

Revelation

Lesson #15

The Battle of Armageddon

(19: 1-21)

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Review

As we saw in our previous lesson, Revelation 17-19 form a recapitulation, taking us to “ground zero,” the epicenter of the seventh bowl’s impact.

In Lesson #14 we met the great “Whore of Babylon” riding upon a beast with seven heads: Babylon the great, *“the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth”* (17: 5), and *“the great city that has sovereignty over the kings of the earth”* (18: 18).

We learned that, in general, the scarlet beast is the 1st-century Roman Empire and, more specifically, the city of Rome, its capital. The “Whore of Babylon” who rides the beast is the “world,” the people who have allied themselves with the infernal trinity—Satan, the Antichrist and the False Prophet—those who bear the mark of the beast: 666.

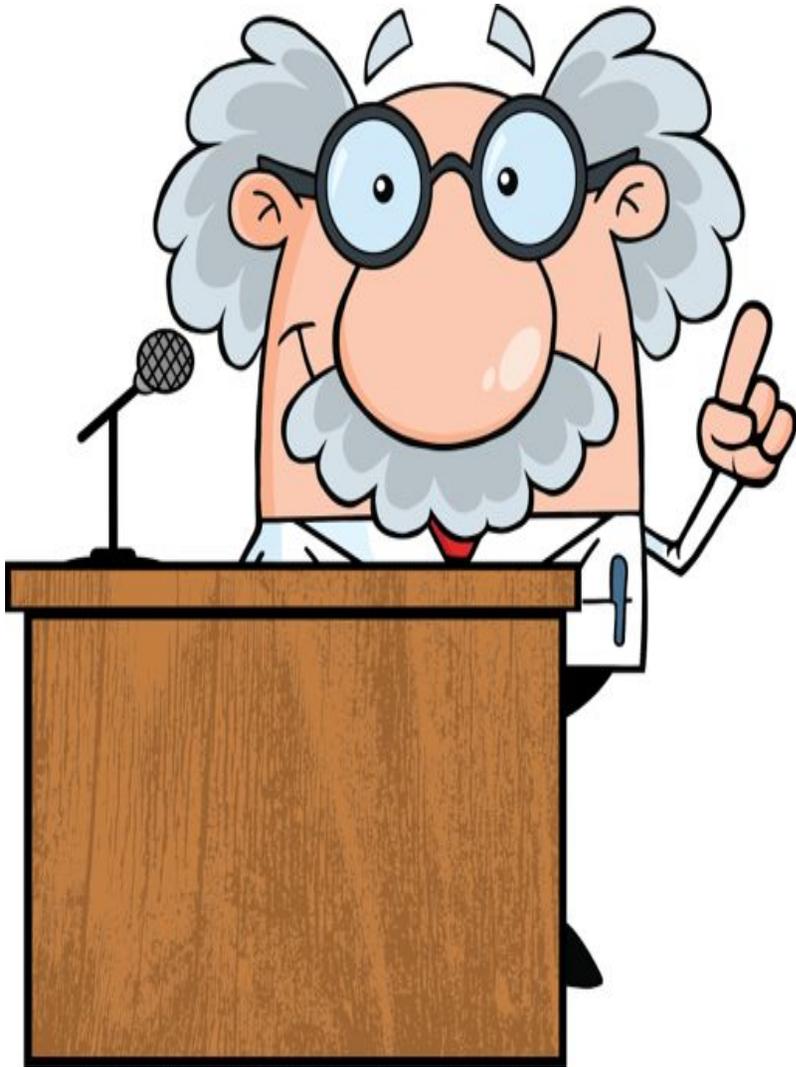
Preview

After a chorus of praise from the twenty-four elders and a vast multitude in heaven, Lesson #15 presents the climactic “Battle of Armageddon” as Christ returns, riding a white horse and leading his army of saints. They quickly crush Satan’s forces, led by the Antichrist and the False Prophet, who are captured and *“thrown alive into the fiery pool with burning sulfur”* (19: 20).

All the rest of Satan’s minions become carrion, food for the birds of the air, who gorge themselves on their rotting corpses.



