

Revelation, Session 8

The Millennial Kingdom and the New Jerusalem

Revelation 20:1-22:21

We come now to the conclusion of the vision and the conclusion of our book. The last four chapters of the book provide a kind of counterbalance to the eighteen that have proceeded. Especially in the vision (the visions) from Revelation 3 through Revelation 19. In those chapters the emphasis is on the sovereign God as judge with occasional attention to notes of promise and regular interludes for hymns that remind us that the end of this story will not be judgment but reconciliation. Now in chapters 19-22 redemption is at the center of the action with the occasional reminders of judgment as salutary warnings before we rush too quickly to celebration.

We have found it most helpful in studying Revelation not to attempt to reconstruct some kind of visionary chronology, one action right after another. Seven seals; seven trumpets; seven plagues. Now the woman with the stars; now the woman on the beast. Rather Revelation is better seen as a kind of enormous tapestry, a panorama with scenes that overlap and comment on each other. You will see in some of the illustrations that the book of Revelation lends itself to just that kind of art and interweaving.

In the same way as we come to the end of the end of days we resist falling into speculation about whether a thousand years is really a thousand years or exactly how the millennium relates to the triumph of the rider on the white horse that precedes it or the two bindings of the dragon that follow. Our reticence is not simply a confession of bafflement before the conflicting timelines and images. Nor is it simply our reaction to the long and confused history of trying not only to sketch out the order of events in Revelation but to tie them, each in

order, to events in our everyday world. It is our conviction that attempts to rob this poetry of its ambivalence and resonances are in danger of robbing it of its power—both for its own time and for ours. Christopher Rowland points out the ways in which St. Augustine reads this material to support his vision of a heavenly Kingdom which impinges on earthly kingdoms but can never simply be identified with them. “In The City of God...(Augustine) questions simplistic attempts to read off from the complexities of history evidence of the hand of God in the affairs of men and women...The best that can be hoped for in the earthly city is a modicum of peace and justice to assure some kind of stability and harmony. (Rowland, NIB, XII, 712)

We would also suggest that for all its imperfection the church can represent a kind of parable and approximation of the transcendent Kingdom of God, even on earth.

Down with Satan (twice): Revelation 20:1-10

However literally we may want to take the depiction of Satan as a dragon and serpent (with echoes both of Genesis and of near eastern creation stories), what John needs us to see is that not even the most horrendous of human institutions—idolatrous cities, false prophets, overweening greed—stands independent of the depth of evil itself. Behind and through the whore and the beast and the false prophet and the greedy merchants there is the deeper evil connoted by the serpent, and until he is destroyed evil is not destroyed altogether.

It is not clear what we are to make of Satan’s double overthrow. It is a little like the suggestion that D Day was the turning point but not the end of the war; or the image from a football game when, as the commentators constantly remind us, the momentum has decisively turned. What is clear is that while the Ancient of Days and the lamb will descend from heaven to earth, Satan descends from earth into the pit. The imprisonment of evil empowers the

resurrection of the faithful; Satan has no power over them. What we see depicted at the beginning of the millennium is the first resurrection. Perhaps this is because it anticipates a second resurrection, after the thousand years. Perhaps, as Eugene Boring suggests the seer wants to combat any suggestion that resurrection has already happened in the lives of the Christians, prior to the binding of Satan and the coming of the last days. Or perhaps, the “first resurrection” is “metaphorical”, like the “second death”. The “second resurrection” is “literal”, like the “first death.” All the witnesses have participated in the death and resurrection of Christ through their baptism – at least if they have read Paul. That is their “first resurrection.”

What we do know is that this millennial reign is not only the reign of God and of the lamb but of those who have been martyred in their cause. They have not worshiped the beast nor borne his marks; they have not fallen into idolatrous service of emperor or empire. As is typical in apocalyptic visions, the millennium is described as if it had already passed (see vs. 5), but our vision mixes past with future, or ignores our usual temporal categories altogether. The vision suggests eschatology already on the way to realization, using fairly traditional Christian imagery.

