



## THE REIGN OF SATAN

### Justice Introduced

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### Revelation 15

#### The Seven Angels with Seven Plagues

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. 3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, 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!<sup>[a]</sup>  
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.”

5 After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent<sup>[b]</sup> of witness in heaven was opened, 6 and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. 7 And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, 8 and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

1. For *sign* see note on 12:1. This sign is described as *great and marvellous*, which marks it as outstanding. Such a description is not given of any other portent, but these adjectives are used of God's own works (v. 3). The plagues these angels deal with are *the seven last plagues* (for *plagues* cf. 9:18, 20; 11:6). The word is quite general. From the meaning 'blow' or 'stroke' it comes to be used of misfortunes generally. But there is an air of finality about this description. These plagues are the last earth will know. In them God's *wrath* (see note on 14:10) *is completed* (*etelesthē* = reaches its *telos*, its end or aim).

2. John's habitual reserve comes out when he sees not 'a sea of glass', but *what looked like a sea of glass* (cf. 4:6 where see note). This time it is *mixed with fire*, an unusual combination of images. The mention of fire may be due to the fact that the context deals with wrath and judgment. 'The red glow on the Sea spoke of the fire through which the Martyrs passed, and yet more of the wrath about to fall on the world which had condemned them' (Swete). Kiddle sees the exodus symbolism again: 'A heavenly Red Sea!... The "sea" has been forded by the martyrs. It is now about to submerge their foes.'

John sees also those who had obtained the victory which he spells out as *over the beast and his image and over the number of his name* (see note on 13:18). Nothing evil can triumph over God's people. In the early church the day of a person's martyrdom was often called the day of his victory. Barclay comments, 'The real victory is not to live in safety, to evade trouble, cautiously and prudently to preserve life; the real victory is to face the worst that evil can do, and if need be to be faithful unto death.' These conquerors stand on or by (*epi* could mean either) the glassy sea. NIV interprets 'harps of God' as *harps given ... by God*, and Beasley-Murray as harps for worship. It is an unusual description of harps (but cf. 'the trumpet of God', 1 Thess. 4:16). It shows that the victors enjoy their triumph only because of what God has done for them.

3. They sing (presumably to their own harp accompaniment) *the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb*. There is harmony between the different phases of the revelation. Moses is not in opposition to Christ, nor the law to the gospel. Paul can speak of the law as bringing us to Christ (Gal. 3:24), and it is co-operation of this kind that is in mind here. Moses is called *the servant of God* and it may not be fanciful to recall that 'the servant of the Lord' is a theme of prophecy, more particularly in Isaiah. Perhaps John means us to see the prophets as well as the law as caught up in this song. Certainly the exodus imagery will be in mind, as often in this book. The great deliverance under Moses forms the pattern for the great deliverance wrought by the Lamb. In strictness the repetition of the words *the song of* should mean that there were two songs, one of Moses and another of the Lamb. Indeed, some exegetes have understood the words in this way. They say that the song of Moses is that in Exodus 15 and the song of the Lamb is that here. But it is much more likely that there is but one song with the double title.

The song is almost entirely made up of Old Testament expressions. This is the one song in Revelation to show the parallelism so characteristic of Hebrew poetry. It begins by calling God's works *great and marvellous* (cf. Pss 92:5; 139:14). The inhabitants of the earth

have marvelled at the beast and his wonders. But what are truly great and marvellous are not such trifles, but the works of God. So God is hailed as *Lord God Almighty*. His power is incomparable. From power the thought moves on to justice. God's *ways* are *just and true* (cf. Ps. 145:17). The last word evokes recollections of 'doing the truth' in John's Gospel (John 3:21) and First Epistle (1 John 1:6). God is addressed then as *King of the ages* (or 'of the nations'; see notes in *GNT, TCGNT*); his universal sovereignty is in mind (cf. Jer. 10:6–7). John keeps on bringing out this point; it must have been exceedingly important for his troubled readers.

