

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 6: Some Notes

A short chapter, but full of exciting stuff: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse; the opening of six of the seven seals on the scroll; the voices of the martyrs; and all the apparently unchanging things falling apart. This is a good point at which to challenge the idea that common sense has no place in Biblical interpretation. Common sense is a good antidote to the various lobbies that have an evangelistic one-interpretation approach to the Book of Revelation. Conqueror on White Horse: must be Jesus! Common sense says that Jesus is not going to be one of the four disasters that John's world and our world are subject to. The rigid evangelist sees four successive horsemen and then a big bang, and proclaims the end of the world. Common sense says that actually conquest, strife, famine and pestilence co exist, and that if the tail end bit was really the death of the sun and moon (rather than a dramatic way of describing @natural@ disasters, "taking shelter" would not be an option!

John was talking about the things of his own time; and in some parts of the world nothing much has changed. One example is the white (victory) horse: the Parthian archers riding their white horses had forced a Roman army to surrender. The snippet about wheat, barley, oil and wine is interesting: the grain basics rocket in price, while the stuff at the more luxurious end of the food market is not so badly affected. Sounds just the sort of economic injustice you might expect. Earthquakes and volcanoes were in the news then too.

One of the commentators makes the interesting point that a writer has to put one thing after the other, whereas the music composer can weave themes together. The musician could run the four horse themes together.

There are some subtle points that might be lost. On the face of it the conquering white horse is a good thing. Victors always celebrate victory! John's point is that there is always a price to be paid for victory – and not just by the losers. Roman citizens would take the point, when the victor in this picture was not a Roman but a Parthian! The end piece rubs in the equality between rich and poor; the posh person fleeing his palace with nothing and the poor woman fleeing her hovel with nothing are sheltering in the same cave! (If you have seen "The Admirable Crichton" you may be thinking that the poor woman is likely to be a great deal cave-savvy than the rich man.

The whole chapter raises that familiar chapter of why a good God allows bad things to happen (or causes them to happen). We can discuss, but one way of looking at this issue is to try to envisage a world in which God made absolutely sure that nothing bad ever happened and nobody ever did anything with bad consequences.. The martyrs section is interesting: here the martyrs (and there are a lot of Christian martyrs already when John writes, and many more every day now) are by the heavenly altar. They seem to be pleading for vengeance (which is a nasty if an understandable word). But, like the "Wrath of the Lamb", this is maybe more about Justice and Purpose – for the assurance that the martyrs have not died in vain.

One important footnote. Whenever the end things reach their climax – tens of years or billions of years, it seems to me that the Christian message is still Sieze the moment. Jesus Himself was not too busy to help the little people. The apostles, who probably believed that the end was nigh, got on with healing and caring. We can't decide when the sun embraces the earth. We can help the needy neighbor... and wasn't "judgement day" about having given or not given a glass of water?