Satan and his host return from near death to a dramatic last gasp. The references to Gog and Magog go back to Ezekiel 38, as our author draws once again on Old Testament images to reinforce his own vision.

Perhaps the sudden return of Satan before his final defeat was depicted to warn the first century Christians to stay ever vigilant. It’s not over till it’s finally over. Perhaps it is a reminder to readers and hearers that the final victory belongs to God but only in God’s time. In either case notice that there is no real extended battlefield scene depicting the war between Satan and his troops and God. At the beginning of this section the angel simply seizes the dragon. At the end

the devil is thrown (presumably by God) into the lake of fire where he joins his old subordinates forever and ever—a long, long time.

Judgment Day: Revelation 20:11-15

Now God comes to earth in judgment, and the dead both from sea and the underworld are given up to judgment. The picture of God on the white throne seems to owe something to the imagery of Daniel 7:9-10. It is not clear how the works recorded in “the books” are related to the names recorded in “the book of life.” Does the Book of Life simply confirm the verdicts of the other books; those whose works have been worthy? Or does the Book of Life represent a divine judgment of grace that precedes and perhaps even supersedes the score of right and wrongdoing? In any case in the context of Revelation it is clear enough that the deeds that count most are deeds of fidelity and resistance to any form of idolatry.

The second death, after the judgment, leaves no room for future resurrection. For those whose names are not found in the book of life this is the complete and final stop. Death and Hades are personified as was the Dragon, and they too are subject to the final death. In an odd way, therefore, death will be no more.

The fiery lake reminds us of the fiery sea of glass mixed with fire in front of the throne in Revelation 15:2, and of the way in which water serves so often in this book as a symbol and instrument of judgment, of separation from God. Or alternatively, the image suggests the ways in which God finally stills the forces of chaos and destruction often intimated by the image of the tumultuous sea.

New Heaven, New Earth: Revelation 21:1-8

The reminder of judgment now gives way to the dominant motif of these chapters, the promise of life (though judgment will reappear in 20:8) The new creation for which Revelation longs is more than cosmic; the transcendent is transcended. Heaven and earth are both made new.

As in all the divine activity of this book, God does God's will by sending something down from heaven—now it is the New Jerusalem. We notice that the consummation of history in this book does not come when people are snatched up into heaven but when God establishes God's new city on earth.

The voice from the throne (God's own voice? An angel?) proclaims John of Patmos' version of St. Matthew's name for Jesus—Immanuel; God with us. Whatever promise John sees in incarnation is completed and surpassed by this final incarnation, this fullest encampment of God among humankind.

We catch something of the context of the churches who read this book when we are reminded in the hymn-like proclamation from the throne that what God needs to do when the New Jerusalem comes is to “wipe away every tear.”

God's self declaration points both to who God is in God's self and to what God does for believers. He is the beginning and the end; creator and new creator. He does good to those who thirst for righteousness and to those who conquer—that is to those who like the conquering lamb are willing to bear witness even to death.

Then in 21:8 we return to the bad news; the fate of those who have gone against God, the familiar burning lake. Notice though that going against God involves above all a variety of forms of idolatry, false worship, mistaken faith.

The New Jerusalem: Revelation 21:9-23.

We return to one of the seven angels, previously an instrument of wrath who poured out one of the seven plagues, now an instrument of redemption as he invites the seer to see the New Jerusalem and yet another “woman”—the bride of the lamb, presumably. The passage reminds us that feminine imagery provides for our author rich possibilities not only for anxiety but for sketching the possibilities of God’s reign. The image of the bride and the vision of the New Jerusalem remind us, as Augustine did, that the church itself can be a manifestation of the Kingdom of God, a kind of realized eschatology, imperfect but hopeful. The Kingdom is imperfectly manifest in the church, even the seven churches with which our book begins.

