

Daily View

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Notes on Revelation 19-20

For those of you who are following the Revelation series, I attempt, in this article, to sum up my views on these difficult chapters. When interpreting this section of Revelation, one passage sets off alarm bells in my head. Revelation 22:18-19 says, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." So... I very gingerly offer this "take" on Revelation 19 & 20 and I could be wrong on the details although I think we can all step back and see the main point of these chapters.

Chapter 19: Scenes of Victory

After the defeat of Babylon, heaven rings out with praise to God. We can't ignore the fact that this happens because of the defeat of the spiritual enemy, in this case the "great harlot." Her demise is reason for celebrating because the blood of Christ's servants has been avenged.

This is a chapter about victory, not only at the end of time, but even when it was written and even now. Today, Christ reigns and his saints reign with him (Revelation 1:4-6). That calls for great rejoicing and John sees a marriage feast to illustrate it. The church has been redeemed; evil has been defeated; and Christ and his saints can praise God together for the salvation that he gives.

In the figure of the bride and Bridegroom some see the Hebrew custom of betrothal in which the bride and groom were referred to as "husband and wife,"

though not yet married. Presumably, then, the picture here relates to such a betrothal of Christ and the church with the "marriage" to come later. Some would say this would happen only at the judgment.

There are problems with this view. First, verse 7 says that the "marriage of the Lamb (not betrothal or engagement) has come and his wife has made herself ready." John saw a *marriage*. In v. 9, people are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. In Ephesians 5:23ff. and Romans 7:1ff., Paul writes as if the church was then married to Christ. Ephesians 5:30-33 is explicit on that point. The church and Christ are pictured, not only under the figure of Head and body, but also of Husband and bride. The point of the figure in Revelation 19 may simply be to convey the happiness and the atmosphere of rejoicing which accompanies marriage.

After the great picture of rejoicing saints and heavenly beings, John sees heaven opened. He then views a majestic warrior sitting upon a white horse. In 6:2, I took the position that

the one sitting upon the white horse there was not Christ, but conquering nations, or the principle of war. There, the Greek word for "crown" was *stephanos*, meaning a victory crown or wreath. Here, the "many crowns" (*diadema*) are crowns of royalty. Whether right or wrong on 6:2, there is no question about who *this* rider is. He is "Faithful and True" and "the Word of God" is his name (vv. 11, 13; John 1:1, 14).

It may be that the battle of Armageddon (16:16) is being described here, though the name is not used (remember that it is possible that Har-Megiddo, from which we get our translation Armageddon, has a secondary meaning in Hebrew of simply "place of gathering." In verse 19, we see the armies "gathered" to make war). In any case, the nations (v. 15) and the kings of the earth (v. 18) are defeated. The beast and false prophet are cast into the lake of fire (v. 20). The "rest" (i.e., all of those who received the mark of the beast and worshipped his image, v. 20) were killed by the (figurative) sword which proceeded out of His mouth (v. 21). Total spiritual victory (the

only kind that really matters – though there is a physical aspect to it here) belongs to the KING OF KINGS AND THE LORD OF LORDS.

Chapter 20: Scenes of Judgment

The details of this chapter are notoriously difficult to interpret with any degree of certainty so we must be careful not to be dogmatic about our view of it (again,

see 22:18-19). We should also view with great skepticism anyone who "has all the answers" about the thousand year binding of Satan and the thousand year reign. This chapter is the happy hunting ground for date-setters and modern-day "propheteers" and ripe for *eisegesis* (reading *into* the text instead of interpreting "out of" the text [*exegesis*]).

Having said that, being unsure about the details does not prevent us from getting the message. If we keep the "moving picture" of Revelation in mind, we can see the significance of this scene: Satan is being bound and will not be able to deceive the nations anymore. Although he will be "released," it will be for just a "little while." This is a point emphasized over and over again: Christ wins and his followers share in that victory. The saints reign for as long as Satan is "bound." The saints have their victory over the beast, but ultimately also over Satan himself. This is the general point.

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With that caveat, and an understanding of the general sense in view, I'll venture to present my thoughts on the chapter. In Ezekiel 36-39, a sequence is described which, I believe, has a bearing on Revelation 20. Israel was condemned by God because she bore "the shame of the nations" (36:5). But the day was coming when God was going to restore and renew Israel, not for her sake, because she was so righteous (she wasn't) but for His own name's sake (36:22). To picture this, Ezekiel was told to preach to some bones (chapter 37) and the dry bones came to life (37:7). Israel would again be established as one kingdom under one King. That King would be "David" (37:24). Of course, in this prophecy, the King is Jesus, "son of David" and the kingdom is the church.