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As the seven seals and seven trumpets brought increasingly severe warnings to repent and turn to God, so the seven bowls brought judgment upon the earth.

With the seventh bowl pouring out the seven last plagues, God's judgment on "Babylon" is complete, and the path is cleared for Christ's triumphal return.

Before he returns, however, we witness a great victory celebration in heaven.

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“After this I heard what sounded like the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven saying:

‘Alleluia!

**Salvation, glory and might belong to our God,
for true and just are his judgments.
He has condemned the great harlot
who corrupted the earth with her harlotry.
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’**

They said a second time:

‘Alleluia!

Smoke will rise from her forever and ever.’

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne, saying, ‘Amen, Alleluia.’

(19: 1-4)

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“Twenty-four Elders,” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 32r), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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- John hears what sounded like **“the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven”** (19: 1) praising God in the presence of those surrounding God’s throne, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders.

- This “great multitude” first appeared in 7: 9-14, the countless numbers *“from every nation, race, people, and tongue,”* the white-robed victors who came out of the great tribulation.

- This same “great multitude” sang the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb, praising God’s justice in 15: 2-3.

- This is their *third appearance*.

- The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders concur, shouting in a loud voice, **“Amen. Alleluia”** (19: 4).

After defeating the Assyrian Empire in 609 B.C. at the Battle of Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar II,



The Whore of Babylon, the great harlot, has been defeated; God's justice prevails, and the path is cleared for Christ's return.

But first we hear a startling announcement!

“A voice coming from the throne said:

**‘Praise our God, all you his servants,
[and] you who revere him, small and great.’**

**Then I heard something like the sound of a great multitude or
the sound of rushing water or mighty peals of thunder, as
they said:**

Alleluia!

The Lord has established his reign, [our] God, the almighty.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory.

For the wedding day of the Lamb has come,

his bride has made herself ready.

She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment.’

(The linen represents the righteous deeds of the holy ones.)

(19: 5-8)



The voice coming from the throne is presumably that of the living creature, the one who leads the liturgy in the Holy of holies and who handed the seven bowls to the seven angels in 15: 7. He invites all of God's people to join in the praise.

So, together with the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders and the "great multitude," all God's people, small and great alike, shout in a voice like the sound of a "great multitude" or the sound "rushing water," accompanied by peals of thunder:

"Alleluia! The Lord has established his reign, [our] God, the almighty. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, his bride has made herself ready. She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment."

(19: 6-8)



Well, look at that! Just as we had the infernal trinity of Satan, the Antichrist and the False Prophet committing “fornication” with the Whore of Babylon, so is the genuine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit about to be wed to the virtuous bride of the Lamb!



Oh, boy, there's going to be a wedding!

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The Hebrew Scriptures commonly refer to Israel as God's "bride":

*"For your husband is your maker;
the Lord of hosts is his name,
Your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,
called God of all the earth."*

(Isaiah 54: 5)

God tells the prophet Hosea to *"go, get for yourself a woman of prostitution and children of prostitution, for the land prostitutes itself, turning away from the Lord"* (1: 2). Israel, God's bride, has betrayed God over and over again, and he wants Hosea to know how that feels, all the while longing for the day when Israel will once again call God *"my husband"* (2: 18).



That day will most certainly come, and when it does God will renew all creation, put an end to war and *“betroth you [Israel] to me forever”* (Hosea 2: 21).

Isaiah envisions Israel at that moment:

*“I [Israel] will rejoice heartily in the Lord,
my being exalts in my God;
For he has clothed me with garments of
salvation,
and wrapped me in a robe of justice,
Like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem,
as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”*

(61: 10)



Jesus, too, uses bridegroom imagery of himself:

“Then the disciples of John approached him and said, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast [much], but your disciples do not fast?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.’”

