



THE REIGN OF SATAN

Don't Go To Sleep

September 17, 2017

Revelation 16

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."

2 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

3 The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

"Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgments.

6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve!"

7 And I heard the altar saying,

"Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!"

8 The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire.

9 They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish 11 and cursed the God of heaven for

their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

12 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. 13 And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. 14 For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. 15 (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) 16 And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

The Seventh Bowl

17 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” 18 And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. 21 And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

REVELATION 16:1-9

The First Four Plagues

I was cycling down the road one day when I came up beside my former tutor. I had studied the New Testament with him some years before, and was now engaged on some early work towards my doctorate.

‘How are you getting on?’ he asked. ‘How’s it going?’

At that stage I was up to my neck in Romans 1:18–3:20. Readers of Paul will know that this passage is mostly about God’s wrath against all human wickedness—in other words, against all of us.

‘Actually’, I confessed, ‘I’m having a hard time with wrath.’

‘Aren’t we all!’ he replied cheerfully, and cycled off.

I think I know what he meant. We would all much rather live in a world without wrath. We would all much rather imagine a God without wrath. In fact, a substantial part of mainstream Western Christianity has imagined just that—and has followed through on the

consequences. H. Richard Niebuhr, one of America's most famous twentieth-century theologians (and brother of the even more famous Reinhold Niebuhr), once memorably described the **message** of much ultra-liberal Christianity: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a **kingdom** without judgment through the ministrations of a **Christ** without a cross.' Pretty damning, that. We might have preferred a '**gospel**' like that, but it certainly isn't the one we've got.

And it certainly doesn't match the world we've got. That's the problem. In any family, school, business, country—in any organization or system of whatever sort—there will be deep problems. Things will go wrong. Human pride, greed, fear or suspicion will take over. Unless it is spotted, named and dealt with, it will only get worse. If it is allowed to flourish unchecked, it can even be hailed as a new way of living. The story of the twentieth century was in part the story of just that, as new ways of being—Communism, Fascism and Apartheid being the three most obvious—reared their ugly heads and did untold damage to people and societies, until eventually they collapsed under their own weight, not least the weight of the lies which were needed to sustain them. It was partly because H. Richard Niebuhr could see this going on that he warned against a wrathless, sinless, crossless message. It might lull us to sleep just when we needed to be wide awake.

The 'wrath' of the creator God consists of two things, principally. First, he allows human wickedness to work itself out, to reap its own destruction. Second, he steps in more directly to stop it, to call 'time' on it, when it's got out of hand. If we knew our business, we would thank God for both of these, even though both can appear harsh. They need to be. If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before. What we see here, in the first four plagues, is a mixture of both types of 'wrath'.

We remind ourselves yet once more that this is deeply and powerfully symbolic language. This is obvious when it comes to angels 'pouring bowls of wrath' this way and that, but people often forget the lesson when they read the symbolic consequences. The point at issue in these first four plagues is fairly simple. God will allow natural elements themselves (earth, sea, rivers and sun) to pass judgment on the human beings who have so grievously abused their position as God's image-bearers within creation. They are supposed to be looking after God's world, and caring for one another as fellow humans. But God will call the natural elements themselves to turn on them and judge them for their wickedness.

These judgments are total. Before, with the seals and the trumpets, only a part of the world was harmed or destroyed (remember, again, that all this is symbolic), sending a warning signal to those who need to repent. Here that note is absent. This time, everything in the sea dies. All the rivers turn to blood (again, John is drawing on the plagues of Egypt). There is no more space for **repentance**. These plagues are the beginning of that long process, which will end in chapter 20, by which God will rid his beautiful world, first (in this chapter) of those who have assisted in its destruction and decay, then (in chapters 17

and 18) of the great imperial systems that have set up massive structures of injustice, and finally (chapters 19 and 20) of the dark powers that lie behind those systems themselves, ending (as in 1 Corinthians 15:26–28) with Death and Hades themselves.

This long, powerful sequence of thought tells us as clearly as anything could that what we are faced with is neither a capricious or ill-tempered divine being nor a careless, laissez-faire world ruler. We are faced with the God who made the world, and whose generous love is seen most clearly in the **sacrifice** of his own son, the lamb, the one who shares his very throne. If this God (to look no further than our own recent history) does not hate the wickedness of the communist and fascist systems that devastated so much of Europe, he is not a good or loving God. If he does not hate Apartheid, with its systematic dehumanization of half the human race, he is not a good God. And if he does not finally do something about these and similar systems, he is not a loving God.

Because of the nature of his love, he will not always be stepping in and calling ‘time’ before the appointed moment. If he did, too many, who might yet repent and be rescued, would be caught in the middle. But he will let evil take its course and bring its own nemesis; and, at a moment which only he is in any position to judge, he will bring the necessary closure on the world’s wrongs. This he must do if he is, indeed, the father of Jesus the **Messiah**. This is what it means that the angels pour out the bowls of his wrath upon the earth, the sea, the rivers and the sun.

REVELATION 16:10–21

The Last Three Plagues

The lunch had been substantial, the meeting was tedious, the room was warm, and the speakers droned on and on. The chairman noticed that one of his colleagues was finally subsiding into slumber. With cruel timing, he waited until the poor man’s head had come to rest on his arms, folded on the table in front of him. Then, interrupting the speaker, he said, ‘Perhaps Dr Johnson would like to give us his opinion on this matter?’

We all looked at our colleague, by now happily asleep. His neighbour dug him in the ribs. Pulled back out of his dream, he had no idea that he had been asked a question, let alone what it was about. The rest of us hid our smirks, propped open our own eyes as best we could, and tried to concentrate.

