

The Seven Last Plagues

Revelation 15-16



Revelation 15:1-4

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,

We are introduced to the last plagues that will end the wrath of God. These seven last plagues are the seven bowls of God's wrath recorded for us in chapter 16.

There was a similar prelude in 8:1-6 before the seven trumpets were blown.

The phrase "wrath of God is finished" need not necessarily refer to the end of the world, but to this particular judgment which has been the theme of the book of Revelation thus far (i.e., destruction of the temple and Jerusalem)

Verse 2 shares symbols seen in chapter 4 about the throne room of God (sea of glass).

"Those who have conquered the beast" refer to martyrs who have conquered the beast with the word of their testimony (Rev 12:11; 14:12-13).

These martyrs have joined the heavenly choir.

Exodus 15:1-2 (Song of Moses)

¹Then 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.

²The 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.

They sing the song of Moses (Exod 15) that was sung after the plagues of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea.

There are several allusions to the plagues poured out in Egypt and God's deliverance of his people. It is noteworthy to remember that in Revelation 11:8, Jerusalem was called Egypt. Now they sing about their exodus from Egypt/Jerusalem.

They are singing the song of rescue, and the song of the Lamb (for his deliverance).

Deuteronomy 32 (Song of Moses)

Then Moses spoke the words of this song until they were finished, in the ears of all the assembly of Israel:

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak,
and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

²May my teaching drop as the rain,
my speech distill as the dew,
like gentle rain upon the tender grass,
and like showers upon the herb.

³For I will proclaim the name of the Lord;
ascribe greatness to our God!

There is another “song of Moses” recorded in Deuteronomy 32. The earlier song was a song of deliverance, the latter song is a song of disaster when they would turn from the covenant (vv. 23-25). Compare Deuteronomy 32:32 with Revelation 14:18ff.

The “song” is the overthrow of the Old Covenant coinciding with the establishment of the New Covenant.

Deuteronomy 32:23-24 (Song of Moses)

“And I will heap disasters upon them;

I will spend my arrows on them;

²⁴ they shall be wasted with hunger,

and devoured by plague

and poisonous pestilence;

I will send the teeth of beasts against them,

with the venom of things that crawl in the dust.

²⁵ Outdoors the sword shall bereave,

and indoors terror,

for young man and woman alike,

the nursing child with the man of gray hairs.

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Deuteronomy 32:32-34 (Song of Moses)

³² For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom
and from the fields of Gomorrah;
their grapes are grapes of poison;
their clusters are bitter;

³³ their wine is the poison of serpents
and the cruel venom of asps.

Cf. Rev 11:8, “their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.”

Rev 14:18, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.”

There is another “song of Moses” recorded in Deuteronomy 32. The earlier song was a song of deliverance, the latter song is a song of disaster when they would turn from the covenant (vv. 23-25). Compare Deuteronomy 32:32 with Revelation 14:18ff.

The “song” is the overthrow of the Old Covenant coinciding with the establishment of the New Covenant.

This is fitting with words of Jesus and the words of the covenant in his blood. Along with his judgment upon this generation who slew the prophets and rejected the Messiah.

Jesus and other New Testament writers echo Deuteronomy 32:5, referring to the people as a “perverse and crooked generation” (see Matthew 17:17, Luke 9:41, Acts 2:40).

Revelation 15:1-4

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
⁴Who 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.”

This song of the Lamb recognizes his great deeds, his justice and truth, and his sovereignty and power.

He is a God to be feared and honored and praise.

He alone is holy and all nations must bow to him.

There is certainly a New Covenant motif here. The gospel is now gone to the nations, Christ is now king of the nations and all nations will come and worship you. It seems fitting to understand that this is the Song of Moses (marking the end of the Old Covenant) and the Song of the Lamb (marking the establishment of the New Covenant).

Revelation 15:5-8

⁵After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. ⁷And 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, ⁸and 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.

