



Universalism in the Apocalypse

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It might seem strange to discover universalistic themes in an apocalyptic writing devoted in large measure to divine judgment. Most discussions of a New Testament universalism center on certain Pauline or deutero-Pauline texts (Rom 11:32; Phil 2:10; Col 1:20; 2:15; Eph 1:10, 20-21) or the natural theology embedded in Acts (Acts 10:34-35; 17:26-28). But contrary to what one might expect, the Apocalypse of John may also be the bearer of a redemptive vision that includes all of humankind.

We will attempt to explore that possibility in the Apocalypse, but we do so with considerable hesitation, keenly aware of the sensitivity of the subject and the uncertainty of any single interpretation. Yet, since the theme arises from the text itself, it can scarcely be avoided. In a pluralistic religious setting, where Christian claims for the finality of Christ rub shoulders with competing or different claims, Christians need to know what their own Scriptures say. This article is one effort to listen carefully to John's vision of the future.

I. PORTRAITS IN CONFLICT

What does Revelation teach about the fate of humanity? At first glance it seems to follow the traditional pattern of salvation for the people of God and judgment for all of God's enemies. Final salvation is entry into God's new world; final judgment the lake of fire, the second and ultimate death. There is judgment against the evil powers and against evildoers. The wrath of the Lamb is real, very real (Rev 6:16-17; 9:15-18; 14:9-11, 17-20; 19:15). In the end the unholy trinity of evil is eternally consigned to the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10) along with Death and Hades (20:14). The kings and nations, too, and all others who followed the beast and were deceived by its lies, are judged and destroyed in the end (19:17-21; 20:7-9, 15). And in the new Jerusalem we find only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27), while the unclean and faithless are excluded (21:8; 22:3, 15).

Yet this is not the full picture. From time to time, there are traces of a universality in God's love that reaches beyond judgment. Already the open-

ing vision of the throne room of God and the Lamb climaxes with the song of redemption that includes not only the ransomed "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9), but also "every creature (*pan ktisma*) in heaven and on earth and in the sea, and all therein" (5:13). We may be able to limit the first reference to the redeemed among humanity, but the second anticipates the worship of the whole creation (cf. Phil 2:10). This scene describes the worship of God and the Lamb in the new Jerusalem.

The vision of the countless multitude of the redeemed (7:9) similarly includes persons from every nation and tribe, and again may refer only to the redeemed. However, one should observe the emphasis on the vast number of the redeemed, exceeding all human imagination. In Revelation 14:6, prior to the final series of judgments, an angel in midheaven proclaims an eternal gospel to all who dwell on earth, once again identifying these as every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. Nothing is said about their response, yet this is a surprising word of hope—a last gasp effort—to redeem the rebellious world. Even more significant is the victory song of Moses and the Lamb (15:3-4). In this preparatory vision of the coming redemption, we are told that “all nations (*panta ta ethne*) shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed.” This appears to be all-inclusive!

However the strongest evidence for some kind of universalism in the Apocalypse occurs in the final visions of the new world. In the new Jerusalem, where the presence of God provides unending light, we are suddenly told that the nations (*ethne*) walk by this light, and the kings and nations of the earth bring their glory and honor into the city (21:24-26). After the apparent destruction of the kings and nations and all their dubious glory in the preceding scenes of judgment, their presence here is surprising, if not astounding. Moreover the gates of the new city remain open forever, as though the welcome mat is spread for still more kings and nations. And in the concluding vision of paradise restored (22:2), we hear that the leaves of the tree of life bring healing to the nations (*ethne*). Surprise once more, for the wounds of the nations seemed mortal at the parousia and the final conflict with Gog and Magog (19:21; 20:7-10).

How shall one resolve these apparently contradictory portraits? Is John simply inconsistent, forcing us to choose one or the other? Are we reading too much into the fleeting images of universal salvation? Or, does John deliberately keep the question open about the fate of humankind and the mystery of salvation? These and other possibilities need to be considered. Suffice it to say at the outset that interpretations range from the traditional view of salvation only for the elect (whether a few or a countless number!) to the view that the Apocalypse presents the strongest case for universalism in the New Testament.

