

Poetic Justice

Armageddon and the Fall of Babylon – Part I

Revelation 16:1-7

Introduction

Mention some of the words found or described in the book of Revelation and you will get a reaction from just about anyone. Whether or not a person spent any time in church or was raised an agnostic, mention the word “rapture” and they will have an opinion. Mentioning the number “666” will get a reaction too.

I read recently that Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico successfully gained permission in 2003 to change Highway 666 to Highway 491. It had been named Highway 666 in 1926 simply because it was the 6th branch off of Interstate 66. The states were finally granted the right to change the road number, not because they were superstitious, or because they were concerned about the coming antichrist, but because they could not keep the highway signs from being stolen. Chronic sign theft caused more money to be spent than they wanted. People just wanted to have the sign for their memorabilia, whether they believed in the book of Revelation or not.

Nearly everyone knows that words like “rapture,” “antichrist,” and “666” are part of future events with cataclysmic effects.

Another word that captures the attention of the world is “Armageddon”. Nearly everyone knows that this has something to do with the end of the world as we know it. The more informed know that it has something to do with a final world war.

Speculations about this word abound. The latest rage in “Armageddon fever” is the calendar from the ancient Mayan civilization. This civilization believed in time cycles in which old world orders were destroyed and new orders were created by the gods. The end of the latest cycle, according to their calendar, is around December 21, 2012.

Remember this in 2012. You might want to save your Christmas shopping until after December 21st just in case . . . there is no need to spend time and money. For me, doing Christmas shopping before December 21st would be really early anyway. Why rush it?

As we approach the end of 2012, more books than ever will be sold, as well as tabloids, good luck charms, and New Age secrets of the universe. Even pseudo-Christian scholars will cash in on the end times fever as people become increasingly fascinated with the end of the world. Could it be the ending of civilization as we know it and the beginning of another?

Frankly, all of this has within it seeds of truth.

Time *will* reach a new cycle as God – the true and living God – comes to destroy the kingdom of Babylon and her allies and to launch His own millennial reign. There is a coming day when the kingdoms of this world will collapse and God the Son will rule a civilization on Earth that is vastly superior to any we have now.

I can say with biblical authority that this will have nothing to do with the year 2012. It has to do with the predicted seven year Tribulation period that we have been studying – a seven year period launched by the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and a new world leader, which has yet to occur.

Armageddon, then, is at least seven years away or more. Even if the rapture occurred today and the Tribulation period began soon after, the earliest date for Armageddon is 2016.

If you are looking for signs of the coming battle of Armageddon, it will not have anything to do with Christmas shopping and the close of 2012. In fact, what will happen on planet Earth just before God the Son returns to establish His kingdom, defeating the armies at Armageddon, has already been clearly spelled out for us in the book of Revelation.

John will deliver the details of the rise and fall of Babylon. We have, in living color, details of the final cataclysmic events that wrap up the final days of civilization as we know it.

For one thing, the world will be wrapped in God’s final outpouring of wrath just prior to Christ’s return with His church to set up the millennial kingdom.

By the way, as I researched the Mayan calendar and civilization, I discovered they believed that time

cycled and repeated itself. They believed that by knowing their past, they could control their future.

Isn't it ironic that the Mayan civilization does not exist today? All that remains of a massive civilization are broken down ruins and remnants of their idolatry. They were not in control after all – no matter how much they devoted their attention to the orbit of Venus, Jupiter, and Mars; no matter how extensively they developed their calendars of time; no matter how passionately they believed they could control their future by knowing their past.

John the apostle will reveal to us that as the last civilizations of the world rush toward the battle of Armageddon, mankind is still not in control – God is. The kingdoms of this world will all pass away, but the kingdom of our Lord will stand forever.

Beginning in Revelation chapter 16, seven angels step forward with seven bowls filled with the wrath of God. These bowls are to be poured out in one final series of events just before Christ splits the skies open in His triumphal return to planet Earth.

Observations about the Bowls of God's Wrath

Notice verse 1.

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple, saying to the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."

This scene is both figurative and literal. The bowls are literal bowls signifying the pouring out of the wrath of God. The scene personifies wrath as if it were some kind of liquid being poured from these seven bowls.

By the way, these bowls are shallow saucers. The Greek word "phiale" (φιάλη) refers to a wide shallow bowl much like a saucer.ⁱ

This is like the saucer into which you might pour milk for your cat, if you have one – which certainly fits the idea of Tribulation.

Before we look at the individual saucers of sovereign wrath, let me give four categorical observations about them.