4. In view of God's greatness the rhetorical question is asked, *Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?* (cf. Ps. 86:9; Mal. 1:11). The *name* stands for the whole person (see note on 2:17). The song comes to its end with three statements each introduced with *for* (NIV omits the second *for*). The first declares that God only is *holy* (cf. 1 Sam. 2:2). The word is *hosios*, used in Revelation only here and in 16:5, both times of God. It conveys the idea of perfect purity. The second statement forecasts that *All nations will come and worship before God* (cf. Ps. 86:9). The third concerns God's *dikaiōmata*. Many, including NIV, take this to mean *righteous acts*, but AV is better with 'judgments'. There is reason for holding that the word has to do with legal acts and we should understand it here of 'the judicial sentences of God in relation to the nations either in the way of mercy or condemnation' (Charles).<sup>1</sup> At the last God's judicial sentences will be made plain to all.

Before leaving this song notice that, though it is sung by the victors, there is no word in it about themselves or the way they overcame. Those who triumph in Christ fix all their attention on him. 'Heaven is heaven because in it at last all self, and self-importance, are lost in the presence of the greatness and the glory of God' (Barclay).

5. 'The temple of the tent of witness' is an expression found here only (but cf. 11:19; Exod. 40:34). But the Greek for 'the tent of witness' is the LXX translation of the Old Testament expression 'the tent of meeting'. It would seem that John wants us to discern a reference to the wilderness once again. He is using a symbol of the very presence of God himself. At the same time he introduces once more the thought of witness which means so much to him and to the churches to which he writes with their 'martyrs' ('witnesses').

6. When this sanctuary was opened there came out *the seven angels* who had *the seven plagues*. These plagues thus come with the fullest divine sanction, for they are brought by angels who have come from the very presence of God. Some attention is paid to their appearance, which is not usual in this book. They are clothed in *clean shining linen*. The word for *linen* (*linon*) is not usual for a garment, and some accept the textual variant *lithon*, 'stone'. This is possible in the sense in which the king of Tyre is saluted, 'every precious stone adorned you' (Ezek. 28:13). But this, too, is unusual, and since *linon* is sometimes used of clothing (BAGD), it seems best to accept this sense here. The angels have *golden sashes around their chests*. Some see this as a priestly rather than a military girding, but the point is not proven (see note on 1:13). But at least the appearance of the angels symbolizes their spotlessness. It emphasizes the purity from which the wrath is poured out on the

world. This is no bestial thing, evil with passion. It is a pure concern for the right.

7. The *bowls* which convey the last plagues are given to the angels by one of the four living ones. These have their place close to the throne of God, so this origin for the bowls shows that they come with the fullest divine sanction. This is brought out also in the explicit statement that the bowls are full of *the wrath* (see note on 14:10) *of God*. God is spoken of in terms of eternity: he *lives for ever and ever*. This contrasts with earth's inhabitants, for they are in time. These plagues coming upon them are 'last' plagues (v. 1).

*Bowls* renders the Greek *phialas*. This word was used of the container which held the prayers of the saints (5:8) and it is not at all impossible that John wants us to bear that passage in mind. More than once he brings out the thought that the prayers of God's people, which seem so insignificant, are important. They may initiate great divine judgments. They have their part in bringing about the final state of affairs.

8. *The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God* (cf. Exod. 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10; Isa. 6:4; Ezek. 10:4; 44:4). At this solemn moment God's glory is especially manifested. With *glory* there is linked *his power*, which is very much in place in a book so full of the might of the Lord. John tells us that nobody *could enter the temple* (i.e. the sanctuary) until the seven plagues *were completed*. He does not say that the smoke, etc. brought this about, though this may be in mind. But the main point is the inevitability of the plagues. When God's good time has come, nothing can stop final judgment.<sup>1</sup>

### *Prelude in Heaven (15:1-8)*

This vision serves a dual purpose. On one hand it forms the climactic conclusion of the church's struggle with the beasts which was introduced in the interlude 10:1-11:13. This struggle is framed by "portents" in the sky (12:1, 2; 15:1) which mark the center section (12:1-16:21) as a unit. Moreover, this vision forms an inclusion with 14:1-5 around the announcement of judgments (14:6-20) and contrasts the fate of the conquerors with those who entered the winepress of the wrath of God (14:17-20).

