

8. The Seven Bowls

Revelation 15–16

Literary Structure

1. Initial vision of the seven plagues (15:1)
2. Interlude containing two visions (15:2-4, 5-8)
3. The seven bowls (16:1-21)

I. The Initial Vision (15:1)

A sign in heaven: completes the interlude of chapters 12-14 in which John has seen two other signs in heaven:

1. birthing woman (12:1): Zion about to birth her Messiah, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15).
2. dragon (12:3): Satan seeking to devour the child. Frustrated in his efforts to destroy the child (Christ), to wage war in heaven, and to devour the woman (the Church as God's people), he is allowed to war against the saints. He employs two assistants: the beast of tyrannical rule and the false prophet of deception. But God has installed his king: the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with the saints, who follow him wherever he goes (14:1-5).
3. seven angels with seven plagues: whereby God's wrath will be complete (ἐτελέσθη).

The vision of the seven angels with the seven plagues returns us to the sets of sevens (seals, trumpets).

The divine justice revealed by the seven seals..., and announced by the seven trumpets..., is now to be fully implemented by the seven bowls... From a literary perspective, the bowls expand the meaning of the trumpets, just as the trumpets develop the significance of the seals. But theologically, and together, the three heptads describe God's righteous reaction to human idolatry and injustice. They do so under different sets of images, which illuminate the same image of divine judgement: in the end-time, and at any time.¹

Just as against Pharaoh in Egypt, the plagues (πληγαί **ἑπτὰ**) are God's judgments striking those who oppose him and hold his people captive.

II. Interlude (15:2-8)

Before the seven plagues are poured out of seven bowls, an interlude of two visions sets these in context (cf. 5:2-14; 8:2-5).

A. The New Song (15:2-4)

After the exodus from Egypt and passage through the Sea, Moses led Israel in song, praising God for salvation and judgment (Exod 15:1-18). Now the saints, who have come through a new Exodus, stand beside the sea and sing. These are the great multinational multitude who sang (7:9-10), the 144,000 followers of the Lamb who sang a new song (14:1-5). From an earthly perspective, the beast conquered the

1. Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 393..

saints (13:7), but from a heavenly perspective, the saints conquered the beast (15:2). The song of Moses sung beside the earthly sea is now the Song of the Lamb sung beside the heavenly sea blazing with fiery judgment. This song that the saints sing celebrates not their own victory, but God's holiness and righteous deeds. The song is a pastiche of OT imagery (Deut 28:59-60; Ps 111:2-4 [110:2-4 LXX]; Deut 32:4; Ps 86:9-10). The God who judges is the God who saves: all nations will worship God.

B. The Glory fills the Temple (15:5-8)

The heavenly temple, the tabernacle of Testimony, is opened. In OT, the Testimony (תְּעֻדָּה τὰ μαρτύρια ten commandments on 2 tablets) was placed in the ark of the Testimony (אֲרוֹן הַתְּעֻדָּה ark of the covenant) in the tent of Testimony (מִשְׁכַּן הַתְּעֻדָּה tabernacle). Here, over the Testimony, God met with Moses, and dwelt among his people. Now God meets his people over his Son, the faithful witness, the Lamb.

Out come the seven plague-carrying angels, dressed as priests. One of the cherubim gives them seven bowls, in which the incense representing the prayers of the saints (5:8) has been replaced by the fury of God's judgment. The cries of the saints (6:10; 8:3-4) are about to be answered.

The vision ends with the sanctuary filled with the overwhelming presence of God's glory, cf. the climax to the building of the Tabernacle and the Temple was the entrance of the Shekinah cloud, the Lord's glory, so overwhelming Moses/the priests could not enter (Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chr 5:13-14)

III. The Seven Bowls (16:1-21)

The bowls have the same pattern as the seals and trumpets (4+2+1) except there is no interlude between 6 and 7.

A. Bowls 1–4 (16:2-9)

Bowls 1-4 repeat Trumpets 1-4:

1. Trumpet 1 and Bowl 1 affect the earth.
2. Trumpet 2 and Bowl 2 affect the sea.
3. Trumpet 3 and Bowl 3 affect the rivers and the springs of waters.
4. Trumpet 4 and Bowl 4 affect the sun.

But the destruction is intensified: the Trumpets affected only a third, but the Bowls affect all. The trumpets were warnings to persuade people to repent; the Bowls are judgments, for the time for repentance is over.

Like the Trumpets, Bowls 1-4 recall the Plagues with which God struck the Egyptians:

1. Bowl 1: earth turned to boils, cf. Plague 6 (Exod 9:8-12).
2. Bowl 2: sea turned to blood, cf. Plague 1 (Exod 7:14-24).
3. Bowl 3: fresh water turned to blood, cf. Plague 1.
4. Bowl 4: sun burns men. Opposite of Plague 9 (Exod 10:21-29) and Trumpet 4.

After the Third Bowl, an angel praises God for his justice. In a parody of the question, "Who is worthy?" (5:2), he proclaims that those who killed the martyrs are worthy (16:6) of God's judgment: because they poured out blood, they must drink blood. The altar, which has sheltered the martyrs' blood (6:9) and received their prayers (8:3), agrees.

