

The Book of Revelation

Week #14 – The Lamb and the 144,000

I. REVIEW – REVELATION 13:1-18

A. The Dragon and the Beasts

Unsuccessful in his assault on the woman and her son, the Dragon turns to attack her offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

Cast out of heaven, Satan knows that his time is short and is determined to do as much damage and destruction as he can. He summons his own offspring, two dreadful beasts, and delegates his power to them.

The beasts are symbols, at the most fundamental level, of sinful humanity, but they are not *just* symbols.

They are real spiritual beings, demonic persons who have controlled and corrupted the political destiny of nations over the centuries including the Roman Empire, Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, etc.

B. The First Beast

The first beast is from the sea and represents corrupt government or political authority, i.e., the state, headed by a corrupt ruler. In John's time this would have been the Roman Empire, headed by Nero [or Domitian].

Revelation shows clearly that Satan has power over earthly governments and the anti-God political ideology behind many of them, e.g., Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and Socialism.

In Matthew's Gospel the devil's third temptation of Christ makes this clear:

[8] Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them;

[9] and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." [Mt 4:8-9].

Note that Jesus did not deny the devil's claim to the kingdoms of this world.

C. The Second Beast

The second beast is from the earth or the land, and represents a false religious leader [the false prophet] and a corrupt religious system or authority which promotes false worship.

For those who date Revelation in the 60s the second beast represents the corrupt religious leadership centered in Jerusalem. For those who date the book in the 90s it is the cult of emperor worship.

D. Satan Corrupts State and Church

Thus Satan wants to subvert God's plan by corrupting both kingdom and priesthood – state and Church!

II. REV. 14 – THE LAMB AND HIS RANSOMED

A. Overview

In Revelation 13:1-10 John presented us with a vision of the beast and its followers.

In direct contrast, John's next vision opens with the Lamb standing on Mount Zion in triumph, and with him 144,000 of the redeemed; the same group of martyrs described in Rev. 7.

The Lamb and his followers present a contrasting vision to the beast and his followers.

The Lamb contrasts with the beast and Mount Zion with the sea.

These followers of the Lamb have attained redemption. Salvation will reach its climax when the kingdom of God is fully established [the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride the Church].

Read: Revelation 14:1-3

1] Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

[2] And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like

the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, [3] and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth.

B. The 144,000

The number is symbolic; 12 (tribes of Israel) x 12 (Apostles) x 1000 (indicating a large number).

The vision of the 144,000 on Mount Zion shows that God has not failed Israel, even if they have failed him. It reminds us that though Jerusalem has become wicked, not all from Israel will be condemned.

The 144,000 belong to Christ and His Father and bear their mark on their foreheads. This contrasts the followers of the Lamb with the followers of the beast who have its mark on their foreheads.

The 144,000 are a special group within the faithful, and not simply all of the faithful. They do not simply follow the Lamb, but follow him wherever he goes, even to death.

This suggests an association with the souls under the altar, and the souls of those who have been beheaded because of their testimony to Jesus. They are the martyrs.

C. Mount Zion

It is highly significant that the Lamb stands on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem, which was where God dwelt among men according to the Old Testament. Here, also, according to certain Jewish traditions, the Messiah would appear, to join all his followers.

In *Revelation*, Mount Zion stands for the heavenly mountain crowned with the heavenly Jerusalem. The earthly Zion, where the historical city of Jerusalem was first made an Israelite settlement [2 Sam 5:7], is a visible model of this heavenly mountain.

D. A Voice from Heaven

And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps,

The voice from heaven is a beautiful description of the voice of God symbolizing power and strength, as well as the gentleness and beauty of the sweet music of the harp.

E. The Song of the 144,000

The redeemed are singing a new song – a song of praise, for they now sing of the salvation wrought by Christ, by the shedding of his precious blood.

Only those who belong to Christ and have suffered with him can join in this song which is part of the heavenly liturgy.

Suffering can produce resentment, but it can also produce faith and peace and a new song.

III. THE VIRGINS

Read: Revelation 14:4-5

*[4] It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb,
[5] and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.*

Verse 4 is a difficult verse. The 144,000 are described as celibate men [literally virgins *who have not defiled themselves with women*], but most commentators agree that the imagery here, like so much in Revelation, is symbolic.

In the Old Testament the image of fornication was used for infidelity, especially in the form of idolatry [Ez 16:1-58], which often involved ritual prostitution.

In the New Testament, the bride in her virginity is an image of the Church betrothed to Christ the bridegroom.

Virginity here then stands first for fidelity to the covenant relationship with the Lord, and is first and foremost a symbol of the Church's purity.

A. Firstfruits

The 144,000 were not simply redeemed like all Christians, but were redeemed from the rest of humanity as *firstfruits* - a technical sacrificial term.

They perform a priestly function for the entire people of God and the human race. The sacrifice of the martyrs will have a redeeming effect on the earth.

The 144,000, therefore, are like the twenty-four priestly elders who offered their lives as a priestly sacrifice to God.

B. Celibacy

This special group reflected and reinforced the practice of sexual continence, and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, in both men and women, a practice that was held in high esteem and practiced in the early churches [1 Cor 7:25-35; Mt 19:10-12].