That’s the kind of shock that John administers to his hearers in verse 15. Suddenly, in the midst of the terrible last three plague-oracles, he turns to them and says, ‘Hey! Stay awake at the back, there! Jesus is on the way, and you don’t want to be caught half naked, do you?’

This is so surprising that some modern readers of Revelation have imagined that a later copyist has placed verse 15 here by accident. But a very odd accident it would be: why this, why here? It’s much more likely, I suggest, that John is aware, as the plagues become more

terrible, that some of his hearers might nod off, not physically but spiritually. How easy to think, 'Oh, yes, those people have got it coming to them—they are wicked and they deserve it; but we're all right, we can just relax. Let's sit back and enjoy the movie.' No, you can't, John is saying. I'm talking about the serious danger of deceitful spirits let loose into the world. Many of you have a poor track record at recognizing deceit when it stares you in the face. You need to keep awake, otherwise Jesus might arrive and find your head just coming to rest on your arms ...

That would be the wrong mistake to make. These final three plagues, which complete the sequence of the seven bowls, are terrible indeed, and part of their terror is the sense of how easy it is to give allegiance to the systems that are here under judgment. As with the seals and the trumpets, the first four seem to belong to one set, and the last three to another. Unlike the seals and the trumpets, however, there is no gap, no pause, between the sixth and the seventh, just as there is no chance, now, of further time for **repentance**.

We should not make the mistake, once more, of thinking that this chapter describes things that must happen *before* the events of chapters 17–20 take place. As with the three sequences of seven, so with the final scene of judgment upon Babylon, the monsters and the dragon: these are different angles of vision on the same ultimate reality. As the voice from the **temple** declares in verse 17: 'It is done!' It's happened. It's been completed. Those who fall under judgment here are those who have been given every chance to repent, and have refused. They have chosen to go down with the monsters rather than to suffer and be vindicated with the lamb. In the language of chapters 17–22, they have chosen the way of the harlot rather than the way of the bride.

The fifth plague, then, is a direct attack on the monster's throne—not, presumably, one particular geographical location, but rather a strike at the very heart of the monstrous imperial system, making it collapse under its own weight (as we saw in 1989 with the fall of Eastern European Communism). The 'darkness' evokes, once more, the plagues of Egypt, reminding us yet again that the point of the plagues is the destruction of the oppressors in order that the oppressed might escape.

The sixth plague awakens again, as in chapter 9, the deep-seated fear in Western Europe about the great enemy to the east, in their case Parthia. The Euphrates river formed the boundary; like the river Rhine in Europe, it was a natural barrier, relatively easy to defend. But the sixth angel's bowl, when poured out, dries up the river, so as to prepare the way for a very different kind of '**Exodus**': instead of the children of Israel going dry shod through the Red Sea, the kings from the east can now charge with their armies across the river, ready to attack.

But why would the rulers of the west be drawn into such a foolish confrontation? The answer is that the dragon, the monster from the sea, and the monster from the land—who now, we discover, is also described as a 'false prophet' (verse 13)—will deceive the kings of the earth, and lure them to this great and disastrous battle. Again there is an echo of the

plagues of Egypt, since the ‘unclean spirits’ that come out of the mouths of the Unholy Trinity appear like frogs, able to hop to and fro with their specious stories and plausible arguments, persuading the great and powerful to commit themselves to a hopeless cause.

No wonder John tells his readers that they need to keep awake. This is very, very dangerous territory. Anyone who has lived through the build-up to a war, where suddenly all the newspapers and television stations seem to be pushing one way, and the frog-like, hopping-to-and-fro thing called ‘public opinion’ happens to go along with the prevailing mood, will know what John is talking about, and why he issues this warning.

What then about ‘Mount Megiddo’ (the word in the original is Harmagedon, sometimes spelled without the initial ‘H’)? Literally it is a place, some way inland from Mount Carmel in the north of Palestine, where several major battles took place in ancient times, and though no ‘Mount Megiddo’ as such is known in ancient Israel the area was a well-known battlefield, and the town of Megiddo was close to mountains where, in prophetic symbolism, such conflicts might occur. It would, in any case, be most unusual for John suddenly to use a place name literally, and we should not suppose he has done so here. His point is simply that all the powers of evil must be brought to one place, so that they can be dealt with there. This is why the three frogs are allowed to perform their deceits. We should no more try to locate John’s Mount Megiddo on a map than we should try to produce an exact sequential chronology of all the events he describes, here and in the rest of the book.

And then the seventh bowl. Into the ‘air’ it goes—the space between **heaven** and earth, the sphere of spirits and powers and ideas and influences. And this will finish it all. This brings the whole work to completion. As in 8:5 and 11:19, which likewise round off a sequence of judgments, the collision between heaven and earth results in thunder, lightning and earthquakes. (Remember, once more, that this is symbolic!) As in Zechariah 12, where Jerusalem is split apart by an earthquake, ‘the great city’ (Rome?) is split into three, and the other cities collapse as well, like Jericho before the trumpets of Joshua. Islands flee away, mountains disappear.

John’s hearers would have no difficulty in getting the point. This is not the collapse of the physical earth. This is the only way to describe the collapse of the entire social and political system *on* the earth. Terrible things will happen in human society, for which the only fitting metaphor will be earthquakes and huge hailstones. God will allow the lie at the heart of pagan society, like a crack in the earth’s crust, finally to be exposed. The tectonic plates of different idolatrous human systems will move against one another one more time, and nothing will ever be the same again.

