The New Testament in a Year

Week 51

Revelation 14-18

This week's reflector is Paul Miller.

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Monday

Revelation 14

The symbolism of Revelation is too complex to explain in a few words. A good commentary is essential to unravel it. But the basic message is simple: history is the dramatic conflict between God and Satan, the Lamb and the beast, good and evil.

The real meaning of perplexing events on earth is hidden in heaven, but is now being revealed through John to encourage the suffering church. The 144,000 are those "marked with the seal of the Lamb," who belong to Christ. The number 12 symbolizes the whole people of God. This is 12 times 12 times 1000 a throng without number!

The line between heaven and earth is dissolving. The Lamb, whom John initially saw in the throne-room of heaven, now stands with his people on Mt. Zion, on earth. John's vision is gathering momentum, towards a final climax in which the Lamb will be victorious. The church needs to endure until it's all worked out.

Tuesday

Revelation 15

This chapter has strong echoes of the exodus story. The sending of terrible plagues, those who had conquered the tyranny of the beast standing beside the sea, and the song of Moses are all drawn from the Old Testament story of the liberation of God's people from Egypt.

But the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb are the same song. The God of the exodus and the God of Jesus Christ are the same God! There is no opposition between the story of God's mighty deeds to Israel and what God has accomplished through Christ.

Note that the whole scene, like much of Revelation, is pictured as liturgy, worship. The temple is filled with the glory of God, as it was for the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6).

Wednesday

Revelation 16

Seven angels (messengers) pour out seven bowls of wrath. These trigger horrific plagues, reminiscent of those visited on Pharaoh – sores, blood, scorching heat, darkness. And, just as Pharaoh was given repeated opportunities to change but refused, those who follow the beast "did not repent and give [God] glory." Revelation, which seems to be full of excessive and gratuitous violence, actually tells of God's patience. We get multiple opportunities to come to our senses – but often don't!

The trauma of cosmic conflict is intensifying as the story builds to a dramatic climax. In a reversal of the exodus, the Euphrates dries up to create a path for the "kings of the east" to come and participate in the final battle of evil versus good.

But the outcome is secured. "It is done" the voice from heaven declares. Evil has lost the battle.

Thursday

Revelation 17

Babylon is the name given to the oppressors of God's people. Rome was the latest and worst incarnation of Babylon. John pictures Rome as a prostitute — seductive, alluring, promising wealth, pleasure and glamour, but deadly, getting drunk on the blood of the saints.

Revelation tells us that things are not what they appear. And there are many things that look real, but in fact are bogus. The whore, John says, "was and is not and is about to go ... to destruction" (v. 8), the mirror opposite of the Lord who "is and was and is to come" (1:4).

Verses 9-17 are an elaborate cipher for Rome and a series of emperors. Much of the symbolism is drawn from the Old Testament, principally the Book of Daniel. There is no agreement on exactly what it all stands for. The main point, though, is that they "will make war on the Lamb and the Lamb will conquer them." (v. 14) So the suffering faithful can take heart.

Friday

Revelation 18

A great angel comes down from heaven and announces the fall of Babylon. In striking contrast to the darkness and destruction of divine wrath, this angel makes "the earth bright by his splendor." (v.1)

The angel calls God's people out of Babylon, closely echoing the words of the prophet Jeremiah 500 years earlier. Read Jeremiah 51: 45-49 for comparison.

Babylon's fall means the end for a whole political, economic and military system. Kings, capitalists and captains will all weep and mourn at her demise. This passage reminds us of the ultimate vanity of a way of life built on money alone, and of the interconnected nature of imperial power.

Although it sounds very different, doesn't this chapter echo the Magnificat: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away." (Luke 1: 52-53.)