

# Five Principles for Determining Literalness in the Book of Revelation, and their Application to Rev. 14:10-11 and 20:10

A paper presented at the 2021 Rethinking Hell Conference:  
“Death and Mortality: Engaging the Culture”, December 30–31, 2021

J. Webb Mealy, PhD

## Introduction

A preacher down on the boardwalk at the beach has drawn a minor crowd. All he has is a little sound system and a step stool. He challenges the crowd, “Can any of you honestly say you are not a sinner, deserving of the eternal wrath of God?” A young man steps forward. He says, “I think I’m a pretty good person.” The preacher says, nodding, and drawing in the crowd with his eyes, “Let’s see about that.” He directs the young man to stand on the step stool. “Can you say you have never told a lie?” The young man blushes. “Yeah,” he admits, “I have told many lies.” The preacher says, “You have broken God’s command, ‘You shall not bear false witness.’ Do you not know that the Scripture says that the person who has broken the law in one place has broken the whole Law? God is infinitely holy, and cannot allow his righteous commands to be broken! Unless you repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, you will be condemned by God’s righteous judgment and suffer everlasting torment in hell!” Everyone in the crowd is getting uncomfortable. Most of those who are open to the message are probably thinking, “Wow, God is infinitely holy, that’s scary.” Somehow the preacher has gotten everyone to assume that infinitely holy means infinitely merciless towards non-believers. One little sin, and you’re toast. But, says the preacher, the gospel good news is that if you repent and receive Jesus into your heart as your personal Savior, all your sins will be forgiven, and you will go to heaven when you die, not hell. You will live in bliss with God forever.

As familiar as this preaching scenario is, there are some things that are deeply wrong with it. In the first place, it is more or less completely ahistorical and individualistic. This preaching, and much of the preaching that will follow it up in churches, assumes, through its silence, that there is nothing sinful about Americans and other “first world” countries living in luxury in a world in which ten percent of the world’s people go to bed hungry every night. It doesn’t notice that middle class people live as though we have five planet earths worth of resources. It has nothing to say about the sins of complicity in gross and potentially irreversible pollution of our living planet, about complicity in horrendous acts of military aggression and mass murder that kill hundreds of thousands or even millions, and completely disrupt the lives of tens of millions. It has no message of Matthew 25’s Judgment of the Nations, which focuses on sins of omission on the part of the “haves” in relation to caring for the needs of the “have nots.”<sup>1</sup> The entire New Testament has been essentially reduced to an either/or: either you believe in the message about Jesus and go to everlasting bliss somewhere up above in the hereafter, or you don’t believe, and you go to everlasting torment somewhere down below in the hereafter. Now, to a certain extent I am caricaturing, pointing to the worst kinds of polarization towards extreme individualistic and otherworldly concepts of salvation. There are plenty of preachers, and plenty of believers, who are moving away from that. They are coming to understand the corporate and earth-centered hope

---

<sup>1</sup> A friend of mine who wrote a commentary on Matthew insisted that the Judgment of the Nations was specifically focused on how believers care, or do not care, for the needs of their fellow Christians. But in this day and age, in which believers can be found in just about every place in the world, this restriction of reference does not get anyone off the hook. If you ignore the poor and oppressed, you ignore Christians who are poor and oppressed.

that Jesus and the New Testament authors look forward to. We are the Body of Christ, and our destiny is to fulfill God's corporate design for humanity together in the new creation as the Beloved City. In the new creation, heaven, the place of God's total and intimate presence, comes to earth (Rev. 21:1-7), and so does the New Jerusalem. Its citizens come with God and with his Christ to reign on the earth; they do not abandon creation altogether and spend eternity gazing at God together off in the ether somewhere.

In this paper I'm going to demonstrate that in the Bible, and in the Book of Revelation in particular, the imagery associated with the final destiny of those who are rejected for inclusion in the Beloved City also has a strong—in fact, central—corporate and earthly character. Just as the faithless have banded together in their mortal lives to destroy the earth, to oppose God's prophets, to murder his Son, and to persecute his faithful ones, so their final destruction will come when they band together to attempt an attack on the faithful all over again when they are granted the undeserved gift of resurrection. The picture of would-be attackers slain and burning in Isaiah 66, which Jesus appeals to when he talks about Gehenna, the final fate of the unrepentant, is not disassembled and made into something entirely different in the New Testament; it is reaffirmed and explicitly tied to the resurrection of “the rest of the dead” in the Book of Revelation.