And, in the middle of it all, God will remember Babylon (verse 19b). Chapters 17 and 18, in other words, belong at this point. Part of the final judgment of the last bowl of wrath is the judgment on the city that has become the world’s whore. Only when her ghastly parody has been unveiled and destroyed can we appreciate what it means to belong to the people

John calls the bride.¹

The First Six Bowls (16:1–12)

The bowl cycle parallels and intensifies the destruction caused by the trumpet cycle, even if no death toll of humans is given in chap. 16. In both cycles first four plagues afflict the earth, the sea, the sweet water, and the heavenly bodies. The next two deal with powers of the underworld in warlike images. The Euphrates River plays a role in the sixth plague of each series. Between the sixth and the seventh in each series we find an interlude, which in the bowl series is rather short. The seventh trumpet and bowl are accompanied by loud voices in heaven (or from God's throne), followed by the proclamation of the reign of God and his Messiah on earth (11:15) and of the completion of his wrath, "It is done!" in 16:17. Both conclude with lightning, thunder, earthquake, and hail (11:19; 16:18). These two series recapitulate, not pedantically, but artistically, prophetically, from different perspectives and with greater intensity the day of wrath, which was present already in the sixth seal (6:16–17).

What are the significant new emphases in the bowl series in distinction from the trumpet series? We already noted the intensification of the plagues in this last septet. In four of the bowl plagues, we find references to the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the beast worshipers, and Babylon. The effect of these references is a historization of the bowl plagues in distinction from those caused by the trumpets. John now deals with events in the near future that will destroy the beast's domain. The kings from the east, the Parthians and their satellites, will cross the Euphrates (v. 12). The application of mythic elements to envisioned historical events enabled John to introduce the perspective which perceives the execution of God's judgment in and through expected historical catastrophes. In vv. 5–7 he interrupts the bowl series with a judgment doxology that articulates the principle of divine retribution. This principle is to be applied to all the bowl plagues. Moreover, this interruption also suggests that all bowl plagues are directed against the beast worshipers, not against ordinary sinners. In addition to the interruption, we also find an interlude in vv. 13–16 which is introduced as a new vision with "and I saw." The theme of the interlude will be unfolded in the parousia vision of 19:11–20. Appended to this interlude is a word of Jesus and a beatitude, exhorting the reader/hearer and reflecting the epistolary quality of John's "book."

The bowl plagues begin with a formal commissioning of the angels (15:5–16:1) by a **loud voice from the temple** telling all seven angels to "**Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God**" (16:1). The commissioning is followed by the execution of the divine order; for example, **the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth**. The next three pour their bowls on three other elements of the cosmos—salt water, fresh water, and, the most important element in the sky, the **sun**. The next item of the pattern

¹ Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 140–148). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.

indicates their effect and extent (frequently introduced in the Greek text with *kai egeneto*). For instance, the extent of the second plague was that **every living thing died that was in the sea**. Finally at the conclusion of some of the plagues (vv. 9, 11, 21), the reaction of the people is indicated and their reaction applies also to the other plagues: They **cursed God** (literally, they “blasphemed,” cf. 13:5–6!) and **did not repent** (vv. 9, 11, 21; cf. 9:20–21). The hearts of the beast worshipers had become hardened like Pharaoh’s. Their reaction differed from the response elicited by the gospel’s final call (14:6; cf. 11:13; 15:4). For the worshipers of the beast there is no hope. But the plagues also affect all of nature. Crime, creation, and divine retribution are interrelated.

The image of **the bowls** in this septet has a twofold Old Testament background. Bronze pots and basins were used as cult vessels in the temple (Exod. 27:3). Moreover, Jeremiah was commanded to “take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword which I am sending among them” (Jer. 25:15–16). John fused the priestly bowls of the temple with Jeremiah’s goblets of God’s wrath. The angels coming out of the temple (15:6) perform a judgment ritual that is parallel to 8:3–5. But whereas in chap. 8 the angelic ritual functions as prelude to the trumpet cycle, here the whole cycle is a heavenly ritual, which reenacts, on a cosmic scale, the Egyptian plagues prior to Israel’s deliverance. The cosmic scale of the first four plagues shows that from John’s point of view these plagues will commence in the future. They elaborate the sixth seal.

The first, fourth, fifth, and seventh bowls, as well as the interlude, disclose that God’s wrath will be focused on the worshipers of the imperial cult and followers of Antichrist. The pouring of the first bowl on the **earth** recalls the sixth Egyptian plague (Exod. 9:10–11), but its extent is not localized. All worshipers of the beast and only those **who bore the mark of the beast** receive **foul and evil sores** as mark of God’s judgment. The second bowl parallels the first Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:17–21). The water of **the sea ... became like the blood of ... dead** people. It rots and can no longer sustain life, and **every living thing** of the sea **died**. Note the intensification of the parallel in the trumpet vision (8:8–9). The third bowl, like the third trumpet, is directed against the fresh water supply, but now the **rivers and the fountains of water ... became blood** (cf. Ps. 78:44). Without water, life cannot be sustained. Now John interrupts the series with an audition in order to interpret the first three plagues.

5–7—The interpretation has the form of a psalm (vv. 5–6) and a response (v. 7). The psalm is quite similar to the song of the conquerors (15:2–4) and is given by **the angel** in charge **of water** (cf. 7:1; 14:18). Different elements are related to different angels (cf. *1 Enoch* 60:11–24; 66:1–2) who guard them and complain to God about pollution and abuse of their entrusted elements. Now, however, instead of raising accusations about water pollution, the angel intones a judgment doxology acclaiming the justice of God. The opening lines parallel the song of the victors (15:3). God, “the king of the nations” (15:3), is addressed as **thou who art and wast**, just as in 11:17. The clause “who is to come,” found in 1:4, 8; 4:8, is omitted, because God’s coming in judgment is the subject of this septet (cf.

