

Studies in Revelation 15

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This chapter takes up very little space in our Bibles, yet it contains much about the victory of our Lord. He is greatly praised here for the conversion of the nations. This praise is by those who laid down their lives without bending to the pressure of the beast. In heaven they see the massive benefit that has come by their personal sacrifice. They conquered the beast, and the beast lost the nations. Therefore the Song of Moses has become the Song of the Lamb as well. Deliverance from a foe greater than Pharaoh has been achieved. Deliverance of all nations, not just Israel at the side of the Red Sea, has resulted from the obedience of all who conquered the beast, his name, and his number. This heavenly worship and delight are placed here on the verge of the final judgment.

In chapter 14 an angel called out “*fear God and give Him glory*” (14:7). A response to the gospel so large ensued that Christ with His sickle reaped the earth (14:14-16). The other event is “*the hour of His judgment has come*” (14:7). Just as reapers leave gleanings behind, so the warning of judgment was not heeded by all. The one rejecting the gracious gospel “*will drink the wine of God’s wrath*” (14:10). In chapters 15 & 16 this turns from warning to implementation. Seven angels with seven bowls filled with holy wrath will pour plagues on the earth. (Chapter 15 should be read with chapter 16; they form a unit.) When the bowls are poured out, it is such unrelenting judgment (chapter 16) that it seems inappropriate to us that such great joy (chapter 15) could be tied so closely to the unmitigated wrath of God. With these bowls the wrath of God is finished. In Revelation we find a great polarity. History will end with every human soul who ever existed either in the New Jerusalem with washed robes and healed by the leaves of the tree of life (22:2), **OR** judged for his sin and thrown into the lake of fire (20:15). Revelation 15 is at a point in the narrative where the two sides are being finalized. After chapter 14, there is no further call to sinners to repent; no further conversion occurs. We are in chapter 15. The winepress is about to be trodden, and the blood of the unrepentant will flow (14:19,20).

15:1 Revelation has only three signs: the woman who bore the male child (12:1), the dragon (12:3), and now seven angels in heaven about to pour plagues on the earth. The judgment about to be unleashed does not comprise a divine failure. The promise to Abraham has been fulfilled, “... *In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3). That this is so is clear in the song of vv.3 & 4. Some continue to choose the beast, and will face the wrath of God. Prior to this there have been many partial judgments, but in chapter 16 there are no fractions; it is not a quarter of the population as in 6:8 or a third as in chapter 8. Therefore when 15:1 says that “*the wrath of God is finished*” this is the end for all without Christ. All three signs are imbedded in our history. The woman is the means of entry for Christ. The dragon opposes Christ, and finally those who side with the dragon against Christ experience the plagues poured out of those bowls.

The Final Judgment, a Single Event

It is a repeated theme within Revelation that the ultimate judgment of God comes into effect at a specific point in time. Chapter 15 announces that what transpires is the wrath of God being *finished*. To say it a similar way, “no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were *finished*” (15:8). Thus there is a moment when such wrath is brought to its singular climax.

In 10:6, the angel announced to John that *“there would be no more delay”*. Up to that point in Revelation there had been a series of partial judgments. Though they were very real and even severe, these foretastes of judgment anticipated the ultimate one. The final judgment will complete all judgment. There will be such a divine reaction to evil within God’s creation that it will be finished and completed with nothing left undone. That moment is the change from warnings, to threats being carried out. The angel announced an impending end, *“in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets”* (10:7).¹ This mystery of God includes on one hand the nations streaming to the mountain of the temple of the Lord (Isaiah 2). That is the restitution of righteous worship, the salvation of the nations. On the other hand, the mystery of God requires and includes making the earth desolate and utterly empty (Isaiah 24:1,3), with the wasted city of rebellious man broken down (Isaiah 24:10). We should not be surprised if this comes to us throughout Revelation in multiple images: the treading of a winepress (19:15), a consuming fire from heaven (20:9), or the attack by Christ with a sword in His mouth riding on a white horse, leading His army (19:15), and men calling in fear for the mountains to fall on them (6:12-17). The images vary but the event asserted is the singular climax of history. This is not surprising because the Bible speaks so frequently of this climax as “the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:10), or “the day of God” (2 Peter 3:12) or just “the day” (Hebrews 10:25), and numerous times as “that day” (Luke 21:34). There is a day coming when everything will be set right at once.

