

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD'S PEOPLE (19:1-10)

Following the description of Babylon's destruction, which is an answer to the prayers of the martyrs (19:2b; cf. 6:9-11), comes the mighty chorus of God's people shouting "hallelujah" in a united roar of triumph.

This triumphant scene introduces the reader to a new metaphor, the antithesis of the great prostitute. Unlike the detestable whore, the new figure is one of purity, the figure of a bride ready to celebrate her marriage. She had saved herself for her husband, the Lamb. The figure of the bride is especially appropriate to describe the universal people of God who have remained faithful (cf. Eph. 5:22-32). In terms reminiscent of the parables of Jesus, the messianic consummation is described as a wedding festival (cf. Mt. 22:1-10; 25:1-13). The imagery of a great eschatological feast has roots in both the Old Testament (Isa. 25:6-8) as well as the New Testament (Lk. 14:15-24), and especially in the eucharistic sayings of Jesus, there is the idea of a great final supper (Lk. 22:14-18).

THE WORD "HALLELUJAH"

The word hallelujah derives from the imperative Hebrew expression "praise Yah," or Hallel Yah. ("Yah" is an abbreviated form of the name Yahweh, which appears periodically in the Hebrew text of the Psalms.) "Hallelujah" was a temple call to worship for the post-exilic community, and it appears at the beginning and/or end of Psalms 104-106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, 146-150. It passes into later languages, including English, as a transliteration, and it continues to serve as a liturgical interjection by the Christian church generally.

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE CITY OF GOD (19:11-22:5)

With the fall of Babylon, John now begins his description of the last great scene, the second advent of Jesus Christ and the glorious union of Christ and his people.

The Parousia (19:11-16)

There are three recurring words used in the Greek New Testament to describe the second advent of Christ. They are:

Parousia (= the coming, arrival, or presence of Christ)

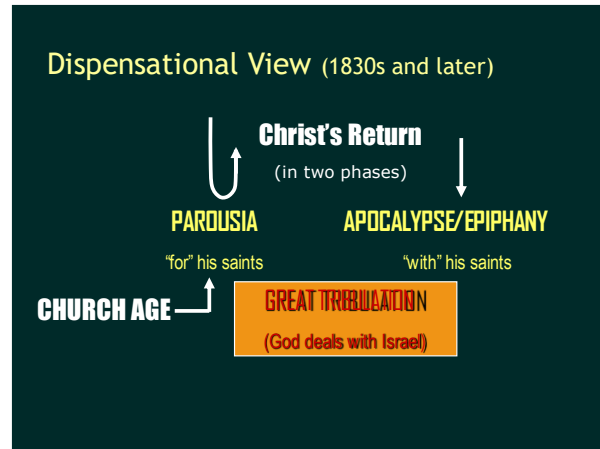
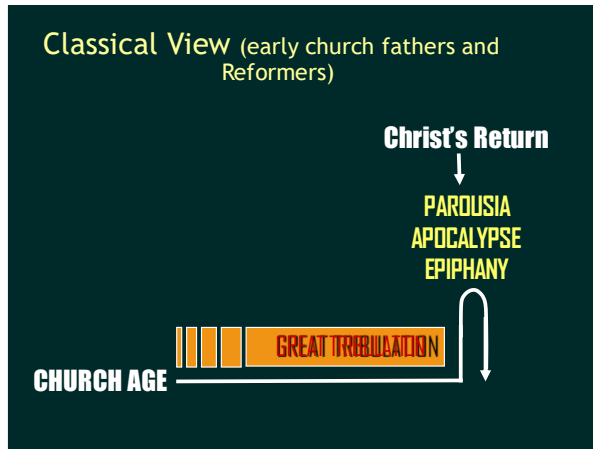
Apocalypsis (= the revelation of Christ)

Epiphaneia (= the manifestation of Christ)

These words all refer to the same event, though they reflect different nuances of its character.¹ While none of them appear in the present passage, probably due to its symbolic genre, the scene