THE BOWLS/CUPS

They were given “seven golden bowls” The KJV says “vials” but they are more broad than tall, hence bowl. But it could be referring to a cup.

Revelation 14:10 speaks about drinking the wine of God’s wrath.

Later in Revelation 16:6 they are now “drinking blood” or wrath. Same in 16:19.

So seven cups means the perfection of God’s wrath.

This language is used by Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion (take your cup from me). It is a common symbol in Jeremiah and Isaiah to refer to the outpouring of God’s wrath.

THE SMOKE/GLORY

The temple in heaven was filled with the glory of God, the glory cloud or smoke. This is similar to the dedication of the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-35) and Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:10-11). In both cases no one could enter the sanctuary (as is the case here). This could mean a transition of the new covenant age or it is that no intercession would now avail for doomed sinners.

Exod 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. **35** And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

1 Kings 8:10 And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, **11** so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

Revelation 16:1-2 - The 1st Bowl

¹Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”

²So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

What are these sores and judgments? My children like it when I include Hal Lindsay’s interpretation, so let me share it. It says, “The rash of malignant sores could easily be caused by the tremendous radioactive pollution in the atmosphere. After the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima thousands of people developed hideous sores because of the radioactivity.”

Thomas Nelson. Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated (p. 417).
Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

“The earth” can be translated “the land” and refer to Israel/Judea.

We’ve already seen that Jerusalem has become Egypt and Sodom and the Church has become the New Israel.

The judgment here parallels the plagues of Egypt in Exodus 9:8-12.

Whereas previous judgments affected ⅓, this judgment is total and complete.

Deuteronomy 28:27, 35

²⁷ The Lord will strike you with the boils of Egypt, and with tumors and scabs and itch, of which you cannot be healed.

³⁵ The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.

“The earth” can be translated “the land” and refer to Israel/Judea.

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These sores were likely both literal and figurative as disease spread through Jerusalem and harkens back to God’s judgment of Egypt.

Revelation 16:3 - The 2nd Bowl

The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

So far the bowl judgments are matching the trumpets.

The first trumpet was on the land, the second on the sea. Likewise the order is the same here.

There are more parallels here between the first plague in Egypt where the Nile was turned to blood (Exod 7:17-21).

In this case, the blood was from corpses.

Hal Lindsey, continuing to follow the nuclear war motif that characterizes much of his exposition, writes: "We can only speculate as to whether a direct judgment of God or a tremendous nuclear exchange will affect marine life to this extent."

Thomas Nelson. Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated (p. 421).
Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Josephus on the sea...

“And for such as were drowning in the sea, if they lifted their heads up above the water they were either killed by darts [arrows], or caught by the vessels; but if, in the desperate case they were in, they attempted to swim to their enemies, the Romans cut off either their heads or their hands; and indeed they were destroyed after various manners everywhere, till the rest, being put to flight, were forced to get upon the land, while the vessels encompassed them about (on the sea): but as many of these were repulsed when they were getting ashore, they were killed by the darts upon the lake; and the Romans leaped out of their vessels, and destroyed a great many more upon the land...

Josephus on the sea... (cont.)

... one might then see the lake all bloody, and full of dead bodies, for not one of them escaped. And a terrible stink, and a very sad sight there was on the following days over that country; for as for the shores, they were full of shipwrecks, and of dead bodies all swelled; and as the dead bodies were inflamed by the sun, and putrefied, they corrupted the air, insomuch that the misery was not only the object of commiseration to the Jews, but to those that hated them, and had been the authors of that misery” (Wars III: 10:9).

So whether on the land or sea, the people of Jerusalem were judged and great calamity befell them.

Revelation 16:4-7 - The 3rd Bowl

⁴The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgments.

⁶For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve!”

⁷And I heard the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”

“The pollution of the water sources did occur during the siege of Jerusalem, and streams of actual blood flowed through the city. This can be seen as a literal fulfilling of this vision, though it is possible that a symbolic meaning is intended as well.”

