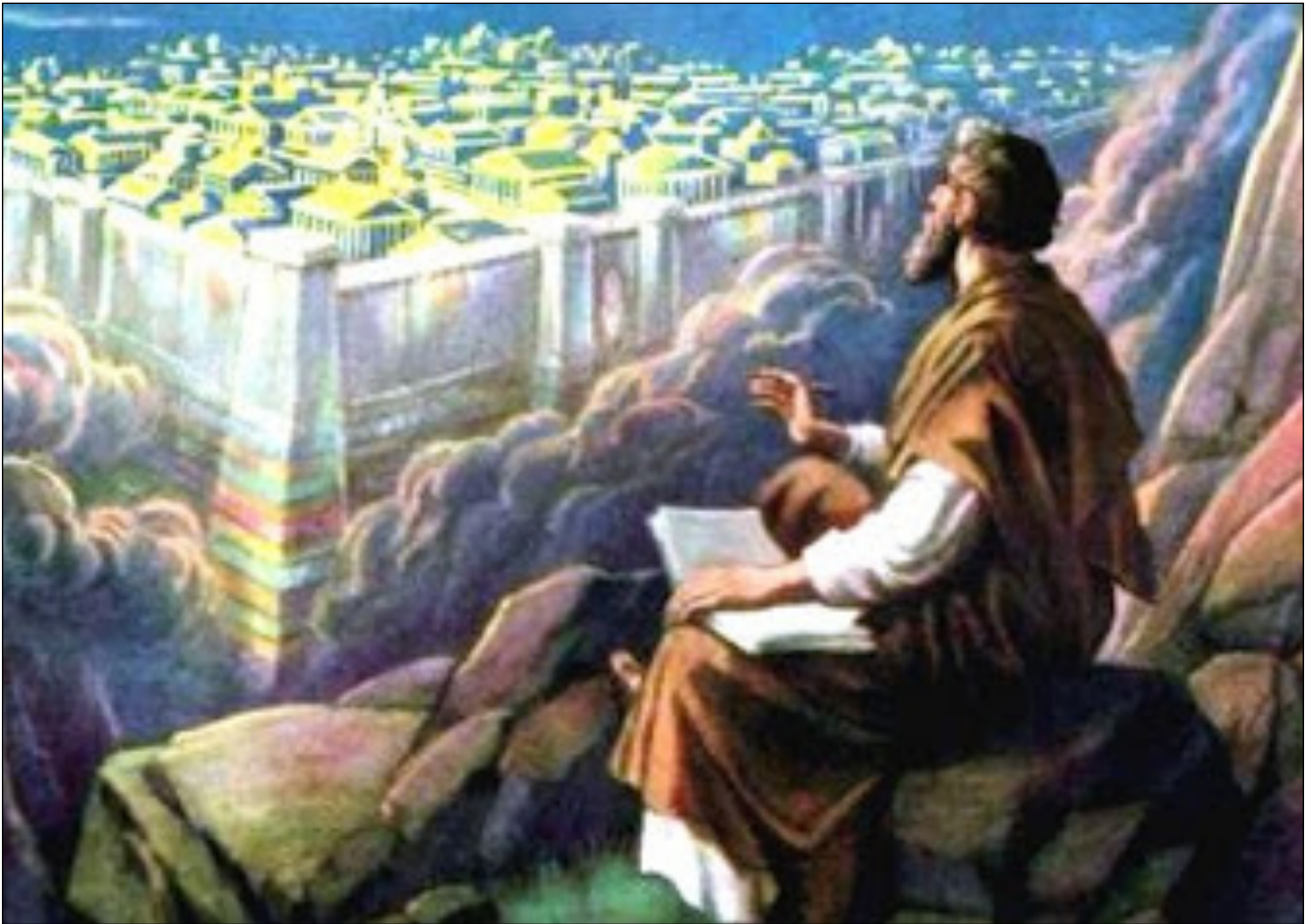

The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021



Artist unknown; Waiting for the Word - The Holy City

The battle is over: Revelation 19:1 - 22:21

Chapter 19 opens with a worship celebration of the end of Rome/Babylon. As with most epic tales, there is a recounting of the destruction, how great God was to pass that judgement, and how thrilled everyone is with the outcome.