Later in 16:17 and 21:6, the Lord Himself pronounces that *“it is done!”* This could read, “it has become fact” or “it has happened” and “It is over!” What is done? In chapter 16, “it is done” has in mind a completed judgment, but in chapter 21 it is a completed salvation, for the Lord is making all things new (21:5). At that point redemption has been completed. Both texts express finality. We conclude that the wrath of God cannot be finished with these seven bowls, as Revelation 15 declares, if His wrath reappears in a later setting.² We hold to this for the simple reason that if God’s wrath appears later, it would show that it was not finished with the seven bowls. A contradiction is not necessary. There cannot be more than one final judgment.

In chapters 17 & 18, God’s judgment on Babylon is His wrath. She will be devoured (i.e., eaten) and burned (17:16). She will drink a cup of judgment (18:6), suffering plagues, death, mourning, famine, and fire (18:8). In a single hour she has been laid waste (18:19), and thrown down with violence (18:21). The imageries are vivid and numerous, but the event is one event. This end of Babylon is just another way to show the time when *“the wrath of God is finished”* in 15:1. Revelation, like a slide presentation, has numerous aspects, subjects, and angles of this final judgment. It is viewed and reviewed but it is a singular judgment. The one event where it all comes together is the Second Coming of Christ. That momentous coming, described in chapter 19, is the singular coming and the final judgment we read of in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10:

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to

¹ The ESV has “fulfilled” in Revelation 10:7 and “finished” in 15:1. In Greek these are the same verb, teleo (τελεω). Both words in English have the meaning of bringing to a conclusion.

² If we interpret the thousand years as a period after the Second Coming, it necessitates a subsequent time of judgment, and that undermines this part of the vision where the wrath of God is expressed with finality in the seven bowls. This argues for viewing the millennium as the time prior to the Second Coming.

you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

So the day (note it is called “that day”) when our Lord Jesus comes to be glorified in His saints is, according to Paul, the same day He will take vengeance on those who know not God. The many charts which separate these things into events separated by years are quite wrong. Human history will be brought to a conclusion at the Second Coming.

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**15:2** The sea of glass is before the throne of God. Some call it “the floor of heaven”. This sea of glass is mingled with fire, with fire being the most common way to depict God’s burning hatred of sin. In Daniel 7:9 God’s throne is fire. The saints in heaven standing beside this sea of glass are singing. The fire of judgment did not burn them; they are safe. Those standing there have been delivered. They conquered the beast by refusing to worship him, rejecting his name or number. For their loyalty to Christ they were murdered (13:7 & 15), but in this trial of faithfulness they conquered. Standing implies that they are living. Those with harps sing; they do not merely accompany the music. The picture is of true believers who died yet were rejoicing at a great victory. Their conquering was by choosing death over rejecting Christ, and that was winning. That provokes two questions: Where have we seen this before? and, Why are they so happy?

This is clearly a replay of the Exodus. After crossing the sea safely Israel on the other side of the sea rejoiced at their deliverance and at the defeat of the pursuing enemy. A glorious salvation is tied in Exodus 15:1-21 to a stunning judgment. In John’s vision in Revelation 15 the people of God are standing beside the sea again. Jewish Christians hearing Revelation read to them (1:3) saw the parallel. Then too, the song of vv.3,4 is called “*the song of Moses, the servant of God*”. (Note the connection of Exodus 14:31 with Exodus 15:1.). Now all whom the beast has killed sing a victory song.

**15:3,4** This victory song is also the victory of the Lamb. The original song had in mind the death of the Egyptian tyrant and his army. The Israelites sang of deliverance but not their resurrection; here they do so. Other nations trembled (Exodus 15:14-16). If this is also the song of the Lamb, the redemption is of a new and higher kind. The Lamb by His blood has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”. He has made them to be “*a kingdom and priests to our God*” (5:9,10). This is different from crushing them; it is saving them.

Appendix 15 A below delves into the amazing, and to us obscure way of reading various OT passages related to the song of Moses in Exodus 15. The way Revelation states the song of Moses involves these themes:

- The deeds are the Lord’s. In their death at the hands of the beast and their resurrection at the hand of God they rejoice and credit God with an amazing accomplishment.
- Their language speaks of the power and majesty of God in superlative terms. He is the “*Lord God, the Almighty*”.
- Further, as the sovereign Lord He is “*King of the nations*”. Such is his right that the nations should be His, not the beast’s!
- This salvation brings together God’s great power with His gracious reach to claim back sinful nations.
- It is right or just that He should do so; He is not stealing; He is recovering what is rightfully His.

