

EXEGETICAL BRIEF:
Revelation 14:8—
An Anger Cup Full of Wrath Wine
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This fall's course schedule for students enrolled in our seminary's Pastoral Studies Institute included a study of John's Revelation. This meant that I got to read and discuss this great message a number of times in different places with different groups of students. It happened that several different translations of the Bible were open before one group of students. When we got to Revelation 14:8, we were surprised at how different each translation was from the other.

Before we look at these different translations, we will establish the setting of the verse. Our verse falls within John's fourth set of visions. In chapters one through eleven, we get three sets of visions dealing with God's coming interaction with the inhabitants of the earth. In the second part of Revelation, beginning with chapter twelve, we watch how God intends to interact with Satan and his evil partners, antichristian government and the apostate church. These are terrible enemies who pursue and persecute God's church. But throughout this time of tribulation, the gospel is preached and God's people are preserved.

Revelation 14:8 is in the second part of Revelation. It is the fifth prophecy in the fourth set of Revelation's seven visions.¹ This fifth prophecy features three angels. The first angel (14:6-7) is proclaiming the eternal gospel. Our second angel (14:8) is announcing the fall of Babylon. The third angel (Rev 14:9-13) is warning people not to receive the mark of the beast, i. e., of antichristian government.

So what did the second angel say in Revelation 14:8?

Καὶ ἄλλος ἄγγελος δεύτερος ἠκολούθησεν λέγων· ἔπεσεν ἔπεσεν
Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη ἡ ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς
πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη.

Our discussion will focus on this portion of the verse: ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς. Of primary concern is how the various translations treat τοῦ θυμοῦ. The translations fall into one of five categories.

¹English translations tend to make it difficult to identify these seven prophecies or visions that comprise the fourth set of Revelation's visions because they do not provide consistent translations of the obvious markers that John placed into his Greek text. Following the first prophecy that begins at 12:1, John introduces each of the next six with Καὶ εἶδον at 13:1, 13:11, 14:1, 14:6, 14:14, and 15:1.

Approach #1—Demonstrate literal “loyalty” to the original.

KJV: And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.²

Readers of this formalistic translation might appreciate Moulton’s comment that such a string of genitives is “ambiguous,” “obscure,” and “clumsy.”³ Grammars tell us that this piling up of genitives reflects Hebrew usage and is very rare in Classical or Koine Greek.⁴

Approach #2—τοῦ θυμοῦ means “strong feeling/passion” and the genitive case for τῆς πορνείας explains what the passion is for.⁵

ESV: Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

and

GNT: A second angel followed the first one, saying, “She has fallen! Great Babylon has fallen! She made all peoples drink her wine—the strong wine of her immoral lust!”

Professor Becker’s version of this approach produces a very clear translation:

And another angel, a second one, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great which made all nations drink of the wine of her adulterous desire.”⁶

Approach #3—The translation of τοῦ θυμοῦ seems to be a synthesis based on a related passage. The genitive τοῦ θυμοῦ is descriptive.

NIV2011 and NIV84: A second angel followed and said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.”

NIV2011 retained this translation from the 1984 version. I could not find in either Bible a footnote or a help that would explain how the translation team arrived at “maddening” for τοῦ θυμοῦ. The range of meanings for θυμός is wide and includes the idea of breath, spirit, life, emotions, mind, anger, and more. θυμός relies on context to narrow the range intended by the author. But there was no evidence that the range is broad enough to include “maddening” in any lexicon available

²Also following this approach: ASV, ISV, NCV, NKJV, NRSV, and Vulgate.

³*Grammar of NT Greek*, Vol III, p 218.

⁴Moulton again, p 213 and Blass-Debrunner-Funk, paragraph 165.

⁵This is Professor S. Becker’s preferred approach. His rationale for his translation is on pages 226 and 272 of his commentary.

⁶Becker, p 222.

to me. The NIV's rationale for "maddening" must come from Jeremiah 51:7 (and perhaps Jeremiah 25:16).

Jeremiah 51:7: Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD's hand, making the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore, the nations go mad.

A footnote giving these verses would allow their readers to assess the strength of the translators' rationale.⁷ Another possibility is that the NIV translation team was striving to replace the ambiguous τοῦ θυμοῦ with an equally ambiguous "maddening." The wine Babylon gives to the nations can make them mad as in exceedingly drunk and therefore out of one's right mind. Or maddening could mean infuriating. That is, the wine Babylon would give the nations to drink would lead them to the intense anger we see the nations act out against Babylon, the mother of all prostitutes, in Revelation 17:15-17. These are theories that seek to explain the NIV's translation of τοῦ θυμοῦ with "maddening."

Approach #4—τοῦ θυμοῦ means "wrath" and the genitive offers the result of drinking the wine of Babylon's immorality.

HCSB: A second angel followed, saying: "It has fallen, Babylon the Great has fallen, who made all nations drink the wine of her sexual immorality, which brings wrath."

The wine that Babylon has given the nations to drink is the wine of her spiritual adultery. The consequences of drinking this wine is that God will pour out his wrath upon those who share in Babylon's spiritual adultery. That is why drinking Babylon's wine "brings wrath."

Approach #5—Omit τοῦ θυμοῦ from the translation.

Luther: Und ein anderer Engel folgte nach, der sprach: Sie ist gefallen, sie ist gefallen, Babylon, die große Stadt; denn sie hat mit dem Wein der Hurerei getränkt alle Heiden.