(Matthew 9: 14-15)

And John the Baptist picks up this bridegroom imagery when he denies being the Messiah:

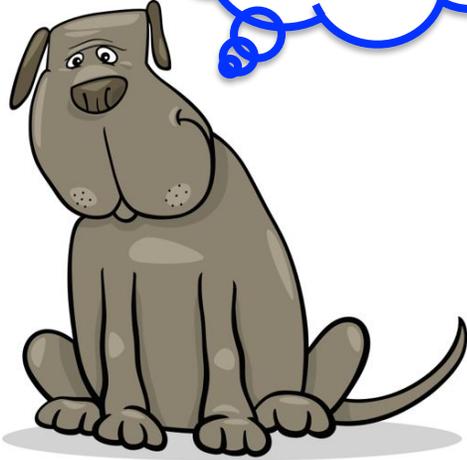
“You yourselves can testify that I said [that] I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease.”

(John 3: 28-30)

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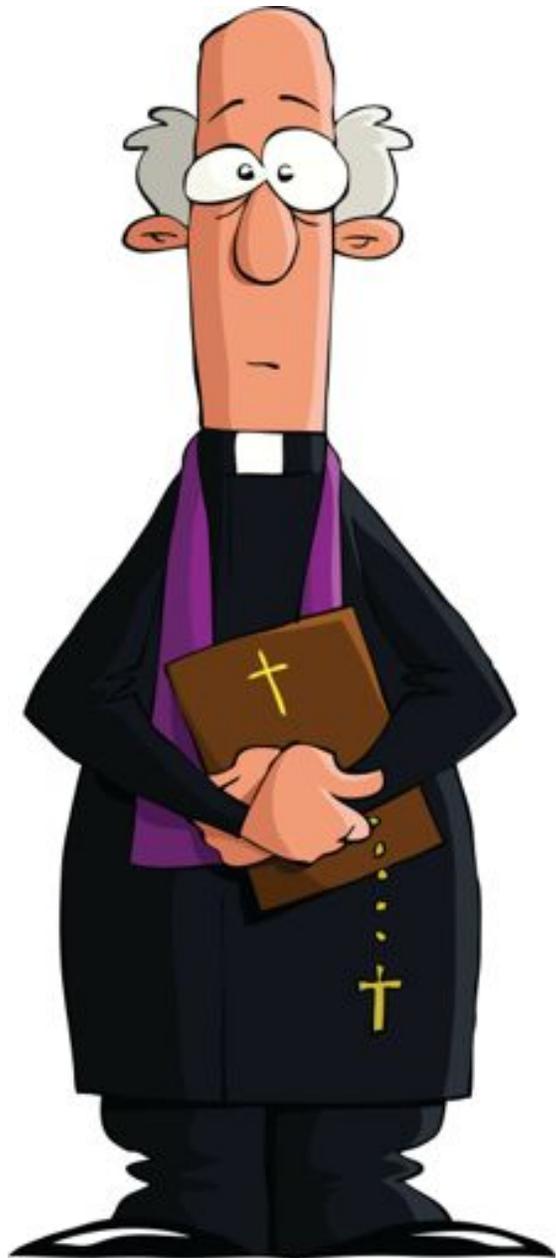


So, this passage in Revelation 19:
6-8 fulfills both the prophecies
concerning Israel as God's bride in
the Hebrew Scriptures, and the
bridegroom allusions to Jesus in
the gospels!



Very nice!

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In Revelation, the bride of the Lamb, of course, is the Church, those who belong to Christ: those who bear the Lamb's name on their foreheads (14: 1; 22: 4); those who have not soiled their clothes (3: 4); those who are dressed in "*bright, clean linen garments*" (19: 8).

The victorious bride of the Lamb, in her virtue and purity, stands in stark contrast to the fornicating Whore of Babylon, dressed in scarlet and drinking drunkenly from the cup of her abominations.

“Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These words are true; they come from God.’ I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, ‘Don’t! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers who bear witness to Jesus. Worship God. Witness to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’”

(19: 9-10)

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To understand the wedding feast of the Lamb and his bride, we need to know something about Jewish wedding customs in the 1st-century Roman world.

Step #1: The Betrothal

•According to Jewish law and the customs of the time, “betrothal” refers to a negotiated, contractual agreement to enter into marriage, usually made by the families of the bride and groom when they are quite young. Once the betrothal is made, the couple is considered man and wife in all legal and religious aspects, except that of actual cohabitation. In the relationship between Christ and the Church (or Christ and individual believers), the “betrothal” encompasses conversion and baptism.