In service of demonstrating this, I'm going to adapt some material from my latest book, *The Bad Place: Or, everything you always wanted to know about hell, but were afraid to ask*. It's from a section discussing the Book of Revelation called “Five Principles for Deciding Whether to Take Things ‘Literally.’”<sup>2</sup>

### **Five Principles for Deciding Whether to Take Things “Literally” in Revelation**

I think it would be generally agreed that not everything in the Bible is to be taken literally—and especially in the Book of Revelation. It is a rare person who will say that the devil is a literal seven-headed dragon (Rev. 13:1; 17:3), and that Jesus practices a unique martial art in which he grasps the hilt of a sword in his teeth (Rev. 1:16; 19:15, 21). But how do we decide what imagery to take literally in the Book of Revelation, and how literally to take it? After all, when we look carefully, it becomes evident that Revelation's visions represent nearly everything that they reveal in symbolic terms. Most of us, for example, would agree that God is not going to cultivate oysters twenty stories tall in order to supply the “single pearl” gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:21). We can call these kinds of imagery symbols, images, metaphors, figures of speech, and the like. But let's not get caught up in an over-complicated discussion of the technicalities of how they convey information in non-literal ways. To simplify, let's just agree that John communicates what he sees in his visions by means of *word pictures*, and let's agree that word pictures can either be literal or non-literal. I propose for consideration the following five principles for interpreting word pictures in Revelation:

#### ***Principle 1***

Each individual word picture should be interpreted so that it remains self-consistent throughout Revelation. We shouldn't interpret a word picture literally in one instance and non-literally in another instance. For example, once we understand that white clothing symbolizes purity, we should understand every instance of it in Revelation as symbolizing purity (see Rev. 3:4-5; 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). We shouldn't pick out one instance, like Rev. 4:4, and say that in that case John is just talking about ordinary and literal white clothes. Similarly, we discover in Rev. 22:16 that Jesus calls himself “the bright morning star.” Learning this commits us to the same

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Bad Place: Or, everything you always wanted to know about hell, but were afraid to ask* (Amazon, 2021), 190-203.

interpretation of Christ's promise to give the overcomer the morning star in Rev. 2:28. When we interpret Rev. 2:28 so that it is consistent with Rev. 22:16, we understand that Jesus has promised that he will give *himself* to the overcomer. The word picture of the "morning star" does not mean one thing in one place in Revelation, and something entirely different in another place.

### *Principle 2*

Any word picture should be interpreted so that its literalness matches its literalness within any OT prophecy that John alludes to in using it. If a word picture is literal in its OT prophetic context, we should assume that it's going to be literal in Revelation. If it's non-literal in its OT prophetic context, we should assume that it's going to be non-literal in Revelation. Why should we expect there to be this kind of congruence? Because John clearly understands his visions to be part of one integrated stream of prophetic revelation from God. John is not snipping things from the OT and pasting them together like a collage made from magazine cuttings, without reference to their original meaning or context. He's giving us an account of actual visions that he experienced as he was being prayerful in the Spirit on a Sunday morning on Patmos (Rev. 1:9-11). When John recognizes that what he is seeing is something that another prophet saw before him, he takes care to describe his vision in words that alert his readers to the presence of a connection. He looks upon all biblical prophecy—including his own—as one interconnected revelation, and therefore we should expect the function of word pictures in Revelation to be organically connected to their function in the visions of the OT prophets. For example, in Daniel 7, the beast with its ten horns is a composite symbol of the last evil empire in human history *and* the sequence of rulers leading up to its final king (Dan. 7:7-8, 11, 19-27). Likewise, in Revelation, the beast with its multiple heads and horns is a composite symbol of the last great evil empire *and* the sequence of rulers leading up to its final king (Rev. 13:1-10; 17:3, 7-18, esp. v. 9).

### *Principle 3*

Any word picture should be interpreted so that it makes sense when interpreted in the context of closely-related word pictures in the Book of Revelation. For example: John tells us in Rev. 4:5 that the seven blazing lamps in front of God's throne in heaven "are the seven Spirits of God." He later tells us that he sees golden bowls full of incense, "which is<sup>3</sup> the prayers of the holy ones" (5:8). Comments like these make it clear that John does not take his visions of the heavenly temple and its equipment literally, as though there were literal, physical golden lamps and bowls in heaven. The heavenly temple and its individual elements symbolize truths about God and his relationship with humanity and the creation. Accordingly, when we encounter other temple-related word pictures, we should apply what John has told us in these two cases. For instance, in Rev. 6:9, John sees "underneath the altar of sacrifice, the souls of those who'd been slaughtered because of the word of God, and because of the testimony that they'd maintained." In the OT, the blood of animals offered to God is to be poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice (Exod. 29:12; Lev. 4:7). John's vision tells us that these slain witnesses have had their lives "poured out," but that God has accepted their lives as a holy offering to him, and their lives are held safe by God (see Rev. 6:9-11).