11:17). His judgments are **just**, not spiteful nor capricious, even though to John's church, this may be far from self-evident. His people must hear time and again that, contrary to their present experience, God's judgments are righteous (cf. Ps. 119:137). A "person is punished by the very things by which he or she sins" (Wis. Sol. 11:16; cf. Rom. 1:22–32; Acts 7:42). In agreement with this principle and the principle of corresponding retribution, the people who **have shed the blood of saints** and of their leaders, the Christian **prophets**, to them God has **given ... blood to drink**. Of course this is to be understood metaphorically, not literally. Those who are "drunk with the blood of the saints" (17:6), having made war on them (13:7) and on the prophets (11:7), are given **blood to drink** (16:6). God's judgment fits the crime. The sarcasm of the angel's judgment doxology is as obvious as the identity of the recipients. They are the followers of the beast who have turned against God's faithful people and their prophetic leaders. **It is their due!** which in Greek (*axioi eisin*) repeats a phrase of 3:4, but now with a sarcastic tone. God's judgment corresponds to the crime.

And I heard the altar cry in response to the angel's doxology. The **altar** is here personified and acts as spokesperson for the martyrs whose souls lie beneath it (6:9–11). Their petition for vindication is fulfilled by God coming in judgment upon their murderers. **True and just are thy judgments**, the voice from the altar calls out. God's identity, his truth and righteousness, is revealed in that murder will not go unpunished.

8–9—The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fierce heat. The sun receives a special commission. **It was allowed** (Greek, *edothē*), authorized, to mete our judgment by fire. This effect differs from the fourth trumpet plague (8:12) and from the sixth seal (6:12), but it relates to the promise of 7:16: "The sun shall not strike them [the conquerors], nor any scorching heat." The pouring of the fourth bowl extends the plagues of this series to all parts of creation—earth, sea, rivers, and the sun in the sky. Yet the reaction to the plagues among the earth dwellers is not repentance and acclamation of God but cursing, blaspheming his name (cf. 13:1, 4–5), probably by maintaining the emperor cult.

We should remind ourselves again that the verb past tenses are part of the style of visions and auditions and should not mislead us into thinking that John is describing or interpreting experiences that happened in his (immediate) past. Even though Satan's throne is already present in Pergamum (2:13), Rome has not yet become drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6) from John's perspective, nor has it yet been given blood to drink (16:6), nor has the fifth angel already poured his bowl on the beast's throne (16:10). The cosmic dimension of the plagues also requires their futuristic interpretation.

The fifth bowl is directed against the **kingdom** and **the throne of the beast**. The beast's **throne** symbolizes its authority and power which it had received from the dragon (cf. 13:2). The beast's **kingdom** refers to the extent of its power and includes all followers and worshipers. For John, Rome, the city, the emperor, and the imperial cult were historic manifestations of the beast's throne and kingdom. Now the beast's **throne** and **kingdom**

are under attack. The effect was **darkness**, like the ninth Egyptian plague (Exod. 10:22; cf. Rev. 8:12). Probably John would have us understand this **darkness** not only as an eclipse of the sun but also metaphorically, as God handing idolatrous Rome and its followers over into the darkness of the imperial cult (cf. Acts 7:42a; Rom. 1:22–32; Wis. Sol. 11:15).

Their reaction can be no other than to curse **the God of heaven** (v. 11), the “God who has power over these plagues” (v. 9). They **curse** him because their religion is being destroyed. Those whose hearts are hardened cannot and shall not repent. Simultaneously their hardness and darkness constitute God’s just judgment. John knew the story of the Egyptian plagues and was quite aware that just as the scorching sun shall not smite the people of God (7:16), so likewise the darkness shall not cover them. Even though “thick darkness” descended upon the land of Egypt and shall descend upon the kingdom of the Antichrist, “the people of Israel had light” (Exod. 10:23) and so will the church.

The sixth bowl, as well as the sixth trumpet, refers to the **great river Euphrates** which was the eastern frontier of the Roman empire. That great river **dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east**. The sixth trumpet vision had pictured a vast mythical cavalry army coming from the Euphrates, swarming across the land and killing one-third of the people (9:13–19). This mythical army is now historicized. The **kings from the east**, the Parthians, and their vassals are ready to invade the empire. The Euphrates River has ceased to exist as protective natural boundary. An invasion from the east is imminent. According to Isaiah (11:15) and Jeremiah (51:36), the miracle of the deliverance at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21) will be repeated during the end time for the remnant of Israel in Assyria and Babylonia. In John’s vision, however, it will not be Israel but the enemies of Rome, the kings of the east and their armies, that will cross the river dryshod.

The hearer would now expect to be told about an invading cavalry army of Parthians and their satellites, about Nero’s return and revenge on Rome. Instead, John postponed the vision of Rome’s destruction to the following chapters (17:15–18) and he introduced an interlude.