This is not at all a de-valuation of marriage, which is a symbol and image of the relationship between Christ and his Church [Eph 5:32], but the elevation of a very uncommon and difficult [sacrificial] practice of a chosen few [men and women] who by their consecrated virginity would point to and symbolize the eschatological marriage of the Lamb and his Bride.

IV. THE MESSAGES OF THE THREE ANGELS

Read: Revelation 14:6-8

[6] Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people;

[7] and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water."

[8] Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion."

[9] And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,

[10] he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

[11] And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

[12] Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

[13] And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

A. Preaching the Gospel – a Two-Edged Sword

One of the signs which is to precede the end was the preaching of the Gospel to all nations [Mt 24:14]. The first angel comes with the message of the Gospel to *“every nation and tribe and tongue and people.”*

Paradoxically, this good news is also news of judgment, the judgment of God’s love for the world in the cross, as well as the effect on those who in refusing the light choose darkness and self-destruction.

Isaiah explains that the “good news” is a two-edged sword, since to the righteous it speaks of deliverance, but to the wicked it is the announcement of condemnation [Is 61:1-2].

The message of the angel is a summons to worship the God who is the Creator of all things. It is a call for the followers of the beast to abandon their idols before judgment falls.

B. The Fall of Babylon Predicted

Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion."

The second angel predicts the fall of Babylon – a code word for Jerusalem [or Rome]. John looks backward to the fall of ancient Babylon in the words of Isaiah 21:9, then forward to the fall of contemporary Babylon.

The angel says that that the city has “fallen” though John has not yet seen it destroyed. Like the prophets, the angel speaks of something about to happen [prophecy] as if it had already happened [history].

Jerusalem is given the title Babylon, one of the most wicked cities in the Old Testament. But more importantly, Babylon

[modern Iraq] was the nation that destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 586 BC. Ever since it has symbolized pagan power hostile to the people of God.

[Most scholars insist that Babylon is Rome, not Jerusalem. See the topical essay “*Who is Babylon*” in your Ignatius Catholic Study Bible on pgs. 58-59].

Jerusalem is like Babylon because it destroyed the true temple, Jesus Christ [John 2:19-21].

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body.

C. The Fate of the Followers of the Beast

"If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur . . ."

The third angel proclaims a warning to all. There is still time for repentance but an awful fate awaits those who do not accept the grace, for the punishment is terrible and eternal.

In chapter 13, the false prophet threatened that anyone refusing to worship the beast would be killed. Yet the angel shows that anyone who sides with the beast will suffer a much worse fate.

It is only the certainty of God's victory and final judgment that sustains the Christians, who keep God's commandments and their faith in Jesus, the first martyr.

"Fire and sulphur" is the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah [Gen 19:24], with Sodom as another code name for Jerusalem/Rome.

D. The Fate of the Apostate

In Revelation the fiercest warning of all is reserved for the apostate. The reason is that the Church was battling for its very existence. If it were to survive, the individual Christian would have to be prepared to face suffering and trial, even imprisonment and death.

But the heavenly reward was worth the price!

E. The Rest of the Blessed

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

As in Revelation 13:10 the faithful are exhorted to stand firm in the midst of tribulation, confident that God will reward each according to his merits.

Those who are called to die in the Lord in the persecution about to break out are blessed not only because of their martyrdom, but also because of all their good works, *"for their deeds follow them"* [See *Gaudium et Spes* 39].

V. THE HARVEST OF THE SON OF MAN

[14] Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.

[15] And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe."

[16] So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

[17] And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle.

[18] Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe."

[19] So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God;

[20] and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

A. The Last Judgment

The judgment of the righteous and the wicked is symbolized in terms of two familiar figures of the harvest: one of grain and the other of grapes.

Both were used as metaphors of God's judgment, either on his own people, or on their enemies.

First, the saints are gathered up like sheaves of wheat to be stored in a granary [14:16; Jn 4:35-38], then sinners are severed like grapes from the vine to be thrown into a wine press and crushed.

B. The Son of Man

[14] Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.

The final coming of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is depicted in verse 14. He is described as the royal figure from Daniel 7:13, 14.

“And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom . . .”

His golden crown is a sign of his kingship over the earth. Those who have followed the beast have, therefore, rejected the true King. They are ripe for judgment. The sickle in Jesus' hand is a tool for harvesting.

The Son of Man reaps the grain – the final gathering of the elect in the final judgment, while the angel with the sharp sickle reaps the grapes – the harvest of those destined for judgment.

C. A Massive Slaughter

And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

The winepress is to be trodden outside the city, that is, the judgment occurs outside the city of Jerusalem, and involves a huge bloodbath.

VI. REFLECTION

[The following reflection is taken from Fr. George Montague's book, *The Apocalypse – Understanding the Book of Revelation and the End of the World*].

Faith and Baptism seal us in the Holy Spirit with the name of Jesus and the Father, or, as Revelation puts, it with the name of God and the Lamb. This is our ultimate identity.

*The world would like to claim us as its own. It would like to “mark” us with its own brand, removing our unique personhood and freedom and sweeping us into the enslaving worship of its values. Its two methods of “converting” us to itself are **fear** and **seduction**.*

We fall victim to the first beast when we yield to fear. We feel outnumbered and alone and decide that the easier way is to “go along” with what we really do not really agree within the depth of our faith-enlightened heart.

We fall victim to the second beast when we let ourselves be so fascinated by the wonders of our technological age that we assume its consumerism, its narcissism, its hedonism and greed.