Quickly we turn from the destruction that has dominated most of Revelation to the clean-up of that destruction and the projection of what life will look like as they all move forward.

Bride and Bridegroom

With the battle for Rome/Babylon over, a new metaphor is added to John's vision, that of a wedding between humanity and Christ. This is a familiar image for most Christians, and an influential image for women in monastic and lay ordered life.

The image begins in the celebratory song in chapter 19 and concludes in chapter 21 where those living in New Jerusalem are the only ones pure enough to be the bride of Christ (the Lamb). These images of bride and groom are intermingled with the images of the Holy City.

The wedding ceremony itself is much in keeping with Hebraic tradition where the groom goes to retrieve his bride a year after she has had time to grow and prepare for married life. In Hebraic culture it was not uncommon for a young girl to be betrothed and thus committed in marriage before she had experience puberty. Women did have agency and could agree or disagree, as seen in the story of Rebecca agreeing to marry Isaac (Genesis 23:58). However, in most cases marriage was not a love match but families aligning for mutual benefit. That can be seen through the image in Revelation about the wedding feast: the commitment has already been made, and we are just witnessing the last stage where the bride has been prepared for the final acts of unification between the heavenly and now cleansed earthly worlds.

The Millennium

Much has been made of the significance of the Millennium in Revelation, but it was only a passing reference in John to a standard of time that was both finite yet

incomprehensible. The significant part was that the faithful would support Christ's rule as priests, the most highly respected role in Temple worship. These were the ones who had obediently accepted martyrdom rather than acquiesce in the cultural demands of the Roman public worship.

During the time of John's writing, the churches were already seeing members fall away or become convinced that they could practice Christianity with friends and family, and still maintain the expected worship practices of a Roman citizen. This was not as much of a concern for the Hebraic peoples, because they already had a blanket reprieve from Roman worship. However the influence of Hebrew-Christians had already waned, and the church was increasingly dominated by Greek thought and culture. John was primarily concerned with the early Christians from a non-Hebraic world (Greek, Egyptian, Arab, etc). The great reward for not compromising, was living a millennium with Christ before the others had an opportunity to experience resurrection.

Lake of Fire

The modern images of hell as a place of endless torture can find their origin in the 'lake of fire' found in Revelation 20:10-15. John includes those he considers against God, all are brought from death to be judged. Even Hades, which was considered the forerunner to the popular Christian concept of hell, is thrown into the lake, thus negating the possibility that Hades is the place of endless torture. At this point those who died as martyrs have an exemption.

One of the overarching myths coming out of the early centuries of Christianity was that of extensive persecutions and countless martyrs. In her study on the subject, Dr. Candida Moss has identified only nine authentic tales of martyrdom in early Christian writings, arguing that the rest were meant to inspire faithfulness in other Christians during those first centuries of the church, rather than meet modern standards of historic authenticity.



By Arthur Robins

God and Magog

These two people or cultures have become associated with horrible things, but their legend has far outlived their initial reference. After the Ark landed and everyone was free to live, the Bible contains a genealogy of Noah, with Jetheth's son, Magog, being one of Noah's grandsons. There is no early Biblical reference to Gog. In Ezekiel, they are identified as



enemies of Israel, Gog being a person and Magog being the nation. By the time they get to Revelation, they are Satan's last allied after Satan's millennium in captivity, starting the final war between good and evil. Into the Middle Ages, Gog and Magog represent every enemy of the state, from the Huns to the Mongols, and germanic nomads.

A Canadian connection: LM Montgomery had two China dogs, Gog and Magog, and used them in her book, *Anne of Ingleside*, where one of the children introduces them as "God and My God".