Thomas Nelson. Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated (p. 424).
Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

The identity of the one judged is mentioned in verse 6, “For they have shed the blood of the saints and prophets.”

This was the sin, THE sin, of Israel.

Shedding the Blood of Saints and Prophets

“The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

“Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Luke 13:33-34).

Shedding the Blood of Saints and Prophets

“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:52).

“Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!’” (Matt 23:34-37).

Revelation 16:4-7 - The 3rd Bowl

⁴The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
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⁶For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve!”

⁷And I heard the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”

Clearly then, verse 16:6 refers to Jerusalem who is now being judged for the killing of the prophets, the saints, and the Lamb of God, Christ himself.

This is just judgment.

NOTICE ALSO verse 7, “and I heard the altar” say Amen.

What’s significant about the altar? It was the altar itself where the blood of the saints and prophets was poured out (cf. 6:9-11).

Revelation 16:8-9 - The 4th Bowl

⁸The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

The plagues have affected the land, the sea, and the rivers, and now here the sun.

The imagery is again like the plagues of Egypt and not necessarily directly related to physical phenomena.

Psalm 121:6, "The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night."

Isaiah 49:10, "they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,"

The saints are described in Revelation 7:16, "They shall hunger no more,
neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat."

This is a reversal of covenant blessing. This is now a covenantal curse. God has removed his hand of protection and blessing and the people perished.

Deuteronomy 28:22, "The LORD will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew. They shall pursue you until you perish."

Hal Lindsey, too, in keeping with his general method, gives a fully naturalistic interpretation: I believe that in a full-scale nuclear exchange the balance of the atmosphere will be radically upset, and this could be one of the things that is implied here.

Thomas Nelson. Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated (p. 431).
Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Revelation 16:10-11 - The 5th Bowl

¹⁰The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

Here we have an indicator that the previous judgments were indeed against Jerusalem, not Rome, the world, or a revived Roman empire.

But in this case the “throne of the beast” is struck. What is this referring to?

This could be referring to the chaos that erupted when Nero committed suicide in AD 68. Tacitus refers to the “worldwide convulsions” that rocked the empire in the year following Nero’s death. AD 69 came to be known as the “year of the four emperors.” F.W. Farrar speaks of “the horrors inflicted upon Rome and Romans in the civil wars by provincial governors.”

Again, from Lindsey: “I believe there’s a reason for God’s blackout of this Revived Roman Empire: the darkness will allow the movement of 200 million Oriental soldiers into the area of the Middle East, the subject of the next judgment. However, why the two hundred million Chinese would be able to navigate the many thousands of miles trek overland in the darkness, while the technology of Western Europe would be incapable of detecting them presents a mystery almost as great as any in the Book of Revelation.

Thomas Nelson. Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated (pp. 433-435). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition. “

The “Convulsions” in Rome

“Such were Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Vespasian and Mucianus deliberately planned to starve the Roman populace; and in the fierce struggle of the Vitellians against Sabinus and Domitian, and the massacre which followed, there occurred the event which sounded so portentously in the ears of every Roman—the burning to the ground of the Temple of the Capitoline Jupiter, on December 19th, AD 69. It was not least of the signs of the times that the space of one year saw wrapped in flames the two most hallowed shrines of the ancient world—the Temple of Jerusalem and the Temple of the great Latin god” (F. W. Farrar)

Significance of Revelation 15-16

1. Jerusalem has become Egypt, the church is the new Israel fleeing persecution and bondage. Egypt is judged with plagues.
2. Jerusalem has become Sodom, producing the grapes of Sodom and given over to just destruction. Sodom is judged by fire.
3. Jerusalem has become Babylon, ready to be conquered.
4. The curses have come upon Israel (Deuteronomy 28, 32).
5. Hebrew 8:13, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." Hebrews 12:28, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."