

Study 18: Revelation Chapter 16

Introduction

“...As it is pictured here in 16:12-16, Armageddon represents the climactic convergence of the powers of good and evil. ... Does it all seem somewhat unreal? We should be prepared. No one can say we are without warning...”

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Notes for study 18: Revelation Chapter 16

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Introduction

The time has come for the seven bowls of wrath to be poured out. They bring God’s judgement upon the earth – specifically upon the dragon, the beasts, and their associates. The pouring of the bowls follows from the vision of the saints in the previous chapter. Despite the destruction that is to come on the world, the message is that God’s people are safe and protected by Him.

This chapter describes the "third woe" (see 15:1-19:10) in the form of the outpouring of seven bowl judgments. They occur in rapid succession with only a brief pause for a dialogue between the third angel and the altar, accentuating the justice of God's punishments (vv. 5-7). This rapid succession is probably due to John's desire to give a telescopic view of the first six bowls and then hasten on to the seventh, where the far more detailed judgment on Babylon occurs. Again, seven symbolizes fullness, this time fullness of judgment (cf. Lev 26:21). (NIVBC).

“...Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."...” (16:1 NIV). The command comes from the Temple – it is a message from God – and is only given once. In response to the command, the angels proceed in their mission without hesitation one at a time, and in rapid succession.

The First Bowl

“...The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image...” (16:2 NIV). The images follow the pattern of the plagues in Egypt, and the seven trumpets. The retribution is specifically brought against *the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image*, which we have seen to be those involved in Emperor worship. Hailey comments²:

It was not until the sixth Egyptian plague (Exod. 9:9ff.) and the fifth trumpet (9:4ff.), that men were affected directly, although the first five plagues upon Egypt and the third trumpet affected men indirectly. But in the series of bowl-plagues, man is grievously smitten from the very first. ... A like judgement may be repeated in history from time to time, but to those John addressed, the judgement concerned the Roman system of emperor worship: this is a reaping of the corruption which had been sown (cf. Gal. 6:7f.).

There is great similarity between the trumpet plagues (chapters 8 & 9) and the bowl plagues (chapter 16), however it should be observed that the trumpet plagues were only partial (“1/3”) and called for repentance, whilst the bowl plagues bring about complete destruction.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.341) connects the pouring of the bowls of wrath to the destruction of Jerusalem:

“The verses that follow from *thirteen* to *sixteen* describe the gathering armies for the final battle in the overthrow of Jerusalem, with the spiritual overtones of the conflict between the forces of Judaism and heathenism on one side, and Christianity (the church) on the other... It is sufficient to add that the sixth plague was descriptive of the battle which destroyed this symbolic Babylon – the apostate harlot Jerusalem, *causing great mourning* for Jerusalem among the Jewish tribes everywhere.”

¹ Bewes, p. 112

² Hailey, p. 327

Harkrider³ proposes the following comparison between the trumpet plagues and the bowl plagues:

7th Seal, Rev. 8:1 The Seven Trumpets Rev. 8; 9		7th Trumpet Rev. 11:15 The Seven Bowls of Wrath, Rev. 15; 16
Natural Calamities		
1/3 Earth Burned Hail, Fire with Blood	1st	Earth had Grievous Sore On All With mark of Beast
1/3 Sea Became Blood Great Mountain Burning	2nd	Sea Became as Blood Every Soul In it Died
1/3 Rivers, Fountains Poisoned Star (“Wormwood”)	3rd	Rivers, Fountains Became Blood
1/3 Sun, Moon, Stars Darkened	4th	Sun Scorched Men
Internal Corruption		
Locusts From Bottomless Pit – “Destroyer” Tormented 5 Months	5th	Darkness on Beast’s Kingdom – Men Gnawed Tongues (Pain)
Outside Invasion		
Army From Euphrates 200,000,000 Horsemen, 1/3 Part of Men Killed	6th	Army from Euphrates Gathered at Armageddon

The Second Bowl

“...*The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died...*” (16:3 NIV). The whole of the sea is affected, along with all of the sea creatures. Hailey suggests that this relates to the moral condition of the society at the time⁴:

Society was dead in sins and trespasses, and now there occurs the blood as of a dead man, putrid and rotting – a revealing illustration of the true nature of the spiritually dead. The result is death to all who come into such a society – not inherited, but consequential death. ... A society abandoned to idolatry and its consequent morals, as was the Roman Empire of John’s day, is spiritually dead. In such a society, morals decline to the lowest level; the family collapses, schools breed anarchy and rebellion, business ethics are forgotten, entertainment becomes base and sordid, and printing presses exude smut and filth, until the whole is strangled in its own death blood and suffocated by its own stench. Our society must listen to the trumpet warnings before God pours out the bowls of wrath.