¹Mathias Rissi, *The Future of the World* (Naperville: Allenson, 1972) 14, links together Rev 14:6 and 15:4 as a word of promise to the nations distinct from the saints.

II. THE PRESENCE OF THE NATIONS

The crucial issue is the presence of the nations in the visions of the new creation. Who are these nations and kings who bring their glory and honor into the new world? A number of suggestions has been proposed.

1. One suggestion is that these are nations which did not worship the beast and its image or receive its mark; hence they are different nations than those judged in Revelation 19-20.² If this is true, it is one of John's best kept secrets. Every other indication is that the deceived nations represent the totality of humanity apart from the saints. Thus, at the parousia Christ “smites the nations,” a phrase allowing no exceptions since the end has come (19:15). In the subsequent battle (or non-battle) between the armies of Christ and the beast, the beast and false prophet are cast into the lake of fire, while the rest of the beast's followers are slain, and the vultures gorge on their flesh in a macabre banquet of death (19:17-21). The “rest” are further identified in a long list as kings, captains, mighty men, horses and riders, and all men—free and

slave, great and small (19:18). Again, no exceptions seem possible since this is the conclusive battle of Armageddon, the decisive clash between the followers of God and Satan.

After this scene, only the millennium and last judgment remain. Here John's logic is broken by his portrayal of the millennium, which requires Christ to reign with the martyrs over the inhabitants of the earth. So the nations must reappear, despite their preceding destruction at the parousia. Apocalyptic scenarios simply defy careful logic or chronological straitjackets! But at the end of the millennial reign, Satan deceives the nations one last time to attack the saints; the nations—from all four corners of the earth—are destroyed by heavenly fire, while Satan is thrown into the hellish lake of fire (20:7-10).

Likewise the scene of the last judgment (20:11-15) confirms the totality of these events for the fate of humanity. All persons are brought before the throne and judged by what they have done. No exceptions.

In sum, John appears consistent in his use of terms and in his portrait of the fate of humanity. The nations constitute the deceived and judged, while the saints are the saved. There are no others.

2. This conclusion also argues against another suggestion, long espoused, that the nations in Revelation 21:24 and 22:2 are the elect.³ If they are, John is simply a confusing and careless writer, who designates the nations as deceived humanity in one section and as the saved in the next. Rather, there is consistency throughout Revelation in the use of the term nations. Prior to Revelation 21 the term is used either as a neutral designation of the earth's political inhabitants (5:9; 7:9—the elect “from every nation...”) or more frequently as a negative description of the deceived, hostile, and judged lot of humanity (Rev 19-20). The elect in Revelation are saints

²John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 327, describes them as a body of saved Gentiles distinct from the church.

³R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943) 644; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940) 439.

(14:12), church (2:1), servants (1:1), kingdom and priests (1:6), witnesses (2:13), conquerors (2:7). Never are they the nations.

Moreover, John gives clear evidence that he identifies the nations in Revelation 21:24, 26, and 22:2 with the nations judged in the previous scenes. Twice he mentions the glory and honor of the nations and kings of the earth. This must refer back to the material wealth and abundance which mighty Babylon used to corrupt the nations and kings of the earth and which became the basis for God's judgment of Babylon and its seduced followers (Rev 17-18). Now, this glory and honor is somehow transformed so that it can enter the new Jerusalem.

Similarly, after the terrible destruction of Babylon and the deceived nations, the word about “the healing of the nations” (22:2) in the new world is most fitting. Although the saints, too, long for the day when tears and death are over, they already have that promise (7:13-17; 21:4-5). This word is for the nations, who have suffered the just judgment of God. Now they hear a word of grace and restoration.⁴

3. A third suggestion to explain the surprise presence of the nations in the new Jerusalem is to regard the references as mere remnants from Old Testament prophetic promises, and so essentially insignificant for John.⁵

It is true that John is incorporating prophetic promises of the future restoration of Jerusalem, which include the coming of nations and kings with all their wealth and glory (Isa 60:3, 5; 61:5, 6; 66:12, 18). All of John's paintings of the new Jerusalem or paradise restored use biblical images. But they are not simply impressionistic paintings whose details do not matter. John paints his own Christian portraits, and he does so with deliberate care and purpose. John *intends* to place the nations and their glory in the restored world. This marks one of the surprise features in his portrait.