### *Principle 4*

Any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with non-figurative, which is to say, straightforward, informational, and interpretive statements that John gives us. For example:

---

<sup>3</sup> Literally "are." John is referring to the grains of incense, not to the golden bowls.

- In Rev. 1:12, 16, 20 John sees seven lampstands and he sees seven stars in Jesus' hand. Jesus interprets these vision elements for John: the seven lampstands "are" (in other words, they *symbolize*) the seven churches, and the seven stars "are" (the stars *symbolize*) the angels of the seven churches. Similarly, in Rev. 4:5 John sees seven torches of fire burning in front of God's throne, "which are the seven spirits of God." It is no more valid to say that the lamps that John sees in Revelation 1 and the torches he sees in Revelation 4 are also *real*, which is to say, *literal*, lamps and torches, than it is to say that the seven stars that he sees in Jesus' hand are also seven actual, literal stars somewhere in the universe.
- As we saw just above, John explains that the incense offered to God by the 24 elders is the prayers of the holy ones. The word picture of burning incense is not literal; it represents communication—prayers being received by God. Trying to hold that it is also literal in some way is to miss the point. John is trying to teach us how to understand elements of his visions as *he* understands them.
- In Rev. 5:6 John sees a Lamb standing as though slaughtered, and he sees that it has seven horns and seven eyes. He explains that the lamb's eyes "are," which is to say these represent, the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth.<sup>4</sup>
- In Rev. 16:13-14, John sees three frogs coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. He immediately explains what he understands these frogs to represent. "They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty." They're not also, at the same time, literal, biological frogs.
- Finally let's look at an example that is a little more involved. In Rev. 21:23-24 we read of the New Jerusalem that "the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it." This word picture—of the nations and kings of the earth being illuminated by the glory of God and bringing gifts into the New Jerusalem—looks on first glance like a promise that the wicked "kings of the earth" (Rev. 6:15; 16:14; 17:2; 18:3, 9; 19:19), along with all of humanity, will have access to the New Jerusalem (see also Isa. 2:2; 60:3-10). But this promise must be interpreted by John's interpretive words in Rev. 21:27: "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." John clearly explains that the promise of entry to the New Jerusalem applies only to the holy ones, only to the citizens of the Holy City. Thus, in the new creation, the holy ones *are* the "kings of the earth" (see Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4, 6), and they constitute all of humanity on the earth. When you take into account John's own explanatory words, the more literalistic universal salvation interpretation of the picture of the nations coming into the New Jerusalem is ruled out.

### *Principle 5*

Any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with the teachings of Jesus above all (since the resurrected Jesus is the source of the Book of Revelation—see Rev. 1:1), but also with the teachings of the authors of the NT and the Bible in general. For example, we don't conclude from John's repeated use of the expression "the seven spirits" (Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) that there are actually seven separate Holy Spirits. We understand from numerous passages elsewhere in Scripture that there is one Holy Spirit. Our knowledge of this is strong enough that we interpret

---

<sup>4</sup> The "seven spirits of God" is its own puzzle, which we will discuss under Principle 5. What is not hard to understand here in any case is that Jesus is not to be understood as a literal lamb with seven horns and seven eyes.

John's words, in the light of Zech. 4:10b,<sup>5</sup> as referring to the creation-wide scope of the Spirit's activity.

### Applying the Five Principles for Determining “Literalness” to Imagery of Everlasting Burning in Rev. 14:11 and Rev. 20:10

Let's now apply each of these five principles to the question of whether we should understand the “smoke from their torment” as literally going up “forever and ever” (Rev. 14:11) and whether we should understand the “day and night forever and ever” torment of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet (Rev. 20:10) as literally going on forever.

#### *Principle 1 and its Application to Rev. 14:11*

Principle 1 says that we should expect the literalness of a word picture to match its literalness elsewhere in Revelation. There is, it turns out, exactly one other place in Revelation besides Rev. 14:11 in which we hear of smoke going up forever and ever. Let's see if it can be taken literally.

Rev. 19:3

3Hallelujah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever!

This verse refers back to the instant and total destruction of Babylon the Great by fire that had just been prophesied in Revelation 18. Its destruction is to come “all in one day” (Rev. 18:8), and “in one hour” (Rev. 18:10, 17, 19). The beast, joined by the kings of Babylon's enemies, betrays the great city of Babylon, and together they completely destroy it with fire (Rev. 17:16-18). Rev. 19:3 is also a reference back to Rev. 14:8-11 and to Isa. 34:10. In Rev. 18:21, the sudden and final end of Babylon the Great was conveyed by using a dramatic word picture in which an angel threw an upper millstone into the deep sea (alluding to Jer. 51:63-64). Here in Rev. 19:3, Babylon's end is expressed in dramatic imagery of a burnt ruin that never stops smoldering. The force of this imagery, which is projected “into the ages of the ages,”<sup>6</sup> is that Babylon's destruction will be irrevocable, permanent, and final. Ruins that are imagined as smoldering forever are, by force of logic, imagined as forever left un-rebuilt. In Rev. 19:3 John's readers are being assured that Babylon, the greatest enemy of God's people ever to appear on earth (16:6; 17:6; 18:24), will never, ever rise again.

