

INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION - PART SIXTEEN

Chapters 15 and 16 continue the good news and the bad news of chapter 14. After portraying so vividly in cartoon form the horrific conditions on earth for Christians and Jews between 64 and 70 AD, God's people needed to know exactly where they stood in eternity. In chapter 14 they were reminded that Jesus is both the Lamb, their Saviour, and the King, their judge. The whole world including them and their persecutors would be 'harvested' either to reward or to condemnation. Meanwhile, in the light of this, there was a job to do to tell the world the truth.

A third sign in heaven appeared in 15:1,(12:1,3), another signpost pointing plainly to the ultimate conclusion of history. Notice the comparison to John's other major book, his gospel, where he identified Jesus' miracles as being signs on earth which pointed to the greatest miracle, the resurrection.(Jn.2:11) The first two signs reminded us of the conflict between the Devil and the woman, this third sign made it plain who won.

Another group of seven angels came into the story. The first seven communicated with the churches,(1:20), the second group told us of the damage first man and then Satan had done to the earth(8,9) as a third of the environment was destroyed. This time destruction was complete. But first assurance was given to those who belonged to the Lord that this would not happen to them. The image was the one from 4:6 of peace and security.(15:2) Again they were celebrating in music. Their first theme was from the song of Moses in Exod.15 where the Israelites gave thanks for their redemption from domination in Egypt by Pharaoh, an earlier Caesar, and the plagues from which they escaped.(15:3) Their second theme was from Ps.86:9 in which David looked beyond his persecutors to God's ultimate victory.(15:4)

The angels with their plagues emerged appropriately from the heavenly temple. Remember that the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans and has never been rebuilt. The book of Hebrews explained that the tabernacle built by Moses was only a copy of a heavenly model.(Heb.8:5) As such it was good to be reassured that though the earthly temple was gone, the heavenly original would always remain. In 11:19 we were told that from the temple God was still speaking. Here we were reminded that God was still very much in charge. This would be a great comfort to those on earth who felt that everything had collapsed.(15:5-8)

As the seven angels poured out their plagues on the earth there was an obvious similarity to the plagues God sent on Egypt because of the oppression of His people there. But at the same time there were also some important differences. In Egypt the plagues were local, now they were worldwide. In the time of Moses there was still opportunity for Pharaoh to repent, now it was too late. The development of sores,(16:2) the water and food supply being polluted by blood, (16:3,4) the world being darkened,(16:10) the frogs,(16:13) and the hail storm, (16:21) are all familiar from Exodus. Repeated emphasis was given to the reason for the plagues, the worship of a false God, the beast, their refusal to repent and their blasphemy against God.(16:2,9,11,21)

The plagues in the book of Exodus were not random acts of unpleasantness but deliberate answers to the false gods worshipped by the Egyptians which the Sun god, the Sky god, the Frog god, the Nile god and so on. Each one in turn was exposed by the true God as powerless. While some of the images had changed in the first century the issues were the same, the Romans and Greeks each had sets of supposed gods which together with various influences from the East, and above all the cult of emperor worship made up the range of alternatives being worshipped with those with 'the mark of the beast', the Devil's thinking in their minds. The point God was making again through John was that all these philosophies and religions were as bankrupt as the old Egyptian ones Moses

had exposed. If only we will draw on 'the tabernacle in heaven', eternal life available now, we will have all the answers we need to the false gods of those with the Devil's thinking in their minds.

The remaining plagues were of fire, a great war and a great earthquake.(16:8,12,18) II Pet.3:10 also described what sounds like a nuclear fireball destroying everything. We have answers for now and a certainty about the final answer from God when the present earth is destroyed.

Many people think of God's judgement as being inconsistent with the loving character of God. 16:5-7 stressed that on the contrary it proved God's righteousness because by it the murder of Christians would receive justice.

Megiddo in northern Israel had been the scene of crucial conflicts in the past.(Judg.5:19; II Kgs.23:29) Zech.12:11 had foreseen a future battle there associated with the Lord's return. Har-Magedon was an alternative spelling of the same place. From a military point of view it was a natural route for the invasion of Israel from the north or east

The Lord reminded us again that His coming will take everyone by surprise, 'like a thief'. The question is whether the surprise will be welcome or unwelcome. (Matt.24:43; Rev.3:3)

17:1,2 Q.1 So far we have met three figures of evil, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet; who was the fourth figure who now came on the scene? What clues do we have as to her identity from these first two verses?(Rev.2:20)

17:3-5 Q.2 What further information were we given in these next three verses about the identity of the harlot? How has the harlot been used as a picture in the Old Testament?(Isa.1:21; Jer.2:20; Nah.3:4) In what other way was a woman used as a picture?(Eph.5:25) What contrast do the two pictures represent? What great temptation faced the church as a body under Roman rule?

17:6 Q.3 When John saw the harlot 'he wondered greatly' whereas with the first three evil figures he did not seem to have any trouble recognising them at once. Why might that be? What according to this verse had been her chief crime?

17:7-12 Q.4 What was the harlot riding? Was the scarlet beast the same beast as in chapter 13? What similarities were there? And what differences? If the beast was not the same what might be the reason for using the same picture again? If John was now describing something future on earth rather than events in his own time, do we have any clues as to whether these are events that have already happened or are they still to come? Does it matter?

17:7-14 Q.5 Wherever these events lie in history what were the two important points of John's message in this passage? How would they help the people of those days and us today? How were believers described in verse 14? What reassurance were these titles?

17:15-18 Q.6 What was going to happen between the harlot and the beast? Why would this be? What kind of recurring conflict in history might fit this description? Again what help might it be to us to know that such things will happen?