

Revelation 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 December 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Revelation chapter 15. Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened. And out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls, full of the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power. And no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished. In Revelation chapter 12 we saw two great signs in heaven, the woman and the dragon. Now at the beginning of chapter 15 we encounter another, seven angels with seven plagues.

We are reaching a climax here. In the first verse we are told that the seven plagues that the angels will bring will complete the wrath of God. As heavenly signs, the woman and the dragon had connections with the zodiac, with the woman being Virgo, and the dragon being Scorpio and the claws, which we know as Libra. Now with the seven angels with plagues, we have further signs. We've seen sets of seven angels on a number of occasions before, for instance in the angels of the seven churches, and in the trumpet blowing angels. The angels here will be given bowls, and should probably be connected with the seven planets of the ancient solar system, and also with comets, which, as Peter Lightheart notes, were referred to as bowls. Austin Farah suggests that we might see a descent through heavenly hierarchies here, as Christ himself opens the seven seals, the archangels or angels of the presence blow the trumpets, and seven angels pour out the bowls. Perhaps with the bowls we should also, as Farah argues, see a connection with the cherubim like a man, which relates to the sign of Aquarius, the water bearer.

The ordering of the final seven plagues here is interesting, as they will fall after the 144,000 of Israel have passed through the sea. This company seems to precede the greater company of the redeemed.

There is a three-fold exodus here, as Lightheart observes. The lamb, the bridegroom, precedes everyone else, then the 144,000 of the core bridal company, the first fruits of the earth, and then the wider multitude that follow after them. At the heart of chapter 15 is rich and subtle exodus imagery.

Themes of the exodus pervade the book of Revelation, but here they are especially dense. There are the great plagues, and then there is a scene reminiscent of the Red Sea crossing, on the other side of which a great company of Jews sing the song of Moses, much as Israel, led by Moses, sung the song of the sea in Exodus chapter 15, after their deliverance from Pharaoh, the great sea monster, of the story of the exodus. There the waters through which the Israelites were saved destroyed their enemies, and here the 144,000 are brought through a new sea of glass mingled with fire, which will be a means of destroying their enemies. They have passed through the sea of blood that was described at the end of chapter 14, and are now safe on the other side. The fiery character of the sea of glass here is one that connects it with the stream of fire that came out from God's throne in Daniel chapter 7. Yet the sea that they passed through was not so much a boundary on a horizontal plane than it was a boundary on a vertical plane. They have passed through the firmament, and now stand above it by the sea of glass before the throne of God, the same sea that we saw back in chapter 4 verse 6. This fiery firmament sea will come down upon their pursuers in the bowls in devastating judgment, but they themselves are now entirely safe on the other side. They have been harvested from the earth, and are now in God's presence. Earlier in chapter 14 verses 1 to 3 we read,

[4 : 42] Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name, and the Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they were singing a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. They were taught a new song back then, and now they are singing it. The preceding throne scenes were characterized by great companies joined together in song, and the same is the case here. They are now being included into the liturgy. Earlier in chapter 5 verse 9 a new song was introduced as the Lamb ascended to the heavenly company. Now the renewing of the song of heaven continues with the inclusion of the company of the 144,000. The redemption is the formation of a choir. The company are described as singing the song of Moses, connecting them with the Israelites in Exodus chapter 15.

Some have also seen an allusion to the song of Moses that he sung at the end of his life, which Joshua helped with in Deuteronomy chapter 32. However, allusions to that are much weaker.

The reference to the song of Moses here is strange and somewhat surprising. Apart from its setting after a great Exodus-like crossing of a sea, the song of the 144,000 does not seem to be that closely related to the song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15 at all. Rather, the Old Testament background of the song seems to lie more in Psalms 86 and 98 and the book of Jeremiah chapter 10. Psalm 86 verses 8 to 10 read, There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things. You alone are God. And Psalm 98 verse 2, The Lord has made known his salvation.

He has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. In his treatment of this passage, Richard Borkum reminds his readers of Isaiah chapter 11 verse 15 to chapter 12 verse 6, which presents its readers with the reframing of the Red Sea crossing deliverance and subsequent song in the context of a new deliverance. And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the Sea of Egypt and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath and strike it into seven channels and he will lead people across in sandals. And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. You will say in that day, I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw waters from the wells of salvation, and you will say on that day, give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously. Let this be made known in all the earth.

[8 : 06] Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. Borkum observes that this song in Isaiah chapter 12 is clearly playing off the song of Moses from Exodus chapter 15. It is not an entirely novel composition. It picks up the words of the opening verses of Moses' song in that chapter, in verses 1 to 2.

However, the stronger background for the songs of Isaiah chapter 12 is found in Psalm 105. In verses 1 to 2 of that psalm we read, O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wondrous works.

Borkum observes the way that Psalm 105 was verbally linked with Exodus chapter 15, albeit principally in places other than those in which its language is adopted by Isaiah chapter 12.

