

On Wrath and Chaos in Revelation

Introduction

One of the things that can be most disturbing about Revelation is the many pictures of God's wrath poured out on the inhabitants of the earth. The images of blood flowing at the height of the horses' bridle, or of the inhabitants of heaven rejoicing in the smoke of the torment of humans are the sorts of images that give us pause. Some people have taken images like these and concluded that God is petty and vindictive, and is out to cause pain to those who don't worship him. God seen in this way seems to be quite an egomaniac, insisting that people praise him or else he burns them. Is this what the wrath of God is about though? Does God so badly *need* our recognition that he is out to punish those who refuse? Revelation gives us not only a very graphic picture of the wrath of God, but also it gives us some clues in understanding how God's wrath functions in justice and judgment in a manner consistent with the purposes of a loving, creator God. In examining God's wrath in Revelation we will consider three areas. First, we will look at how Exodus lies in the background of Revelation, and how the creation theology of Exodus plays out in Revelation. Second we will consider how God's wrath is demonstrated by turning people over to evil. Finally, we will examine the justice of God's wrath in which the punishment is a direct consequence of the sin. My hope is that these things will help clarify the pictures of God's wrath we find in Revelation.

Exodus and a Theology of Creation

One of the Old Testament books that stands firmly in the background of the imagery used in Revelation is the book of Exodus. In Revelation, Jesus is described as the sacrificial lamb, whose blood redeems God's people. In Exodus, it is the blood of the Lamb on the doorposts of the Israelites that marked them for salvation. The imagery of the sea is used throughout Revelation, but it is very clearly a reference to Exodus in Revelation 15, where the faithful stand at the sea and sing the song of Moses and the Lamb. This scene is meant to bring to mind Exodus 15 where Israel stands on the shore of the Red Sea after having seen the forces of Egypt destroyed by God. The recurring throne room scene in Revelation (4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18-21) contains elements of the plagues as well as from Israel's encounters with God at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19). Finally, the imagery used to describe the trumpet and bowl judgments in Revelation is clearly drawn from the plagues that God brought upon Egypt and the Pharaoh. What is the purpose of using so much Exodus imagery in Revelation? The story of the Exodus is one of the foundational stories of the Judeo-Christian faith. By that I mean that we can understand a great deal about the character of God and the human situation through the Exodus narrative.

Viewing our human situation as presented in Revelation through the Exodus narrative gives us insight. Just like Israel, we were freed from bondage to the forces that oppose God. Israel was in slavery under Egypt; we were slaves to sin which leads to death (Romans 6:16-17). Our freedom involves the sacrificial Lamb of Jesus Christ. We are covered by his blood (Revelation 7:14), just as the Israelites, who were marked by the blood of the lamb were passed over (Exodus 12). Furthermore, in Exodus 12:23 we learn that it is the "destroyer" who executes the judgment of the death of the firstborn. We find the destroyer again in Revelation 9:11. In Revelation the destroyer leads the plague of demonic locusts, who are not allowed to harm those who are sealed by God. Just as God's people, Israel, were to follow Moses, their deliverer, we too follow our deliverer, Jesus Christ. Also, Exodus helps us to understand our present situation as God's people. We have been delivered but are not yet in the Promised Land. Our promised land is shown in Revelation 21-22, the New Jerusalem and the new heaven and earth. We are not currently there. Instead, we are in the wilderness where we are to learn to trust God to lead and guide us to the

Promised Land. These parallels are straightforward, but what can we learn of God's wrath in Revelation from our understanding of Exodus?

