

Monday Evening Bible reading Group: Revelation Chapter 10: Some Notes

The key issue here is the nature of evil. Nobody doubts the existence of people doing bad things, and most would sign up to the idea of some people so consistently doing bad things that they are properly labelled bad people – though even very bad people are capable of doing good things, just as good people can do bad things. If we assume that badness/evil can only be done by those capable of moral choices (so animals and natural phenomena may be nasty in their consequences but can't be evil), is there such a thing as evil, other than what human beings choose to do? First a further brief note on human evil. A court may decide that somebody probably did the bad thing X, but find them unfit to plead on account of mental illness, or guilty but insane (or with diminished responsibility), or guilty but with mitigating circumstances. Manslaughter is the verdict where someone killed but didn't set out to kill. Sex outside a loving relationship may be a sin, but it won't be classed as rape if the woman was old enough to consent and did consent.

So even humans doing evil isn't entirely straightforward.... and what about doing evil because you were acting under orders. (E.g. the guards in German, British (Boer War) or Russian concentration camps..)

Some people believe that individual and collective evil is all the evil that there is, and that to talk about evil forces is to shuffle human responsibility onto a non-existent other. Someone in the dock pleading that the devil made him/her do it probably wouldn't get very far – though a psychiatrist might be called in. Others feel that there is just too much evil in the world to be explained by human choices, These people (we?) might also feel that their own personal experience of temptation (whether successfully resisted or not) indicates some malevolent external power – not just hormones, self-interest and opportunity.

The Bible, and most of the great faiths, assume the existence of evil forces, usually personified. In many ancient traditions (and there are hints of this in the Bible, God had in the beginning His own fight with a dark force, The battle between good and evil is fought in the heavenly places, and not just between me and myself. Popular English speaking views of the Devil probably owe as much to Milton as to Revelation and other Bible books; but from Genesis onwards the Devil plays a significant tale; and the last book in the Bible has both Satan and the Anti-Christ. John is likely, in personifying evil to have had in mind both Nero (Christian persecutor in chief, and well-known for his savage cruelty) and Antiochus the Syrian invader who had Jews slaughtered for being Jews, and who made the Temple a pagan temple, with brothels in the side rooms. We probably have in mind Hitler. Or maybe Pol Pot.

There are some points of interest in Chapter 10 that might be overlooked. No idea what height John was, but imagine him as a little old man. That little old man takes the message book from the hand of the gigantic angel (some think this angel is Jesus). The little old man has a crucial role to play in the history of the universe; and he has to Take this. It isn't

handed to him. Jewish children learnt the alphabet by identifying letters written in sweet stuff on a board: right answer, lick letter. Nice sweet taste, but for the prophet the digestion is unpleasant (bitter) both because the message is a tough one, and because preaching it brought persecution. Note that the gospel has to be internalised (lived in a transforming way), not just remembered and mouthed!

You rather suspect That John would have been a bit out of step with the apologetic approach to mission which says “Now of course you are doing fine, and I don’t want to force my ideas down your throat, but if you get a spare five minutes in a busy life, you might to think whether this chap Jesus (lived a long time ago, but still relevant in some ways) has anything to say that would help you carry on with the good work”