The Third Bowl

“...*The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood...*” (16:4 NIV). The pattern follows the previous bowl plagues, and the third trumpet plague. This plague brings total destruction.

³ Harkrider, p. 189

⁴ Hailey, p. 328

Whilst there might be a temptation to think that God is unkind and unjust (some might say unloving) in bringing about such total destruction, we need to remember that God has patiently disciplined them to bring about repentance. However, they refused to repent, and God's righteous judgement is proclaimed by one of the angels "...Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve."..." (16:5-6 NIV).

The injustice brought upon God's people by the Romans demands that God brings His justice to bear upon them. Without punishment for the crimes committed, there is no justice! There was a response from heaven, although we are not told who it came from "...And I heard the altar respond: "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments."..." (16:7 NIV). Heaven supported and affirmed the angel's statement, that God is right to bring about such punishment.

The Fourth Bowl

"...The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. ⁹ They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him..." (16:8-9 NIV).



"...After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. ⁶ Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests..." (15:5-6 NIV)



"...Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."..." (16:1 NIV).

The Fifth Bowl

Like the previous plagues, the first four are similar, then the fifth and sixth are different, and the seventh ushers in something different. “...*The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done...*” (16:10-11 NIV). The Christians in Asia Minor would have clearly identified the beast. Hailey notes⁵:

This throne was the seat of world power, which would have been thought of by the saints of John’s day as the world rule from Rome. But this throne should not be restricted to Rome only; for wherever world power is worshipped, there the beast has his throne.

The NIV Bible Commentary adds:

This is not a reference to the fall of the Roman Empire or Caesar worship, though John's words would include this level of meaning. In 2:13, John used the word "throne" to designate the stronghold of Satan at Pergamum. Thus "the throne of the beast" symbolizes the seat of the world-wide dominion of the great satanic system of idolatry (the Abyss? cf. 20:1). This system is plunged into spiritual darkness or disruption, bringing chaos on all who sought life and meaning in it. This bowl plague, while similar to the fifth trumpet, strikes at the very seat of satanic authority over the world; and the darkness is moral and spiritual rather than physical (cf. 21:25; 22:5; Jn 8:12; 12:35-36, 46; 1Jn 1:5-7; 2:8-10). Again the terrible refrain is repeated: "But they refused to repent of what they had done." (NIVBC).

However, we should note that this is not the final judgement, as the people who had worshipped the beast *refused to repent of what they had done*. Hailey adds⁶:

They neither recognized the glory due God on the one hand, nor their diabolical works as the cause of His wrath and judgement on the other.

In letters to the five churches which had sin in their midst (all except Smyrna and Philadelphia), God had called upon church members to repent that they might escape judgement and receive the promised rewards (chaps. 2, 3). Also, God caused the everlasting gospel to be preached to men of earth (14:6f.) and sent His plagues upon them to bring them to repentance, that they, too, should escape inevitable judgement and condemnation. But all of this was to no avail; therefore, total judgement had to eventually come.

The Sixth Bowl

“...*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...*” (16:12 NIV). The Euphrates river has previously been mentioned (9:14), and at that time it held God’s army (of 200,000,000) in reserve. It symbolised the direction of the previous invasions. This time, an invasion is prepared by removing a barrier when the waters are dried up. The kings from the east are God’s enemies (revealed in 16:14), and they will soon muster towards the battleground.

“...*Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet...*” (16:14 NIV). Frogs were unclean animals (Lev 11: 10-12), and were one of the plagues brought upon Egypt. It is quite explicit that these were *evil spirits*, and they originated from Satan. “...*They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty...*” (16:14 NIV). The signs that they worked were not true miracles, but they were deceptive (13:13-14), and through those signs the kings of

⁵ Hailey, p. 332

⁶ Hailey, p. 332

the world were deceived. The Roman Empire had the status of “world leader” and had great influence and domination over the other nations around it. However, these other nations were deceived, and succumbed to the immoral practices of Rome. The same is true for any society that claims to be the leader in society, but does not honour and respect God, who gave it the power and authority. God is set to bring about destruction of the power, and also those who have gone along with it.

There is a clear warning to God’s people, and the message originates from Jesus “...*Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.*”...” (16:15 NIV). The message had been delivered to the seven churches (3:2-4; 18), and John uses the present tense *stays awake and keeps his clothes* to show that it requires continued vigilance.

