

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE LAMB, THE 144,000, THE ANGEL MESSAGES, AND THE HARVEST OF THE EARTH: 14:1-20

Chapter 14 concludes the interlude between the seven trumpets of judgment and the seven bowls of wrath. It has a special continuity with chapters 12 and 13. Whereas chapters 12 and 13 describe the terrible power of evil as it is displayed in antagonism toward the people of God, chapter 14 provides assurance to God's people that the powers of evil will be judged by Almighty God and that God's people will themselves emerge from their crucible in triumphant glory.

The Victory of God's People (14:1-5)

Earlier, there was given a proleptic declaration that God's people would be triumphant through the Lamb's blood and their faithful witness (12:10-11). Here John recalls that promise and returns to his imagery of the Lamb and the 144,000, who stand triumphant on Mt. Zion. Several significant points should be made:

The Geography of Mt. Zion

The Lamb standing on Mt. Zion creates a sharp contrast to the two beasts that arose from the land and the sea. Symbolically, this imagery shows the superiority of the Lamb and the people of God over the powers of evil and the followers of the unholy trinity.

Mt. Zion carries with it an extensive array of ideas arising from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a shift in emphasis from Sinai to Zion in the history of Israel, represented by Yahweh's trek from Sinai to Zion (Ps. 68:7-18). When Solomon installed the ark of the covenant in the 1st temple, the poet could say with assurance that "the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary" (Ps. 68:17b). Zion, which became the shrine-center of Yahweh's people and the permanent residence of Yahweh, was considered to be impregnable (Ps. 46:1-7; 48:8-14; 125:1-2).



SINAI & ZION

The two Old Testament mountains, one associated with Moses, the other with David: Jebel Musa, the traditional Mt. Sinai (left); an artist's conception of Mt. Zion and city of David (right)

However, the loss of Zion in the exile devastated the Israelites (Ps. 74:1-11; 137:1-9). Out of this exile arose the hope for Zion's full restoration (Isa. 66:18-21). However, while the first flush of excitement

was intense in the return of the remnant from Babylonian exile (Ps. 126:1-6), the harsh realities of trying to rebuild a culture and a center of worship made it a hope deferred (Ezra 3:10-13; Zec. 6:12-13b, 15; 8:1-3). Within the New Testament, the deferred hope of Zion's restoration was seen by the early Christians to be symbolically fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth and the new community of faith (Ro. 9:33; 1 Pe. 2:6-8). The kingdom of God is spiritual Zion, and those who have come to faith in Christ Jesus have "come to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (He. 12:18-24, 28-29). The triumph of God's people on Mt. Zion, then, is the spiritual fulfillment of the prophetic promise in the Old Testament (Joel 2:30-32; Isa. 24:18b-23; Mic. 4:6-8).

Once more, the observant reader will pick up the overtones of an exodus motif. Just as Israel made her journey through the wilderness to the land of promise, and ultimately to Mt. Zion, where Yahweh would take his residence, so the people of God, pictured as a woman in the desert, have made their way to Mt. Zion, the place of final triumph.

Marked With the Father's Name

In the original vision of the 144,000, the reader was informed that God's people were sealed in their foreheads (7:3). Here the seal is defined as the Lamb's name and the Father's name (cf. 3:12; 22:4). As such, the mark of God's people with God's name contrasts the mark of the beast's followers that bear his name (13:16-17). The harpists who sing the song of redemption are not identified, though they are distinguished from the four living creatures and the 24 elders. It is not unlikely that they represent angelic hosts. In any case, no one could grasp the meaning of the redemption song except those who had been redeemed, which is to say, the blessing of salvation and victory are only truly understood by those who experience it.

The Purity of God's People

The idea of purity, pictured as abstinence from sexual intercourse, arises from the Old Testament injunctions for purity in things having to do with religious ritual or holy war (Ex. 19:15; Lv. 15:16-24; Dt. 23:9-11; 1 Sa. 21:5; 2 Sa. 11:11). The point being made is not that celibacy is praiseworthy, but that God's people are the pure warriors of God's armies. The picture is wholly symbolic, and it finds its ultimate meaning in the refusal of God's people to have any relations with the great prostitute, Babylon (17:1-2, 4-5; 18:3-5). This imagery of purity is reinforced by their abstinence from lying and their devoted following of the Lamb. As the metaphor shifts, the people of God are described as a first-fruits offering, that is, a praise offering to God (cf. Ex. 23:16, 19). This may well be in anticipation of the harvest scene to be described in 14:14ff., in which the wicked of the earth are reaped in judgment.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Why do you think that no one could learn the "new song" except those who had been redeemed from the earth?*
- *The 144,000 are described as those who did not "defile themselves with women...but kept themselves pure." To what does this metaphor point?*
- *Do you think the idea of "the first-fruits to God and the Lamb" has any relationship to James' reference to Christians as first-fruits (cf. Ja. 1:18)?*

The Angel Messages (14:6-13)

Three angel messages are now described, each consisting of a theme pertinent to the close of the age. First, an “eternal gospel” is announced to all the earth. It is a call to repentance and worship. It is probably best not to become overly technical with the term “gospel” in this passage. It is anarthrous in the Greek text (i.e., it has no definite article) and should probably be taken in the general sense of an announcement rather than in the more specific sense of the full Christian message.