Let's pause for a moment and consider whether it is even possible to interpret this idea of endless smoldering literally. Suppose we agree that Babylon the Great symbolizes a human city, or maybe even a civilization pictured as a great city, which achieves the status of world empire on the earth at the end of this age. Now let's dare to imagine something like a great nuclear conflagration, which is to be instigated by the beast and the “ten horns,” leaders of Babylon's opponent nations to which he defects (see Rev. 16:12-14; 17:12-13, 15-16). Let's imagine that the incendiary attack instantly kills a large portion of humanity and destroys every living thing that it touches within the borders of Babylon the Great. Now let's remind ourselves that God's plans for this earth (according to Revelation) include the radical dissolution of the current earth and its atmosphere (6:12-14; 16:19-21; 20:11; 21:1b), followed by their radical renovation (21:1-4).<sup>7</sup> As a result, if we are to interpret Rev. 19:3 literally, we will be required to imagine that God, in the process of renewing the entire creation, plans to do one of two things: (1) miraculously preserve that portion of the earth where Babylon stands in a desolate and un-renovated state for all eternity, or (2) miraculously lift the smoldering wreck of Babylon the Great from the skin of the present earth, and hold it in

<sup>5</sup> Obviously “the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth” do not refer to seven literal eyes, but to the completeness of the LORD's knowledge of his creation.

<sup>6</sup> Gr. εἰς τοὺς αἰώνας τῶν αἰώνων.

<sup>7</sup> See also Isa. 24:1-20; 64:1-2; 65:17-19; 66:15, 22; 1 Pet. 3:7-13.

suspense while re-creating the world, and then transplant it into the new creation—rather like a dead, rotting scab that God chooses to transplant onto the pristine resurrected body of the new earth and leave unhealed for all eternity. This idea—of a smoldering Babylon miraculously preserved and/or transported into the new creation, so that it can throw toxic smoke into the skies of the new creation forever and ever—is obviously intolerable to the Christian imagination. This concept flies in the face of the beauty and wholeness of the picture painted in Revelation 21–22. *Therefore Rev. 19:3 cannot be, and is certainly not to be, taken literally in regard to its temporal force.* Principle 1 tells us that we shouldn't interpret a word picture literally in one place in Revelation and non-literally in another—but that we should interpret each word picture consistently in all its instances. Since the everlasting smoldering in Rev. 19:3 cannot be taken literally, Principle 1 tells us the word picture of everlasting smoking in Rev. 14:11 should not be taken literally either. We'll talk in greater depth about Rev. 19:3 below.

### *Principle 1 and its Application to Rev. 20:10*

Given that there is similar imagery of everlasting “day and night, forever and ever” burning in Rev. 20:10, Principle 1 raises the question, *Might this imagery also have non-literal force?* The application is less clear, however, than in the case of Rev. 14:11. In this case there is no smoke to be pictured as rising forever and ever, but rather the devil and his cohort are pictured as suffering torment in the fire forever and ever. The question of literalness is thus not settled decisively one way or the other by the application of Principle 1. The imageries are close, but not identical.

### *Principle 2 and its Application to Rev. 14:11 and 20:10*

Principle 2 tells us that a word picture in Revelation should be interpreted so that its literalness matches that of any OT passage that it alludes to. Rev. 14:11 and 20:10 very clearly allude to the word picture in Isa. 34:9–10, in which the fields and streams of Edom are pictured as burning forever with sulfur and pitch:

Isa. 34:9–10

<sup>9</sup> Edom's streams will be turned into pitch,  
her dust into burning **sulfur**;  
her land will become **blazing pitch!**  
<sup>10</sup> It will not be quenched **night or day**;  
its **smoke will rise forever.**

From generation to generation it will lie desolate;  
no one will ever pass through it again.