Furthermore, what He does is true to His ways. The way of the Savior was the way of the cross. The Lord Jesus defeated His arch-enemy by enduring all that the Evil One could mount against him. Christ calls on us to take up our cross and follow Him (Matthew 16:24). We do so in the face of scorn, rejection, suffering, and death. It is the way of God, and the way of God becomes the success of God. Just as the Lord was raised on the third day, the saints are in the presence of the Lord (v.2), singing, grateful not only for the Lord's accomplishments, but also for His ways. In God's method of defeating His enemies, Christ ransoms the nations by His bloodshed not theirs. In this way He conquered and so becomes the "*King of the nations*". All nations will come and worship Him, because His righteous acts have been revealed.

Those righteous acts include the worldwide vindication of His witnessing church in chapter 11. The world rejoiced in their death (11:10), which came only when their testimony was complete (11:7). The breath of God entered them and they stood up (11:11, compare with 15:2). Fear fell on "the dwellers on the earth". They heard the Lord call His witnesses into His presence and watched them go up. Seeing that Someone really can make war with the beast and conquer him, the nations mourn over Him (1:7) in repentance. They had a fresh fear of God, now identified as the Christ of the martyrs. They give glory to the God of heaven (11:13); no longer do they give it to the beast from the sea (13:1). Instead, "*all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him*" (1:7). In this way, God's way, the nations come with proper fear, finally glorifying His name. God is God. The beast is an imposter. The craven worship of the old serpent, whose joy was to deceive the whole world (12:9), has been turned by God into the true worship of the true Lord. Satan has been exposed as a fraud. Suddenly the nations see the truth. And those conquering saints, murdered by their neighbors, but standing in heaven as a result, sing of God's wisdom and victory. Those who once were their neighbors, and who delighted in their death, are now fellow brothers and sisters.

**15:5-8** The seven angels in heaven with seven plagues (v.1) prepare for their duty. The nations have come, but there are still those who remain faithful to the beast. The cup of God's judgment is full to the brim. Finally, the time for vengeance has come (6:10,11; 8:1-5; 16:5-7).

The sanctuary of God was opened. Those with washed robes may enter God's presence (22:14). But those in their sins have no mediator to shield them. The worst situation for any sinner is to stand by himself in his sin exposed to the holy Presence of God. This is a scene of death, the second death (20:14). Israel's high priest would not dare to pull back that curtain, unless he carried the blood of an innocent victim with him (Leviticus 16:15,16). He could not even have a clear view of the Lord between the cherubim. Smoke sheltered him from the Holy Presence (Leviticus 16:12,13). Finally in Revelation 15:5 the sanctuary is open. For those not reconciled, death will follow.

The wrath of God will be poured out by seven angels. The judgment they are commanded to do is pure and holy and proper and deserved. (Note again 16:6,7.) The angels' bright and pure linen symbolizes righteousness. A cherub (the four living creatures are cherubim) gives the bowls full of the wrath of God – nothing partial anymore. The text adds to the wrath of God that He is the God Who lives forever and ever. That alone should make us believe in eternal punishment for it is the wrath of the immutable Lord, Whose loathing rejection of sin never fades. And so the sanctuary was filled with smoke, which came not from a priest dropping incense over hot coals, but from the prayers of the martyrs rising like incense before the Lord. All those who were to be killed (6:11) have been, so now God's response to their plea for vengeance is being answered. The divine agenda cannot be interrupted or delayed. Judgment will proceed; no one can come before God with any other matter until those seven angels finished pouring out the seven plagues. The beast cannot shield his worshippers, and Satan does not care to do so anyway. It is the great and beautiful glory of God to save. He loves to forgive. But He will defend His holiness, and when His cup of wrath is full, it is His glory to punish sin. About this He has no

embarrassment, and we should make no apology. Beware the day, if I may use our colloquial speech when God says in effect, “That’s it; I have had it; get out of my way; I am going to do something about this!” Salvation comes when we fear God and give Him glory (14:7; 15:4). To reject the glory of His grace in Christ is to experience the glory of His justice in holy wrath upon those who reject His Son.