On the other hand this vision serves as prelude in heaven for the bowl septet, because 15:1 introduces the **seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended**. When the seventh bowl is poured out, we hear, **It is done** (16:17). Yet John's vision narrative is not finished but continues. Out of the seventh bowl evolve the visions of the judgment on Babylon (chaps. 17-18), just as out of the seventh seal the trumpet visions had evolved.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 181-184). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Revelation 15:2-4 gives us a second preview of the church of the millennium (cf. 7:9-17), and, like the first, it places the emphasis on worship. Salvation is worship in heaven, beside the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb. The liturgy in heaven which began in chap. 4, which was interrupted by seals and trumpets, which became audible again in 7:12; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; and 14:2-3, is now expanded by the hymns of the conquerors. The victorious church has learned to sing the new song (14:3). With his hymns, doxologies, and acclamations, John did not just draw a contrast between the church and Roman imperial court ceremonial, but he also wished to interpret the drama of his visions and to highlight the importance of worship.

Since our prelude in heaven introduces the last septet of judgment visions (16:1-21), we do well to recall the sequence of the three angelic announcements of judgment (14:6-10): first, general judgment (14:6-7); second, judgment on Babylon (14:8); and third, judgment on the worshipers of the beast (14:9-10). **This sequence is now inverted, and John will narrate in reverse order, first, the judgment on the worshipers of the beast (16:1-21); second, judgment on Babylon (17:1-19:10); and, finally, third, the general judgment (20:11-15; or 19:11-20:15). This reversal parallels the sequence in the elimination of the antagonists. The supreme antagonist, Satan, who was introduced first will be destroyed last, while the two beasts who were introduced after him will be destroyed before him. The reversal has logical, not chronological, significance.**

**1**—The structure of the prelude is A (v. 1) -B (vv. 2-4) -A' (vv. 5-8). **Another portent in heaven, great and wonderful,** interconnects with the portents of 12:1-3. The bowls of wrath will be God's response to the dragon's fury against the woman and her child. The verse also functions as title of the new section (Bousset), announcing its theme. **Seven angels with seven plagues ... are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended** (15:1; cf. 16:17).

**2-4**—The center of the heavenly overture is occupied by the victors in heaven who have **conquered the beast** and have refused to be identified with Antichrist, that is, with **the number** (666) of the beast's **name**. They are not just martyrs but *all* who were faithful unto death (2:10; 14:13) and who in the practice of their faith bore the name of the Lamb and of his Father (14:1). They conquered the devil "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (12:11); they endured (13:9-10; 14:12) and now they celebrate their exodus, their deliverance from Sodom and Egypt, from Babylon/Rome (cf. 11:8), from the world characterized by idolatry. They are in heaven **beside the sea of glass** (4:6). That this sea is **mingled with fire** (cf. 8:5) alludes to the judgments of chap. 16 and to the Red Sea that brought judgment on the Egyptian oppressors. Another exodus has been enacted, more glorious than the first. Therefore the conquerors in heaven have **the harps of God in their hands**, instruments that the 24 elders also play (5:8). **And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.** These are not two songs but one. Just as in former times at Israel's exodus, after its deliverance at the Red Sea, a hymn of deliverance was sung (Exod. 15:1-21), so now those who endured (13:9-10; 14:12) and

were delivered by the blood of the Lamb (5:9–10) raise their voices in praise of the **Lord God the Almighty**. Israel’s deliverance in the exodus, which is the very heart of the Old Testament, has its typological correspondence in the eschatological deliverance of God’s people at the end of time. Moses and Jesus are the agents of God’s deeds of deliverance at the beginning and the end of the story of God’s people. The designation of Jesus as the Lamb gives an additional depth to this typology. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb was effective at the exodus from Egypt, so the blood of the Lamb is effective in the eschatological exodus from Egypt, Babylon/Rome.

