

Revelation 19:11-18

Introduction

In this module, we explore a story from the New Testament that has bloody battle imagery.

Orientation to the Text

The New Testament book of Revelation depicts God establishing justice on Earth in the “end times.” The book was written in Greek in the first century CE.

At the time, Christians represented a tiny minority within the Roman Empire. The author’s main goal seems to have been to encourage Christians in his community to persevere and do God’s will, despite the fact that they were being persecuted. He also seems to have wanted to discourage them from giving up their Christian identity or practices in the face of social pressure to do so – e.g., going back to the “idolatrous” practices that were common in the Roman world.

Most of the book of Revelation consists of a series of visions, which are often introduced with the words “I saw.” The author is saying that he “saw” these things in visions. In the passage printed on the next page, the author says he had a vision in which he saw a figure riding on a white horse. The figure is not named in the text, but is usually understood as Christ.

The genre of Revelation is apocalyptic literature. It is not a “history” book or the equivalent of a “newspaper written in advance.” Apocalyptic literature includes symbolic imagery that is not meant to be taken literally, and which can be very difficult to interpret. As a result, there is a lot of debate among scholars about how to understand the details of the text.

Getting Familiar with the Text

Read the excerpt from Revelation printed below, then answer questions 1-3. These questions are designed to help you start getting familiar with the contents of the text.

Revelation 19:11-18 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

¹¹ I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems^a; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God.

¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron^b; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders – flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.”

1. How is the rider on the white horse described in verses 11-16?
2. What types of battlefield imagery appear in the passage?
3. Is this how you normally imagine Jesus?

^a A diadem, like a crown, was a symbol of royalty or authority worn on the head.

^b Many phrases in the passage are quotes or echoes of passages in the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. E.g., “He will rule them with a rod of iron,” which resembles Psalm 2:9.

Digging Deeper

After thinking about questions 1-3, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

4. When one reads violent-sounding scriptural texts, it is important to think about the historical context in which they were written. At the time of the book of Revelation, Christians represented a tiny minority within the Roman Empire, with no political or military power. They would not have been in a position to wage battles on God's behalf. From the book of Revelation, it also seems that the author felt his community was being persecuted by more powerful persons in Roman society.
 - a. How might the idea that God and his agents (Christ, angels, etc.) would kill God's enemies as part of a final judgment scenario be encouraging to people who were part of a persecuted and powerless minority?
 - b. How might the passage from Revelation 19 have encouraged Christians in the first century not to give up their Christian identity or practices in the face of social pressures to do so?
 - c. Do you feel differently about Revelation 19 if you understand it as a message for people from a persecuted minority, as opposed to people from a more powerful segment of society?
5. Some people today draw contrasts between the New Testament and other scriptures, such as the "Old Testament" or Hebrew Bible, and the Qur'an. Some people say that the New Testament is about love and peace, while these other scriptures are "harsher" or more violent.
 - a. Do you think these sorts of statements take passages like Revelation 19 into account? More broadly, do you think they are usually based on a comprehensive awareness of the entire contents of the New Testament, Hebrew Bible, and Qur'an?
 - b. Do you think these sorts of statements adequately consider other relevant factors, such as the historical contexts in which the texts found in the Hebrew Bible and Qur'an were produced? For example, do they consider whether some violent-sounding passages in the Hebrew Bible and Qur'an may also have been written for people who were part of a persecuted minority?
 - c. Why do you think people (e.g., Christians) sometimes make statements like these?

Further Reading

- Jacob L. Goodson (2021). “Left Behind? The New Testament and American Evangelical Support for War.” In Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge, pp. 88-97.
- Shelly Matthews (n.d.). “Violence in the New Testament.” *Bible Odyssey* [online]. Available at: www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/violence-in-the-new-testament [accessed 15 May 2021].
- Craig R. Koester (2001). *Revelation and the End of All Things*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Summary of Key Takeaways

- Jesus is depicted as a warrior and violence is carried out with God’s sanction in the visions contained in the New Testament book of Revelation.
- When one reads violent-sounding scriptural texts, it is important to think about the historical context of the people for whom the texts were written, and ask whether those people were part of a persecuted minority.
- People who draw negative contrasts between the New Testament and other scriptures typically do not take the entire contents of these scriptures into account, or adequately consider other relevant factors, such as the historical contexts in which the scriptures were produced.