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Appendix 15 A

The Development of the Song of Moses into the Song of the Lamb and the Salvation of the Nations³

The Bible has in it some unusual linkage among passages with similar themes. This ancient Jewish way of connecting Scripture is not common among us centuries later. They used texts with certain words to interpret other passages with the same expressions. It is surprising to us that Revelation 15 can call the words of vv.3 & 4 “the Song of Moses” and then not quote anything from the original Song of Moses found in Exodus 15. If there is no connection between them at all, then the words of Revelation 15:3 are awkward and appear to be mislabeling. However, there is a large similarity in theme, if not in quotation. The agenda of God over the centuries moved from making His redemptive glory known almost exclusively to Israel. He announced His work of saving the nations.

Isaiah 12 is an example of the Song of Moses being enlarged to include the salvation of the nations. Unlike Revelation 15, it maintains explicit reference to the original Song of Moses. The first of two songs in Isaiah 12 speaks of Isaiah’s salvation as an individual (Isaiah 12:1-3). Then a second song enlarges the scope of salvation from Isaiah the individual to praise for God’s glorious deeds “*among the peoples ... in all the earth*”. That is the kind of development quite similar to how the new song of Moses and of the Lamb in Revelation 15 traces its roots back to the original exodus deliverance.

Isaiah 12 takes on the flavor of a new exodus. There is quotation of the original, but the beneficiaries are greatly expanded. It calls for proclamation of God’s glorious deeds among the Gentiles. This is a new kind of deliverance. The historic difference is noteworthy, because the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, as reported in Exodus 15, does not refer to other nations enjoying any saving benefit. Instead, it spoke of them trembling in fear at God’s awesome judgment on Egypt (Exodus 15:14-16). In both Isaiah 12:5 and Exodus 15:1 the Lord has *triumphed or done gloriously*. God can triumph in more than one way. He can crush evil nations, and He can save them. The certainty of the salvation of the nations is a theme much needed in our thinking. This truth is abundantly clear in the Old Testament, and it is a theme emphasized in the Book of Revelation.

³ I am exceedingly grateful for Richard Bauckham’s “The Climax of Prophecy” pp.296-307 for opening to me how these texts are related – © T & T Clark, 1993, London and New York.

Other similarities of the Song of Moses in Revelation with the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:

1. Revelation 15/16 and Exodus 15 appear in a context of divine judgment.
2. The Lord showed Himself as the only true in dealing with Egypt. The gods of Egypt were unable to deliver Pharaoh and his army. They were also unable to keep Israel in bondage. In Revelation the boasts about the beast, "*Who is like the beast*" (13:4) changes to "*You alone are holy*" (15:4). From here on God has no competitors.
3. The Exodus brought God's people into His Sanctuary (Exodus 15:17). The Song of Moses and the song of the Lamb affect the nations: the first with terror and the last with salvation. They come to worship. The sanctuary was opened (15:5), then God and man live together in "*the dwelling place of God*" (21:3).

The original Song of Moses in Exodus 15 is quoted in Isaiah 12. Isaiah 12 also quotes the first verse of Psalm 105.

Exodus 15:1 Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for **he has triumphed gloriously**; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. **2 The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God**, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Isaiah 12:1 You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. "Behold, **God is my salvation**; I will trust, and will not be afraid; **for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.**" **3** With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

Isaiah 12:4 And you will say in that day: "**Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples**, proclaim that his name is exalted. **5** Sing praises to the LORD, for **he has done gloriously**; let this be made known in all the earth. **6** Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Psalm 105:1 ... **give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples!**

In Exodus 15 the Lord God of judgment delivered Israel. In Isaiah 12 He is presented as the glorious Savior who must be made known in all the earth. This theme is lining up with Revelation 15:3,4, where the Lord is recognized as the King of the nations to Whom all nations will come in worship. The first Song of Moses had no such element. Isaiah 12 is a fresh, different, and enlarged manifestation of God's salvation.

This exodus connection within Isaiah 12 links to another passage. Isaiah 12:4 quotes Psalm 105:1 explicitly: "*Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples ...*"

Within Psalm 105 those deeds are specific. Much of that psalm deals with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. In this way Isaiah 12, using Psalm 105 looks back to a past triumph described as glorious, and looks ahead to future saving deeds which are also glorious.

