

Will all be saved? A discussion on the theme of universal deliverance in the song in Revelation 15

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ABSTRACT

The so-called “Song of Moses” in Revelation 15 is a song of which its Old Testament background is highly debated in modern scholarship. There is, however, no disagreement on the fact that the song does contain lots of Old Testament themes. This paper aims to discuss one of these themes that appear to be present in the song namely the theme of universal deliverance. The paper discusses the different points of view in modern scholarship on the theme and attempts to determine which view carries most weight; taking into account the possible Old Testament texts alluded to in the song.

KEYWORDS

Universalism, Salvation, Moses, Revelation, Old Testament

TREFWOORDE

Universalisme, Verlossing, Moses, Openbaring, Ou Testament

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Revelation 15:3-4 a song is found, commonly known as “the song of Moses”. The song is seemingly introduced by the words: καὶ ᾄδουσιν τὴν ᾠδὴν Μωϋσέως τοῦ δούλου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν ᾠδὴν τοῦ ἀρνίου λέγοντες (“and they sang the song of Moses, the servant of the Lord and the song of the Lamb, saying:”)¹ After this introduction a short song is found abounding with allusions to the Old Testament.² If there are so many allusions to the Old Testament, it is to be expected that it should be possible to identify some theological themes or motifs drawn from the Old Testament. On closer examination of the song it appears that there are indeed some Old Testament motifs present in the song. For example: The Lord as the Almighty God, the fear of the Lord, the Lord as the only holy One and also the idea that everyone, including those who do not repent on earth, might in the end be saved (a theme of universal deliverance³). It is this theme of universal deliverance, which will be the subject of investigation in the current paper, as there seems to be a lot of disagreement among scholars about it. It is also not the usual Christian point of view.⁴

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- 1 The author of this paper has argued in his thesis, titled *Identifying the so-called “Song of Moses” in Revelation 15*, for his MTh degree, received in April 2014, that the song of which the words are found in Revelation 15 is in fact the song of the Lamb referred to in verse 3a and “the song of Moses” is most probably a reference to the song of Moses found in Exodus 15.
 - 2 There are many different views on which Old Testament texts are actually alluded to in the song. The differences are very complicated and it is not within the scope of the current study to discuss it in detail. On example will suffice to illustrate the differences among scholars. Beale (1999:794) and also Van de Kamp (2000:354-355) argues for instance that the first part of the song alludes to Deuteronomy 28:58-59 while Van de Kamp (2000:355) also indicates that the the other texts alluded to in this song are Psalm 145:17, 86:9, Deuteronomy 32:4, Jeremiah 10:7, and Daniel 3:45. Moyise (2004:350) on the other hand does not see any indication of an allusion to Deuteronomy 28 in the song and he would rather argue that the allusion is to Tobit 12:22. The differences are clearly very complicated and it is not within the scope of the current study to discuss it in detail.
 - 3 This theme will also be referred to as a “universalist” theme.
 - 4 It should, however, be indicated here that a well know and generally accepted theologian of the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, argued for the possibility of universal salvation. His arguments was based on the grounds that Christians are no less sinners than non-believers and therefore are no more deserving of being saved than anyone else. This implies that if non-believers are not saved, then Christians should not be saved either (Greggs, 2010:500-501). According to Greggs (2010:504) Karl Barth has this same point of view as he states that “yes, it is true, for Barth, that Jesus stands at the door

The aim of this paper is to critically discuss the different points of view on the matter and investigate if John might have left open the possibility that everyone might in the end be saved. Furthermore it will be indicated why this motif might be seen as being drawn from the Old Testament.

2. INDICATIONS IN THE SONG OF A THEME OF UNIVERSAL DELIVERANCE

In the song in Revelation 15:3-4 there are a few possible indications of a theme of universal deliverance present in the text. The first is the allusion to Tobit 12:22 where the “great and marvellous *deeds*” of the Lord are mentioned as opposed to the other possibility of an allusion to Deuteronomy 28:59 which speaks of the great and marvellous *plagues* of the Lord which might be an indication of a universalist theme. This will be discussed in more detail in another section of this paper.

The second indication of a theme of universal salvation present in the text is the use of the phrase: πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἤξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιόν σου (“all nations will come and worship before you”). At the end of verse 3 the Lord is also lauded as: ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν αἰώνων (“King of the nations”). Smalley (2005:387) points out that “the nations” in Revelation always refers to the ungodly people, but in this specific instance the word is meant more inclusively to imply those who serve the Lord as well as those who do not.

