

REVELATION

Study 8: The Seven Bowls

In our previous study, we looked at John's visions of the cosmic battle that is taking place behind the scenes of the Roman Empire's persecution of the churches. In these series of visions, we were introduced to the triumvirate of evil made up of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet who wage war against God's people. John depicts a cosmic battle scene between the beast and the Lamb and presents a choice for his audience. Will they resist the beast and follow the Lamb or will they give in to the beast's power and influence and suffer God's judgement against the beast?

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss what John sees next as he describes the outcome of this cosmic battle. As we examine these next two chapters in Revelation (15-16), we will see how John describes these visions by using imagery that comes directly from the exodus story. And so, we are going to begin this study by looking at a particular theme that is found throughout the New Testament: it is the theme of a *new exodus*. John has used this theme of a new exodus throughout the book of Revelation, and so we are going to look at how he uses it here in these two chapters to depict the victory of God's people and the effect it will have on the rest of the world.

The New Exodus

Revelation 15-16

Israel's exodus out of Egypt was the central event of salvation that defined their history and identity as the people of God. In the exodus story, God delivered the people of Israel from oppression, destroyed the empire that oppressed them, made them into his own special people and gave them a new homeland. It was such an essential event in Jewish history that it became the blueprint that shaped the Jewish hope and expectations for another great salvation event in the future.¹

You see, as God's people found themselves once again living as exiles under the oppressive empires of Babylon and then Persia and then Greece and then eventually Rome, this hope of a new future exodus began to become a major theme in the Jewish prophets and other Jewish writings.

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 70

It was believed that God was going to bring about a new exodus for his people that was going to be even greater than the original exodus because it was going to be a final definitive event where God rescues his people and destroys his enemies once and for all. The New Testament writers saw this as the very thing that Jesus was accomplishing through his life, death and resurrection, but it is John here in the Book of Revelation that actually develops this theme of a new exodus more than any other prophet or writer that preceded him.

For example, John introduces Jesus in the opening greeting of the book as the one “who has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us into a kingdom of priests” (1:5-6). These are words that directly connect Jesus to the Passover Lamb in the exodus story (Exodus 12) and followers of Jesus to the people of God gathered around Mount Sinai (Exodus 19).

In chapter four, John’s vision of God’s throne is described with imagery taken directly from the scene surrounding God’s presence at Mount Sinai in the exodus story. And in chapter five, John sees the risen Jesus as a slain Lamb who has ransomed a people for God from all the nations on earth and who has made them into a kingdom of priests” (5:9-10). Again, all of this intentionally connects Jesus to the Passover Lamb and all followers of Jesus to God’s people at Sinai.

In chapters eight and nine, John’s descriptions of the seven trumpets portray warning judgements much like the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-12). And just like Pharaoh in that story, these warning judgements do not lead God’s enemies to repent and humble themselves before him.

And then when we get to chapter eleven, John reveals the story of God’s two witnesses who, like Moses and Aaron in the exodus story, confront the idolatry and injustices of the empire through their prophetic witness and faithfulness to the one true God. This connects the role of the church to the role of Moses and Aaron in the exodus story. Followers of Jesus are to confront the idolatry and the injustices of their own society and culture through their faithful witness to the one true God.

Now, this is certainly not an exhaustive list of John’s allusions to this theme of a new exodus, but it is certainly enough for us to realize that this is a major theme throughout the Book of Revelation. John is interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the great event of salvation that God’s people have been waiting for. Jesus is the servant of God (like Moses) and the slain Lamb (like the Passover Lamb) who has rescued us as God’s people, made us into a kingdom of priests for God and who is now leading us into the ultimate promised land of a new creation. All of this will help us better understand what John is describing next in these visions found in chapters 15-16.

The Song of the Lamb

Revelation 15:1-4

In chapters 12-14, John had several visions that came together to portray a cosmic battle scene between the beast and the Lamb. John's next vision here in chapter 15 reveals the winner of that battle, and it does so by picking up the theme of a new exodus that we have just discussed. John sees those who have conquered the beast standing beside the sea and singing a song of praise.

In the original exodus story, God delivered his people through the Red Sea, and then he threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea.² God's people then stood beside the sea, and they sang a song of praise celebrating the victory that he had given them over Pharaoh and his army.³

Here in the book of Revelation, the Christians' path of being a faithful witness to the point of death – like Jesus, Antipas and the souls of those who had been slain – that path is compared to the path that God's people took through the Red Sea.⁴ And it is those who have walked this path of being a faithful witness to the point of death that John sees standing beside the sea and singing a song of praise celebrating the victory that God has given them over the beast.⁵ This "song of the Lamb" is portrayed as a reinterpretation of the "song of Moses" from the exodus story. And the way that it is reinterpreted is significant; it is meant to teach us how this new exodus will bring God's kingdom here on earth once and for all.