Similarly, in the vision of paradise restored and the leaves "for the healing of the nations" (22:2), John draws on Ezekiel 47 for the portrait, including the river of life and the trees for fruit and healing. But John deliberately omits Ezekiel's temple and adds the nations as recipients of healing and restoration. While Ezekiel limits the restoration to Israel (and aliens within its borders), John's picture is remarkable for its generosity.⁶

Throughout the Apocalypse one finds that John takes up and shapes

⁴Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 256, objects that since sin is excluded in the new world, this cannot refer to healing of sinners. But healing from the *effects* of sin is not excluded from the new world, just as the saints are healed from their grief and pain.

⁵Many commentators have conjectured that Rev 21:9-22:5 is a slightly altered Jewish document. Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 385, argues that John simply retains prophetic figures of speech which presuppose the continuance of Gentiles on earth after the eschatological age arrives, without intending them to be interpreted seriously or literally. Also T. F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965) 120.

⁶J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 309, especially notes the generosity of John's description. Unlike Isaiah 60:10-16, the nations here do not either become servants to Israel or perish. In 1 Enoch 48:10, the earth's inhabitants repent and are saved (but without honor), while there is no hope at all for the kings and mighty ones. The closest to John is the Testament of Levi 18, where the Gentiles are enlightened along with Israel and brought into paradise by a new priest.

the prophetic traditions in his own Christian image (especially noteworthy is his transformation of the messianic lion and root images into the Lamb who was slain—Rev 5). In these paradise portraits the presence of the nations is a significant addition.

III. WHAT DOES THE PRESENCE OF THE NATIONS MEAN?

If we are correct in claiming that John intentionally places the nations in the new world, and that they are directly related to the previously deceived and judged nations, what does their presence signify in the Apocalypse? And how do they get in?

Admittedly this is not easy to answer, since John has consigned the nations to the lake of fire and seemingly pronounced final judgment on all those whose names are not written in the book of life (14:9-11; 20:15). Can there be any escape beyond the parousia and judgment day?

John's christology makes things even harder. John knows no salvation apart from God and the Lamb (1:5; 5:9; etc.). And this holds true even in the images of the new Jerusalem. After the nations with their glory and honor are brought into the new city, we read that "nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27). If the nations and their glory get in, their names must somehow be written in the Lamb's book of life. Similarly in the vision of paradise restored, the healing of the nations is followed by the words, "there shall no more be anything accursed"

(22:3). In the new creation, only those healed and cleansed by the love of God and the Lamb are present. In this respect the Apocalypse retains a Christian vision to the end.

How then does one reconcile all these conflicting data? It is too easy to throw up one's hands in dismay or to choose one side or the other. Those interpreters who try to incorporate the seemingly conflicting data into a comprehensive vision of the future have chosen the better way.

So how might that look? There is no doubt that judgment is real in Revelation. The beast and all the kings and their deceived followers experience the divine wrath, the just judgment of God. It is true that the weight of divine judgment falls upon the unholy trinity, who are confined to the fires of eternal torment with no hint of relief (20:10). The destruction of Satan marks the end point in God's judgment against the demonic powers who enslave the world. Yet the rest of rebellious humanity likewise experiences divine judgment in the lake of fire, as we have shown (20:15; 14:11).⁷ Whatever else there is, there is certainly no cheap universalism in the Apocalypse! Human beings remain accountable to the just judgment of their Creator. Hence Caird is right in saying, "John has allowed for the possibility that a

⁷G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper, 1966) 260, correctly emphasizes the special focus of the Apocalypse on the fate of the unholy trinity as the demonic source of evil. Their confinement to the lake of fire seems absolute. But, unbelieving and deceived humanity shares the same judgment in the lake of fire. To speak of a lesser punishment for humanity strains the evidence.

man's name may be expunged from the book [of life], that human disobedience may in the end prove impregnable to the assault of love."⁸ Those who argue for an absolute universalism or some kind of universalism without judgment miss this profound point of the Apocalypse, a point that can scarcely be overlooked in a book replete with judgment.

Yet there is also the reality of the new heaven and earth and the vision of the redeemed creation-including the nations and their glory. Thus Morris observes, "John doesn't envisage the salvation of a tiny handful and the destruction of the vast majority of mankind. He sees God as bringing 'the Gentiles' into His holy city. God's purposes for man will not be frustrated."⁹ These nations appear in the new world despite their divine judgment and consignment to the lake of fire. How do they get in? How are they finally cleansed and their names written in the book of life? The Apocalypse does not say. In some sense their presence remains a profound mystery of divine grace. Might it be intended to remain so?

Some explanations of their surprise presence, attractive as they are, seem to go beyond the evidence in the Apocalypse. Thus Sweet argues that the very structure of the Apocalypse reveals a universalistic vision.¹⁰ He observes that the scenes of judgment upon the nations (Rev 6-20) are sandwiched between visions of creation and redemption (Rev 4-5) and visions of healing and fulfillment (Rev 21-22:5). The last word is therefore the restoration of God's creation, not its demise. (He compares this to Rom 11:32, where God consigns all to disobedience in order to have mercy on all.) While Sweet agrees that the nations in the end must somehow be washed in the blood of the Lamb, he notes that John does not address this question.

These observations on structure appropriately support the universal scope of John's apocalyptic vision. In the end, God's intention and promise for the created order will be accomplished. That is the purpose of Christ's redemptive work. Yet this does not in and of itself necessitate a universal restoration without any loss of the old. Other apocalyptic visions find no

irreconcilable conflict between God's ultimate renewal of the world along with the elect and the destruction of evil and evildoers. So in John's vision we have this unsolved tension between the universal vision of the restoration of all things, including even the nations and their glory, and the reality that nothing unclean shall enter (21:27). Some do remain outside, despite God's universal intention.

Even more compelling is the argumentation of Mathias Rissi, who is probably the foremost advocate of John's universalistic intention.¹¹ He finds

⁸Ibid.

⁹L. Morris, *The Revelation*, 204.

¹⁰J. Sweet, *Revelation*, 51. He interprets the visions of judgment as not simply punitive, but something more like the "impact of truth upon illusion" that opens the way for repentance.

¹¹M. Rissi, *The Future*, especially pp. 77-83. Also in general agreement with Rissi's universalistic interpretation of Revelation are Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 52, 55-56, 76, and Arland J. Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 133-135.

a promise not only to the church but to Israel (21:12) and to the nations (14:6; 15:4) in Revelation and claims that "because the victory of God is the *victory* of the *Redeemer*, the end will not be the triumph of destruction and nothingness, but the healing of the world."¹² He recognizes that the judgment of God cannot be minimized but still insists that "neither in its historical nor in its eschatological form is the judgment God's last word, but rather serves in the final analysis as the agent of his grace."¹³ In particular, he appeals to the two redemptive visions of the new Jerusalem and paradise as the centerpiece of John's universalism. In the former, the presence of the nations and kings in the new city, whose gates remain forever open (21:25), means that the seer envisions a constant flow into the new city from the outside. "John announces nothing less than that even for this world of the lost the doors remain open."¹⁴

But for Rissi it is the final vision of paradise that exceeds all the previous ones in announcing the universality of salvation. "While in the vision of the new Jerusalem with its open gates the *promise* and the availability of unconditional grace is made manifest, the concluding vision prophesies the *realization* of this grace. Life and healing are now in fact imparted to all the nations. Jerusalem broadens itself out to become paradise. There is no longer a 'within and without,' for the end of every curse and condemnation is announced."¹⁵

We would essentially agree with Rissi's interpretation of the first vision in that it opens the scope of salvation to the nations and declares God's intention of unconditional grace for all. But as Rissi himself notes, there are still the unredeemed in this vision, those on the outside. So to arrive at an absolute universalism Rissi must interpret the final paradise vision to be cosmically inclusive. Yet here is where the evidence weakens, and his arguments become strained. First, it is doubtful that the paradise vision (22:1-5) represents the fulfillment of the new Jerusalem vision (21:1-27). They are more likely two visions of the same reality, written with differing biblical images in mind (new Jerusalem, paradise restored). Second, even more problematic is Rissi's interpretation of 22:3 ("there shall be no more anything accursed") as a word declaring the end of any and all punishment or condemnation, including the lake of fire. Instead, it seems best to interpret this in the same way as the preceding reference to the unclean in 21:27, namely as a statement that in God's new world there is nothing accursed. There still

may be a “within and without.” Finally, the whole last vision centers on paradise and on the fulfillment of God’s promises to the faithful. John speaks

¹²M. Rissi, *The Future*, 17.

¹³Ibid., 83. “The aim of all judgment is repentance.”

¹⁴Ibid., 74. Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 200-201, likewise argues that something happened to the kings and nations in the lake of fire to change them. Hence he sees no alternative to the conclusion that John is “talking of a continued possibility of repentance and redemption,” even from the lake of fire.

¹⁵M. Rissi, *The Future*, 80. He even suggests the demonic powers may be transformed (Rev 21:5), although he admits that John says nothing explicit about it. At this point Rissi seems to have gotten carried away with his view of absolute universalism. John’s unholy trinity, as the source of all evil, meets its eternal fate in the lake of fire, period (Rev 20:10).

above all to God’s servants (22:3-4), to those who have worshiped God and the Lamb, and whose foreheads are already sealed with the name of the living God (7:3; 14:1). That he can include the nations who have not yet served God in his redemptive vision is vivid testimony to his belief in God’s universal redemptive purpose. But, at the same time, we need to exercise due caution and not say more than John says. In 22:1-5, only the victory of God and the Lamb, only the affirmation of the Creator’s purpose is in view.

IV. THE MYSTERY OF DIVINE GRACE

The careful reader must see both the universalistic and non-universalistic evidence as part of John’s total vision of the future. One of the most helpful discussions of this issue among recent commentators is found in the popularly written study by Vernard Eller.¹⁶ He acknowledges that if there is a universalism, there is still no possibility of salvation apart from faith in Jesus, a “rare” universalism indeed. Moreover, John is aware of the seriousness of sin and human accountability, so that any concept of God’s love must also include God’s justice and judgment. Nevertheless, he concludes that John leaves open the possibility of redemption for any person and for the healing of the whole cosmos. “John attributes to and leaves with God ‘the universalistic possibility.’”¹⁷

We find this phrase, “the universalistic possibility,” to be an appropriate and compelling summary of the evidence in the Apocalypse. It neither shuts the door completely to anyone, even the rebellious kings and their deceived followers, nor does it automatically open the door to everyone, regardless of their conduct. It allows the *possibility* of God’s redemptive goal for all, yet leaves its actuality to God and God alone.

The hints of universalism in the Apocalypse are signs of the profound mystery of divine grace. The presence in paradise of the kings and nations with all their glory and the leaves of the tree of life for the healing of the nations is intended to surprise and astonish. These pictures proclaim the fulfillment of God’s redemptive purpose for the creation—including even the overcoming of those once bent on opposing God and those deceived by the usurpers of God’s rule.

These hints of unexpected grace bespeak the truth of the hymn, “There’s a wisdom in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea; there’s a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty For the love of God is broader than the measures of man’s mind, and the heart of the

Eternal is most wonderfully kind” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, #290). We think John of Patmos would nod his head and say, “Yes, that’s close to what I had in mind.”

Yet the mystery of divine grace remains. We never learn how the nations and kings enter the city. Nor does John ever deny the possibility that some may remain outside—nothing unclean shall enter (21:27), neither anything accursed (22:3). Again in the postscript, John divides humanity into

¹⁶V. Eller, *The Most Revealing Book*, 202-205.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 204.

the blessed who will taste of the tree of life and enter the city gates, and the outsiders whose life and practice apparently disqualify them from the promises of the new creation (22:14-15). So it goes—the gates are open wide, yet we don’t know if all stream through.

Perhaps this is where John intends the vision to stop. The gates are indeed wide open; the invitation of the Spirit and Bride is extended to all. God and the Lamb have some surprises in store. But what these are must be left to God, and God alone.