1. The bowls are rapidly delivered.

All of this will affect the earth and the human race over the course of a few days and weeks. The language implies that one bowl after another will be poured out without delay.

These bowls are poured, not dripped. The language refers to sudden pouring as the bowl is

emptied entirely at once. This leads to a second observation.

2. The bowls are cumulatively distressing.

With only a brief pause in verse 5, these bowls are poured one after another, adding judgment upon judgment.

Understand that these bowls are all supernatural acts of God. The text does not tolerate the attempts of many authors to give them a purely natural, scientific explanation. They will hit far too rapidly for any explanation other than that they come from God Himself.ⁱⁱ

This is much like the way the plagues of Egypt swept through the land.

Perhaps you have read the *Reader's Digest* explanation of the plagues that occurred in the book of Exodus. According to this explanation, the plagues began with a volcanic eruption which caused the water to turn poisonous and red, which drove frogs inland bringing flies with them as they died in heaps, and pestilence developed from this which caused cattle to die, and then people became infected with boils, and the ash from the eruption also caused the sun to darken . . . and on and on.

Of course the effects of the plagues have to be generalized so that one in every household seemed to die because of them. Never mind that the Bible specifically attributed the plagues to the miraculous power of God through His servant Moses. This included the killing of the first born from every family who refused to follow the protecting plan of God, foreshadowing Christ's atonement as they put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts.

Never mind all of this. There has to be a scientific explanation for these natural phenomena.

These events can no more be explained apart from the hand of God than can the rapture.

Try explaining the creation of a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21). Explain a city made of transparent gold (Revelation 21). Explain city gates made from single pearls – each gate carved from a single pearl (Revelation 21). Are there monster oysters somewhere working on these things?

While you are at it, explain the resurrection of Lazarus. He was wrapped in burial cloths so that breathing would be like us trying to breathe through a pillow smothering our faces. In addition to this, he had been in a tomb for four days with nothing to eat or drink (John 11).

Explain the resurrection of Christ Himself (John 20).

In fact, if you want an easier miracle to explain, try explaining the miracle of Christ walking on the stormy waves at night on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14). Although I did read a few months ago that scientists have been able to track weather patterns dating back to the time of Christ and now believe there was a sudden freeze and that Christ actually walked on floating pieces of ice.

That explains it!

Peter tried to walk on the water too, but he kept slipping off the ice. He did not sink, he slipped.

These bowls of wrath are the supernatural work of God through His created universe which brings about terrifying judgment upon planet Earth.

Let me make a third observation about these bowls of judgment.

3. The bowls are specifically directed.

We will notice that only followers of the antichrist will experience the torment of one or more these judgments. We are told that the first bowl of terrible sores will only affect the followers of antichrist in verse 2.

The fifth bowl of “darkness,” in verse 10, specifically designates the throne of the antichrist. It may only affect his capital city.

So the believers who have survived to this point in the Tribulation may indeed be spared some of the effects of this final outpouring of God’s wrath.

However, let me give a fourth observation in addition to the fact that these bowls of judgment are rapidly delivered, cumulatively distressing, and specifically directed.

4. The bowls are terminally destructive.

As we will discover, life on the planet will change for everyone – unbeliever and believer. Water is going to run out. Food sources and ecosystems of the planet will be permanently disrupted. Without the intervention of Christ returning to the planet soon after these bowl judgments are poured out, no one would survive very long.

However, Christ does return. He sets up His kingdom with His capital in Jerusalem and, though we are not told, there is plenty of evidence demonstrated through the events of the kingdom to assume that God not only miraculously turned the water sources to blood, but He just as easily turns the oceans and seas back to clean sources of water.

The truth is, if He did not, the earth would be uninhabitable. Yet we know that Christ will reign on

the earth with millions of people for a thousand years (Revelation 20).

The Bowls of God’s Wrath

Let us now take a closer look at this final series of judgments from the hand of a holy God.

Bowl #1: Unbelievers are plagued with painful sores.

Notice verse 2.

So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth; and it became a loathsome and malignant sore on the people who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image.

The word translated “sores,” or “helkos” (ἑλκος), can be translated “abscess”.ⁱⁱⁱ

This word in Latin gives us our word “ulcer”. It describes festering, painful, incurable, oozing, ulcerous sores.^{iv}

This is the same word in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, or the Septuagint, for the sores inflicted upon Pharaoh’s magicians as Moses demanded the release of his people in Exodus 9.

These are running, inflamed sores that refuse to be healed.^v

These sores will not affect believers, John writes in this verse. They will only affect those who have the mark of the beast – the name of the antichrist – on their bodies.

This is a symbol of their coming eternal, physical suffering.