I could not find any comment in Luther's writings about why he chose to omit τοῦ θυμοῦ in his translation of this verse. We are left to wonder whether Luther and his collaborators could not agree on a translation. Or perhaps they agreed that this "clumsy accumulation" of genitives could not fit into a German sentence?

The Apostle John did not set out to be obscure. John presumed that he had provided the context required to allow his readers to follow his meaning. The authors of Scripture chose their words carefully. The Spirit was with them throughout this process and inspired every word they wrote. So can we clarify the context that John provided so we—

⁷I am presuming that Jeremiah 51:7 provides the rationale for this translation. As mentioned above, I could not find anything in their Bibles that stated this.

2000 years later—can unpack this string of genitives: ἔπεσεν ἔπεσεν Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη ἢ ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη? It seems that we are obligated to try!

Read below one attempt to provide the context needed to get John's meaning in Revelation 14:8. But first, consider this expanded translation of our verse:⁸

A second angel followed, saying: "It has fallen, Babylon the Great has fallen, who made all nations drink her wine—the wine which is God's wrath. This wrath comes upon the nations because they united with Babylon in her immorality."

The second approach above that translates τοῦ θυμοῦ with "passion" gives us a sentence that makes excellent sense. Babylon's enticements to commit spiritual idolatry were strong wine, both intoxicating and maddening. Though I understand why many translations prefer this interpretation, I am reluctant to adopt this approach. Here is why:

1. In Revelation 14:10, John again uses θυμός. Here θυμός clearly means wrath. To paraphrase this verse: beast worshippers must drink God's wrath (θυμός) wine out of God's anger cup.⁹
2. Revelation 14:19 shows us an angel who is throwing rebellious "grapes" into the great winepress of God's wrath. I wonder if John is explaining the τοῦ θυμοῦ of Revelation 14:8 with the τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ of 14:19.
3. Except for our verse and Revelation 18:3 which features the same string of genitives as our verse, when John uses θυμός, he clearly means "wrath."¹⁰
4. Revelation 14:8 is an echo of Isaiah 21:9 where the context is the destruction of Babylon rather than Babylon's influence on other nations.
Is 21:9: Babylon has fallen, has fallen. All the images of her gods have been shattered on the ground.
5. Revelation 14:8 also echoes Jeremiah 25:15 where the context of the cup of the wine of wrath again is one of judgment and destruction.

Jer 25:15: This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take this cup of the wine of wrath from my hand and make all the nations I am sending you to drink from it."

⁸This translation is just a slight variation of HCSB's translation found in Approach #4.

⁹Cf. BDF, p 165 on this verse. Also, it would be expedient to say that John's use of ὀργή and θυμός align with Trench's distinction, namely, that ὀργή describes the state of being angry and θυμός describes the expression of anger. But John's use of ὀργή and θυμός in Revelation does not adhere rigidly to that distinction.

¹⁰Rev 12:12; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15

6. Revelation 17:2 describes how the impenitent inhabitants of the earth became drunk on the wine of Babylon's sexual immorality. Here the context does focus on the seductive powers of Babylon, the mother of all prostitutes. If θυμός did mean "passion," I would expect to see it incorporated in this verse.

The three translations that WELS is reviewing take very different approaches to translating Revelation 14:8 (and 18:3). Though they are very different from each other, each has interesting if not compelling justification. Of the three, I harbor a mild preference for the HCSB: "the wine of her sexual immorality, which brings wrath."

When a reader of this exegetical brief accuses me of stacking up a pile of firewood that produced little heat, I would plead guilty. As stated above, my interest in this verse arose from the different translations and interpretations of it. More interesting is how I became aware of these different translations. As stated earlier, John's Revelation was September's topic for a number of students enrolled in the Pastoral Studies Institute. Revelation and certainly Revelation 14:8 is of tremendous comfort and encouragement to these future colleagues of ours. I can think of eight PSI students who were born and raised in countries where antichristian governments or antichristian world religions make it exceedingly dangerous to be Christians. Some students under the PSI banner are refugees in America because martyrdom would seem inevitable were they to remain in their homelands.

These men have close family, relatives, and loved ones who still live in these countries. The immediate family of the wife of one student was just evicted from the village where they have lived and owned land for generations. They were evicted because they worship Jesus. The local government has ordered them to leave town. There is no appeal. There will be no transfer of assets from one village to the next except those which the family can carry.

The family of another PSI student was driven out of their homeland by thugs who in the name of their god wielded machetes. The schedule says that I teach Revelation to them. The truth is, they teach the comfort and the power of Revelation to me. For God's children who face death for the gospel, for people who are eager to get back to face this threat again in their homeland, John's Revelation is more than an interesting collection of fantastic images and symbolic numbers. Fallen, fallen is Babylon! Every enemy of Jesus and his Church stands condemned. They are defeated. In their pride, these enemies cannot know this. The day is quickly dawning, however, when these enemies who insist on being God's enemies will drink God's cup of wrath to its dregs.

For a time, Babylon will cause tribulation. But God's people are numbered, sealed, and secure in their victory just as Babylon is sealed in

her condemnation to the lake of fire. God's children—even those who do not escape the enemy's blade—reign with God's Lamb. So now, before the Lion of Judah returns to avenge his martyrs' blood, proclaim the eternal gospel. Wield the double-edged sword. Enlarge the choir that sings the New Song of victory to our Lord!