So far all this has been provided to show the glorious deeds of the Lord are not merely broadcasted; they will be experienced in all nations. Isaiah 11:10 proclaimed Christ, "the root of Jesse" as the signal to Whom the nations will come. "His resting place shall be glorious". The deliverance of one nation from Egypt has been expanded to include all.

Now we turn to see how the Song of Moses becomes also the Song of the Lamb Who by His blood ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).

Revelation 15:3,4 quoting Psalms and Jeremiah

Revelation 15:3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God [see Exodus 14:31] and the song of the Lamb, saying, "**Great and amazing** are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, *O King of the nations!* 4 *Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.*"

Psalm 86:8-10 There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. 9 *All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.* 10 For you are **great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.**

Jeremiah 10:6,7 There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. 7 *Who would not fear you, O King of the nations?* For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you.

Psalm 98:1,2 Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he

has done marvelous things! **His right hand** and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. 2 The LORD has made known his salvation; he **has revealed his righteousness** in the sight of the nations

From the original song of Moses

Exodus 15:6 Your **right hand**, O LORD, glorious in power, your **right hand**, O LORD, shatters the enemy. **Exodus 15:11** "**Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?** Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, **doing wonders?** **Exodus 15:12** You stretched out your **right hand**; the earth swallowed them.

Note the complex connections:

- Revelation 15:3,4 quotes from Psalm 86, Jeremiah 10, and Psalm 98.
- All three of these contain words (more clear in the original than in English) from the Song of Moses in Exodus: *Who is like You, O Lord among the gods* in another form is: *there is none like you among the gods*.
- Note also the reference to God's *right hand* in Psalm 98, and also *doing wonders/marvelous things*.
- Jeremiah 10 does not mention the idol gods in verses 6 & 7, but that is the point of the rest of the chapter.
- Psalm 105 is not quoted in Revelation 15, but it is in Isaiah 12. Psalm 105 speaks of the exodus. Isaiah 12 is a parallel Scripture to show that the first exodus has been expanded to include the salvation of the nations.
- Revelation 15 does not quote directly from the Song of Moses in Exodus 15; it simply quotes passages that do. (The amazing deeds in Revelation 15:3 and Psalm 98:1 come close to Exodus 15:11.)

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## Appendix 15 B

### Universalism in the Book of Revelation

*In these studies in Revelation, a most natural question is whether we are teaching universalism. It is the most serious question I have faced at University Presbyterian Church in my years of teaching here.*

**Classic Universalism** teaches that all shall be saved. By that universalists mean that that includes each and every individual without exception – every last soul. They quote 1 Corinthians 15:22 correctly but understand it mistakenly, “*As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*”. Universalism, when it chooses to deal with a text, deals with very few that show there are sinners who suffer eternal perdition. Their basic assumption is that both *all*'s in the 1 Corinthians text refer to the same people. They think Christ represents everyone that Adam represented. They do not see two groups.

A similar text is Romans 5:18: “*Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*” If the *all* is identical in both cases in this text, then everyone condemned ends up justified.

In this Appendix I am not spelling out their arguments, but dealing briefly with certain texts before turning to universal language within the Book of Revelation. For both texts above a very simple factor makes confusion over those words unnecessary. The truth is that all in Adam (and those who remain in Adam) die, because they are condemned in Adam. These are *all* whom Adam represented. At one point in time, it was the entire human race. But God has intervened to have Christ appear as the last Adam, and so *all* those He represents are (or will be) justified in His obedience. Thus we now have two groups in mind with two representations. *All* in Christ were once in Adam. Salvation is a genuine saving of *all* who were once represented by our Father Adam

in the Garden, but were also chosen and called to be in Christ. The result of this is that *all* in Christ (in the mind of God) will believe and will be joined to Him by that faith. The result is that each person ends up either in Adam or in Christ. To remain in Adam is eternal death, but to be in Christ results in the certainty of eternal life. It is only those in Christ who have eternal life, and not all are in Christ. A short way to say this is: All those represented by Adam die, but all those represented by Christ will be made alive.