Interlude (16:13–16)

And I saw initiates a new vision which contains a new subject that is related to the Parthian invasion and yet quite distinct from it. The actors in this interlude are not the kings from the east but the demonic triumvirate of **dragon** (cf. chap. 12), **beast** (cf. 13:1–8), and **false prophet** (cf. 13:11–18). **Three foul spirits like frogs** (cf. Exod. 8:2) issue from their mouths. These froglike spirits **are demonic spirits** agitating for war. With deceptive propaganda and **signs**, miracles, that seem to legitimate their propaganda, they manage to assemble **the kings of the whole world ... for battle on the great day of God the Almighty**. It is apparent that **the kings from the east** are *distinct* from the **kings of the whole world** (Greek, *oikoumenē*). The *oikoumenē* is the civilized world of Rome and its vassal kings in sharp distinction from the **east** of the barbarians. What is not yet clear is how these two groups of kings (vv. 12 and 14) will be related to each other. Will the

invading Parthian forces (with Nero in the lead) be met by the armies of Rome and its satellites for the final battle at **Armageddon**? Will they annihilate each other and in so doing execute God's judgment on themselves? Or will there be a different scenario? The hearer is kept in suspense during the sixth bowl vision and during the interlude. All he hears is when and where the battle will take place. It will take place on the **great day of God the Almighty**, which is the day of final judgment promised by the prophets (Joel 3:9–13; Zeph. 1:14–18; Isa. 13:4–22; Ezekiel 38–39; *1 Enoch* 56:5–8). The place of the battle is called in Hebrew **Armageddon**, literally, the mountain of Megiddo. Megiddo, situated on a plain, was the site of many a battle (Judg. 5:19; 2 Kings 9:27; 23:29). Yet there is no "mount" of Megiddo, and the name has eluded all attempts to define it geographically. For instance, it was thought to be a reference to Mount Carmel nearby. But that mountain is never called Mount Megiddo in the Old Testament, a fatal flaw in that interpretation. For John, Armageddon is wherever the eschatological battle of the great day of the Lord is fought.

The coming of the great day of the Lord prompted John to break the story of his vision and interject an exhortation to watchfulness (v. 15). This interjection is meant to serve as key to unlock the mythic symbols of the interlude. Their meaning is not to be found in our calculations concerning the time and speculations about the geographic location of the battle to end all wars. Their point is that we, the readers/hearers, ought to be prepared to meet our maker and Lord. **"Lo, I am coming like a thief!"** This word of Jesus addresses directly, through John, the readers and hearers of this letter, and it should impress upon them the futility of calculations (cf. Matt. 24:42–44; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10) and admonish them to alertness. **Blessed** are those who are **awake, keeping their garments that they may not go naked and be seen exposed!** No calculations and speculations will function as fig leaves and hide our nakedness on the day of the Lord. Christians who sleep securely with their apocalyptic timetables under their pillows will march **naked** into captivity (cf. Ezek. 23:26–29). Implicit in the beatitude is a solemn warning, not to lose their status as kings and priests unto God for which they are destined (5:9–10; 7:9). Incidentally, only in 3:3 and here is the **thief** identified with Christ.

The seventh bowl is poured into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne announcing, "It is done!" (cf. 10:6–7; 11:15; 15:1). We are also reminded of the "third woe" prior to the seventh trumpet; it is now completed. The interlude in 10:6–7 had promised that *the end* would come in the days of the seventh trumpet call. And it did! Just as the trumpet cycle evolved out of the seventh seal, so the bowl cycle evolved out of the seventh trumpet, reaching its climax in the proclamation, **It is done!** These cycles deal with the same eschatological future. Each culminates in the day of the Lord (cf. 11:15–19) which from John's point of view was imminent. In short, the three septets do not describe successive historical periods. **It is done!** leads us to the threshold of eternity but not beyond. There were **flashes of lightning, loud voices, peals of thunder.** The seventh bowl, poured **into the air**, without which nothing can live, is accompanied by manifestations of theophany (cf. 4:5; 8:5; 11:19). However, these manifestations of God's coming to judge the world in righteousness have still another function which becomes

apparent in the **great earthquake** and the **great hailstones**. They function in the seventh bowl plague as instruments of God’s judgment itself. The **great earthquake** is identified as one that **had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake**. This great earthquake connects the seventh bowl with the sixth seal (6:12) which had introduced the day of the Lord in the seal septet. **It is done!** relates to the church’s struggle with imperial Rome (chaps. 12–13), to the scene on Mount Zion (14:1–5), and to the song of Moses and the Lamb by the conquerors (15:1–4). Therefore the announcement **It is done!** must also include the fall of Babylon/Rome (cf. 14:8). And it does! **The great city was split by the great earthquake into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath.** Babylon/Rome is made to drink the cup of God’s wrath (cf. Jer. 25:15–16) in retribution for her “passion” with which she intoxicated the nations through the imperial cults (14:8). The **great city** is none other than Babylon/Rome, the heart of the empire, the instigator of the emperor cult and of the church’s future oppression. **It is done!** means that the judgment of Rome is completed—here by an earthquake of tremendous proportions, later, in chap. 17, by something else. John himself gives us quite a few pointers against understanding his symbols and images literally, the way some modern fundamentalists do.

The images of Babylon and the beast will be related with some new nuances in chap. 17, even though from one perspective both symbolize the Roman empire. Moreover, the announcement, **It is done!** must also include the rest of creation. **And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found** (cf. 20:11). The life on this earth, as we know it, is herewith finished. But what is happening to the worshipers of the beast? **And great hailstones, heavy as a hundredweight** (about 66 lbs.) **dropped on** them, and they, quite naturally, **cursed God for the plague of the hail** (cf. Ezek. 38:18–23).