Second, just as the reader was briefly introduced to the figure of the beast before it was described (11:7), so the reader here is introduced to the Great Babylon before she is described. A full extension of the metaphor of Babylon will be given in chapters 17 and 18. Here, however, the angel merely announces the fall of the great city representing blasphemous civilization.

Finally, the entire retinue of the beast will be punished by God. The idea of wine representing God’s undiminished fury is graphically described as *kekerasmenou akratou* (= having been mixed undiluted). The idea is that the wine is mixed with spices to make it all the more potent, and unlike normal household beverages, it is not diluted with water.¹ Once more, the patience of the saints is enjoined (cf. 13:10) so that while God’s people will be under severe duress, they may rest assured that God will judge evil in the end. The accompanying beatitude, while it bears particular meaning for Christian martyrs, also bears a general meaning for all Christians for whom death holds no terrors. The passage in 14:13 is taken up in the funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer.

The Harvest (14:14-20)

In these final verses of the interlude, John uses two metaphors for harvesting, the first depicting a grain harvest and the second depicting a grape harvest. In ancient Israel, flax and barley were harvested in the spring, while grapes were harvested in the summer.

There is a similarity between this harvest scene and the one described by Jesus in his parable of the dandelion and wheat (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43). While grain is not specified in John’s metaphor, the differentiation from the grape harvest to follow suggests that the reader is to understand the first one to be a grain harvest. Interpreters are divided as to the meaning of this first harvest vision. If the reaper is to be identified as Jesus Christ, as the title “Son of Man,” the golden crown, and the seat on a white cloud suggest, then the harvest represents the coming of Christ for his people. It is the gathering of God’s good grain to himself. On the other hand, if the reaper is not Jesus Christ (based on the fact that he is commanded by an angel to reap, a command that might not seem appropriate in view of the lordship of Christ), then the harvest of grain is to be taken as synonymous with the harvest of



¹ In the ancient Near East, wine was mixed with spices, which made it particularly intoxicating. Wine as a household beverage was used much more extensively than in modern times, due to the scarcity and pollution of water. In everyday usage, it was often diluted with water, cf. J. Ross, “Wine”, *IDB* (1962) IV.849-851.

grapes, that is, the gathering of the wicked for judgment. On the whole, it is difficult to decide between the two, though the title “Son of Man” (or “son of Adam” in its Hebrew counterpart), by this point in Christian history, is especially difficult to associate with anyone besides Jesus Christ.



UNESCO World Heritage, Thebes, Valley of the Nobles, Tomb of Nakht: showing the treading of grapes (ca. 1400 BC)

The grape harvest is associated with an angel who had charge of the fire from the altar, and this immediately recalls the martyrs’ cry for vengeance (6:9-11; 8:3-5). The meaning of the grape harvest is easier to interpret than the previous grain harvest inasmuch as its imagery is clearly attested in the Old Testament as a symbol of God’s judgment, particularly his eschatological judgment (cf. Joel 3:12-13; Isa. 63:1-6; Lam. 1:15). The imagery of heavily flowing blood outside the city has parallels in 1 Enoch 100:3, where it says that in the eschatological battle the blood would flow to the horses’ chests, and in 2 Esdras 15:35f., where the blood would flow to the horses’ chests and the camels’ knees. The extent of the carnage, 1600 stadia (about 180 miles) may be an intended hyperbole, such as one finds in the Jewish Talmud, where it describes the Emperor Hadrian’s unrestrained blood-bath as being “till a horse sank to its nostrils in blood.” On the other hand, if it is to be taken literally, the distance is approximately the length of the Holy Land. The name of the city is not mentioned, but the particular names cited

elsewhere in the Apocalypse are Jerusalem, Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, and by implication, Rome, all of which seem to represent the same thing, the unbelieving, blaspheming world that rejects God and his Christ (11:8; 14:8; 17:9, 18). The description of the field of battle as awash with blood is often linked to the later reference to the Battle of Armageddon (cf. 16:14, 16).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *If a messenger as impressive as an “angel” preaches the everlasting gospel to all earth-dwellers, why do you think they will refuse to accept it? Do you think their rejection of the gospel is related to what St. Paul calls “powerful delusion...to believe the lie” (2 Th. 2:9-12)?*
- *Inasmuch as the term “saints” (= holy ones) in 14:12 is used in the other books of the New Testament to refer to Christians, this factor becomes a major argument in favor of post-tribulationism. How strong is this argument?*
- *How does Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares, where separation awaits the harvest at the end of the age, bear upon the question of pre-tribulationism vs. post-tribulationism?*