**Evidence OUTSIDE Revelation which refutes classic universalism** Need I show that some go to hell, and many are already there? Judas is but one sorry example (Acts 1:15-20). Some are reprobate, which means that they are given up by God to uninterrupted slavery to their unnatural passions (Romans 1:24-32). To be *given up* by God is the opposite of being saved. Further, Jesus spoke of two kinds of resurrection, one to life and the other to judgment (John 5:28,29). In Isaiah 66:23,24 we find opposite destinies. Glorified saints worship the Lord, and *“they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”* This stark situation is one Jesus referred to in Mark 9:

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, *“where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”* (Mark 9:43-48; there is no verse 44 or 46)

The Lord quoted the Isaiah 66 text approvingly, agreeing with it. Therefore, to be a universalist one must disagree with Christ, and look upon His understanding of Scripture as defective – as if God the Son did not know what His own Scripture meant! To disagree with Christ deliberately is to make oneself by definition not a Christian, but this is not the same as not understanding a text.

In 2 Thessalonians 1, the apostle teaches that the coming of Christ has opposite but simultaneous features. This makes plain that there are two different groups in mind: believers (afflicted believers in v.6, called saints in v.10) and gospel-rejecters who do not know God (v.8). To these two groups come relief or vengeance respectively. This is in complete agreement with similar presentations in Revelation.

**Statements WITHIN the Book of Revelation which disprove universalism** The final judgment is a recurring theme in the book. The final judgment is final. It is not only a judicial sentence announced and executed, it is the last word from God concerning that person, a word never revised.

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17)

The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. (Revelation 11:18)

Revelation 11 shows two sets of people, some loyal servants, and the others are destroyers. In wrath God destroys the destroyers without a hint of reversing that judgment.

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (Revelation 14:9-11)

Here is a clear text showing that not only are the worshippers of the beast *not* saved; their punishment is eternal. The beast is also a man (13:18) to be cast into the lake of fire (19:20). If their torment is "forever and ever" the ones tormented are aware of and actually experience the torment. It is not possible to have eternal torment with no one enduring it. This text not only refutes universalism, it corrects those wavering evangelicals who deny a real hell. They dare to correct God when His views do not accord with theirs. When the threat of the third angel in chapter 14 was carried out, the imagery employed is sinners cast into the winepress, and what came out was not grape juice but blood, human blood and lots of it (14:19,20). That is quite the opposite of a universal salvation. The winepress imagery, drawn from Isaiah 63, is also used to represent the Second Coming in 19:15. That same verse shows Christ with a sword in His mouth, which He uses to strike down the nations (universal language). But if we turn the page to chapter 22, we have the healing of the nations (also universal language). Obviously universal language is used both ways. More on this below.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it ... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done ... This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Not all are have their names in the book of life, and each one not found there will be thrown into the lake of fire. Having their names in the book of life was out of the control of every human person, but *what they had done* (in other words their sin) was their responsibility. For their refusal to obey God they are penalized. I daresay that universalism prefers to ignore this text. If universalism is correct, the Book of Life contains all names without exception. There would be no need to discover whose names are in it.

Another vein of relevant evidence is what Revelation says about Babylon. Babylon is the great city of earth dwellers opposed to God and in league with the beast. Revelation has repeated images to show its destruction. Here from other notes in this series is a review of the fall of Babylon. It reviews the destruction of "the great city". What was destroyed was not a structure but a society of people. That kind of rejection by the Lord is very emphatic in chapters 17-19.

**The various pictures of the fall of Babylon.** This is a recurring theme appearing in a number of visions. In 14:8 an angel says, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great..." That is an announcement that it has happened. Then Revelation 16:19, as part of the seventh bowl and as part of a different vision, describes God giving Babylon the cup of His wrath. This is in the context of God's announcement "It is done!" (16:17)... But then a new vision in chapter 17, with John being carried off in the Spirit into the desert, Babylon is the harlot on the beast. Within chapter 17 she (i.e., Babylon) is destroyed (17:16). ... It follows the picture of Babylon's demise in the teeth of the beast in chapter 17. Next Babylon is consumed by fire from God (18:8); her smoke *rises forever* (19:3). Within that vision her end is like a millstone taking her to the bottom of the sea (18:21). The last mention of Babylon returns to the imagery of smoke rising without being extinguished (19:3).

We must conclude that within Revelation the expressions of final judgment, in which sinners fall without any escape, are many, vivid, and explicit. Universalism must avoid all these passages.

**Why Universal Language is Used** The surprise to some of us then is the frequency with which Revelation uses universal language. It takes some getting used to. The simple explanation is that situations or settings are viewed from different perspectives, sometimes opposite perspectives. (That is a very important sentence to be weighed carefully.) Outside Revelation we find that "*the earth is the Lord's ... and those who dwell therein*" (Psalm 24:1). It is true at the same time, though from a different standpoint, that "*the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*" (1 John 5:19). Both are true; Psalm 24 speaks of God's sovereign right; 1 John 5 speaks from the angle of the world's slavery to Satan.