Rev. 14:10–11

<sup>10</sup>“If somebody worships the beast and his image...they're going to be tormented with **fire and sulfur**... <sup>11</sup>The **smoke** from their torment **goes up forever and ever.** [They will] get no rest **day and night...**

Rev. 20:10

<sup>10</sup>And the devil...was thrown into the pool of **fire and sulfur**—where both the beast and the false prophet are. They're going to be tormented **day and night, forever and ever.**

We can apply the same thought experiment to Isa. 34:9–10 as we did to Rev. 19:3. Do we believe that God is going to miraculously transport poisonous and poisoned Edom into the new creation, so that its streams of burning pitch and fields of burning sulfur can spew toxic smoke into the skies of the new creation forever? Or do we believe that the word picture of an everlasting smoldering wasteland is intended to assure the people of God that perennial enemies such as Edom will never again arise to threaten the faithful? If the second of these is what we believe, then Principle 2 tells us that we should not take the everlasting smoke of torment in Rev. 14:11 or the devil's “day and night, forever and ever” torment in 20:10 literally either. We should take this language as a

hyperbolic way of expressing the irrevocability of God's judgment on dangerous enemies, and the permanence of its results in each case.

Now, someone might respond, "In the deepest sense, Rev. 19:3 and Isa. 34:9-10 are actually pictures of the torments of the lost in hell. Rev. 19:3 and Isa. 34:9-10 are not ultimately about literal Edom or Babylon the Great in this age, and Rev. 14:11 refers to all the lost, not just to the literal followers of the beast as stated in the text." To anyone who wants to try this move, I reply that you need to decide whether you're going to be a literalist or not. Aren't you now tossing aside the very literalism that you have always claimed required you to believe in everlasting torment--and indeed even resorting to allegory--so that you can salvage your belief in everlasting torment when literalism leads to impossible results? Wouldn't it make better sense to admit that prophetic Scripture sometimes uses temporal hyperbole, and to be open in principle to the possibility that temporal hyperbole is at play in Rev. 14:11 and 20:10?

### *Further Application of Principle 2 to Rev. 20:7-10*

I have proven elsewhere in technical detail<sup>8</sup> that Rev. 20:7-10 pictures the great last rebellion of the devil and all the resurrected unrepentant. I have proven that this passage has intimate links to Isa. 26:10-11 and Isa. 26:20-27:5. Each of these portions of the so-called Isaiah Apocalypse pictures the same moment of the final judgment and permanent removal of all the forces of deadly danger to the faithful, including the great dragon, which John identifies as the devil. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Christians typically think about the final disposition of the those they refer to as "the lost" as though it is something that they experience in a completely passive way: God drags sinners out of the realm of the dead, they stand defenseless before the bench of divine judgment, they are condemned, and they are forthwith individually sentenced to and consigned to some form of everlasting torment whose intensity somehow matches their particular sins. But crucial pictures of the end of the unrepentant in Isaiah (Isa. 26:10-11; Isa. 26:20-27:5; Rev. 20:7-10; cf. Isa. 66:22-24) reveal created beings ferociously active in attempted violence against God's faithful ones in the specific context of the glorious earthly reign of God and the faithful. The unrepentant ones are not pictured as helpless pawns to be endlessly dangled in fiery torments at God's pleasure, but as dangerous attackers who must be stopped once for all for the protection of God's beloved community. Let's look at some portions from the Isaiah Apocalypse together for a moment, alongside their parallels in Revelation.

---

<sup>8</sup> See my monographs, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20* (JSNTSup, 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992; repr. Seattle: Amazon, 2019); *New Creation Millennialism* (Seattle: Amazon, 2019). See also the sketch below.

Isa. 26:10-11

<sup>10</sup>But when grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness.  
In the land of integrity they do evil, and do not see the majesty of the LORD.<sup>9</sup>  
<sup>11</sup>LORD, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it.  
Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame; let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them.

Isa. 26:20-27:5

<sup>20</sup>Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until my wrath has passed by.  
<sup>21</sup>See, the LORD is coming out of his place, to bring the evil of the earth dwellers down upon them.  
The earth will disclose the blood shed on it; the earth will conceal its slain no longer.  
<sup>27:1</sup>In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword— his fierce, great and powerful sword— Leviathan the escaping<sup>10</sup> serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea.

John clearly understands that he is seeing, in the scene he describes in Rev. 20:7-10, the same last judgment and fiery destruction of the forces of wickedness that is revealed in Isa. 26:10-11 and 26:21-27:5. In both Revelation 20 and the Isaiah Apocalypse, the human and angelic forces of rebellion were imprisoned in the underworld when history was brought to an end and the glorious God's glorious Kingdom came to earth (Isa. 24:21-23; 25:6-9 || Rev. 19:18-20:3). But when their prison sentence was over, they deceived themselves all over again and attempted to attack the faithful all over again. Isaiah's and John's common description of the ultimate confrontation between God and the human and cosmic forces of obstinate evil leads not to the question, "Will God ever be done

Isa. 27:2-5

<sup>2</sup>In that day—Sing about a fruitful vineyard:  
<sup>3</sup>I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it.  
<sup>4</sup>I have no wrath in me— Will someone bring me briars and thorns in battle? I would go to them and set them all on fire.  
<sup>5</sup>Instead, let them come to me for refuge! Let them make peace with me! Let them make peace with me!