The beast worshipers remain obdurate to the end and in the end. Their great city, Babylon, has fallen (14:8), having drained the “cup of the fury of his [God’s] wrath” (16:19). Nevertheless, the power behind Babylon, the demonic trinity, has not yet been overthrown, even though the outcome of the great conflict between God and Satan has been decided ever since the Lamb opened the seals of the scroll (5:6–14; cf. 12:7–12). Though while “it is done,” it is not yet done and John will communicate a new climactic series of visions.²

1. As often, John hears a voice which he does not identify. It is *a loud voice*, suitable for the announcement of the release of the last plagues. Here the adjective precedes the noun in the Greek (John usually has it follow the noun) so there is some emphasis on *loud*. The voice came *from the temple*, so that it originated with God. Indeed we might go further and reason that the voice must be the very voice of God, for we have just been told that no-one could go into the sanctuary until these judgments were completed (15:8). This seems to exclude angels and others. If this is the way we should understand the passage, John is telling us that the last plagues are released by none less than God. For *God’s wrath* see the

² Krodell, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 280–289). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

note on 14:10.

2. *The first angel went* (i.e. ‘went away’, *apēlthen*) and *poured out his bowl*. The impression left by the choice of this verb is that the angels did not, so to speak, step forward and pour out their bowls, then return to their places, but rather that, having discharged their tasks, they disappeared from the scene. The result of the pouring out of the first bowl was that *ugly and painful sores* appeared on the beast’s adherents. We are reminded of the plague of boils in Egypt (Exod. 9:10–11; cf. Deut. 28:35). The recipients are described as *the people who had the mark of the beast* and who *worshipped his image*. These are the things that specially characterize them and mark them off from other people. There are some evils that afflict those who give themselves over to wickedness but do not affect other people.

c. The second bowl (16:3)

3. The *second angel* directed his efforts toward *the sea*, which *turned into blood like that of a dead man* (cf. Exod. 7:17–21). In the Greek *like* precedes *dead man*, not *blood*, i.e. it means ‘blood as of a dead man’ rather than ‘as blood of a dead man’. But this can scarcely affect the general meaning. When the second trumpet was blown, something like a mountain was hurled into the sea, a third of the waters became blood and a third of the creatures in and on the sea died (8:8–9). On this occasion there is no mention of one-third or of any other proportion. We are now face to face with finality. Everything in the sea died, and this is expressed in a full and unusual way, ‘every living soul ... in the sea’.

d. The third bowl (16:4–7)

4. When the third trumpet was blown, the rivers and fountains were affected, and this is the case with the third bowl, too. But there is an intensification. With the trumpet, one-third of the waters was affected (8:10–11). Now they are all involved. Then the waters simply became ‘bitter’. Here they all turn to blood. It is not said that the people died, but that presumably is only because other judgments followed so swiftly. Without water to drink there is no future for the human race.

5. John heard ‘the angel of the waters’ (NEB), a designation that appears to be found nowhere else. Among the Jews angels were often thought to be responsible for specific areas of the universe (see the list in the Index to vol. 2 of Charles’s *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*). Thus there is nothing surprising about John’s expression. Indeed, there is at least one passage which speaks of angels (plural) ‘who were in charge of the waters’ (1 Enoch 66:2). But there is certainly nothing like it anywhere else in the Bible.

‘The angel of the waters’ sees in these proceedings an excellent example of making the punishment fit the crime. He speaks of God as *just* and his activity as *judging*. The pouring out of the bowls is not a series of arbitrary actions, but a solemn act of judgment. God is

described in terms of his eternity (for *who are and who were* see note on 1:4). This time there is no 'who is to come' for the consummation has arrived. Instead of a reference to a future coming we have *the Holy One*, perhaps better, 'O Holy One' (RSV, GNB; the article is equivalent to a vocative). For 'holy' see note on 15:4.

6. The 'punishment fits the crime' theme becomes explicit. The sinners in question *shed the blood of your saints and prophets* and because of that *you have given them blood to drink*. It is fitting that those who delighted in shedding blood should now drink it (cf. Wisdom 11:16, 'one is punished by the very things by which he sins'). Those who so readily shed the blood of Christ's followers now find themselves caught up in fighting one another and consequently in the shedding of their own blood. The forces of evil do not present a united front (17:16). There are hatreds and divisions and strifes among its members. The crisp *as they deserve* puts an emphasis on their desert as the final touch. Kiddle reminds us that 'experience has an abundant store of examples to prove to whatever nation cares to pay heed that communities do suffer proportionately to their crimes, and that often enough there is a grim and obvious aptness in the ill effect of an ill cause'. Hanson brings this up to date: 'The comment is not unlike that which many people are making today about the atom bomb: "thou hast given blood to drink". God has allowed us to discover one of nature's greatest secrets, and we look like celebrating the event in blood.'

7. For *the altar* see note on 6:9. This is the only place in Revelation where the altar is said to speak, though earlier there was a voice from its horns (9:13). The altar is especially connected with the prayers of the saints (8:3) which introduced judgments of God (8:5). The angel who commanded that the vine of the earth be reaped came from the altar (14:18), a further link with judgment. The altar now interjects its agreement with the angel. It does this first with *yes*, and follows with an address to God as *Lord God Almighty*, a most appropriate address in view of the divine power put forth in the judgments under consideration. Then secondly the altar speaks of God's judgments as *true and just*. The same adjectives, though in the reverse order, were used of God's ways (15:3).

e. The fourth bowl (16:8-9)

8. The fourth angel now poured his bowl on the sun. The familiar *was given* (there is nothing corresponding to *power* in the Greek; it reads simply 'and it was given') reminds us once more that God is over the whole process. There is no independent power in the sun. If the sun is to scorch people it is because God gives it the power to do so. In previous sections of the book there have been signs in the sun, but they have all been concerned with restricting it in whole or in part (6:12; 8:12; 9:2). This time, by contrast, the sun scorches people with a heat so fierce that it can be said to be *with fire* (contrast 7:16).