In all of this, "Israel" (the "church" in the Old Testament) is set in contrast to the "nations" ("Gog and Magog," 38:2). Ezekiel was to prophesy against them and predict their utter defeat by the Lord, so that the Lord would be magnified (38:23). This "war" and judgment comes by way of a great earthquake, or "shaking" (38:19), mountains being thrown down (38:20). Ezekiel 38:22 describes a judgment with pestilence and bloodshed, flooding rain, great hailstones (cf. Revelation 16:21) and fire and brimstone. After this judgment, Gog would be "buried" (39:11) and "the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God from that day forward" (39:22). God will not hide his face from them anymore because He has poured out His spirit on them (39:29).

The similarities between this section of Ezekiel and Revelation 15-22 is striking. There seems to be three stages in God's plan for the church. First, there is the establishment of the "new Israel" (see Galatians 6:16 for Paul's use of the term, "the Israel of God"). Second, there is a war against the church by the nations and, third, the ultimate victory of God and the judgment on the nations which flows from it. John is seeing the latter two stages in even more detail: the war and the ultimate victory. This has been the theme throughout Revelation. Chapter 20 may be describing it, although with some additional information.

In Revelation 20, Satan is bound, meaning he is unable to deceive the nations. There is a more general sense in which he is bound and therefore unable to reach the heart of a person unless the person allows him in (cf. Jn. 12:41; Mt. 12:29). But the language of Chapter 20 seems more restrictive: Satan is totally bound from doing something. According to verses 1-3, the angel has the key to the bottomless pit and he has a chain — not to bind Satan to a "tether pole," as some have illustrated it — but to cast him into the pit, shut him up and "sealed it over him..." bound from deceiving the nations until the thousand years were ended" (v. 3). We read too much into the passage if we teach more than that. Jesus is not showing John anything that relates to Satan's powers, He is showing His demise. This "binding" is to last for a thousand years, the same period of time that the saints (or at least those who have died for Christ, v. 4) reign.

"After these things" Satan must be released for "a little while" (v. 3). There is no reason to believe that these "time-figures" are literal. In fact, the "thousand years" and a "little while" may be relative terms that run concurrently; that is, while Christ is reigning, Satan is still active, but is less effective. Satan was defeated in the "Christ Event" (the death, burial, resurrection and

ascension of Christ c. AD 30. Yet, we know Satan was still active after that (I Peter 5:8; I John 5:19, etc.). Yet, there seems to be a diminishing of Satan's powers. For example, demon possession, which was so common in Jesus' day and in the early part of Acts, seems to be less common as the first century winds down (although an "evil spirit" appears in Acts 19).

The "little while" may simply be describing the end of time and the judgment of the devil. Note in v. 7 that Satan will be released "to go out to deceive the nations." It does not say that he succeeds, but simply that he is released and goes out to do it. Satan is Satan — he does what is in his nature to do; he is arrogant and confident. Therefore, when he is released from his prison, he's going to make the attempt, once more, to accomplish what he tried to accomplish with Rome. However, notice that immediately after he gathers "Gog and Magog" together that fire "comes down from God out of heaven" and devours them (v. 9). Then, the devil is cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, tormented day and night forever (v. 10).

This is followed by a vision of the Judgment: Jesus sitting on the great white throne, a vision even earth and heaven could not face (v. 11). All are judged, both small and great. The "rest of dead" (see v. 5), meaning those who followed the beast, were raised to stand in the judgment and they will undergo a "second death" — cast into the lake of fire. Saints will not face this death (v. 6); they have a part in the first resurrection at their "first death" (baptism?). The "second resurrection" will come at judgment and would correspond to I Corinthians 15, etc. (The terms "second resurrection" and "first death" are not used in Revelation, but are implied by the use of their opposites).

Chapter 20 then presents the "End" in graphic terms. God has his victory over the nations and Satan can no longer deceive them (a continuing blessing for us today). At the end, Satan will be released from his prison. The picture is of Satan gathering his "army" of nations together for a war against God. But this is just a figurative way of presenting the end of the spiritual war and answering the lingering question about the final disposition of Satan and the nations. We know from II Peter 3:9ff. that the earth is going to be burned up and everything is going to happen fast, in a moment, a "twinkling of an eye" (I Corinthians 15:52). John's vision of Satan being released does not contradict those passages. John is describing in picturesque terms (the "gathering for war," "Armageddon") what Paul describes in literal terms in I Corinthians 15:24: "*Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and authority and power.*" Paul goes on to say (v. 26) that "*the last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*" Compare that language with Revelation 20:14, where Death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire.

All of this is followed by Revelation 21-22, in which the eternal aspect of the kingdom is described. Christ destroyed the power of Satan with regard to both the living and the dead. We'll discuss that next time.