¹A popular interpretation within dispensational teaching is that there will be two comings of Christ at the end of the age, or more precisely, two aspects of the second coming of Christ separated by a seven-year time span. As such, the dispensationalist attempts to separate the *parousia* of Christ from the apocalypse and epiphany of Christ. Alas, this interpretation cannot be accepted without doing violence to the biblical text, and it must be rejected. See discussion in G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 49-57.

before the reader seems clearly to be an expanded description of Christ's return as it was briefly described earlier in the book (1:1, 7-8; 17:14).



Two primary viewpoints have been defended with respect to the so-called "rapture" of the church and its relationship to the great tribulation period. The classical view (post-tribulationism) was held for most of Christian history, which is to say, the church would face the terrible persecutions of the anti-Christ. With the development of dispensationalism in the mid-1800s, a second view has become prominent (pre-tribulationism). This is the view that Christian believers will be evacuated from the world prior to the great tribulation, and they will remain in heaven with Christ for seven years, finally returning to the earth when he returns to the earth.

In describing the return of Christ, the imagery is no longer the Lamb. Rather, John now draws his symbolism from the Old Testament ideal of Yahweh as the Man of War riding a war horse (cf. Ex. 15:1-12). John gives sufficient means to identify the figure. The names "Faithful" and "True" and "Word of God" and "King of kings and Lord of lords," as well as the imagery of his eyes like blazing fire and his tongue like a sword (cf. 1:14, 16), unmistakably identify him as Jesus Christ. His mission is to crush every enemy in rebellion against God (cf. 1 Co. 15:25; Ro. 16:20). His robe is saturated with the blood of his enemies, much as the robe of one who treads grapes in a winepress would be stained with the juice of the pressed fruit (cf. Isa. 63:1-4). His armies represent the hosts of heaven (Zec. 14:5; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26; 1 Th. 3:13; 2 Th. 1:7).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Do you think the triumph in heaven sung by the great multitude in 19:1 is simply a different metaphor for the triumph of the 144,000 in 14:1 and the announcement in 11:15-18?*
- *What do you make of the angel in 19:9-10 who describes himself as "a fellow servant...who holds to the testimony of Jesus?" In what sense might angels hold to the testimony of Jesus?*
- *Dispensationalists generally understand the "armies of heaven" (19:14) to be the saints of the raptured church, who have now been with Christ in the heavenlies for seven years during the great tribulation. They make a distinction between Christ coming "for" his saints (the rapture) and Christ coming "with" his saints (the return of Christ to earth). In light of Mt. 16:27; 24:31; Mk. 8:38, how credible is this interpretation?*

The Great Eschatological Battle (19:17-21)

The conflict between God and Satan, Christ and antichrist, reaches its climax with the last great battle, earlier referred to as Armageddon and the “battle of the great day of God Almighty” (16:14-16). John draws his imagery for the battle primarily from Ezekiel’s prophecy of the last great eschatological battle (39:17-20). Once more, John has created a startling contrast, macabre in its implications. While the church is called to celebrate her wedding to the Lamb, the scavenger birds are called to feast on the carrion of God’s enemies. The beast, the false prophet, and all their cohorts are destroyed. The beast and the false prophet, like Pharaoh and his armies in the exodus, are thrown into the waters, this time the burning waters of fiery sulfur (cf. Ex. 15:1,4-5,7-10, 21). Christ’s followers will reign with him a thousand years (20:6).

The Thousand Years (20:1-6)

This short passage, for all its brevity, has become one of the most divisive in Christian history. The debate concerns the meaning of the thousand years, a period which is mentioned multiple times. Essentially, there are four major views that Christians have held concerning the passage.²

Historic Premillennialism

This position understands the 1000 years to be a future time of blessedness on earth following the return of Christ. The earth will finally realize its destiny in a perfect world. The antecedents to this view come from the earliest centuries of the Christian church, hence “historic,” and it generally upholds the belief that the restoration promises to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the broader concept of God’s people in the New Testament. The church, the final form of God’s people, is made up of both believing Jews and Gentiles, who have become a new Israel. Historic premillennialists are usually post-tribulational.