B. Bowls 5–6 (16:10-16)

1. Bowl 5: Beast's Kingdom in Turmoil

God effortlessly darkens the beast's throne, and engulfs his kingdom in darkness, cf. Fifth Trumpet (9:2), ninth plague (Exod 10:21-23).

2. Bowl 6: The Eschatological Battle

The Sixth Bowl develops the theme of the Sixth Trumpet:

- Trumpet 6 released the four angels bound at the great river Euphrates (9:13-21), so that an army of two myriad myriad horsemen might invade and kill a third of mankind.
- Bowl 6 dries up the Euphrates, so that the kings of the east (presumably heading this invading army) might cross over.

The theme of both the Sixth Trumpet and the Sixth Bowl is the eschatological battle, “the battle of the great day of God Almighty” (16:14).

The Euphrates marked the boundary between Israel/Judah and her enemies, Assyria and Babylon; and it marked the boundary between Rome and its enemy, Parthia. Israel/Judah saw her enemies coming from the north; Rome saw its enemies coming from the east. These are the same direction: from beyond the Euphrates. Babylon lay astride the Euphrates: God announced he would dry up her waters prior to her fall (Isa 44:27; Jer 50:38; 51:36); fulfilled by Cyrus

The three frog-like evil spirits (echoes of the second plague), coming from the dragon (Satan), the beast (imperial Rome), and the false prophet (imperial propaganda system), gather the armies to Armageddon. There are two interpretations:

1. Megiddo: הַר־מִגְדּוֹ *Har-Megiddō*, “the hill of Megiddo.” Megiddo guarded the narrow ravine through which passed the Via Maris, “The Way of the Sea,” between Galilee and the Mediterranean, between Mesopotamia and Egypt. At this very strategic location were fought many important battles (lists 34) including several in OT (Barak vs. Sisera [Judg 5:19]; Jehu vs. Ahaziah [2 Kgs 9:27]; Neco vs. Josiah [23:29; 2 Chr 35:22-25]).²
2. Mount of Assembly: הַר־מִוֶּעַד *har-mô'ēd*:³ fits the context of assembling for war. Cf. the king of Babylon assaulted the mount of assembly (Isa 14:13). Such assembly (συναγωγή *יער*) for war happens 3 times:
 - a. the frog-like demonic spirits assemble the kings of the earth for battle (16:14, 16).
 - b. The beast and the kings of the earth with their armies assemble for war against the white horse-rider and his armies (19:19).
 - c. Satan assembles the nations (Gog and Magog) for war against the camp of the saints, the beloved city (20:8).

Into the middle of this assembly are embedded two words of pastoral counsel:

1. “Behold, I am coming (ἔρχομαι) like a thief.” Jesus repeats his warning to Sardis (3:3 where ἦξω is

2. Eric H. Cline, *The Battles of Armageddon: Megiddo and the Jezreel Valley From the Bronze Age to the Nuclear Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). lists 34 battles.

3. Meredith G. Kline, “Har Magedon: The End of the Millennium,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 2 (1996, June): 207-222..

used), but here as a word of encouragement.

2. Beatitude (3d of 7) on the watchful: those awaiting the return of Jesus not Armageddon.

C. Bowl 7 (16:17-21)

Between the Sixth and Seventh of the series of Seals and Trumpets there was an interlude to set the Seventh event in context. There is no need of an interlude between the Sixth and Seventh Bowls, because the end is here: γέγονεν “It is done!” (16:17). The things which must happen (ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι 4:1) have happened.

Each series of seven has ended with a description of the terrifying phenomena associated with the theophany of God (Exod 19:16-19; Rev 4:5):

Exod 19:16-19 ¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

Rev 4:5 Καὶ ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου ἐκπορεύονται ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταί.
And from the throne went forth lightning and sounds and thunder.

7th Seal καὶ ἐγένοντο βρονταὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ ἀστραπαὶ καὶ σεισμός.
And there was thunder and lightning and an earthquake (8:5).

7th Trumpet καὶ ἐγένοντο ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταὶ καὶ σεισμός καὶ χάλαζα μεγάλη.
And there was lightning and sounds and thunder and an earthquake and great hail (11:19).

7th Bowl καὶ ἐγένοντο ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταὶ καὶ σεισμός ἐγένετο μέγας, οἷος οὐκ ἐγένετο ἀφ’ οὗ ἄνθρωπος ἐγένετο ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τηλικούτος σεισμός οὕτω μέγας.
And there was lightning and sounds and thunder and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came upon the earth, so great was the earthquake (16:18).

The 7th Bowl precipitates the great eschatological earthquake (cf. Ezek 38:18-19; Hag 2:6, 7; Heb 12:18-27): The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men... (16:19-21).

This earthquake brings the destruction of the great city, Babylon. The Fall of Babylon will be described more fully in the next section (17:1–19:10). It must be destroyed, to make way for the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem (21:9–22:9).

None of the bowls produces repentance (16:9, 11, 21), yet the new song offers the prospect of universal worship of God (15:4).