3. THE OLD TESTAMENT

Before looking further at the theme in Revelation it is important to investigate the presence of the motif in the Old Testament, specifically in the texts to which John most probably alludes to, as part of the argument in this paper is that the idea is drawn from the Old Testament. The idea of all nations coming before the Lord (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἤξουσιν) is not uncommon in the Old Testament. The first place to look at is Psalm 86 to which the song in Revelation 15 clearly alludes as it is indicated in the following table.⁵

and knocks, but in the power of his resurrection he is able to make his way into locked rooms.”

5 Beale (1999:796-797) argues that most of the language of Rev 15:4 comes from Ps 86(85):9-10. Looking at the table provided it is clear that there are indeed many correspondences between the two texts. Moyise (2004:351) agrees and says that “the closest linguistic parallel with Rev 15:3-4 is Ps 86:8-10.” The irony of the fact that Beale (1999:797) acknowledges the important role played by Ps 86:9 in the song will be discussed later on in this paper.

| Rev 15:4b | Psalm 85:9LXX |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| πάντα τὰ ἔθνη | πάντα τὰ ἔθνη |
| | οσα ἐποίησά |
| ἠχουσιν καὶ | ἠχουσιν καὶ |
| προσκυνήσουσιν ἐθνῶπιδν σου | προσκυνήσουσιν ἐθνῶπιδν σου |
| | κῦριε καὶ δοχᾶσουσιν τοῖ ονομᾶ σου |

The Psalmist sees the Lord as so almighty that everyone will eventually come before him and worship him. Tate (1990:381) argues that Psalm 85:8-13LXX is about the “affirmation of the incomparable sovereignty of Yahweh”. He subdivides this section into two sections of which the first part is verse 8-10 to which the song in Revelation 15 most probably alludes. This first part especially focuses on the “incomparable nature of the Lordship of Yahweh” (Tate, 1990:381). This idea of the incomparability of Yahweh is also a strong theme in the song in Revelation 15 and in verse 4 it is specifically stated that *σὺ μόνος ἅγιος* (“for you alone are holy”). The incomparability of the Lord is strongly linked to the theme of universal salvation, because it implies that the Lord is so strikingly different and more wonderful than any other God that no one is able to resist worshipping Him. In the song in Revelation 15 this incomparability of the Lord is therefore given as the reason why everyone will worship Him. The same is true for Psalm 85LXX. In Psalm 85LXX it is Yahweh’s incomparable greatness (*σὺ εἶ ὁ θεὸς μόνος ὁ μέγας*) that causes all nations to come and worship Him.

In Isaiah 2:2 it is said that the house of the Lord will be exalted to the highest mountains and all nations will come to it – *ἠχουσιν ἐπὶ ὄρους ἁγίου τὰ ἔθνη*. Watts (2005:49) discusses the text of Isaiah 2:1-5 in detail and reaches the conclusion that “there is little here of the idealistic perfection pictured in 11:6-9 or 35:1-10. It nonetheless describes a sharp reversal of policy and goal. There is nothing here of political dominance or of nationalism. Zion’s appeal will be religious and universal.” Clearly then, even when taken in its original context, Isaiah 2:2 suggests something of a universalist theme. Watts (2005:50) does however indicate that the idea of judgement is still important. Even though all nations are now welcome in the city of Yahweh, the requirement for residence in the city is still obedience to Yahweh. The next chapter has a strong theme of judgement centering on “the day of Yahweh” which might be seen as support for this argument. This does not however mean that John could not have broadened the idea of universal salvation. It has been indicated in other sources that John at times takes Old Testament themes from their original

context and gives it new meaning without totally disconnecting it from their original context.⁶

Isaiah 66:18 states that the Lord will gather all the nations and they will be able to see His glory - ερξομαι συναγαγεῖν πάντα τα εθνη και τὰ γλώσσα και ηχουσιν και οψονται τη δόξαν μου. In both texts there is an eschatological perspective present. This gathering of the nations before the Lord in the last days is an important theme in the book of Isaiah. Beale (1999:797) points out that this idea that all nations will come to Zion is a strong prophetic theme that can be found in other prophetic literature as well.⁷ This indicates that among the prophets there is some kind of idea that all nations will eventually bow before the Lord and worship Him. As the theme is also present in at least one Psalm, it is not limited to the prophetic literature. It is therefore clear that there are some indications in the Old Testament that all nations might be present before the Lord at the end, worshipping him for all he has done. The question still remains whether this implies that they will be saved regardless of their faith in the Lord is not evident thus far, but it is clear that the song in Revelation 15 connects to this theme in the Old Testament when describing the glory of the Lord.

