

Our God reigns

Revelation 19.1-10

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How will the story of our world end? This has been mankind’s major question for centuries. Historians have studied the past to find clues to understand the future. Philosophers and scientists have tried to penetrate the meaning of things, but they have yet to find the key. No wonder perplexed but misguided people have turned in desperation to astrology and spiritism! Much better is: to listen to what God through his own Son and his apostles has to tell us. That gives us sure answers.

1. The adulteress world

God has given the apostle John on the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern Turkey, a magnificent vision of heaven and earth and its future. All things will one day be renewed, you and I included.

But God did not give John a detailed timeline, not a schedule telling us what will happen when. But in the Word of God, we have mental pictures that give us insight in our world, images of how our Lord supports his children, and yes, also what the future of this world will be.



In Rev 18, St John has described the future fall of the evil empire called Babylon. ‘Babylon’ according to many, stood for the Roman Empire – hence for all evil empires where rulers and their people focus on money, power, lust; it is the empire where the church of Christ is being subdued and persecuted and where for the morality of Christ there is no place.

For you, Biblical savants, I like to suggest another option. Bear with me. In the book of Revelation, Jerusalem is called Sodom and Egypt, and the great city where the Lord is crucified. Rev 11.8 speaks of:

...the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified.’ The great city where the Lord is crucified, Jerusalem, is called Sodom, and Egypt. A few chapters later, in Rev 16.19, we read of

...the great city, split into three parts. [...] God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.’

Is John calling names at Jerusalem? Sodom, Egypt, Babylon? Is this book of Revelation telling Jerusalem that the Biblical punishments of the evil empires of Sodom, Egypt and Babylon will be applied by God to Israel itself?

Is John predicting here, or describing with hindsight, what Jesus also spoke about, namely the destruction of Jerusalem? This is what Jesus said in Matthew 23:

I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you [...] your house is left to you desolate.

Jesus then continues to describe the total destruction of Jerusalem, which actually happened in 70 AD.

In any case, whether Rome or Jerusalem, John describes those empires as prostitutes – they sell their soul for more money, more power, for dancing through life at the expense of others and while others suffer.

These empires, these kingdoms of man, will eventually collapse because God will judge them. God hears the cries of the oppressed. Injustice does not last forever.

Listen to some verses from Rev 18 about this empire of Babylon and its fall.

With a mighty voice he shouted:

‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! [...] The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.’ (Rev 18.2-3)

You see how the relations between nations and business are described here as adultery? In the Bible that term often has the connotation of religious sin: the worship of strange gods like Mammon, the god of money. Some religions and gods seem to give power and wealth to those men who lead them.

In Rev 18.24 we read: ‘In [Babylon] was found the blood of the prophets and of the saints...’ These words underline for me that we have John here addressing Jerusalem, more than Rome, because the words echo the language that Jesus used about Jerusalem.

This shedding of the blood of the prophets and the saints is the major issue in God’s judgment of the kingdoms of this world.

John writes his book to encourage the church of God: those rulers who seem almighty will be done away with. Those rich and mighty, who trample the poor, they will not have the last word. Those who persecute the church of God, they will be judged by God who himself will



descend from heaven to bring justice and judge the ‘Supreme Commanders’ of this world. So if you feel down and out sometimes about the massive injustice all over the globe, and in Egypt as well – be encouraged.

2. Our God reigns

Those rulers of our world may seem mighty, but this is a visual distortion. They only seem mighty because God is withholding his power for now. He gives mankind space as a mother who looks at the playing of many children in a large sandbox. The boy who is bullying other kids may think he is big – but just wait until mother comes and interferes.

‘Hallelujah, for our Lord God Almighty reigns’. (Rev 19.6)

That is what John hears the angels sing. The bully in the sandbox may be strong – but mother will interfere in the end. Our God will not allow anyone to continually mess around with his children. He will, in the end, act decisively. There is hope for us, and for this world.

The word Hallelujah occurs four times in the few verses we read from Rev 19. This is the only time this word Hallelujah, ‘Praise to Yahweh’ occurs in the New Testament, at the moment when God comes to save his people.