Step #2: The Wedding



- For the wedding the bride is adorned in a beautiful dress, jewels and flowers: *“For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, his bride has made herself ready. She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment”* (19: 7-8).
- The bride and her friends process to the house of the bridegroom, who comes out with his friends to formally greet her, and she enters his home to applause, song and celebration. In Revelation, the new Jerusalem comes *“down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband”* (21: 2).
- The wedding feast lasts seven days. Friends, family and the entire town or village participate in the festivities. The marriage is consummated on the first night of the feast, and the couple lives together in their home from then on. In Revelation, we view consummation and life together, as we tour the new Jerusalem—our eternal home—in 21-22.

“Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These words are true; they come from God.’ I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, ‘Don’t! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers who bear witness to Jesus. Worship God. Witness to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’”

(19: 9-10)

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- This is quite extraordinary! The angel is presumably one of the four living creatures, those who surround the very throne of God. John—understandably—is about to fall on his knees before him in worship, but the angel says: *“Don’t! I am a fellow servant of you and of your brothers . . .”* (19: 10).

- Even the mightiest angel falls infinitely short of the worship due only to God. What’s more, the mightiest angel claims to be simply a *“fellow servant of you and of your brothers.”* In heaven, all of us—from the greatest to the least—are fellow servants and brothers in the family of God.

- As St. Paul says:

“For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

(Galatians 3: 26-28)

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With that, we end the first section of Revelation's conclusion, which began when we met the Whore of Babylon in chapter 17.

Now, we begin a series of four visions (19: 11 – 21: 8) which show how God draws human history to a close.

The first is the climactic “battle of Armageddon” on the plains of Megiddo.



**. Paul gives us a preview of Christ's return
the end times:**



“We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words.”

(1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18)

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Tel of Megiddo [Armageddon]. Jezreel Valley, Israel.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
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Atop Megiddo, looking out to the “Plains of Megiddo” (Jezreel Valley).

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
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“Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] ‘Faithful and True.’ He judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

(19: 11-16)

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(19: 11-16)

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"Rider on the White Horse," *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 33r), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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- Seeing the “**heavens opened**” signals a new vision, a depiction of Christ’s return, an event that virtually every Christian in the 2nd half of the 1st century *expected would occur imminently, in their lifetime.*
- As we noted previously, a victorious emperor entered Rome in triumphal procession riding a **white horse**. The white horse signals victory.
- Jesus entered this world as a helpless infant lying in a manger in Bethlehem, and he left this world on a cross, the Lamb of God who died that we may live; when Jesus returns, he rides astride a white horse, a victorious warrior, waging war and bringing judgment.

“Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] ‘Faithful and True.’ He judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

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- His eyes were like a **“fiery flame”** suggests an intense, penetrating knowledge, a razor-sharp clarity between right and wrong, virtue and sin, righteousness and judgment.
- The **“many diadems”** are the crowns of a king who rules many nations. Recall that the dragon wore seven diadems and the beast, ten (12: 3; 13: 1).
- He had a name **“that no one knows except himself”** suggests not only that he is beyond understanding, but that he has a clear, comprehensive knowledge of who he is. In the Johannine world, Jesus’ self-knowledge is complete from start to finish, unlike in the synoptic gospels where Jesus’ identity and mission gradually emerge.



• He wore a cloak **“that had been dipped in blood.”** On first thought, the blood seems to be that of a conquering warrior returning from battle. But here the battle has not yet begun; rather, the cloak **“dipped in blood”** recalls Jesus’ bloody death on the cross, the blood by which he conquered sin and death, the blood by which we are saved.

• And his name was called the **“Word of God”** recalls the opening of John’s gospel: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (1: 1).

“Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] ‘Faithful and True.’ He judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

(19: 11-16)

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- The **“armies of heaven”** are those who bear his name: the 144,000 and the vast multitude who came out of the great tribulation. St. Paul portrayed them in 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18. They are riding **“white horses”** and are dressed in **“clean white linen.”**
- Out of his mouth came a **“sharp sword to strike down the nations”** whom he will **“rule with an iron rod,”** an overt allusion to Psalm 2.