9. *Seared by the intense heat* (lit. 'scorched a great scorching') emphasizes the effect. But sinners would not learn the lesson. They simply *cursed the name of God*. They did not repent. They gave God no glory ('did not repent to give glory' links the two thoughts; had they repented, the ascription of glory would inevitably have followed; cf. Colclasure, 'The

only way to flee from God is to flee to Him'). God *had control over these plagues*. It is important to John (and to us) that God is sovereign; he is over the whole process right to the end.

f. The fifth bowl (16:10–11)

There is a change. The first four bowls related to nature: land, sea, rivers and springs, the sun. But the last three are 'more directly political' (Swete). They take us to the operation of the powers of evil.

10. *The fifth angel* made his attack directly on the beast's citadel. He poured out his bowl *on the throne of the beast*, with curious results. The beast's *kingdom was plunged into darkness* (cf. 9:2; Exod. 10:21–23) and his adherents (this is surely the meaning of the indefinite *men*) *gnawed their tongues in agony*. Just as there is no mention of what caused the darkness, so there is no mention of what brought about the pain (though possibly it is the result of the previous plagues, ulcers from the first plague and burns from the scorching heat of the fourth). John is not giving a detailed report, but simply highlighting the important points, in this case the darkness and the pain. There was something similar about the fifth trumpet plague. Smoke came out of the abyss and darkened the sun and the air, and this was accompanied by the appearance of locusts who tortured people (9:1–6). It is possible that we should take the darkening in this plague to denote the waning of the power of the beast, and this will be further stressed in the remaining plagues.

11. Sinners reacted in the wrong way (as was the case with the preceding bowl): they blasphemed God. John brings out something of his majesty by calling him *the God of heaven*. But these earth-dwellers could not recognize the majesty of heaven when they saw it. They were preoccupied with their *pains* (plural here, though singular in the previous verse). One pain is singled out, the ulcers (the same word as in v. 2, though here plural). John notes once more that, despite their troubles, these people did not repent. Even grievous pain did not awaken them to the realities of the situation.

g. The sixth bowl (16:12–16)

More is said about the result of the pouring of the sixth bowl than that of any of the first five. It prepared the way for the End. It did not usher in the End, but prepared for it.

12. *The sixth angel* poured his bowl on *the great river Euphrates*, a river mentioned earlier when the sixth trumpet signalled the release of four angels bound there who were to kill one-third of mankind (9:13–15). The effect of the outpouring of the sixth bowl was the drying up of the Euphrates to make ready a *way for the kings from the East*. In the Old Testament a mighty action of God is frequently associated with the drying up of waters, as the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21), the Jordan (Josh. 3:16–17), and several times in prophecy (Isa. 11:15; Jer. 51:36; Zech. 10:11). 'It is possible that his mind runs also on the story told by Herodotus (i.191) of the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, who marched into the city across the

drained bed of the Euphrates; a new Babylon is to be surprised, and the drying up of the river marks the removal of the last obstacle to its fall' (Swete).

The Euphrates was the boundary of the Roman Empire and for John's readers the land beyond it was a great unknown land. Who could tell what mighty kings lurked there? The Parthians lived in that area and during the first century there was a persistent fear that they would invade the Empire. This was reinforced by the Nero *redivivus* myth, which affirmed that Nero would put himself at the head of the Parthian hordes and march into the Empire.

John is suggesting that at the End all these fears and more will be realized. We should bear in mind that Nero and his armies in the myth were not going to ally themselves with Rome, but to attack her. So John is thinking of division among the forces of evil (cf. 17:16), not of a united front. But we would be wrong in holding that he is doing no more than voice a contemporary expectation. By appealing to contemporary fears he is making the point that at the end of time the divided forces of evil will engage in a terrible conflict. Curiously, having told us that the way will be cleared for the mighty potentates to march westward, John does not follow this up. He does not say that the kings used the way prepared for them. In fact he does not mention them again.

13. John now sees *three evil* (Gk. 'unclean') *spirits* coming out of the mouths of *the dragon, the beast and the false prophet*. This last-mentioned is evidently the beast from the earth (13:11; cf. 19:20 with 13:14). The dirty spirits are *like frogs*, which may be meant to remind us of the plague of frogs in Egypt (Exod. 8:3). Love sees here 'a devastating caricature of the failure of evil. That which men fear most because it appears to be mighty and eternally entrenched becomes at long last only a ridiculous spawning of sickly creatures of the night.' Frogs have evil associations. They are slimy and ugly. They produce an incessant and meaningless croaking, but no solid achievement. Such thoughts are aroused by the symbolism. The main idea, however, is that these spirits are like the 'lying spirit' who was to entice Ahab into battle (1 Kgs 22:21ff.). But instead of enticing one man, these have the much greater task of enticing the whole world into battle.

14. These spirits are 'demonic spirits' (not *spirits of demons*; as the demons are themselves spirits, they can scarcely have spirits). They work *miraculous signs* (*Sēmeia*; see note on 13:13). They do not simply do extraordinary things. Their miracles have meaning. The three have one real task to perform, namely that of gathering all men together for the final battle. They *go out to the kings of the whole world*; their influence is exerted on rulers rather than on the common people. But it is universal, affecting *the whole world* (cf. 3:10; 12:9).