Amillennialism

This view does not look for the 1000 years as a future age. Rather, it interprets the language as symbolic and as describing the realities of Satan’s defeat when Christ died and rose from the dead. The 1000 years is a non-mathematical symbol of the era between Christ’s resurrection and his return at the end of the present age. Amillennialism was the dominate view during long periods of Christian history. Augustine can be credited with the systematization of this approach, and most churches from the Reformed tradition, following John Calvin, are amillennial.

Postmillennialism:

Postmillennialism is the view that the millennium refers to the closing era of this present age during which the church will be successful in evangelizing the world. After the reign of Christ becomes world-wide through the preaching of the gospel, there will be a long period of righteousness and peace, after which Christ will return. Postmillennialism is often difficult to distinguish from amillennialism, since both views understand the 1000 years as a symbol of the church age. In any case, we should understand that the prefixes pre-, a- and post- are modern

² For a brief but insightful comparison of these four views, written by scholars each of whom espouses one of them and interacts with the others, see: R. Clouse, ed., *The Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

theological jargon and cannot be traced backward very far in church history.

Dispensational Premillennialism

This, the newest of the interpretations, is the view that the 1000 years are a future span of time in which the promises to Israel in the Abrahamic covenant shall be literally fulfilled in Palestine. This theology, which has its roots in the teachings of J. N. Darby of the mid-1800s, has become the most popular one within American fundamentalism, largely due to the Scofield Reference Bible which champions it. Dispensational premillennialism usually goes hand in hand with a pretribulation rapture position.

The viewpoint followed in this study is that of historic premillennialism. It anticipates a reign of Christ over the earth for 1000 years following his second advent. However, a certain reservation should be maintained in view of the fact that this is the only passage in the Bible which specifically describes it. There is no capacity for foolproof cross-referencing. The strength of the premillennial position does not come so much from a literalistic hermeneutic versus a figurative one (as sometimes suggested) as it does from the fact that to view the millennium as future avoids the anachronistic character of amillennialism and the overly optimistic tone of postmillennialism. At the same time, historic premillennialism understands the covenant promises of God to Israel to be fulfilled, not to the Jews alone, but to the entire body of God's redeemed people in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Thus, there is no distinctive Jewish character to the millennium as is maintained by dispensational premillennialists.

The basic exegesis of the passage, then, follows along these lines. When Christ comes, the powers of evil will be silenced for 1000 years. This binding of Satan is precautionary rather than punitive, for Satan later will be loosed again for a short period. The righteous dead will be resurrected (cf. 11:15-18), including the martyrs. Together with Christ they will reign in true righteousness over the nations of the earth (cf. 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 1 Co. 6:2). This resurrection of the righteous is called the first resurrection (cf. Jn. 5:29). Due to the frequent symbolism of numbers in the Revelation, the 1000 years depicts a long period of time, though it need not refer to exactly 1000 years, but rather, may represent an ideal period represented by ten to the third power.

The Battle of Gog and Magog (20:7-10)

After the 1000 years of peace, Satan will be released from the abyss. Apparently, this release is necessary to manifest the evil that still resides within the nations of the world. John draws his vocabulary from Ezekiel from which he borrows the terms Gog and Magog (Eze. 38:1-2; 39:6). While Ezekiel refers to Gog and Magog as hostile nations in the north, John uses the terms to represent the nations of the world who stage the final assault upon God's people. In this final battle, God's people are once more delivered. This time, the powers of evil are silenced forever. Satan will be banished for eternity.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *The interpretive options of literalism and symbolism are especially apparent for these passages concerning Christ's return and the 1000 years. What are the pros and cons of each?*