God is shown to be the faithful creator in Exodus (and Genesis as well). Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, stresses the necessity of a solid "creation theology" in understanding God in the book of Exodus. This means we must understand God as the faithful creator of the earth, and we must look for God's continuing creational purposes in the Biblical story. God is about bigger things than saving a few individual souls. He is recreating, restoring, and redeeming. He is continuing to bring order out of chaos (as found in Genesis 1). This new creation is what Isaiah spoke of (e.g. Isaiah 65, 66). It is the New Heavens and Earth in Revelation. It is the Kingdom of God to which Paul was referring in 1 Corinthians 15. It is the reason that all creation groans in anticipation in Romans 8. God's salvation and redemption of persons is part of God's renewal and recreation of the cosmos. God's choosing Israel was not an end in and of itself. In Genesis 3 we find that the brokenness and corruption of creation comes as a result of the rebellion of humanity against the creator God. This is the result of humanity's special place in God's order. Because of this, it makes sense that God's bringing about a new creation which repairs and surpasses creation before the fall, would begin with the problem: fallen humanity. God chose Israel to be his people, and this was a part of God's redeeming humanity. God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15) was to bless him so that he would bless the nations. He was to be the first of a new nation, a new people. Jesus Christ came as the perfect Israel, the fulfillment of God's promises, and the first fruits of what is to come. We begin with the end in mind. God is taking history and the created order towards his end.

If it is the case that God is indeed directing history towards a new creation, then the forces of sin and evil that oppose God are working in an anti-creational and anti-human manner. In regard to Pharaoh and Egypt, Fretheim writes, "Pharaoh's oppressive, anti-life measures against Israel are anticeational, striking at the point where God was beginning to fulfill the creational promise of fruitfulness in Israel (Gen. 1:28; Exodus 1:7). Egypt is an embodiment of the forces of chaos, threatening a return of the entire cosmos to its precreation state." (p.106) In the Exodus, Egypt is a force in opposition to God. God is bringing forth a new creation, with Israel in the center of this work. When Egypt enslaves Israel, it is in direct opposition to God and God's creative purposes. God's plan to set creation free from its bondage (Romans 8) began in Israel, but Egypt oppressed and put Israel in bondage (Exodus 1:11). Furthermore, the evil of Egypt's anticeational activity becomes even clearer in the edict to kill the sons of the Israelites in Exodus 1. If Egypt is an anticeational force, then that affects the way in which we understand the plagues. Fretheim writes, "The plagues may thus be viewed as the effect of Pharaoh's anticeational sins upon the cosmic order writ large" (p.106-7). He also calls plagues the "ecological signs of historical disaster" (p.108). In the plagues upon the Egyptians we see creation out of control. We see creation given back to chaos. Water was meant to be life giving and sustaining, but in the plague it not only brings death, but is a picture of death. Living things, such as locusts, gnats, and frogs are out of control. They swarm and overwhelm. The lights that God put placed in the sky fail to function as God created them to do. God's wrath against the Egyptians in Exodus is played out largely in these terms, as Fretheim calls them, "ecological signs of historical disaster." The plagues are concrete instances of the results of siding against God, against creation, against order. If you choose the forces of chaos and destruction, this is what it involves.

This should shape our understanding of the visions of God's plagues of judgment in Revelation in a powerful way. After all, God is again seen as the faithful creator in Revelation. In Revelation 4 God is praised as the one who created all things. It is from this understanding of God as creator that our understanding of God's redemptive and judgmental acts must be understood. Therefore, in the trumpet and bowl judgments we again have plagues that demonstrate what happens to those who oppose God and his creational purposes. The trumpet and bowl judgments are the result of opposing God's good creational purposes. They are visions of creation out of control. They are visions of creation turned over to chaos. In

regard to the plague of demonic locusts found in Revelation 9, Craig Koester writes, “The judgment depicted here is not direct divine punishment, but a revelation of what it would mean for God to hand over the world to other powers” (p.100). The idea of God turning people over to the forces of evil and chaos as a means of judgment leads us to our next section.