This also serves as a warning to those who have yet to bow to the antichrist and his image – and there are millions who have yet to submit to him.

This will serve as both encouragement and warning to those who have not submitted to continue resisting the antichrist. In other words, this plague of sores will communicate to the world, “Look at what happens to followers of the antichrist. They are plagued with sores that even he cannot heal.”

Jesus Christ never failed to heal those that He wanted to be healed.

The antichrist has attempted to masquerade as the Divine Physician, but he is unable to heal his own people. The antichrist is exposed as a false physician.^{vi}

This will signal to the world that the antichrist is not the god he claims to be, which will play a role in

his undoing. The armies from the east will soon dare to defy.

Bowl #2: The oceans/seas are turned into blood.

Note verse 3.

The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became blood like that of a dead man; and every living thing in the sea died.

This excellent translation does not say that the sea became like the blood of a dead man, but that it became blood, like that of a dead man.

The Greek word used for “blood” is the word “haima” (aima). This gives our prefix “hema,” such as used in “hematology,” which is the study of the nature and function of blood.

As unbelievable as it might sound, the oceans of our world become, in an instant, literal blood that resembles the blood of a corpse – congealing, coagulating, thickening, dark blood.^{vii}

We cannot imagine the horror, the stench, the corpses of sea mammals, creatures and fish piled on shore and floating dead upon the water’s surface.

Everything having to do with the ocean will grind to a sudden halt; the effects on the food supply of the world will be catastrophic.^{viii}

Some conjecture that these bowl judgments are simply a restating of earlier judgments. They do sound familiar. However, on closer inspection, the earlier judgment that turned water bodies into blood, which was the second trumpet judgment in Revelation chapter 8, only affected a third of the sea, killing only a third of the sea creatures before the water returned to its normal state. This bowl judgment, however, affects all the large bodies of water and every living sea animal.

One believing scientist wrote,

In this toxic ocean nothing can survive, and soon all the billions of fishes and marine mammals and marine reptiles and the innumerable varieties of marine invertebrates will perish, thus still further poisoning the oceans and contaminating the sea shores of the world. . . . In the present world, sea organisms provide the basis for the world’s great “food chains,” and the ocean itself. . . is the anchor of the earth’s essential hydrologic cycle. . . . The sea and its creatures had once been a spring of life; now it becomes a turgid pool of death.^{ix}

Bowl #3: Fresh water sources are turned into blood.

If the seas becoming blood is not bad enough, another angel now steps forward in verse 4.

Then the third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water; and they became blood.

In other words, anyone thinking, “Yeah, that ocean thing is really bad news, but I live in Kansas and Colorado and we’ve still got plenty of drinking water in the springs, rivers, wells, lakes, etc. so we’re gonna be alright,” should think again.

This is comprehensive global judgment.

This is reminiscent of an earlier judgment from chapter 8 of Revelation in which a third of the fresh water sources became too bitter to drink.

However, this time, in this act of judgment in this final series of God’s wrath, water is turned to blood on a global scale.

All inland water is affected, leaving people with nothing to drink.^x

Unless God miraculously reverses His judgment, mankind cannot survive without water. Soon, all bottled water, drinks of every kind, water stored in tankers and towers, water of any and all forms will run out.

That which happened to the Nile River, as God judged Pharaoh by turning the Nile into blood, now happens to the world’s entire supply of water. The contamination of the world’s oceans will be an environmentalist’s worst nightmare. But the destruction of the world’s remaining fresh water supply will be a catastrophic, staggering blow to fallen humanity.^{xi}

One author put it this way when he wrote, “This effectively signals the death of our planet [and the human race].”^{xii}

This is so horrific. The stench is so unimaginable. The resulting death is so catastrophic. The nightmare of dying of thirst is now the reality facing the entire planet.

People will certainly wonder how a God of compassion, mercy, love, and grace could ever do such a thing.

God anticipates this kind of question to be in our minds. In fact, about the time we might think mankind deserves an explanation, even though they were warned earlier that the entire world was going to experience the undiluted wrath and fury of God, an

angel steps forward to effectively speak in God's defense. Listen to this angel in verses 5-6.

And I heard the angel of the waters saying, "Righteous are You, who are and who were, O Holy One, because You judged these things;

"for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it."

How terrifying these words are to the human ears.

This is poetic justice. These unbelievers poured out the blood of Christ's followers, so now, God pours out blood. The same Greek word for pour is used in both instances.

They deserve this!

This is the ultimate illustration of sowing and reaping; this is poetic justice played out like never before.