In language drawn largely from Ezekiel 48 John describes what the heavenly Jerusalem will be like. It is a contrast to the earthly Jerusalem, which at its best did not reach this majesty, and which now toward the end of the first century C.E. lies in ruins.

If for a moment we take our cue from Northrop Frye and read the Bible as one large tapestry, what he calls The Great Code, we notice what God the Alpha and Omega has done. At the beginning God set humankind in a garden, but at the end, in redemption, humankind is brought not to a farm but to a city. All the ambivalence our book has shown to capitals, commerce, ports and powers is somehow transcended and transformed, not by returning to some rural past, but by embracing the city which in all its complexity belongs to God.

Revelation 21:22-27 draws a picture of worship beyond worship and of light beyond light. God needs no temple because God is temple. God needs no heavenly lights because God is light. Everyone, remember, is a priest and in the blessed city no one walks in darkness. Of course John cannot end this glorious picture without a quick reminder that idolaters will be excluded (as we remember they’re in line for the lake of fire.)

The River of Life: Revelation 22:1-7

Again the angel is no longer an instrument of wrath but of enlightenment. His job is no longer to punish but to show.

Now we fall entirely into imagery without any particular attempt at daily probabilities. A tree grows on both sides of a river. God and the lamb are everywhere. Work gives way to worship. Notice that the sterile sea of glass and the terrifying sea of tempests gives way to a living stream: usable water, fresh water. And again the faithful are named by the name on their foreheads. Here is their true identity.

The angel sets the seal of veracity on these verses and on the whole book. Who can deny the truth of a book verified by God, the spirits, the prophets, the angel, and the servants of God.

Though we have now puzzled over this book for almost two millennia it is clear that however metaphorical John the seer was in his vision, and however inconclusive in his timeline, he writes for his people and his time with the expectation that the end is near. “See I am coming soon.”

Then the visionary is blessed and those who read or hear and believe.

Last words: Revelation 22:12-15.

Now presumably Christ speaks at the end of the book as at the beginning: here, too, he is alpha and omega. J. and C. Gonzalez suggest that these last verses are a kind of liturgy, recalling us to the book’s setting “on the Lord’s day.”

Again with the usual dualism of apocalyptic literature the faithful are separated from the unfaithful, those who belong inside the new city are separated from the doggedly blasphemous outside.

Several times in this book, John of Patmos has been told to “come”—to witness one vision or another. Now everyone who is thirsty can come, again for living water from a flowing stream.

And again Christ will come, soon.

Focus Texts: Rev 20:1-10; 21:9-27

Questions for Reflection

1. The attempt to distinguish what the thousand year reign might mean have been many and not very fruitful. Are there ways in which you can see in the life of the church or in the movements of history something of God’s reign, not fully consummated, but on the way? What would such signs of God’s reign be?
2. John’s vision is of a new heaven and a new earth...not of earth dissolving into heaven. How does this challenge or affirm the way you think about God’s sovereignty over the creation, or how you think about death and new life for Christians?
3. From early in the church’s history and at particular times like the Protestant Reformation some wise Christian leaders have thought that Revelation should not be included in the Bible. It is too complicated and tends to make trouble. Now that you have spent these weeks studying this book, what is your understanding of its role in scripture and in Christian life?

Basic Reading

Gonzalez, *Revelation*, 130-148.

Further Reading

Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Power of Apocalyptic Rhetoric –Catharsis,” Chap. 5 of *Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 141–163.

C. H. Giblin, “The Millennium (Rev. 20.4-6) as Heaven,” *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999) 553–70.

M. Gourgues, “The Thousand-Year Reign (Rev. 20.1-6): Terrestrial or Celestial?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985) 676–81.

C. F. D. Moule, “A Reconsideration of the Context of Maranatha,” *New Testament Studies* 8 (1962) 307–310.

W. W. Reader, “The Twelve Jewels of Revelation 21.19-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981) 433–57.