Looking at both of the Old Testament songs connected to Moses, it is clear that none of this universalistic perspective is present in either one of the two songs. There is, however, one instance, namely Deuteronomy 32:43, where the MT reads: הִתְרַנְּנוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ – literally “rejoice (praise), nations, His people ...”⁸ The word גוֹיִם has been translated with ουρανοι (“heavens”) in the LXX and עם (“nation”) as עם (“with”), translating the text as “rejoice, heavens, with his people”.⁹ Still one might argue that even if the Hebrew is to be taken as the correct reading, it is not necessarily an indication of a theme of universal deliverance, because the verse seems to be more of a warning against the nations not to harm the people of God and not a call to worship him or an indication of the deliverance of all nations regardless of their actions and what they believe. However, it would seem strange that people will rejoice who is being judged. They would rejoice if they also receive deliverance.

6 cf. Moyise (2003:399)

7 Beale (1999:797) specifically mentions Isaiah 2:3, 49:22-23, 60:14, 66:22-23; Micah 4:2; Zechariah 8:20-22, 14:16.

8 Translations had a lot of trouble translating this verse. Some translated it as saying that the nations should be glad with the people of God for example “rejoice, nations, with his people” (New King James Version). Others would rather see it as saying that the nations should praise the people of God for example “al julle nasies, julle moet die volk van die Here roem” (Nuwe Afrikaanse Vertaling).

9 It is clear that the translator of the LXX text had difficulty making sense of the Hebrew text and attempted to translate it in a way, which actually does make sense.

4. THE VIEWS OF SOME SCHOLARS

It might now be helpful to turn to what other scholars already wrote in this regard. Especially the works of Beale (1999), Van de Kamp (2000), Bauckham (1993) and Moyise (2004) are important here.

There is a clear difference of opinion between Beale (1999:797) and Van de Kamp (2000:355) on the one hand, and Bauckham (1993:297) and Moyise (2004:354) on the other. Beale and Van de Kamp appear to be arguing against a universalistic view of the judgement of God in Revelation, specifically in relation to the song of Moses. This is especially indicated by their argument that the first words of the song are an allusion to Deuteronomy 28:59-60 which speaks about the “plagues of the Lord” which are used to judge the enemies of God’s people. Beale (1999:798) connects Deuteronomy 32 to the song in Revelation because he sees in both the theme of judgement. He also explains why he is against a universalistic theme in the sense that all nations will in the end be saved. To him the word *πᾶς* is not used with the meaning of “all” in the sense of every nation, but rather all nations who accepted the Lord. He states that: “The sense in these verses is not ‘all’ without exception, but all with distinction. Otherwise some of the verses would affirm that all without exception are redeemed and others that all without exception are deceived or judged, which clearly is not the case.” He points to other New Testament texts to emphasize his argument that everyone could not be saved. To him the whole song is about God’s incomparability in his saving act. Van de Kamp (2000:355) sees the fact that the song is (in his view) also called the song of Moses, as a strong indication that the song is about the theme of judgement that runs through the song. He agrees with Beale (1999:794) that the first part of the song is an allusion to Deuteronomy 28:58-59. The view of Beale (1999:798) follows on the reasoning of Beckwith (1967:676) who argues that the song is most certainly about the punishment of the enemies of God for their wrongful deeds. This is indicated by the placement of the song right after the announcement of the last seven plagues and directly before the start of the judgement. He continues to argue that the song is therefore not a song by the saints in reaction to their victory. It is only a song of praise for the just judgements on the enemies of the Lord (Beckwith, 1967:676). Most other scholars do not support this opinion, yet it is to a certain extent in line with the strong theme of judgement that Beale (1999:798) sees present in the text. Decock (2009:282) agrees with this as he sees the use of the word *δικαιῶματᾶ* as an indication of the judgement on the enemies of the people of God. On the other hand, this judgement might just be a warning to the people and not the final judgement.

It is somewhat ironic that Beale (1999:797) argues that Psalm 86(85) plays such an important role in the song in Revelation 15. He is strongly opposed to seeing a

theme of universal deliverance in the song, but exactly the Psalm that plays in his view such a great role in the song is a Psalm that itself seems to contain clear strains of a universalistic theme (Beale, 1999:798).

The view of Carey (1999:151) in this regard is worth adding to the views of Beale (1999:798) and Beckwith (1967:676) as he states about the message of Revelation in general, and the song in Revelation 15 specifically: “Indeed, the powerful suffer, but so do the weak. Revelation subtly erases the distinction, offer equal judgement – but not opportunity – to all.” This view is in contrast with the opinion of Bauckham (1993:297) to which this discussion will now turn.