Rev. 20:9-10

<sup>9</sup>And they came up onto the broad plain of the earth.<sup>11</sup> They surrounded the camp of the holy ones, the Beloved City.<sup>12</sup> And fire came down out of heaven<sup>13</sup> and burned them up.<sup>14</sup> <sup>10</sup>And the devil, who was deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur...to be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

<sup>9</sup> I prefer my own literal translation of this sentence. NIV has, less literally, "even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil, and do not regard the majesty of the LORD."

<sup>10</sup> Heb. *bāriah*. Escaping from where (Rev. 20:7)? Translator Robert Alter comments on the obscure word *bāriah*: "It is also the ordinary word for the bolt of a gate and so could conceivably refer to the serpent held under lock and key." *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary: Three-Volume Set* (W. W. Norton & Company; Kindle Edition), p. 1823.

<sup>11</sup> See Hab. 1:6 for similar imagery.

<sup>12</sup> Lit. "and the Beloved City." "And" here means "that is."

<sup>13</sup> Some mss add, "from God."

<sup>14</sup> See 2 Kgs 1:10; Ezek. 38; Isa. 26.

t tormenting these sinful beings?" but rather to the question, "Will God's beloved always have to worry about enemies periodically being allowed to attack them?" It is to this situation that John applies the word picture from Isa. 34:10, with its temporally hyperbolic language of "day and night, forever and ever" (Isa. 34:10 || Rev. 14:11 || 20:10). Will deadly enemies—the devil in particular—spring up perennially, forever? No. They will be uprooted and destroyed in a way that is both total and absolutely permanent. That is the force of the "forever and ever" burning and/or smoking language in all the passages in which it occurs.

### *Principle 3 and its Application to Rev. 20:7-10*

Principle 3 tells us that we should always interpret word pictures in Revelation so that they work harmoniously together with related word pictures in Revelation. We've already talked in some detail, under Principle 1, about the relationship between Rev. 14:10-11 and 19:3, so we will consider that discussion sufficient as regards Principle 3. Let's now turn to Revelation's word pictures related to those in Rev. 20:7-10. I would argue that they are almost all to be found in the oracle of Babylon the Great's fiery destruction in Rev. 18:1-19:3. If we can discern how the words and images in that passage "work," we can then attempt to assess whether, how, and how closely, the words and images in Rev. 20:7-10 "work harmoniously together" with them. So as a first step, let me give a basic exposition of the literary dynamics of the oracle of Babylon's destruction.

**First**, in Rev. 18:1-20, John gives a detailed prophecy that Babylon will be suddenly, completely, and permanently destroyed by fire in one day (18:8), in one hour (18:10). The descriptions in this section remind the readers that no one who betrays Jesus by worshiping the beast will escape the same kind of fiery destruction. Rev. 14:9-12 will absolutely come to mind as they read Revelation 18.

**Second**, John sees an angel perform a symbolic action:

Rev. 18:21

21And a powerful angel lifted up a stone like a huge millstone, and threw it into the ocean.<sup>15</sup> He said, "That's how quickly<sup>16</sup> Babylon, the great city, is going to be overthrown. She'll never be found again."

So we've gone from fiery imagery to watery imagery, but both are in service of the same purpose: emphasizing the total, and *permanent*, destruction of Babylon the Great (esp. 18:14). A millstone cast into the deepest ocean *will never come back up*. I should mention that the permanence issue is crucial, because ancient cities somewhat regularly burned down, but people began to rebuild them as soon as the ashes were cool, and it was common for them to return to their former status within a generation or less—just the way Tokyo and Berlin bounced back from being bombed into rubble in WWII.

**Third**, right after the symbolic casting of the millstone, the angel goes on to prophesy about sights and sounds that will be *absent* from now on among the ruins Babylon:

Rev. 18:22-23

22The sound of harp players and singers,<sup>17</sup> flutists and trumpet players—  
They're never going to be heard in you anymore.  
No worker in any skilled trade is ever going to be found in you anymore.  
The sound of a mill grinding flour is never going to be heard in you anymore.

---

<sup>15</sup> Lit. "the sea."

<sup>16</sup> Or "how violently," or "how suddenly."

<sup>17</sup> Or "musicians." See Ezek. 26:13.

<sup>23</sup>The light of a lamp is never going to be seen in you anymore.