The hymn itself consists of Old Testament phrases and recalls Moses’ victory song (Exod. 15:1–18) and to a lesser extent his farewell song (Deut. 32:1–43). Two rhetorical questions are based on Jer. 10:7 and Ps. 86:9: **Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord?** The answer obviously is: no one. **For thou alone art holy.** The statement that **all nations shall come and worship thee**, literally, “in your presence,” has troubled some interpreters as being out of place because it suggests universal salvation, unless worship here means “grudging recognition” of God’s superiority (so Mounce). But the Old Testament background of v. 4 is the hope and promise of the pilgrimage of the Gentile nations to Mount Zion (Isa. 2:2; 66:19–21; Jer. 16:19; Mic. 4:2–3). The invitation offered by the angel with “the eternal gospel” (14:6–7) has not been in vain. Not all Gentiles will perish in the apocalyptic upheavals. Therefore in 11:13, and here in 15:14, John took up the Old Testament promise of the pilgrimage of Gentiles to Mount Zion. They have learned the lesson at last that God’s judgments are **just and true**, that God is not a tribal deity, or a member of a pantheon, but the sovereign **king of the ages** (so RSV; other manuscripts read “King of the *nations*”). Their future **worship** (future tense!) shows that they will become part of the one people of God in the end, that is, after the general judgment (20:11–15). The conquerors of the beast, however, shall sing this hymn of praise already prior to the general judgment, during the millennium (cf. 20:4–6). The hymn, like the chorus of Greek drama, interprets the meaning of the catastrophes to come. God’s acts of judgment have salvation and worship as their ultimate goal.

**5–8**—The third part of this heavenly prelude begins with the opening of the **temple of the tent of witness**. The heavenly counterpart of the tent appears, which symbolized God’s presence with his people during the years of their sojourn in the desert (Exod. 25:9; Heb. 8:5). The **seven angels** process out of the heavenly temple-tent. They are clothed like priests in white **linen**. Their status is indicated by **golden girdles**, symbols of royalty and high priesthood (cf. 1:13). They are commissioned by one of the four living creatures (4:6–8), who transfers to them **seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God**. In 5:8 the golden bowls of incense symbolized the prayers of the church and of martyrs crying out for justice (cf. 8:2–5). The injustices and oppressions that have risen from the earth are soon to be hurled back in just retribution (cf. 2 Thess. 1:1–6). God himself is behind this judgment, executed by his angels. Therefore, the **temple** in heaven **was filled with smoke**, symbolizing his **glory** and **power** (Exod. 19:18; Isa. 6:4; 1 Kings 8:10. **And no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.** No one may

interfere during the execution of his wrath.<sup>2</sup>

What is it that attracts people to the Christian **message**? What is it that draws them to worship the God whom Christians call ‘father’? If you went round your local church and asked people that, you would (I suspect) get a wide variety of answers. Some will have been drawn in by the kindness and gentleness of a pastor, whether ordained or lay, who looked after them at a moment of crisis. Some will have gone to a meeting where they were able to express all kinds of questions and doubts and where they were received with courtesy and respect, and given such answers as were available—but it will be the courtesy and the respect that has done the trick. Others again may have found themselves at a major turning point in their lives and, not knowing where else to go for guidance, may have come to the church and found more than they expected.

This short but powerful song gives a quite different sort of reason why not only individuals but nations will come and worship the true and living God: ‘your judgments have been revealed’. Since Revelation doesn’t often talk about all the nations coming to worship (though ancient Jewish traditions about such things were well known, and the early Christians picked up on them to explain the arrival of so many non-Jews within the people of the **Messiah**), when it does it is worth pondering closely what it means. What are the ‘judgments’ of God? How have they been ‘revealed’? And how has this brought the nations to worship?

When the Bible speaks about God ‘judging’, or putting into effect his ‘judgments’, it is just as much a cause for celebration as for anxiety. We have already referred to the famous passages at the end of Psalms 96 and 98, where the whole of creation, animal and vegetable as well as human, sings for joy because **YHWH** is coming ‘to judge the earth’. Why? Why is that **good news**?

Imagine a village in the outlying countryside of Judaea. It’s a long way from the city, and even traders don’t come there that often, far less government officials. A circuit judge comes to the neighbouring small town once every few months if they’re lucky. But that doesn’t mean that nothing needs doing. A builder is cheated by a customer, who refuses to admit his fault. A widow has her small purse stolen, and since she has nobody to plead for her she can do nothing. A family is evicted from their home by a landlord who thinks he can get more rent from someone else. And a fraudster with his eye on the main chance has accused a work colleague of cheating him, and though nothing has been done about it the other colleagues seem inclined to believe the charge. And so on. Nobody can do anything

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<sup>2</sup> Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 276–280). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

about any of these—until the judge comes.