The day to which all this leads up is not the day of the dirty spirits, nor the day of the rulers of the world, but *the great day of God Almighty* (cf. 2 Pet. 3:12). This is the most resounding description of the last day. *Great* distinguishes it from lesser days. And it is the *day of God*, not of man or even of the antichrist. It is associated with the culmination of the

divine purpose. And *Almighty* reminds us that in the face of the might of the whole earth God's power is supreme.

15. The story of the bowls is interrupted by an interjection from Jesus himself in language reminiscent of that in 3:3. It is to be seen against the gathering of the forces of evil described in the previous verse. With all evil combining against God, this call from the Lord himself brings us back to the realities of the situation.

He likens his coming to that of a *thief*, i.e. it is unheralded and totally unexpected (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2). Then he pronounces *blessed* (see note on 1:3) the man who is ready for that coming. There is nothing surprising in a reference to him *who stays awake* but there is an unexpected twist with *keeps his clothes with him* and in the fact that the fate from which he is to be kept is that of walking *naked* and of his shame being seen. We should probably not press the details of this description too closely. Elsewhere the garments stand for God's sentence of justification. We would not be God's people without them. Here, then, the thought is that believers caught unprepared will be put to shame at the critical time in the world's history. They will be like those outside the people of God.

16. John reverts to the activities of the dirty spirits. They *gathered the kings* (and, of course, their followers) to a place called *Armageddon*. No place of this name is known, and the term is surely symbolic. But its meaning is uncertain. John tells us that it is a Hebrew word, and the two most favoured suggestions are that it means 'mountain of Megiddo' (*har mēgiddô*) or 'the city of Megiddo' (*îr mēgiddô*). The former seems closer to the Hebrew, but unfortunately no mountain appears to be called 'the mountain of Megiddo'. Many stirring feats took place in the vicinity, but they seem to be connected rather with the plain of Esdraelon than with any particular mountain or with Megiddo. In fact Megiddo is mentioned but rarely in connection with battles (Judg. 5:19; 2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chr. 35:22). There are Old Testament passages that look for the ultimate battle near mountains (Ezek. 39:1ff., perhaps Dan. 11:45), but none that we can identify with the present expression.

It is possible that 'mountain' should not be taken literally, but understood of the great mound on which the city stood, in which case the two suggestions come to much the same thing. Since great battles have been fought nearby, the city may stand in John's mind for decisive conflict (Beasley-Murray, 'a symbol for the last resistance of anti-god forces prior to the kingdom of Christ'). In that case it will stand as a symbol for the final overthrow of all the forces of evil by Almighty God. It is not unlikely that the deliverance under Deborah is regarded as setting the pattern. Then Sisera had 900 chariots of iron (Judg. 4:13), but in Israel there was scarcely a shield or spear among 40,000 (Judg. 5:8). Israel's position was completely hopeless. But when the battle was joined, 'the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army' (Judg. 4:15). So will it be at the last day. However strong the forces of evil may appear, and however hopeless the position of those of good, God will win the victory. He will resoundingly overthrow the evil.

h. The seventh bowl (16:17–21)

The climax comes with the seventh bowl. This speaks of utter destruction. It does not say that all people will be killed; they must still face Almighty God for judgment. But this bowl does mean the complete fragmentation of earthly life.

17. *The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air*, which was held to be uniquely the abode of demons (see note on 9:2). The evil spirits are being attacked in their own element. John heard another *loud voice*, unidentified as commonly in this book. But he tells us that it came *out of the temple* and *from the throne*, so that it has the fullest divine sanction. It signals the moment of climax by saying *It is done* (one word in the Greek, as also in 21:6).

18. The announcement of the climax caused great excitement. Similar phenomena followed the blowing of the seventh trumpet (11:19). For *peals of thunder*, etc. see note on 4:5. All this heightens the solemnity of the moment. Special stress is placed on *a severe earthquake*; it surpasses all other earthquakes. This is first put negatively, none like it *has ever occurred since man has been on earth*; and then twice positively, *so tremendous* (*tēlikoutōs*) and 'so great' (NIV omits; the word is *meγas*, which is used seven times in connection with the seventh bowl; it brings out the greatness of the final act).

19. *The great city* is a motif we have seen before (see note on 11:8). It stands for civilized man, man in organized community but man ordering his affairs apart from God. It symbolizes the pride of human achievement, the godlessness of those who put their trust in man. This *great city* is now shattered. It divides *into three parts*, which means complete break-up. And in the break-up of the great city *the cities of the nations collapsed*. The one implies the other. With *Babylon the Great* we return to the theme of the great city. John tells us that this city 'was remembered before God' (where the passive 'avoids anthropomorphism', Sweet). He visits his wrath on her (see note on 14:10). Nowhere in this book is there an expression as emphatic as that rendered *the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath*. John leaves us in no doubt that Babylon is to receive the most wholehearted opposition conceivable from an all-powerful and all-holy God.

20. John reverts to the physical effects of the cataclysm. *Every island fled away*. No mountain was to be found. For the linking of mountain and island cf. 6:14, and for the disappearance of the mountains Zechariah 14:10 (which looks for the whole land to be turned into a plain).

21. Now comes a great hailstorm. Each hailstone weighed 'about a talent'. This is variously estimated at from 45 lb to 100 lb or even more. We cannot be sure of the exact weight, but John's point that the hail was of enormous size is clear. And for the third time in this chapter we read that the effect of the disaster was that people blasphemed (*cursed*) God. To bring out his point that this *plague* was unusually severe, John uses a word which he uses nowhere else in the book (*sphodra*; NIV, *so*). The disaster must be seen for the

decisive event it is.³

³ Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 185–193). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.