Bauckham (1993:297) and also Moyise (2004:354) sustain the universalistic theme found in the last words of the song (οτι πάντα τα εθνη ηχουσι και προσκυνησουσι ενωπιον σου). Bauckham (1993:307) makes it clear that “the problem cannot be solved by regarding the response of the nations in 15:4 as merely craven fear and enforced worship, an unwilling but unavoidable acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty, to which they are reduced by God’s final judgements. This would be to ignore the similarity between 15:4 and 11:13; 14:7 in the language used for the nations’ response to God. Furthermore, the response of unrepentant sinners to the seven plagues is not craven fear and enforced worship. On the contrary, they curse God.”

This reaction of the unrepentant sinners to God’s judgements is clearly expressed in Revelation 16:9, 11 and 21. Therefore, Bauckham (1993:307) does not accept that the worship which all nations bring to God is simply because they have to, or because they are forced to, even though they are unrepentant. He sees this universalistic theme also in Revelation 21:3 where it is said that the dwelling of God will be with the people (των αοιθρωνων). Bauckham (1993:310) sees this as reference to all humanity, not just those who believed in the Lord. This is a continuation of the Old Testament texts which point to the hope that one day many other nations will also be under the reign of God and not just the Israelites, as it is written in Zechariah. Therefore the universalistic theme in Revelation expands on the predictions of Zechariah and opens up the reign of God to “all humanity”. Bauckham (1993:306) sees the song in Revelation 15 as underlying exegesis of the song in Exodus 15.¹⁰ His view on the matter of the universalistic theme is therefore summarised where he argues that the song in Revelation 15 is a song of praise for the wonderful deeds of the Lord, just as the song in Exodus 15 praises the Lord for his wonderful deeds in saving the Israelites from the Egyptians. The praise in Revelation also leads to

10 To him the song in Revelation 15 is very strongly connected to the song in Exodus 15, but on an “invisible” level. The song in Revelation 15 is meant to explain the true meaning of the song in Exodus 15.

“the repentance and worship of all the nations” just as the praise in Exodus “led to the awed recognition of his deity by the nations who heard of them” (Bauckham, 1993:306). This seems to be in line with the opinion of Ladd (1972:203) who believes that these last plagues are intended to convince everyone one last time to worship the Lord and give them one more chance to repent.¹¹

All of this leaves one of two possibilities: either they will worship God because in the end everyone will repent, or they will worship because everyone will be saved, regardless of their faith and after they have been saved they worship God out of gratefulness. It appears that Bauckham (1993:296) thinks that in the end all will be saved, even if this means they only repent after seeing the judgements of the Lord at the end.

Beale (1999:799-780) gives quite a lengthy explanation as to why he disagrees with Bauckham on this matter. He does give Bauckham credit that there might be a “universalist strain” in some Old Testament passages, but he concludes that it can at most mean that certain nations will be forced to acknowledge the one true God at the day of judgement and others will do it willingly, thus still making the distinction between those saved and those judged. He cannot see that John has reinterpreted the Old Testament passages from Exodus and Deuteronomy in such a way that the theme of judgement in both is not reflected in the new song based on these two texts.¹² The opinion of Beale (1999:798) on this universalistic perspective is summarised by him in one sentence: “At the consummation of history all will acknowledge God’s glory, either willingly or forcibly.”¹³ To him this theme is carried through from the Old Testament prophecies where some people among the nations are said to repent and they are saved, while others remain unrepentant and these unrepentant people are judged at the end. This is in line with the view of Ladd (1972:206) who states (about the phrase *οτι παντα τα εθνη ηχουσιν και προσκυνησουσιν ενωπιον σου*) that “taken out of context these words could be interpreted to mean a universal salvation of all nations” and also “the Bible constantly looks forward to a day when God will reign on the earth, surrounded only by those who find their joy in worshipping Him.”

Moyise (2004:354) disagrees with Beale (1999:799) and quite rightly so, because in Revelation 15 the song is said to be about God’s marvellous and wonderful *deeds*

11 The view of Ladd (1972:203) is more in line with the view of Beale (1999:798), as it will be indicated later in this paper.

12 Beale (1999: 798) is quite sure that the songs in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32 are in the background of the song in Revelation 15 and therefore they have to play some kind of a role in this text.