In its sharing of key terminology with Exodus 15, Psalm 105 was seen to function as a sort of an interpretation of the earlier song. Isaiah chapter 12 is using the interpretation of the psalm to develop its own resetting of the song of the sea. Revelation does much the same thing. Borkum identifies a number of key elements of the message of the original song of Moses that Revelation is taking up. He writes, In John's reading of the song in Exodus 15, the following points are likely to have been of significance.

First, God's mighty act of judgment on his enemies, which was also the deliverance of his people, Exodus 15, 1-10 and 12. Second, God's mighty act of judgment demonstrated his incomparable superiority to the pagan gods. Who is like you, O Lord among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? Exodus 15, verse 11. Third, God's mighty act of judgment filled the pagan nations with fear. Exodus chapter 15, 14-16. Fourth, it brought his people into his temple.

[10:30] Exodus chapter 15, verse 13 and 17. Fifth, the song concludes, the Lord shall reign forever and ever. Exodus chapter 15, verse 18. The words with which the song ends, the fifth point, clearly connect with Revelation's overall theme of the establishment of God's eschatological kingdom, and so they have already been quoted at chapter 11, verse 15. The significance of the new Exodus for John is ultimately that it leads to God's eternal kingdom. John's vision doesn't directly allude to the original Song of Moses, so much as it indirectly alludes to it. The introduction of the song as the Song of Moses alerts the hearer to the fact that the Song of Moses is in the background, but without making clear how. When the hearer hears the song that follows, their initial reaction will be confusion at the lack of apparent relation between the original Song of Moses and the song recorded here, when they were led to believe that one existed. However, then they start to recognize other Old Testament scriptures in the background, which tips them off to the fact that something very similar to what occurs in Isaiah chapter 12 is occurring here. The principal background texts are Psalm 86 verses 8 to 10, Psalm 98 verse 2, both of these I have already mentioned, and then

Jeremiah chapter 10 verses 6 to 7. There is none like you, O Lord. You are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due, for among all the wise ones of the nations, and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. The hearer of Revelation chapter 15 should recognize a number of things.

First, that somehow or other the words of the song connect with the original Song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15, while also being the new Song described in Revelation chapter 14 verse 3. Second, that other Old Testament texts are being alluded to, most notably Jeremiah chapter 10, Psalm 86 and Psalm 98. Third, that these Old Testament texts are themselves explorations and developments of Exodus chapter 15, more especially verse 11. Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? This verse of the original Song of Moses, Exodus chapter 15 verse 11, is the key to the whole thing. As Borkham expresses it, it is the common denominator which links the passages to which the Song in Revelation chapter 15 alludes. Its focus is upon the incomparability of God in his redemption. It also makes it more apparent that the Song of the 144,000 is being juxtaposed with the false worship described in chapter 13 verse 4.

And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? Once we recognize the way that Revelation chapter 15 is working with the original Song of Moses, the theological message of the Song becomes quite apparent. Borkham concludes, Revelation's version of the Song of Moses is not, as has usually been thought, a medley of Old Testament phrases with no relation to the Song of Moses in Exodus chapter 15.

On the contrary, it is a careful interpretation of the Song, achieved by skilful use of recognized exegetical methods. The effect is to interpret the Song in line with the most universalistic strain in Old Testament hope, the expectation that all the nations will come to acknowledge the God of Israel and worship him. This has a most important bearing on the significance of the whole of the New Exodus symbolism, which is so prominent throughout Revelation. It shifts the emphasis in the significance of the New Exodus, from an event by which God delivers his people by judging their enemies, to an event which brings the nations to acknowledge the true God. In chapter 15 verses 2-4, the martyrs celebrate the victory God has won through their death and vindication, not by praising him for their own deliverance, but by celebrating its effect on the nations, in bringing them to worship God. This gives a fresh significance to the earlier use of New Exodus imagery with reference to the Lamb's victory, in which by his death he ransomed a people from all nations to be a kingdom and priests for God. Chapter 5 verses 9-10, we now see that this redemption of a special people from all the peoples is not an end in itself, but has a further purpose to bring all the peoples to acknowledge and worship God. The Red Sea crossing ultimately led Israel to the encounter with the Lord at Sinai, to the tabernacle, and to the gift of the law. Much the same movement occurs here, as we now see the sanctuary of the heavenly tent of the testimony opened up. This also recalls the earlier scene at the end of chapter 11. This will initiate a new Pentecost-like event, as Lightheart observes, the pouring out of the bowls is the flip side of the pouring out of the Spirit. Christ entered into the heavenly place, and then the Spirit was poured out in blessing. The 144,000 martyrs passed through the firmament into the heavens, and now the Spirit has poured out in devastating bowls of judgment.

[15 : 53] Ideally, bowls of incense and wine ascend to God and are received by him, but now bowls of incense are tipped over with fiery coals descending, and bowls filled with the wine of the blood of the saints, mixed with the fire of God's wrath, are poured down upon those who filled them with their murders.

A question to consider, how might Revelation's resetting of the Song of Moses change the way that we read the original?