Psalm 2

Why do the nations rage,
and the people plot what is vain?
They stand together, the kings of the earth;
the leaders conspire against the Lord and his Anointed:
*“Let us break their bonds asunder;
Let us cast off their cords.”*

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord, he laughs them to scorn.
Then he will speak in his anger;
in his wrath he will strike them with terror:
*“Indeed, it is I who installed my king
upon Zion, my holy hill.”*

I will announce the decree of the Lord,
the Lord said to me:

*"You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask and I shall bequeath you the nations,
put the ends of the earth in your possession.
With an iron rod you will break them,
shatter them like a potter's jar."*

Now, O kings, understand;
take warning, rulers of the earth:
serve the Lord with fear and trembling;
kiss the Son lest he be angry and you perish,
for suddenly his anger will blaze.

Blessed are they who trust in God.

“Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] ‘Faithful and True.’ He judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’”

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•Acting on behalf of God, the returning Christ—as “King of kings and Lord of lords”—will tread out in the wine press “the wine of the fury and wrath of God, the almighty.” As we have already noted in Lesson #12, treading grapes in the wine press alludes to the conquering divine warrior of Isaiah 63: 1-4—

*“Who is this that comes from Edom,
in crimsoned garments, from Bozrah?
Who is this, glorious in his apparel,
striding in the greatness of his strength?
‘It is I, I who announce vindication,
mighty to save.’
Why is your apparel red,
and your garments like one who treads the wine press?
‘The wine press I have trodden alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me.
Their blood spurted on my garments,
all my apparel I stained.
For a day of vindication was in my heart,
my year for redeeming had come.”*

“Then I saw an angel standing on the sun. He cried out [in] a loud voice to all the birds flying high overhead, ‘Come here. Gather for God’s great feast, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of military officers, and the flesh of warriors, the flesh of their riders, and the flesh of all, free and slave, small and great.’

(19: 17-18)

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**“Birds Will Gorge Themselves” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 33v), c. 1370-1390.
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- Having met the returning Christ with his army of saints, we now turn to the enemy: Satan and his crew and the kings of the earth whom he had gathered on the plains of Megiddo for this final battle of Armageddon.

- This long-awaited scene is foreshadowed in Ezekiel 38-39, and Revelation draws heavily upon it. In Ezekiel's vision, God's people are living in safety and security, when Gog the king of Magog (an unknown pagan king from east of the Euphrates River) attacks Israel with a vast army of horse-mounted warriors. The Lord thunderously defeats Gog and his hoard, sends fire on Magog, and tells Ezekiel to summon the birds of the air and wild beasts to *"eat the flesh of warriors and drink the blood of the princes of the earth."*

- Revelation alludes to Ezekiel's Gog and Magog vision again in 20: 7-10 when Satan returns for another try.

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“Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered to fight against the one riding the horse and against his army. The beast was caught and with it the false prophet who had performed in its sight the signs by which he led astray those who had accepted the mark of the beast and those who had worshiped its image. The two were thrown alive into the fiery pool burning with sulfur. The rest were killed by the sword that came out of the mouth of the one riding the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”

(19: 19-21)