And the sound of a bride and groom is never going to be heard in you anymore.<sup>18</sup>

The image of the millstone thrown in the ocean, and the poem about the absence of human sights and sounds that follows it, convey one and the same message: the coming destruction will be total and the desolation that results will be permanent, everlasting. Isaiah accomplishes something very similar in Isa. 34:10b-17. After presenting the hyperbolic picture of everlasting toxic<sup>19</sup> burning and smoking in Isa. 34:9-10a, Isaiah turns to an extended poem celebrating the peace and quiet that all the desert creatures will enjoy forever: each species will have peace because their land will belong to them, with no humans to bother them ever again.<sup>20</sup>

**Lastly**, to cap off the oracle of Babylon's destruction, John hears voices of a great multitude in heaven saying, Hallelujah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever!" (Rev. 19:3). This unmistakable quotation from Isa. 34:10—which, like its source, is impossible to take literally—adds the final element to this four-fold description of Babylon's destruction. *Add them all together and you do not get four independent pieces of literal information about the destiny of Babylon, but one.* All the imageries serve the one purpose: to assure the believers that Babylon the Great will be completely, and, above all *permanently*, destroyed. These four complementary descriptions of Babylon's fate present us with specific and relevant *precedent*, right in the nearby narrative of Revelation, for the complex communication technique that I claim John uses in Rev. 20:7-15. They show that it is normal in Revelation that the same reality should be expressed by means of layered imagery, or, to use a familiar term that commentators use, *recapitulation*.

I would now like to sketch the literary dynamics of Revelation 20 and to show how observing the use of image layering, or recapitulation, adds significant further evidence that imagery of everlasting burning in Rev. 20:10 should be understood as temporal hyperbole.

1. Following Christ's slaying of the “kings of the earth” and their armies in Rev. 19:18-21, John sees an angel capture the devil and throw him, in chains, into the underworld (Gr. ἄβυσσος). This connects John's narrative with the narrative of Isaiah 24, which ends with the co-imprisonment of the hosts (i.e. armies) of heaven and the kings of the earth in “the pit” (Heb. בַּיִת), a familiar Hebrew way of talking about the underworld, “for many days,” while the LORD reigns in glory on Zion (Isa. 24:23). John quantifies the “many days” during which the devil, and presumably all his rebellious angelic hosts (see Rev. 12:4, 7-9), are imprisoned as “for a thousand years,” which Jews and Christians imagined as a kind of standard or ideal length for an age.<sup>21</sup>
2. John sees thrones set up, and he sees those who have been slain for their testimony and resistance to the beast, and, perhaps, those who persevered in resisting the beast but who were somehow spared from martyrdom, and they all rise and reign with Christ as priestly kings for the thousand years of the devil's imprisonment. The rest of the dead—including the kings of the earth and the armies of the beast who were slain at Christ's coming in

---

<sup>18</sup> See Jer. 25:10. Cf. also Rev. 18:2, which is an allusion not only to Isa. 34:10b-17, but also to Isa. 13:9-22; Jer. 50:39-40; 51:37, 62-64 || Rev. 18:21. The trope of a permanent desolation, in which the animals who only live in deserted places thrive, is common to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Revelation.

<sup>19</sup> His picture has both tar and sulfur continuously burning.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the first image, of a toxic wasteland that has no water and never stops burning (Isa. 34:9-10a), and the image that follows, of a wildlife sanctuary that is an ideal habitat for various creatures (Isa. 34:10b-17), are not literally compatible. This signals that it is the message of everlasting desolation that is key, rather than any literalistic intent of details of the imagery. This ought not to be controversial.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the day-age theory in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Ep. Barn. 15:4-8.

glory—do not come to life, which is to say, they are left imprisoned in the underworld, along with the devil and his angels, for the thousand years. We are tracking with Isa. 24:21-23.