Vision of Heaven as a Walled City

Revelation can never be removed from its context as a First Century Apocalyptic vision. Throughout much of history, walled cities meant security and identity, and this was true for Jerusalem. You either lived within the confines of the city, or you were in the 'wilderness' where anything could happen. Shepherds were routinely used as a metaphor in the Bible as those who lived outside of society, because they were a profession that lived in the wilderness and survived.

Therefore, it is no surprise that John envisions Heaven as a city, bejewelled and not needing a temple for worship, because they now lived with God and worship from a distance was no longer necessary. The first century mind could not envision anything more grand.

In order to get into a walled city gates were needed, all well guarded because that was the point where the city was most vulnerable. As a result, most cities limited their gates with one per wall, depending on size, so that those living and working in the fields just outside the city could rush inside for safety.

John's version of the City of God has not one, but three gates per side, all unguarded, adding up to the symbolic number of twelve (totality, wholeness). Each had a different jewel surrounding it, speaking to the unmeasurable wealth contained in the city.

John gave the size of New Jerusalem, roughly a square of 15,000 miles a side and two million square miles. As a comparison that is the size of 2/3 of North America or the entirety of the Middle East.



The description of the new temple echos the description in Ezekiel 40-44. As has been noted throughout, Revelation does not stray far from Ezekiel. Ezekiel was giving God's parameters for the Second Temple, where John was giving the description of the final temple with no barriers to the faithful and no non-believers left to interfere with worship.

The final word

Unlike the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, John was instructed to share this revelation with the faithful and all believers alone, not attempt to change the ways of those outside the faith. This reiterates that the judgements had been made and penalties planned before Jesus approached John to visit for the vision of the future. There is no desire to change anything since John and those living as he lives are convinced they are already in the heavenly kingdom before all the destruction begins.

The warning to keep this revelation intact without either adding something or removing something, is unique in Christian scripture. The only place such a warning exists in Hebrew Scriptures is in Deuteronomy 4 where the author prepares the Hebrew people to hear the Ten Commandments.

The final grace is in keeping with the style used by Paul to end his letters. This was a common method of concluding a Christian letter in the day, with the due homage and blessing paid to the community hearing this document. This ending can also be found in non-canonical letters like those of a bishop named Clements c. 120 CE.

Revelation used in modern Worship

In the three year cycle of the Lectionary, Revelation is only read in Easter on Year C (Gospel of Luke), and half of those readings are from the final two chapters where the talk is about the Holy City, the New Jerusalem.

Funeral services are the only other time Revelation is read, and that is often parts from verses 20-21, where the dead have been freed and are part of the new resurrection, and all are together in the City of God.

Language does come out of Revelation into our worship services: Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world; King of Kings and Lord of Lords; Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End.

Other mythologies about the end times

End-time literature is not unique to the Hebrew or earliest Christian community. All mythologies have their beginning process and their end times. Interestingly the metaphors and symbols are quite similar around the globe:

- Islam: The redeemer (Mahdi) will come white stallion to rid the world of corruption and evil. He will work with Isa (Jesus) to get rid of the false-Messiah
- Hinduism: Kalki, the last avatar of Vishnu, will come on a white horse and cleanse the land, then bring about rebirth
- Buddhism: First a time of turmoil, then wisdom will be lost for 5000 years. Then a new incarnation of Buddha (Maitreya) will come and rediscover the teachings of enlightenment. Then it will be time for the seven suns, which will systematically destroy the world
- Norse mythology: Ragnarok will be the ultimate war between the gods, with the people dying. Only two people will survive. The war will sink the world underwater, where it will eventually be reborn, fertile and ready to support life again, which the two humans will birth.
- Mayan: the sky will collapse under a huge rain. It will rise again supported by the Five World Trees
- Hopi: Spider Grandmother will create a funnel through which the people will move to the next stage of existence
- Ancient Greece: the world has been created and destroyed countless times, and continues in a cycle. Zeus destroys the world once it reaches its "Iron Age", and then life begins again.