Only in the Psalms the word Hallelujah occurs as well. It is interesting that the word occurs mostly in Psalm 113-118; these are therefore called the Hallelujah-psalms. They were read daily in the temple in Jerusalem in the week when the Easter-Lamb was killed, when the exodus from Egypt was commemorated. When Israel was saved by leaving Egypt while God poured out his vengeance on Egypt.

All the plagues God once used for Egypt, and Sodom, and Babylon, to save Israel from those oppressors, are poured out in the book of Revelation. Over Jerusalem? Over Rome? Over the whole world? to avenge the abuse of the righteous and to save Gods own people.

This is the final exodus, and the church is invited to eat the final paschal meal at the wedding of the Lamb. We use Hallelujah in our liturgy to participate in the heavenly liturgy, together with the Old Testament saints who praised God in the Temple. The word reminds us of the great deeds of God who comes to set us free. He does not let this world turn around as it goes forever, but He is mighty and he will come to make all things good for his children.’

3. The wedding feast

No wonder the masses in heaven roar:

I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” (Read Rev 19.1b-2)

Christians who have cried out for centuries: ‘God, why do you allow so much injustice to happen; why do you allow your own people to be persecuted and butchered; why do we have to live in fear’, such people can praise God for his righteousness.

Babylon, the empire of injustice that killed the children of God, will be judged. This praise to God will ring permanently in eternity – but even today in our liturgy these words of praise to God are heard. The few verses we read from Rev 19.1-10 contain words like ‘salvation and power and glory belong to our God’. Four times we read the word ‘hallelujah’. We also read of the Lamb of God; all terms that we so often use when we celebrate Holy Communion.

“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Rev 19.6b-8).

Our Holy Communion is a looking backward to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God on the cross, it celebrates the great exodus he offers us. It began with his life and sacrificial death. But we also look forward to the eternal marriage of the Lamb – the royal wedding meal – the final stages of our exodus – our salvation.

The persecuted, trampled, despised, those who were second-rate citizens in this world, they are rewarded with a great wedding feast – with the Son of God.

What a sharp contrast between the great prostitute, Babylon, and those who prostituted with her, and this wedding of the Lamb of God.

At weddings, the question is often: ‘what does the bride wear?’ In the description of St John, this is not different. The bride of Jesus Christ, the church, wears fine linen, bright white, and clean. This symbolizes the righteous life of the followers of Jesus Christ. Not just because the blood of Christ has washed us clean - but also because we actually live to the honor of God, insha allah.



What a difference with how the prostitute Babylon and her adulterers is described in Rev 18.

Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! (Rev 18.16).

The Empire is clothed in purple and scarlet – the color of royalty, and power. But also the color of the blood of the martyrs, and the color of sin.

The glittering stones, precious pearls and gold around the neck of Babylon also seem to be a warning of St John that the ostentatious wealth of the nations and their rulers with their fat bank accounts are condemned by God.

To what extent our lifestyle in respect to our money and our behavior towards the poor is in line with the holiness of God?

Conclusion

What to do with this grandiose image of the great climax of our world and God's saving acts for his church? Two things:

First: When the empires fall, God calls his people to be different. When Babylon fell, John heard a voice:

“Come out of her, my people,
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes. (Rev 18.4-5).

We live in the midst of the empires of the world. That is where we are. But our call is clear and simple:

‘Come out of her; do not share in her sins.’ Live a life of exodus in the midst of this world.

If the Babylonian empire of evil is portrayed with excessive wealth, power, lust, religious adultery, we must obviously as Christians be very careful not to participate in the same games of power and money and lust, and spiritual deviation. We are not committed to the prostitute but to bridegroom – Jesus Christ.

And he expects us, who are presently ‘engaged’ to him, to keep our dignity and honor and spiritual virginity – by not participating in the lifestyle of Babylon. This world is not our home. Our Lord Jesus deserves our wholehearted devotion. We have to live worthy of the Lamb.

Secondly: we can only, like John, worship God our savior and the Lamb of God. He comes to the rescue in a magnificent manner. What a comfort that one day we will celebrate that meal with him. And what foretaste we may enjoy even today when we participate in his meal. Now as his fiancée. One day, his bride.

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit