

REVELATION

Chapter 15

Seven Angels With Seven Plagues

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed.² And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God³ and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.⁴ Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”⁵ After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened.⁶ Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests.⁷ Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever.⁸ And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

15:1- 16:21 Chapters 15 and 16 of Revelation display the third and last vision of events on earth. As in the first two earthly visions (6:1–8:5 and 8:6–11:19), there are seven scenes. In this third vision, each of the scenes is introduced by an angel with a censer. The first five scenes (16:1–11) depict events that take place concurrently: each covers the same time period, from Christ’s ascension up to Armageddon. The sixth scene (16:12–16) describes the last battle, here called Armageddon, which takes place just prior to the end of this present world at Christ’s return. The seventh scene (16:17–21) envisions the End at the second coming of Christ. (CC)

15:1–8† The seven angels with the seven plagues (cf. note on 12:1–15:8), in which John sees the church triumphant in heaven, and is alerted to the vision of the seven bowls (16:1–21). Introduces the last of the three sevenfold series of plagues—the bowls of wrath (see note on 8:2). (CSB)

15:1 *Then I saw.* Indicates a new vision is about to be revealed; this one involves seven angels and seven plagues. (TLSB)

ANOTHER GREAT SIGN – For the third and final time John calls a visionary scene a “sign [σημεῖον] in heaven” (15:1). The two other scenes, each

of which he designates as a sign in heaven, are the woman with Child in 12:1 and the dragon in 12:3. In contrast to the “great sign” (σημεῖον μέγα) of the woman with Child (12:1) and “another sign” (ἄλλο σημεῖον), the sign of the dragon (12:3), this scene in 15:1 is called “another sign in heaven, a great and marvelous one” (ἄλλο σημεῖον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ μέγα καὶ θαυμαστόν). While the “seven angels who have seven plagues, the last ones” (15:1), initially are the “sign,” they introduce the seven plague scenes of the third and last earthly vision, and so the whole vision can be understood as this “great and marvelous” sign. For the plagues come from God himself as signs of his anger (15:1, 7). (CC)

SEVEN ANGELS – Who are these “seven angels who have seven plagues,” these censer-angels? Are they to be identified with the angels of the seven churches (Revelation 2–3) and thus also with the angels who have the seven trumpets (8:1–6)? While an argument can be made for identifying the trumpet-angels with the angels of the seven churches, it is more difficult to identify these seven censer-angels. While the seven trumpet-angels are introduced with the definite article, “the” (τούς), in 8:2, there is no definite article modifying the censer-angels when they are introduced in 15:1. (The definite article οἱ does appear in 15:6, but this may be only to further identify the seven angels of 15:6 with those in 15:1.) (CC)

However, this absence of the article here in 15:1 does not necessarily rule out an identification of the censer-angels as the trumpet-angels, for “the article is not the only means of showing that a word is definite” or the only means of identifying a substantive. If the substantive or subject matter is of itself definite or well known because of its familiarity, the article is not necessary to make it definite. This may be the case here. Twice before, groups of seven angels have appeared. When the second group appears—the seven trumpet-angels (8:1–6)—the article is used to suggest that it is the same as the first group: *the* seven angels of the seven churches (1:20; 2:1–3:22). Now when the group of seven angels appears for the third time, no article is needed because these seven angels are by now well known. Even without the aid of the definite article, the reader can identify them as *the same seven angels* who appeared twice earlier. The fact that John does not use the word “another, other” (ἄλλος, or the plural ἄλλοι) when introducing the seven censer-angels could support the interpretation that these seven angels of 15:1 are the same as the seven trumpet-angels and the angels of the seven churches. For John often uses “another, other” (ἄλλος) when he wants the reader to know that another, different angel is now appearing (E.g., Rev. 14:6, 8, 9, 15, 17, 18; 18:1). (CC)

Even if these censer-angels are not identical to the trumpet-angels and the angels of the churches, they have “an obvious affinity,” for “they belong to the drama of the long conflict between the Church and the World.” *The purpose of the third earthly vision (15:1–16:21) is similar to that of the second (8:6–11:19), namely, to show God’s wrath and judgment against the enemies of his church.*

Who would be better to announce these judgments, in both the second and the third earthly visions, than the angels of the churches? (CC)

the last ... finished. A cycle of seven plagues serves as this Book's last sevenfold vision. Luth: "We are not fighting to win land and people, wealth and glory. Nor are we aiming to establish idolatry or extend it. Rather are we fighting to establish God's word and his church. Especially do we fight for our children, for the coming generations.... That is the real reason and serious purpose for which we now fight, die, or live" (AE 43:238). (TLSB)

God's wrath. See note on 6:16. (CSB)

The specific task of these seven censer-angels is the revelation of the "seven plagues, the last ones," by which God will have vented and completed his "fury" (15:1). They are on a godly mission. On behalf of God and for the sake of the churches, they herald the last great effort of God to move the human race to repentance before it is too late. The revelation of and the sending out of the plagues of God's fury are called a "great and marvelous" sign (15:1), for it is by these last plagues that God will display his righteous judgments and thus show forth the glory of his name. (CC)

15:2 *sea of glass.* See note on 4:6. (CSB)

After John sees the seven angels standing prepared and ready to pour out their censers of God's wrath, he sees the battlefield on which the warfare between the church and the beasts of Satan is taking place. He sees the battlefield as "a glassy sea mixed with fire" (15:2). Surely John was reminded of the "glassy sea, like crystal" before the heavenly throne of God (4:6). However, in 4:6 the heavenly sea, though reminiscent of the past turmoil of the warfare on earth, was quiet and peaceful. Thus it was a reminder to John that the saints in heaven, though they had been in the warfare, were now at rest and peace before God's heavenly presence (see 6:9–11; 7:9–17). (CC)

This is a smooth, transparent pavement, clear crystal, with streaks, marks or patches of fiery colors. This is another glorious vision of the redeemed in heaven granted to the apostle, to show that during all this period of abounding wickedness, God was still gathering home his faithful servants to the rest and blessedness of His presence. (CB)

Symbols rooted in the account of the Lord punishing His people's enemies in the Red Sea (cf Ex 13:21–22; 14:19–31). (TLSB)

mixed with fire.† Probably hints at the presence of the Lord. (CSB)

Now in 15:2 the "glassy sea mixed with fire" is a reminder of the horrifying warfare with its suffering that the people of God on earth are experiencing. The

fiery red reflection of the sea symbolizes this suffering that confronts all Christians. But in this terrifying conflict, though they are conquered by the beast and its image (13:5–7), through death and martyrdom they come out of the struggle victorious, just as their Lord did on their behalf (19:15; cf. Is 63:1–6). Throughout the whole time period of suffering, from Christ’s ascension up to the End at his return, the church exhibits this victorious faith by confidently singing the hymn of salvation, even as she goes into death. (CC)

victorious over the beast.† Cf. the saints’ victory over the devil in 12:11. Echoes the seven promises of the seven letters to those who overcome. They had refused to worship the beast (13:12, 16–17). (CSB)

The beast and its image had already been introduced to John in Revelation 13, where the first beast, the beast from the sea, represents all earthly powers of the human nature (society, politics) that the dragon gets under his control and uses in his warfare against the woman, who represents the church (13:1–10; cf. 12:13–18). The image or idol of this first, political/social beast is made by people who are coerced by the second beast (13:14)—the beast from the earth, the beast that symbolizes everything of a false *religious* nature. This second, religious/spiritual beast serves the political beast by compelling the human race to fashion the idol of the first beast and to worship and serve the first, political beast (13:11–18). (CC)

number of his name. See notes on 13:16–18. (CSB)

The number of the beast is not given here in 15:2, but in 13:18 the number was given as 666. While in 13:18 the number is specifically attached to the religious beast, it refers to the unholy trinity of the dragon (chapter 12) and his two henchmen, the political beast and the religious beast (chapter 13). Whichever of the three is working most actively and is most firmly in control at the moment will carry this number. Here in 15:2 the political beast and its image are at the front in the dragon’s warfare against the church. (CC)

harps. See note on 5:8. (CSB)

Though defeated by the beasts (11:7; 13:7), the church is nevertheless victorious (see the textual note above on 15:2). It is a victory that is not apparent on earth, except by faith. It is a victory that will be fully realized as each Christian is taken through suffering to God’s heavenly throne. And it will be fully exhibited at the End for all to see at the judgment and resurrection (see 19:1–10; 20:11–15; cf. 7:9–17). Though experiencing suffering and defeat on earth, even as Christ did, the church is totally confident of victory because of Christ’s victory. And so she voices in song her faith in the victory—even as she goes into death. (CC)

15:3 *song of Moses*.† See Ex 15; Dt 32. Ex 15:1–18 was sung on Sabbath evenings in the synagogue to celebrate Israel’s great deliverance from Egypt (cf. Hos 2:15). (CSB)

Her song is first called “the song of Moses” (15:3). This song of “the slave of God” (15:3) was sung after the great deliverance of the Israelites at the Red Sea (Ex 14:19–31). The song itself (Ex 15:1–21) expresses thanksgiving to God who alone brought about the salvation of his people through the waters (Ex 15:1–10). It also expresses the confidence that God will deliver his people from all future enemies (Ex 15:11–16). And finally it voices a confident hope that the Lord in the end would bring them safely to his eternal abode (Ex 15:17–18). The song in Ex 15:1–21 emphasizes God’s great redemptive action by which he delivered his people from the tyranny and suffering in Egypt. That saving act pointed forward to the deliverance wrought in Jesus Christ. (CC)

song of the Lamb.† The risen Lord triumphed over his enemies in securing spiritual deliverance for his followers (cf. Ps 22). The song directed to the Lamb (objective genitive). (CSB)

The song in Rev 15:3, which is first called “the song of Moses,” is also called “the hymn of the Lamb,” a hymn of God’s redemptive care. In contrast with the “new song” in 14:3, which celebrates the final deliverance at the end of this world, this song of Moses and of the Lamb celebrates the deliverance from the enemy in any particular suffering at any time throughout the pilgrimage of the church on earth. It joins the OT church (“the song of Moses”) to the NT church (“the hymn of the Lamb”) in one grand unity. The Lord is *always* delivering his church in times of turmoil and death so that she can have another day in which to witness. Throughout the time period of the church’s witness she is *always* being defeated, but she also is *always* being delivered in order to carry on her mission. *This continual saving action and care of her Lord is daily celebrated by the song of Moses and of the Lamb*. In the final deliverance at the end of each Christian’s life and in the final deliverance of the entire people of God at the End, the “new song” of 14:3 is sung. But throughout an individual Christian’s *earthly* life and the life of the entire church *on earth*, the song of Moses and of the Lamb is sung daily in celebration and in thanksgiving to God for his continued redemptive care *in the midst of all the church’s suffering in the warfare of the beasts* (15:2). (CC)

Great and marvelous are your deeds. See Ex 15:11; Ps 92:5; 111:2. (CSB)

Just as Moses led the people in praising God in song after the deliverance at the Red Sea (Ex 15:1–21), so also here the redeemed praise the Lord for working an even more splendid act of salvation. (TLSB)

The words of the song glorify God as the Lord and Judge of all nations in view of the fact that only he is holy (15:4). The song pointedly celebrates that the Lord God shows forth his just and righteous judgments. The words of the hymn and its

thoughts are taken from the OT. “Great and marvelous are your works, O Yahweh” are words reminiscent of Ps 111:2–3, in which the psalmist extols the works of Yahweh, which move the heart. In particular the psalmist praises the righteousness (הַקְּדוּשָׁה; LXX 110:3: δικαιοσύνη) of God as a work that endures forever (Ps 111:3; cf. Ex 34:10; Ps 139:13–15). It is “Yah,” “Yahweh,” who is the object of such praise (Ps 111:1). (CC)

Almighty. See note on 1:8. (CSB)

Here in Rev 15:3–4 it is the “name” of “Yahweh, the [only] God, the Almighty,” that is to be feared and glorified because he alone is holy. In Amos 4:13, as the prophet confesses that it is God alone who has created the mountains and the winds, he proclaims in addition that “Yahweh, God of hosts, is his name” (הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת שֵׁם), which the LXX renders as “the Lord God, the Almighty, is his name (κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ ὄνομα αὐτῶ). His holy name is to be feared and glorified (cf. Jer 10:7) because, as proclaimed in Mal 1:11, “My name will be great among the nations from the rising to the setting of the sun.” God’s name will be recognized as great especially when “everywhere incense and pure offerings will be presented to [his] name” (Mal 1:11) and when all the nations come before Yahweh to worship him and thus glorify his name (Ps 86:9; cf. Ps 102:15 [MT 102:16]). (CC)

King of the ages.† See notes on 2:27; 12:5; Jer 10:10; cf. 1Ti 1:17. (CSB)

In contrast to the celebration on the shore of the Red Sea, this one includes people of every nation, for the Gospel goes forth to all people. (TLSB)

The Lord’s name is to be feared and glorified not only because he alone is holy and because his works are great and marvelous, but also because his ways, his actions, are “righteous and true” (Rev 15:3). In his song of praise in Deut 32:4, Moses says that he would proclaim the name of Yahweh because “his work is perfect; because all his ways are justice” (טֹפֵר שְׁמִי; LXX: κρίσεις, “justly righteous”), and “he is a God of faithfulness—there is no unrighteousness; righteous [קַדְוָה; LXX: δίκαιος] and right [קַדְוָה; LXX: ὅσιος, ‘holy’ as in Rev 15:4] is he.” Ps 145:17 says that “Yahweh is righteous [קַדְוָה; LXX 144:17: δίκαιος] in all his ways and holy [קַדְוָה; LXX: ὅσιος as in Rev 15:4] in all his works.” (CC)

15:4 Universal recognition of God is taught in both the OT (Ps 86:9; Isa 45:22–23; Mal 1:11) and the NT (Php 2:9–11). (CSB)

The conclusion of the hymn in Rev 15:4 states that God’s “righteous judgments [δικαιώματα] have been made visible.” Ps 98:2 declares that “Yahweh made known his salvation and revealed his righteousness [הַקְּדוּשָׁה; LXX 97:2: δικαιοσύνη] to the eyes of the nations.” Here in Rev 15:4 it is the Lord’s

“righteous judgments” (δικαιώματα) which are displayed. While δικαιοσύνη refers to God’s own inherent “righteousness” and holiness (LXX Ps 97:2 [MT/ET 98:2]; Rom 3:5), especially the “righteousness” that Christ has earned for the Christian (Rom 1:17; 3:21–26; 2 Cor 5:21), δικαιώματα describes his “righteous judgments,” his holy actions which are motivated by and are in keeping with his own inherent righteousness, which was revealed in Christ. The righteous actions or judgments (δικαιώματα) of God are also the holy standard by which he expects all humankind to live as it is expressed in his Torah (LXX: νόμος)—not just the Pentateuch, nor just the portion of the OT that is doctrinal Law, but God’s teaching, his revelation (both Law and Gospel). So the apostle Paul in Rom 2:26 can speak of the δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου (the righteous requirements or pronouncements expressed in the Law). Mankind cannot fulfill these just requirements, but God in Christ has fulfilled them himself for all people. Through “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus,” mediated through the Gospel, God has set his people free because he has fulfilled the righteous requirement of the Law in Christ. (CC)

Here in Rev 15:4 the δικαιώματα of God are his “righteous actions” by which he will judge the human race; thus they are understood here as his “righteous judgments.” The phrase “righteous judgments” here refers specifically to those actions by which God shows his anger and displeasure at the sins of all people who refuse his gracious invitation to his mercy in Christ, that is, the followers of the beasts (cf. 15:2 and chapter 13) and the enemies of his saints on earth. These “righteous judgments” of God will be displayed and poured out on the earth in the form of the plagues from the seven censer-angels as described in 16:1–21. The purpose of making visible his righteous judgments (15:4) is to move the unbelieving world to repentance before it is too late (16:9, 11). And at the End, when he returns, the Lord Christ will carry out the judgment of God according to this righteous standard in his own righteousness (19:11). (CC)

In this song of Moses and of the Lamb, the saints on earth laud these “righteous judgments” of God. These righteous actions of God not only vindicate their faith and hope in Christ, but also support and confirm their witness to the judgments of God from which only Christ can deliver people. These judgments of God in the form of the plagues poured out by the censer-angels are the setting and arena in which the church’s witness to the victory of Christ’s death and resurrection are made all the more poignant and telling. As the saints go through suffering and persecution into death, they gloriously sing the song as an expression and witness of their prayer that God will use his “righteous judgments,” and even their own deaths (cf. 11:7–13), to move people to fear and glorify his name (15:4) and thus to come and worship him in repentance and faith before the cross and empty tomb of his Christ. (CC)

15:5† The scene now shifts to the seven angels mentioned in v. 1, which is a summary of the whole chapter. (CSB)

tabernacle of the Testimony. The dwelling place of God during the desert wandering of the Israelites (see Ex 40:34–35). It was so named because the ancient tent contained the two tablets of the Testimony brought down from Mount Sinai (Ex 32:15; 38:21; Dt 10:5). (CSB)

Additional themes from the exodus are seen, since the Lord dwelt among His people by means of the “tent of testimony” during their wilderness wanderings (Nu 17:7–8). (TLSB)

After John had seen the church’s battlefield, “the glassy sea mixed with fire” (15:2), and the saints victoriously singing even as they suffered defeat and death because of the beast, its image (which they would not worship), and the number of its name (which they would not receive), the apostle’s sight is lifted heavenward. He sees “the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony,” not here on earth but in heaven (15:5). This “sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony” appears to be a reference not to Solomon’s temple but to the tabernacle, the tent of witness. This was God’s dwelling place, the visible home of God’s presence with his people in their wanderings in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt (Ex 25:8–9; 40:34–38). This tabernacle was sometimes called “the tent of the testimony” (תֵּיבַת הַתְּעֻדָה; with one exception [Num 9:15], rendered by the LXX as ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ μαρτυρίου, Num 17:22–23; 18:2; 2 Chr 24:6), because the ark of the covenant containing the “testimony” of the Law was placed within the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, of the tabernacle (Ex 40:20–21). The tabernacle was also called “the tent of meeting/assembly” (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד), because God would meet with Moses personally and with his people at the entrance to the tent of meeting and because the people of Israel would assemble there when Moses spoke God’s testimony to them (Ex. 29:42-46; 33:7; Lev. 1:1-2; 8:1-5; 9:23; Num. 7:89; 8:9; 10:3). (CC)

As the tabernacle of Moses was the focal point of Israel’s life with God, so now the heavenly tabernacle reminds John that, because of God’s covenant and testimony of mercy and righteousness, God’s holy presence is the center and core of the life of his saints in his heavenly glory. The earthly tabernacle was a type of “a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made of human hands”—the heavenly one, which the exalted Christ entered as high priest into the very presence of God with his own blood as the ransom price for the sins of God’s people (Heb 9:11–12). That is to say, *as the earthly tabernacle embodied God’s presence through his covenant with his people in the wilderness, so now the heavenly tabernacle reminds John that God, through the covenant of his Christ, is with his saints on earth with his “righteous actions” (Rev 15:4) for the protection of his church and for the judgment of her enemies.* Or as Mounce puts it, the heavenly tabernacle “emphasizes that the final plagues come from the presence of God and are the expression of his unalterable opposition to sin.”²⁶ This opposition to sin is witnessed by the “testimony” (15:5) of God’s Law. (CC)

15:6-7 After a sublime description of how the redeemed rejoice in heaven, the vision takes on a somber tone—seven angels are sent from the heavenly sanctuary with orders to pour out God’s wrath. (TLSB)

15:6 *seven plagues.* The last series of plagues (see v. 1). (CSB)

From the opened heavenly tabernacle and from God’s holy presence come the seven angels with the seven plagues of God’s righteous judgments. They are “clothed in pure and shining linen” and “girded around the chests with golden cinctures” (15:6). The “shining linen” is in keeping with the shining white vestments of the angels who appeared at the empty tomb of Jesus (Mt 28:3; Mk 16:5; Lk 24:4), thus indicating that the angelic servants of God appear in the brilliance and purity of his holiness (cf. Mk 9:3). The “golden cinctures” or belts indicate royalty, either of honor received from the king, or of royal family related to the king. In Rev 1:13 the Son of Man is girded with a “golden sash” or cincture (ζώνην χρυσᾶν) around his chest. Thus the seven angels are clothed in the holiness and righteousness of God and his Christ, with the sign of royalty indicating that they are acting on behalf of God and in particular on behalf of Christ their Lord and King. (CC)

golden sashes. Symbolic of royal and priestly functions. (CSB)

15:7 *gave to.*† Seven angels did not bring the plagues out of the temple, but received them from one of the four living creatures (ch. 4). (CSB)

wrath of God. Cf. 2Th 1:7–9. (CSB)

Acting as a servant of God, one of the four winged creatures gives to the seven angels the “seven golden censers filled with the fury of God” (15:7; cf. Is 6:6; Ezek 2:9). The censers do not originate with the angels, nor are they under their authority. The censers contain the anger and judgments *of God*, and what fearful actions they represent are by God’s authority and come from him alone. The seven angels are merely the dispensers. Only one other group of individuals in Revelation holds censers: the twenty-four elders in Rev 5:8. But there the censers are full of incense, which is identified as the prayers of God’s saints. The prayers of the saints in heaven in 6:9–10 petition God to judge those on earth who persecuted them unto death. As representatives of the entire people of God (the OT and NT church) before his heavenly throne, the twenty-four elders hold the prayers of the saints, which prayers were answered in 8:1–11:19 and now again are to be answered in 16:1–21. (CC)

15:8 *filled with smoke.*† Cf. Ex 40:34; 1Ki 8:10–11; Eze 44:4; Isa 6:1–8. Smoke symbolizes the power and glory of God. (CSB)

After the seven angels received their censers, “the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power” (15:8). In the OT smoke was

part of the “Divine Presence when the awful majesty of God is to be insisted upon.” For example, when God descended on Mt. Sinai, smoke covered the mountain like smoke from a furnace, for Yahweh had descended on it in fire. As a result the whole mountain shook violently, and then God spoke to Moses (Ex 19:18–20; cf. 40:34). When Yahweh of hosts appeared to Isaiah in a vision, seated on his heavenly throne and being worshiped by the seraphim, the temple shook violently as smoke filled it. So terror-stricken was the prophet that he cried out in fear, “Woe is me, for I am destroyed” (Is 6:1–5). Here in Rev 15:8 the heavenly sanctuary filled with smoke indicates the awesome and terrifying presence of God in his power as the seven angels stand ready to pour out his anger and fury upon the earth. (CC)

“No one was able to enter into the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished” (15:8). Perhaps John was reminded of the tabernacle of Moses, when the cloud of God’s glory filled it and Moses could not enter it as long as God’s glory rested upon it (Ex 40:34–35; cf. 1 Ki 8:10–11). So terrifying would be God’s holy judgments in the form of the plagues which John was about to witness that no one could penetrate these inscrutable righteous actions of God until they were completed at the End itself (see Rev 10:5–7; cf. 16:17–21; 19:1–8). In response to all this the Venerable Bede (eighth century) concluded that the smoke would conceal the just actions of God so that they would remain impenetrable and closed to mortals until, when completed, the Lord would come. (CC)

seven plagues. The outpourings of these calamities are recorded in the visions that follow (ch 16). (TLSB)