- This poetic justice is greater than Pharaoh attempting to have all the Hebrew baby boys thrown into the Nile River to drown, only to see his army drown in the Red Sea.
- This poetic justice is greater than Haman building a gallows upon which to hang Mordecai the Jew that he so hated, but in the turn of events, Haman himself hangs on this same gallows by the neck until dead.
- Revelation is greater in its poetic justice than King Saul refusing to execute all the Amalekites as God commanded, only to be later killed as he fought the Amalekites.^{xiii}

All of these scenes of poetic justice pale in significance against the backdrop of this apocalyptic scene. The forces of the antichrist that have shed the blood of the believers now have only blood to drink. They have been bloodthirsty in their killing of the saints – and now they are surrounded by blood.

This is actually even deeper. The human race has effectively dismissed the true and living Christ in favor of the antichrist. So in this final series of judgments, they now experience the irony of poetic justice in their choice of Messiah.

- They denied the Creator and are punished by creation;
- They refused the Healer and now suffer incurable disease;
- They refused to follow the One who in His ministry on Earth turned water into wine, and

now experience His wrath on Earth as He turns water into blood;^{xiv}

- They tread upon the blood of Christ and shed the blood of His saints and now they have only blood, blood, and more blood.

The truth is that we all deserve the judgment of God. If He consigned us all to an eternity of torment, we would all receive what we deserve. For the just wages – the payment for sin – is death, *but* – thank God for this little conjunction, as eternity has been changed because of it – as we are told in Romans 6:23,

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For those who believe, not wrath, but the grace of God has been poured out upon them.

Paul used the same word for "pour" that is used in these verses in Revelation for the bowls pouring out the wrath of God when he wrote,

. . . the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:5b)

It is even more ironic to consider the fact that the verb "to pour out," which occurs repeatedly and only in this chapter of Revelation, is the same verb we read in Acts chapter 2 when God poured out the promise of His Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the church came into being.^{xv}

In other words, the love of God is poured out in the hearts of those who believe today. But awaiting those who do not believe in Christ, illustrated before their very eyes in this scene from Revelation chapter 16, is the wrath of God poured out on them.

This is the height of poetic justice!

Those who refused the pouring out of the Spirit of God through redemption will have poured out upon them the fury of God – a pouring out of wrath that will never end.

And the angel says God is right and true in judging the world in this way.

In the *first* book of the Bible, Abraham asked rhetorically,

. . . "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25b)

The angel answers in the *last* book of the Bible in verses 5b and 7b,

. . . "Righteous are You . . . O Holy One, because You judged these things"

. . . “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.”

In other words, “You do what is right. You don’t play by our rules, we play by Yours.”

Matthew Henry wrote that the unbelieving world thinks that everything belongs to them. This is their earth; their air, their sea, their rivers, [their world] . . . they believe they alone have the right to judge.^{xvi}

However, the angel, in these verses, announces the truth about God – this is His earth, this is His air, this is His ocean, these are His seas, His rivers, His creation, His animal kingdom, and His created human race.

This is my Father’s world,

O let me never forget;

That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father’s world,

The battle is not done;

Jesus who died shall be satisfied,

And earth and heaven become one.^{xvii}

In this last series of judgments, we are immediately given the truth – God owns this world. God does what is right. Sin deserves judgment.

We can also hear an invitation to surrender now to the Sovereign – He owns everything.

Come to the Savior – He will forgive everything.

Receive from Him the free gift of salvation – He has already paid for everything.

Instead of having future judgment poured out upon you,

have the love of God poured out in your heart,

and the grace of God lavished upon you,

and the Holy Spirit given freely to you,

as you become a part of the body of Christ,

and a member of the family of God.

ⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 847.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 2000), p. 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rienecker and Rogers, p. 847.

^{iv} MacArthur, p. 139.

^v Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 249.

^{vi} Daymond R. Duck and Larry Richards, The Book of Revelation (Thomas Nelson, 2006), p. 230.

^{vii} Thomas, p. 250.

^{viii} Sam Gordon, Revelation: Worthy is the Lamb (Ambassador, 2000), p. 326.

^{ix} Henry Morris, The Revelation Record (Tyndale, 1983), p. 298.

^x Life Application Bible Commentary: Revelation, ed. by Bruce B. Barton (Tyndale House, 2000), p. 185.

^{xi} MacArthur, p. 142.

^{xii} Kendell H. Easley, Holman New Testament Commentary: Revelation (Holman Reference, 1998), p. 285.

^{xiii} Gordon, p. 328.

^{xiv} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 191.

^{xv} Thomas, p. 246.

^{xvi} Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 174.

^{xvii} Maltbie Davenport Babcock, 1858-1901.