God’s Wrath and the Forces of Chaos

What is the wrath of God? Joel Green and Mark Baker present a helpful understanding of the wrath of God in their book, “Recovering the Scandal of the Cross.” They point out the ideas of the wrath of the gods in ancient and classical Greek literature, where the gods act in unpredictable ways, are prone to anger and hold grudges. This, of course, causes fear. How can you deal with divine anger that may be sudden, unpredictable, and vengeful? Humans can work hard to get on the good side of a god like this, but the results would be inconsistent. Many people today have a similar picture of God as compared to the unpredictable gods in Greek literature. We all sin and make mistakes, yet sometimes it seems God’s wrath pours out, full of anger, and other times, for some reason, we get a free pass. Some see the hand of God in a tornado that strikes a church steeple of a denomination that took a certain stand on sexual issues. However, that then raises the question of where the wrath of God is for those who are in the sex trades industries (or at least with individuals who profit from such)? Furthermore, did other churches that suffered tornadoes, fire, or some other sort of disaster sin in worse ways than those whose church buildings were untouched? These are important questions, because they get to some issues about the character of God. These are the sorts of issues that can disturb us when reading about the wrath of God in Revelation. If we understand God as being “emotion laden” and ready to strike out arbitrarily at those who disobey him, then Revelation paints a disturbing picture. What if the wrath of God is not like an angry man, raging and striking out at someone who disobeyed?

Green and Baker point to Romans 1:18-32 as a crucial place for understanding the wrath of God. In verse 18 we read that the wrath of God is “revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” In order to see how it is revealed, we read on. First, we note that the root sin is worshipping the creature instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Who or what you worship really matters. The wrath of God and consequence of sin comes as a result of giving your heart to idols. When we are in sin, we worship some part of the creation, instead of the Creator. The result of this is found in verses such as, “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,” and “For this reason God have them up to degrading passions.” Romans 1:28-32 states, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” It is important to note here, that this part of Romans is describing how God’s wrath is played out, and that is by turning sinful people over to their own brokenness. Green and Baker write, “The wrath to come refers to the climactic, end time scene of judgment when those who prefer to worship idols rather than the living God receive the fruits of their own misplaced hopes and commitments” (p.54). The wrath of God is evident in the brokenness of the world, which is a result of the stance of rebellious humanity. In Romans 1, Paul gives specific instances of the results of humanity’s having other gods before God. These include rebellion towards parents, boastfulness, and ruthlessness. These things are, according to Romans 1, also the presence of the wrath of God. When humanity rebels against God, it is turned over to its own sin. We live in a world where sin corrupts, steals, and destroys. Now we must ask what happens to creation when it is turned over to rebellion and brokenness?

Genesis tells of God's creation as an act of bringing things into being and of bringing order from chaos. As covered above, anticreation forces ultimately bring forth chaos and destruction (the opposite of God's creative acts). Richard Bauckham, in his commentary on the Theology of Revelation points out the relevance of the flood in Genesis in understanding the theology of Revelation. "The waters of the flood are understood as the primeval waters of chaos or the waters of the abyss, which God in creation had restrained and held at bay, but not abolished. They symbolize the power of nothingness to undo creation, a destructive potential which remains to threaten the created universe with reversion to chaos" (p.53). God's judgment upon the earth in Noah's day was to turn the earth over to these powers of nothingness. The power of nothingness to undo creation is an important concept. It ties in with our understanding of the Exodus plagues above. God's wrath is played out in turning a rebellious creation over to the forces of nothingness it has chosen. But, by the grace of God this does not happen entirely. In fact, God decides to do something amazing in Jesus Christ. He takes on the forces of nothingness, chaos, and death on the cross. The judgment of the ways of the world is found on the cross. The cross shows us our sin. The resurrection, however, reveals to us the power of God to erase the effects of our rebellion. God's creative work is not done yet, and the day is coming when God will destroy the destroyers of the earth (Rev. 11:18).

Wrath, Judgment, and Justice

God's wrath, whether as it is revealed now, or as it will come in the future, is full of God's justice. This is an important point, because the character of God is important. If we can only picture the wrath of God as coming from an emotional, vindictive, and easily angered God, then it becomes hard to understand how God is just, fair, and trustworthy. We turn now to God's justice as shown in punishment.