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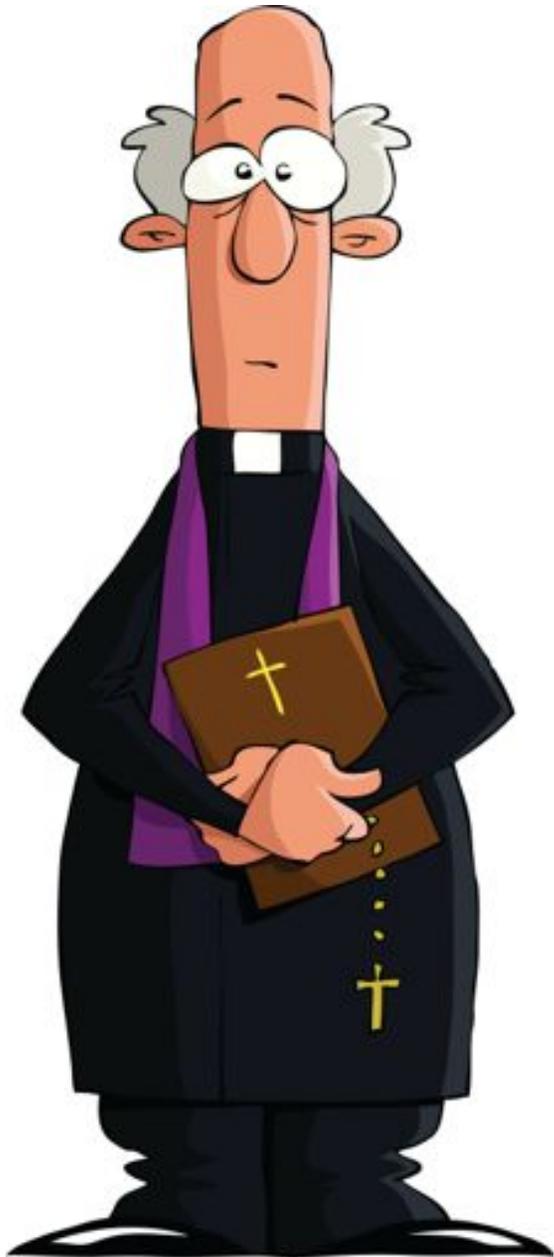


“Pool of Fire,” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 33v), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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- The battle is over no sooner than it begins! Satan and his minions are no match for the returning Christ and his army of saints. As with the war in heaven, Satan again suffers a stunning, humiliating defeat, his second.
- The beast and the false prophet are “**thrown alive into the fiery pool burning with sulfur,**” while Satan’s other forces are simply killed, their corpses devoured by the ravenous birds.
- The “**fiery pool burning with sulfur**” is Hell itself, and Revelation 20: 14 refers to it as the “second death,” a place of eternal punishment and suffering. The fact that the Antichrist and the False Prophet are tossed in immediately, while their followers are simply killed and eaten, suggests their supernatural natures, demonic creatures from start to finish.

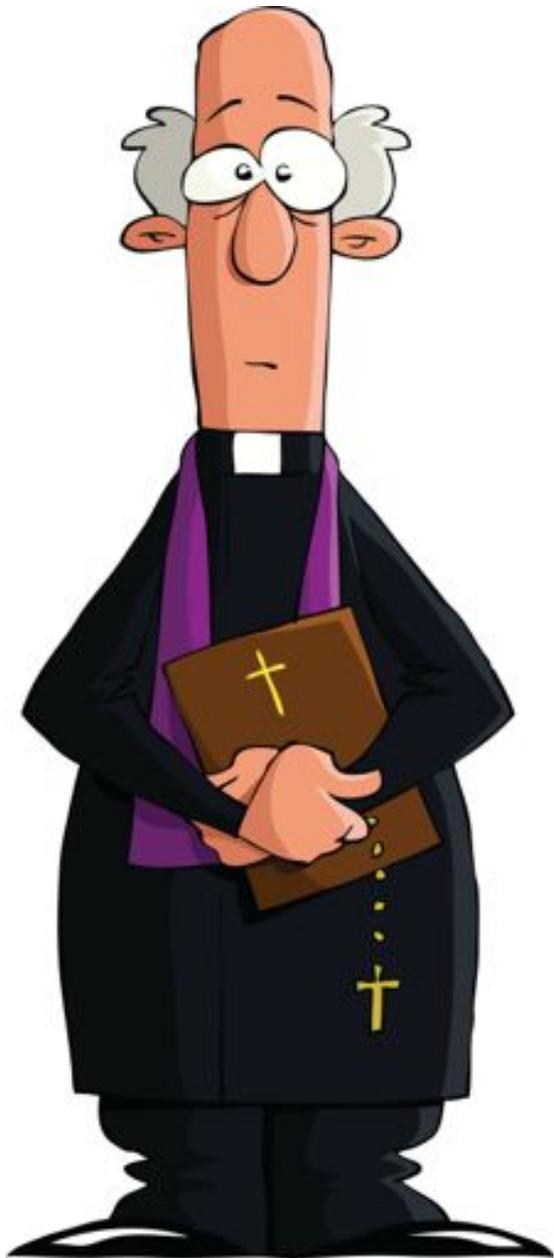


At this point you may ask: “How can I square the Jesus of the gospels, a Jesus of love and compassion, with the returning Christ of Revelation, riding a white horse and wielding “a sharp sword to strike the nations?”