Examples of quite different perspectives are manifold within Scripture. The cross, for example, refers to God's loving provision for sinners. It was also the most criminal act in human history. This diamond can be viewed from many angles. It is a paradox yet true that the most horrible event on earth was the most wonderful. If we step back and look at the big picture, we can catch the ethos of the book. "Revelation's theme is the transfer of the sovereignty of the whole world from the dragon and the beast, who presently dominate it, to God, whose universal kingdom is to come on earth." (Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* p.242. See also p.309: "Revelation deals in images ... each picture presents a valid *aspect* of the truth," emphasis added.)

Revelation 12 speaks of the ancient deceiver pitted against the woman and the male child. Everything is simplified when we see history as the devil vs. God, with both sides making universal claims and having universal goals. There was a time when Satan could claim that he had taken man as his prize; he did have a victory; the human race was under his domination. But God has never accepted defeat! Within the Garden of Eden the Lord announced at that very time that he would overturn Satan's empire. It is still God's dominion. I hope we can say, if the emperor of that wicked kingdom has his head crushed (Genesis 3:15), that he has been defeated, and he has lost his kingdom of darkness. In the Garden we have a divine guarantee of the defeat of the one who appeared to be the winner. This kind of tension, conflict, struggle, and warring opposition is the history of our world from the Fall to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. The battle is for man. It is a war for absolute rule. This conflict is universal; the winner takes all, so universal language should be expected.

The use of the word *man* in Revelation's statements about the Eternal State is instructive. If we take the word as *man*, rather than speaking in terms of a remnant, we catch a sense of a sweeping victory in Revelation 21:3: "*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God **is with man**. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself*

*will be with them as their God*” (ESV). That is paradise restored – the Lord God dwelling with man – using universal language and calling mankind His people. <sup>4</sup>

But then we find in the same chapter a list of those excluded (21:8). With them God does not dwell. Instead they have their place in the lake of fire! So God has man back, but He excludes human beings who chose to keep their sin. The unconverted evildoer still does evil, and the similarly filthy person remains filthy (22:11). This asserts the permanency of their spiritual condition. Classic universalism is wrong. Hell is not emptied. Of those who benefit eternally, we read that the leaves of the tree of life *“were for the healing of the nations”* (22:2). Within this chapter “nations” does not include every individual, yet universal language is employed; the nations are healed. It does not speak in terms of a fraction of nations, because it chooses to focus on the new reality, the new heavens and a new earth. The will of God has been done. He has made all things new (21:5). He has accomplished His purpose and omitted not one He had given to His Son (John 6:37-39). This way of speaking does not obscure that the holy city has an inside and an outside, as seen in chapter 22.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that *they may enter the city* by the gates. *Outside* are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.  
(Revelation 22:14,15)

The *inside* is spoken of in universal language as *the nations*, and as *man*, but in the process the Bible notes that only those who overcome inherit all this (21:7). His bride is limited to the faithful woman, New Jerusalem. His bride excludes the rejected whore Babylon. Then to switch to a different scenario, *the nations* were struck down in 19:15 (they being of the other kingdom), while in God’s kingdom, *the nations* (same word, different people) walk in the light of Christ (21:12,24). In sweeping language the word *nations* is used both ways without a qualifier. Such comprehensive language fits the polarity, which in Revelation becomes so ultimate and final that the other side is totally omitted from any mention in the new creation of which they are not a part. The righteous stand in the judgment, while the wicked are like the chaff that the wind drives away (Psalm 1:4,5). They are remembered no more (Psalm 88:5; Ezekiel 21:31,32). In a new and fresh beginning, the loyal ones become the new total, *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind”* (Isaiah 65:17).