The Battleground is Prepared

The battle does not take place until chapter 19, but in the bowl plagues the sequence leading up to the battle is prepared. “...*Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon...*” (16:16 NIV). Armageddon literally means “Mount of Megiddo” and is strategically placed between Israel and Judah. It guarded the northern entrance to Israel. It was the scene of many famous battles:

Megiddo, however, is only a tell (an artificial mound--only seventy feet high in John's day), not a hill or mountain, though the fact that over two hundred battles have been fought in this vicinity makes this site an appropriate symbol for the final battle against evil. Neither can it mean Mount Carmel near Megiddo, for such a designation is never used and would be totally obscure to the residents of Asia to whom John writes. (NIVBC)

Bewes notes⁷:

What is Armageddon? *Symbolically* it stands for the final collision between good and evil. *Geographically*, it would have been Megiddo, situated about twenty miles southwest of Nazareth. It is, indeed, a traditional battlefield. It was probably the site of the battle of the Kishon River (Judg. 4.13-16 – compare Judg. 5.19) between Sisera and Barak. There Sisera’s chariot wheels became stuck in the mud. Napoleon defeated the Turkish army at the same spot on 16th April 1799 (the Turks also got bogged down in the mud). General Allenby also fought there in 1917.

Rogers adds⁸:

- “In the history of Israel it had been the scene of never-to-be-forgotten battles” (I.S.B.E., Vol. 11, p. 1340).
- Judges 5:19 – It is a battle in which God’s people won against overwhelming odds
 - 11 Kgs. 9:27 – another of God’s enemies defeated.
 - 11 kgs. 23:28-29 – Not Euphrates. Josiah rebelled against God and died at Megiddo.
 - Zech. 12:11 – nearly a hundred years later Zechariah, recalls this.

Hailey also notes a string of biblical battles that were fought at the site, and concludes⁹:

In view of these battles of historical significance we conclude that John used the word symbolically to describe a great decisive spiritual battle between the army of Satan and the forces of God, which would determine the fate of each. This battle was fought and won by the Lord in the complete defeat of the Roman Empire and paganism behind which Rome threw its total power (see 19:11-21).

⁷ Bewes, p. 112

⁸ Rogers, p. 35

⁹ Hailey, p. 336

The Seventh Bowl

The battleground is prepared, and it's time to bring Satan and his messengers under control. "...The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!"..." (16:17 NIV). Like the announcement of the plagues, the pronouncement of the end came from the Temple – it was a message from God. The seventh bowl was poured out into the air, and with these plagues we have symbolism of the “elements”:

First Plague	Earth	16:2
Second / Third Plagues	Water	16:3, 4
Fourth Plague	Sun (fire)	16:8
Seventh Plague	Air	16:17

The statement from God “It is done” means that the plagues are complete and God has brought about justice for the persecuted saints (although the battle has yet to take place in the story).

With the pronouncement came total destruction “...Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake...” (16:18 NIV). There is clearly an earth-shattering effect from this plague. The trumpet plagues had been designed to bring about repentance. The other bowl plagues brought about complete destruction, but were still trying to bring about repentance (16:9, 11). The final bowl plague brought about the complete end of the trouble “it is done”. Hailey notes¹⁰:

Since there had never been a greater realm than this present Babylon and the Roman Empire, there would never have been a greater earthquake when it fell.

“...The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath...” (16:19 NIV). The three parts are unclear, although it is possible that it refers to a later section (18:8) where *death, mourning, and famine* are the consequences of the fall. Regardless of the details, the underlying message is that of total and utter destruction of the Dragon and the Beasts. It should be noted that Babylon does not fall alone, but those “cities and nations” around her are also destroyed. Whilst Babylon had “...made all nations drink of the wine of her fornication...” (14:8 NKJV), they were “...thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God...” (14:20), and now are made to drink “...the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath...” (16:19). The irony is complete, and the destruction is complete.

The nations around Babylon also disappear “...Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found...” (16:20 NIV). There is no place for refuge, and nowhere to run or hide. The magnitude of the destruction is described “...From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible...” (16:21 NIV). The weight of each hailstone is about 50 kg each. Of course, the message is figurative, but hailstones the size of golf balls, and even up to cricket balls (that's baseball size for any American's reading this) are not uncommon in Brisbane. The damage they do is immense. An advertisement on the TV for a car insurance company says “Only in Queensland can a hail storm do more damage to your car than an accident – insure with a company who understands.” The destruction from God is total and immense. They would kill people instantly. Hailey concludes¹¹:

These plagues did not introduce the final judgement; for after hail had killed whom it killed, there were those left who blasphemed God. The severest divine judgements had now been poured out upon wicked and ungodly men, touching all phases and realms of Roman society and power. Only the final judgement, which would bring all men, nations, and wickedness to a total end, could surpass in intensity and finality judgements such as these.

¹⁰ Hailey, p. 338

¹¹ Hailey, p. 340