13 Beale (1999:799).

(τα^ε εργα), while Deuteronomy 32 speaks about God's marvellous and wonderful *plagues* (τα^ε πληγᾶ). Should the view of Beale (1999:797) be sustained, it would imply that John has changed the text from *plagues to deeds*, which according to Moyise (2004:354) seems unlikely as there are other texts, for instance Tobit 12:22, where there is mention of God's marvellous and wonderful *deeds*.¹⁴ It also undermines Beale's own argument about the strong theme of judgement present in the song in Revelation 15 as taken over from the Old Testament. Beale (1999:798) does acknowledge that there are other Old Testament texts also present as background for the song in Revelation, therefore one cannot even argue that he might have seen the song as only alluding to the songs attributed to Moses in Exodus and Deuteronomy where none of the universalistic themes are present. If he sees the change as being deliberately done by John, then it is even more of an argument for the universalistic theme, because then John would have deliberately changed a word linked to judgement to a more euphemistic word.

On the other hand, in the context of Revelation it might be in John's mind that τα^ε εργα is a synonym for τα^ε πληγᾶ. The plagues are after all brought about by the Lord and therefore can be seen as his works. The plagues of the Lord are in Revelation 15:1 described as μέγα και^ε θαυμαστὸν ("great and marvellous") while his works are described using the same words only two verses later (Revelation 15:3). Despite the above mentioned, this argument does not explain why John would deliberately change "plagues" to "works" in a song that introduces the last seven plagues in Revelation.¹⁵ Therefore this argument has to be dismissed as highly improbable. It is also not mentioned by any scholar consulted.

Furthermore, all the arguments of Beale (1999:798-799) for a strong theme of judgement in the text are mainly based on the fact that he is confident that the two Old Testament songs found in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32 respectively are in the background of the song in Revelation 15. It has been indicated above that these two songs indeed do have a strong theme of judgement, which is to be understood in the light of the fact that these songs are both in reaction to the deeds of the enemies of Israel and the victory of God over these enemies. The problem is that Beale (1999:798) does not even consider the possibility that the song written down might not be the song of Moses at all, but maybe a totally new composition to

14 See also Du Rand (1995:205).

15 It might probably be possible that John did not know the text of Tobit. To prove this would however be impossible. I might also be that he did know the text of Tobit, but because the context is not an Exodus context, he alluded to a text from an Exodus context, which will does not answer the question as to why John would change the word "plagues" to "works" in this instance.

celebrate a totally new way of God dealing with people, which could still be seen as parallel to the songs of Moses in the Old Testament and the redemption at the Red Sea.¹⁶

Beale's (1999:798) reference to three New Testament texts – Romans 10:18, Colossians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 1:8, which all indicate that people who do not accept the gospel will in the end be judged, is an indication of his bias. It looks as though he supports the normal view of the Christian faith that at least those who chose against Jesus will finally perish and not be able to worship the Lamb. They will ultimately burn in the fire of hell. From the evidence presented it seems like Beale might be so strongly influenced by this idea that he will not accept any other idea that might be presented by another Biblical text.

5. CONCLUSIONS

When the universalistic perspective in the song in Revelation 15 is explored, it comes down to two main problems: on the one hand it is clear that the Old Testament songs connected to Moses give no indication that all nations will be saved. On the contrary, in Exodus 15 the song is a song of praise for God's victory over the Egyptians, even though Bauckham (1993:306) sees an underlying theme that is fulfilled in the universalistic theme in Revelation. The song in Deuteronomy 32 is also a song about God's punishment on the enemies of his people. On the other hand it cannot be ignored that there is a hint of a universalistic perspective at play in Revelation 15 when it is said that all nations will worship the Lord, the same perspective that is found in much of the Old Testament prophecies as well as in Tobit and in some Psalms. If the people were to be condemned to eternal fire, there would be no way for them to praise the Lord at the end. To come to a final conclusion on the matter would ask for a more thorough study of Revelation and the literature on Revelation, which is not within the scope of the current study. Examining all evidence that emerged from this study, however, it appears that the view of Bauckham (1993:396) does make sense especially in terms of the universalistic theme present in the song in Revelation 15. Looking only at the evidence presented in this paper on the small passage explored it appears that there is a possibility that according to Revelation everyone will in the end have one last opportunity to choose for the Lord and against the beast and then be saved. As they will then know the true greatness and majesty

16 It might be very possible that the song in Revelation 15 is only the song of the Lamb and the phrase "the song of Moses, the servant of God" might refer to one of the other songs connected to Moses in the Bible.

of the Lord they would most probably not choose to go with the beast, but rather choose to come and worship the Lord.

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