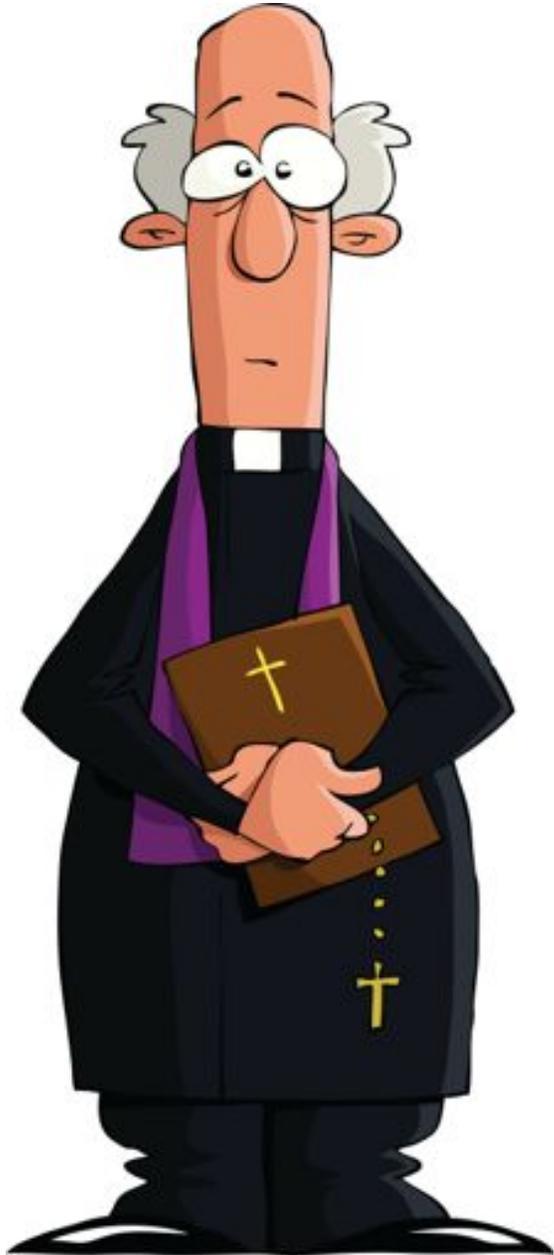
Good question!

First, consider that Scripture portrays Christ in many ways: typologically in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as in the five great sacrifices in Leviticus; through three different human perspectives for three different audiences in the synoptic gospels; through the later Johannine world view in John’s gospel; and through the apocalyptic genre in Revelation. Each illuminates different aspects of who Christ is and of what he did: none is comprehensive.

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Consider, too, Christ’s role at different times in Scripture. God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are present throughout Scripture, from Genesis through Revelation, but each person of the Trinity plays a different role at various times: God the Father takes center stage in the Hebrew Scriptures; God the Son takes center stage in the gospels; and God the Holy Spirit takes center stage from Acts onward.



In the gospels Jesus takes center stage as our redeemer, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” through his suffering and death on the cross. He is our teacher and our savior.

In Revelation, Jesus returns bringing judgment on those who have adamantly and steadfastly refused God’s gift of redemption, those who have allied themselves with the infernal trinity—Satan, the Antichrist and the False Prophet, those who have allied themselves with the values of this world.

As God said in Malachi, “*I, the Lord, do not change*” (3: 6); nor does Christ change: he simply fulfills different roles at different times in the story of redemption.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. In the great victory song of Revelation 19, we learn that a wedding is about to take place. Who is the bride? Who is the groom?
2. Who are the guests who will attend the wedding?
3. Who is the rider on the white horse?
4. Who are those in the army he leads?
5. What happens to the beast and the false prophet in the wake of Armageddon?

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