I propose that is why we read in Revelation of tribes, languages, peoples and nations as the huge body from which the redeemed are drawn (5:9; 7:14). (In 13:7 this same fourfold group is identified as those under the authority of the beast.) The worshipping body, because of the massive conversion of the nations, is composed of *“every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them”* (5:13). That is very universalistic language. The

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<sup>4</sup> In Revelation 21:3 the Greek word rendered as *man* in the ESV is actually plural. Over the last hundred years or so, most modern translations have kept the word as plural. The NIV has “the people”, a singular but collective word. It is plural in Greek as are the associated pronouns: them, they & them. Why then would the ESV use the singular word man for men? The answer lies in the way Revelation uses this word in the plural word elsewhere. In Revelation it often means mankind. Obviously, there is more than one individual in “mankind”. In Revelation 9:15, 18, 20 and 14:4 the ESV translates the plural “men” as mankind, and so does the NIV. These translators sense that *a third part of the men* (to be very literal) in Revelation 9 is less clear than “a third of mankind”. This sense of the word carries over to Revelation 21:3 with the result that the New Jerusalem with all rebels excluded is a situation where God walks with man again. This is far beyond God walking with Adam. All redeemed humanity is now His. Eden has been restored in a wonderful way, and a proper “universalism”, limited to those saved, is the situation in the new heavens and the new earth.

unrepentant are not even considered here. They will be out of sight, out of mind, while God will have His own fully populated world without them.

The nations will come (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:10; 49:6). Two sides appear in the same paragraph in Revelation 11:13. Some perish, but the rest have fear and glorify the God of heaven. The world as we know it will be reversed; the righteous will be the majority, and the wicked will be the remnant of unbelief. The transformation is so grand that "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever*" (11:15). There are two ways to cleanse the earth. One is to rescue sinners from Satan by salvation, and the other is to remove them from the earth by casting them into the lake of fire with the beast, the false prophet, and the dragon. At times Revelation anticipates what will be, and at others reports this change as what the earth has become. A tool to keep that perspective before us is unabashed universalistic language, while avoiding universalism.

**A Different Kind of Scripture** What may hamper our understanding is that Revelation as apocalyptic does not present its message in the usual communication of didactic Scripture, such as the New Testament epistles. There we may compare Scripture with Scripture in a logical way, even though figurative statements appear in all of Scripture. Within Revelation we encounter impressions created by a vision, more like a fantastic dream than an exact prediction of events. A real prediction like Isaiah 53 is very different from Revelation.

Reviewing parables helps us to grasp how stories are designed to illustrate certain truths, which then can be stated literally as long as the story itself is not viewed as actual history. A farmer sowed seed. This need not mean that Jesus had a specific farmer in mind. The seed fell on different soils with different results (Luke 8:4-8). This illustrates the proclamation of the gospel and the varied reaction to it. It was not intended to coach us on how to farm. The parable (Luke 18:1-8) about the widow who kept bugging the unprincipled judge for justice is an illustration about persistence in prayer. It is not teaching about some lack of justice in God. In the same way, Revelation is like a dream where one sees the nations in all their splendor streaming into the New Jerusalem, led by kings at the front of their countrymen (21:24-27). This is still not a statement that there will be no one left out because of unbelief, or that every citizen who ever belonged to that nation will be there. Revelation 21 switches from *nations* and *kings* unqualified to a qualifying statement about *only those* who are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27). Yet the final scene is so comprehensive that it is fitting to present this in universal language. Outside Revelation, we read that "*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (Habakkuk 2:14). This is a universal statement, but it is both preceded and followed by words about sinners, who in the time of that prophet, comprised a contrast with what shall be. Habakkuk even used the word *woe* to express impending judgment.

**Conclusion** Classic Universalism is a great error. It suppresses a multitude of Scriptures while it squeezes every statement arrayed against it into a view taken from a few texts after the desired view has been imposed upon them. Its underlying assumption considers the true God to be a god not feared, a god whose threats are not serious, and a god who requires no atonement for sin. There need be neither repentance nor faith in Christ. If universalists admit any need at all for an atonement, it will be a universal atonement. It is certain that Revelation with its multiple presentations of the Judgment Day does not teach such a doctrine. Classic universalism is a modern form of the old lie, "*You shall not surely die*". The Bible ends with an assertion that the sinner will die in a fate described as the second death. But Revelation does teach such an expansive salvation that it foresees the nations entering the holy city. Earlier those who dwell on the earth (universalistic language) will be converted, or if they are not, they will no longer dwell on this earth.

This is so much so, that one day we will be able to say that all who dwell on earth (the *every creature* of 5:13) are those and only those washed in the blood of the Lamb. Universal worship is anticipated so it is stated as reality within the vision. Someday, outside a vision, it will be so in history.