When he comes, expectations will be massive. Months of pent-up frustrations will boil over. The judge will have to keep order, to calm down accusation and defence alike. He will have to hear each case properly and fairly, taking especial care for those with nobody to speak up for them. He will steadfastly refuse all bribes. And then he will *decide*. Judgment will be done. Chaos will be averted and order will be restored. The cheats will be put in their place, the thief punished and made to restore the purse. The grasping landlord will have to give way, and the false accuser will suffer the punishment he hoped to inflict. And the village as a whole will heave a sigh of relief. Justice has been done. The world has returned into balance. A grateful community will thank the judge from the bottom of its collective heart.

Now magnify the village concerns up to the global level. The wicked empire, and its local henchmen, have become more and more powerful, taking money, lives and pleasure as and when they please. It's no use appealing to the authorities, because it's the authorities who are doing the wrong. So the cry goes up to God, as it did to the God of Israel when the Egyptians were making their lives more and more miserable. And God's action on behalf of Israel is therefore a great act of liberating, healing, sigh-of-relief *judgment*. Things are put right at last.

We would expect, of course, that Israel itself would thank God for his rescue operation, his great act of 'judgment' which has set his people free. But the story of the **Exodus**, which is once again dominating John's horizon, goes further than that. It isn't only Israel that will see what God has done and give him thanks. The nations will look on and say to themselves, 'There really is a God in Israel; there really is a God who puts things right, who judges the earth' (see Psalm 58:11). And, saying that, they will come to worship him.

For John, as for all the early Christians, there was one great act of judgment above all others which was already compelling people from many nations to worship Israel's God. God had raised Jesus from the dead, after his condemnation as a false Messiah. God had reversed the verdict of the human court! He had done the unthinkable, and had demonstrated Jesus to be Messiah after all! What's more, the **resurrection** proved that the cross itself had been the great, spectacular act of judgment, in which sin and death were themselves being condemned and executed.

Now, having done all that in Jesus the Messiah, Israel's God was demonstrating that the followers of Jesus were his true people, not least through their faithful testimony to Jesus, even on peril of their own death. This is the further 'judgment' which flows from the 'judgment' revealed in the lamb.

It is therefore the martyrs, those who have 'won the victory over the monster and over its image, and over the number of its name', who have discovered that they have come through death, as the Israelites had come through the Red Sea, and are now standing, like Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, singing a new song of praise for the fresh act of judgment

which God had performed. (The song in this passage owes something to Deuteronomy 32 as well, but the focus of the passage is then on a different part of the Exodus story.) The plagues in Egypt have reached a crescendo, and Pharaoh and his people have consented to let the Israelites go. They have gone through the Red Sea, sung the song, and arrived at Mount Sinai. There, with the fire and smoke of divine revelation, God gives Moses the instructions not only about the **law** itself but also about the Tabernacle, the place of ‘witness’ or meeting, where God himself would come to meet with his people. It was the forerunner of the **Temple** in Jerusalem.

Now, in a fresh visionary twist, John sees that the heavenly throne room which is also the heart of the heavenly temple has a ‘tabernacle of witness’ within it. This ‘tabernacle’ has been opened, not to let Moses or anyone else in, but to let out the angels who were carrying the seven last plagues, not for Egypt but for Babylon and for the world that had fallen for her seductions.

As with the Tabernacle in Exodus, as with Isaiah’s vision in the Temple (Isaiah 6), and as with Solomon’s dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8), the presence of God is shrouded in smoke, making it impossible for ordinary comings and goings. This is a solemn moment. The new song is exuberant, and heartfelt. Deliverance has occurred. But now we are homing in on the greatest showdown of them all. We left the dragon and the two monsters behind, two chapters ago. They have drawn many into their destructive ways. It is time, now, for the destroyers to be destroyed. This is the purpose of the seven last plagues, and of the cataclysmic judgments which follow them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 136–140). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.