The song of Moses sung by God's people in the original exodus highlights how God's mighty act of deliverance and judgement demonstrated his supreme authority and power over Egypt, and it led the nations to be frozen with fear. The song of the Lamb sung by the Christian martyrs in this new exodus also highlights God's supreme authority, but it leads the nations to fear God in a more positive sense where they end up turning to him and honoring him as the one true God.

Richard Bauckham highlights the significance of Revelation's reinterpretation of the song of Moses when he writes:

² Read Exodus 14.

³ Read Exodus 15.

⁴ Christian martyrs are portrayed as passing through the sea of glass. Compare the imagery of Revelation 4:6 with Revelation 15:1-2.

⁵ This idea is what has already been revealed and communicated through the story of the two witnesses in Revelation 11.

“This gives a fresh significance to the use of new exodus imagery with reference to the first stage of Christ’s work, in which by his death he ransomed a people from all the nations to be God’s own people (5:9-10). We now see that this redemption of a special people from all the peoples on earth is not an end in itself, but has a further purpose: to bring all the peoples to acknowledge and worship God. In the first stage of his work, the Lamb’s bloody sacrifice redeemed a people for God. In the second stage, this people’s participation in his sacrifice, through martyrdom, wins all the peoples for God. This is how the kingdom of God comes.”⁶

This song of the Lamb sung by those who have conquered the beast through their faithful witness echoes the main message being revealed throughout Revelation: We have not been rescued and redeemed by God just so that we can go to heaven when we die; we have been redeemed by God for a specific purpose. Christians are called to participate in God’s purpose of redeeming people from all the nations on earth. We are called to help bring God’s kingdom here on earth, and we are to do that by following the way of the Lamb and being faithful witnesses of God no matter what.

The Seven Bowls

Revelation 15:5-16:21

In order to avoid confusion and misinterpretation of what’s going on in John’s vision of the seven bowls, it is helpful to see where the pouring out of these seven bowls lines up with things that we have already read. We need to see how the cosmic battle scene and bowl judgments in Revelation 12-16 line up with the story of the two witnesses and the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11. It would be helpful to re-read Revelation 11 and then Revelation 12-16 to see how they match up.

As we have already mentioned in a previous study, the main content and message of the book of Revelation is symbolized by the opened scroll that John receives in chapter ten. The scroll that was taken from the right hand of God, opened by the Lamb and then given to John contains the main revelation of how God’s kingdom is going to come here on earth as it is in heaven.

In chapter eleven, this main message is finally revealed to John’s readers in the form of a symbolic story about God’s two witnesses who are killed by a terrible beast. The cosmic battle scene that we have been studying in chapters 12-15 lines up perfectly with this symbolic story in chapter eleven of God’s two witnesses who conquer the beast that wages war against them.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 101

You see, Revelation 12-15:4 is an extended treatment of the main message that is revealed in the story of the two witnesses in Revelation 11. The beast wages war against God's people, but they end up conquering the beast through their faithful witnesses which is what leads the nations to repent and brings God's kingdom here on earth.

This means that what we just read in Revelation 15:5-16:21 – the pouring out of the seven bowls – is an extended treatment of the final judgement that is revealed in the seventh trumpet right after the story of the two witnesses in Revelation 11. The blowing of the seventh trumpet portrays the final judgement of God which is what is being described in the pouring out of the seven bowls.

In keeping with the theme of a new exodus, the seven bowls are portrayed with imagery from the plagues in Exodus, and they lead to the same result: People do not repent, but instead they resist and curse God just like Pharaoh.

The first four bowls are poured out on the land, and they directly affect those who have given their allegiance to the beast. The fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast and brings darkness upon its entire empire. The sixth bowl dries up the Euphrates River (which was the eastern border of the Roman Empire) which leads other nations and rulers to join forces with the beast in order to wage war against God's people. And then the seventh bowl portrays God's final judgement and the final defeat of all the evil among the nations once and for all.

And so, looking at the big picture of Revelation 12-16: Revelation 12-14 sets the stage and reveals the cosmic battle between the beast and God's people. Revelation 15-16 reveals who ultimately wins that war and what effect that will have on the rest of the world. The constant repetition of the nations and people cursing God and not repenting reveals to us that God's final judgement is not destroying people who are sorrowful and regretting that they did not turn to God sooner. Actually, God's final judgement is an act that will ultimately give people exactly what they have asked for.

John has revealed to his readers that Jesus is leading his people in a new exodus. Jesus has rescued us from evil, made us into his own special people, promised us a new eternal homeland and he will one day destroy all evil. In the meantime, we are called to confront the idolatry and injustices of our own society and culture and to conquer the beast through our faithful witness to the one true God. To put it another way, we are called to come out of the empire and to follow the Lamb into the new creation.