a firstborn.

On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-Rimon in the plain of Megiddo. The plain of Megiddo is, in Revelation, spoken of as a mountain.

[15 : 45] This does not reflect the actual geography. However, as in other places in Scripture, the point is likely that of communicating the spiritual geography. This is Mount Sinai.

It's like Mount Carmel as well, with the showdown with the priests of Baal. The showdown with the armies of the nations will occur at a place of communion with God. With the seventh angel's bowls, the great judgment is completed.

The bowl is poured out on the air so that every element and realm has been struck. The waters, the earth, the fire in the sky of the sun, and now also the air.

The entire old world order has been judged. The result is an immense earthquake shaking up the entire cosmos, but focusing on the great city of Babylon. We see similar descriptions of an earthquake that entirely transforms the geography in Zechariah chapter 14.

The city is here described as being split into three parts. Perhaps this can be seen as an allusion back to Ezekiel chapter 5 verses 1 to 8. And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword, use it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard.

[16 : 54] Then take balances for weighing, and divide the hair. A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city.

And a third part you shall scatter to the wind. And I will unsheathe the sword after them. And you shall take from these a small number and bind them in the skirts of your robe. And of these again you shall take some and cast them into the midst of the fire and burn them in the fire.

From there a fire will come out into all the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.

And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her. For they have rejected my rules and have not walked in my statutes.

Therefore thus says the Lord God, Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you.

[18 : 00] Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, even I, am against you, and I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. It might also refer to the extreme factionalism into which the city of Jerusalem fell.

Josephus writes in Book 5 of the Jewish War about the division of Jerusalem into rival factions in its last days. The cities of the nations fell. The shake-up of this period, civil war in Rome, and the destruction of Jerusalem, leads to a more general collapse of the old order, most keenly experienced by Jews in the land and in the diaspora.

The islands flee away as the diaspora outposts suffer from the consequences of the fall of the great city of Babylon, which is Jerusalem. The mountains are nowhere to be found, as great powers and rulers are swept from the land.

Babylon the Great will be made to drink the cup of the wine of God's fury. David Chilton suggests that the plague of the hail might be a reference to the great stones that Josephus describes as being hurled against the city by the Roman army in Jewish War, Book 5, Chapter 6.

The stone missiles weighed a talent and travelled two furlongs or more, and their impact not only on those who were hit first, but also on those behind them was enormous. At first the Jews kept watch for the stone, for it was white, and its approach was intimated to the eye by its shining surface as well as to the ear by its whizzing sound.

[19 : 29] Watchmen posted on the towers gave the warnings whenever the engine was fired and the stone came hurtling toward them, shouting in their native tongue, The sun is coming! Those in the line of fire made way and fell prone, a precaution that resulted in the stones passing harmlessly through and falling in their rear.

To frustrate this, it occurred to the Romans to blacken the stones, so that they could not be seen so easily beforehand. Then they hit their target and destroyed many with a single shot.

Nevertheless, even when faced with all of these great judgments, the people still fail to repent. A question to consider.

There are multiple allusions to several past instances of great judgment upon a land or city in the book of Revelation. How many of these can you identify? What happens can you identify? What happens can you identify?