One theme that occurs throughout Revelation is the theme of the punishment fitting the sin, or directly resulting from the sin. As Referenced above, Revelation 11:18 speaks of "destroying those who destroy the earth." If you choose a reality of destruction, then God's judgment is that you receive destruction. In the letter to Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-28), a false teacher is mentioned that leads people to fornication (idolatry). The result is that she will be thrown on a bed and her children struck dead. Following this metaphor of fornication for adultery, the judgment makes sense. In Revelation 8:12, we learn those who choose to live apart from the light of the world will live in darkness. Revelation 16:6 states that those who shed the blood of the saints and prophets are given blood to drink. The prayers of the saints in Revelation 6 rise up as incense with the question of how long will God allow evil people to persecute them. The response to this is found in later chapters where the persecutors torment rises up as smoke (Revelation 14) and Babylon goes up in smoke (Revelation 18). This gives us the parallel images of the incense of prayer and smoke of torment, both rising up to God. These are just a few of the examples of God's justice playing out in judgment.

One vivid picture of the wrath of God, justice of God, and Gods' judgment is found in Revelation 14. In verses 9-11 we hear the announcement that those who worship the beast will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger. What an image! What exactly is the wine of God's wrath? We find out a few verses later in the chapter, when the angel gathers the grapes or vintage of the earth (vv. 17-20). This image is one of judgment. Evil is being gathered and judged, and the image used is that of grapes being gathered into a winepress. In this metaphor, the winepress is the winepress of God's wrath, but the actual substance of the wrath, or more accurately, the raw material, is supplied by the grapes. The grapes represent those who worship the beast, those who do evil, and those evil deeds. That is what is gathered, the wine press simply brings everything to a head. It brings evil to its conclusion. This is the wine that flows out. This is the wine of God's wrath. This is also consistent with what we read in Romans 1. Sinful humanity gets the fruit of their own rebellion. This is the justice of God.

At this point, the careful reader should be a bit concerned. After all, who among us has lived a life so faithfully, so perfectly, that we do not fall under condemnation by this justice? It's not a case of God venting his anger on us. It is the case that the seeds of our own destruction are in our own hearts. In fact, when we consider this destructive nature of evil, we can truly see why a faithful, creator God would hate sin and evil. This brings us to a crucial point as we consider God, humanity, and the gospel. Humanity has rebelled against God, breaking the relationship between us and our Creator. Something needs to change, but it is not God. Furthermore, it is not a matter of God simply overlooking our issues. Even if God were to ignore our brokenness, sin still bears the fruits of death. We would still be condemned. Understanding God's wrath, judgment, and justice shows us that God's wrath plays out by allowing us to be turned over to our own evil. Evil is ultimately self-destructive. This is seen clearly in Revelation 17, when the 10 horns devour the Harlot, Babylon. In order for us to be saved, something within us must be changed. We need to be fixed. Our mess needs to be undone. The justice of God is shown in our receiving the fruits of our rebellion. The mercy of God is in Jesus Christ, who came to save us.

Conclusion

We have examined the theme of God's wrath as found in Revelation by considering the Exodus background with its creation theology. A solid creation theology leads us to a healthy understanding of God as creator, who is still at work with his creative purposes, bringing all of history to his ends of a new creation. This led us to consider how God's wrath is played out by turning people and creation over to the anticreation powers of evil, nothingness, and chaos that seek to destroy. These things are the fruits of our rebellion. Choosing to be outside of God's will means to choose these things, and God's wrath is revealed in our getting our own way. Finally, we examined how God's judgment comes from his justice. It is not arbitrary, nor is it a matter of God venting his anger on us. Judgment comes as a natural result of rebelling against a good God.

This may not make the scenes any less fearful and disturbing for us as we read John's visions in Revelation. The visions are describing a reality of the result of sin. We should still be convicted and disturbed, not because we fear a moody god who may strike those we love, but rather because we, and those whom we love, may some day receive the fruits of our own actions. Those who have denied God time after time, at some point will be allowed to have their way. The fearful part of Revelation is that the judgments described show what it means to live without a loving God who brings order, goodness, beauty, love, and life into reality. A life apart from God would indeed lead us to call out to the mountains to fall upon us. The purpose of the visions of judgment in Revelation is very clear. They are a call for us and for all people to turn back towards the God who created them, and to his Son who redeemed them. Fear is an appropriate response to these visions, but hope is as well.