3. When the thousand years are over, the devil is released—and we readers immediately ask ourselves, won’t “the rest of the dead” also be released now from the underworld? That’s what we were just now told (Rev. 20:6). And sure enough, the devil finds himself a horde of human followers as numberless as the sand of the seashore, who “come up on the broad plain of the earth”<sup>22</sup> (Rev. 20:8), which is conceptually impossible if you are not first *underneath* the broad plain of the earth. This is the humans who have until now been incarcerated in the underworld with the devil, but who now, “when the thousand years are completed,” stand resurrected on the earth. They all attempt one unified attack on the “camp of the saints, the Holy City,” and are consumed by fire from heaven, just as Isaiah prayed in Isa. 26:10-11. The devil, who, as an angel, can easily flee such a torrent of fire, is caught and thrown into the pool<sup>23</sup> that it forms, and is incinerated like the rest.
4. Now, in Rev. 20:11, we see a courtroom scene in front of God the Judge, before whom we had seen heaven and earth flee in the sixth seal (Rev. 6:11-17). Apparently we’re seeing this all over again. The dead, above whom the ceiling of the earth has just been stripped away like the lid of a sardine can, stand exposed in the underworld before the Enthroned One, now to be judged according to their actions done as mortals, as written in the books (20:12). Next, they are drawn out of the realms of the dead and judged by their actions (20:13). Everyone who is not a citizen of the New Jerusalem ends up being cast into the pool of fire, the second death (20:14-15). The readers are presented, in the relationship between Rev. 20:7-10 and 20:11-15, with the same pattern of image layering that they just witnessed in Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:4-6: the same moment of judgment is presented first as conflict and divine victory, and then as a courtroom scene. Astute readers have understood that Christ’s coming in glory is, at the same time, *both a battle and a trial*. This double character can also clearly be seen in Daniel 7 and in Rev. 11:15-18, both of which form the backdrop of both Rev. 19:11-21 and Rev. 20:4-6. The relationships between Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:4-6 on the one hand, and between 20:7-10 and 20:11-15 on the other hand, conform to the classic pattern of recapitulation, in which a single eschatological event or reality is presented two or more times, in a different visual forms, or, so to speak, from different angles.

This narrative analysis of Rev. 20:1-15 opens up unique forms of evidence that the *annihilation*, the permanent removal, of the devil and all of his followers, is the deeper story beneath the word pictures of 20:9-10. First of all, note how Rev. 20:7-10 is immediately preceded in 20:6 by a reference to “the second death,” to which “the rest of the dead,” which is to say, those kept incarcerated in the underworld for the thousand years, appear to be vulnerable. The expression is repeated in 20:14 and 21:8, and in the latter two verses it interprets the “pool of fire [and sulfur].” So before we ever see any language about everlasting torment, we have already been pre-loaded with the idea of a second—and presumably final—death that will befall the resurrected unrepentant. We’re also confronted first with two *images*: (1) would-be attackers of the faithful being inundated by fire from heaven, and (2) the devil being tossed into, and presumably drowned in, the pool of fire that forms from the fiery downpour. Together, these two elements can hardly avoid suggesting the idea that unrepentant humans and angels will face instant and complete incineration. In addition, we have John’s description of the fire as coming down and “devouring” them, recalling the scenes in 2 Kgs

---

<sup>22</sup> Gr. ἀναβαίνω.

<sup>23</sup> Gr. λίμνη. This word more often means a pool such as a tide pool, or a tidal marsh or a pool left after a rainstorm, than a “lake.”

1:10 and Isa. 26:11. In the midst of these descriptions of engulfing and consuming fire, drowning fire, and the second death, we encounter a picture of torment “day and night, forever and ever” (20:10) for Satan, the beast, and the false prophet—the most dangerous enemies of humanity ever to appear on the earth—*beings holding major responsibility for the demise of the entire human race and of the earth itself*. They, together with their collaborators (Rev. 14:11), merit the strongest language for final and irrevocable destruction within the covers of Scripture: the unique temporally hyperbolic language of Isa. 34:9-10, which assures the faithful that their deadliest enemies *will never, ever arise again*.

We of course saw, in examining the narrative dynamics of the oracle of the destruction of Babylon the Great, that multiple kinds of language and imagery clearly expressed the instantness, the totality, and the permanence of Babylon’s removal by fire. Capping all of these off was the temporally hyperbolic image of ruins smoking for all eternity. All the imagery, from the more or less literal, to the symbolic, to the fantastic and hyperbolic, functioned together harmoniously to convey the firm assurance: Babylon will *never* rise to threaten the faithful again. The same narrative-compositional dynamic, in which multiple forms of description are employed, clearly shows up again in relation to the destruction of the devil and the “rest of the dead” after the thousand years. There is the more or less literal: the second death; there is the less literal and/or the symbolic: the image of a torrent of fire coming down from heaven and devouring the would-be attackers of the Beloved City, and the pool of fire, in which those outside the City’s walls are drowned; and the fantastic and hyperbolic: the image of the devil and his henchmen somehow continuing to drown in the pool of fire forever and ever. There is not only unity and harmony between the internal descriptive elements of the Babylon oracle by itself and the elements of the double presentation of the final judgment by itself, but the two sections also exhibit congruence between them as compositional wholes: they resonate with and are harmonious with one another in their use of words and imagery.<sup>24</sup>

That was a long, long exposition applying Principle 3, which tells us that we should always interpret word pictures in Revelation so that they work harmoniously together with related word pictures in Revelation. Let’s turn now to Principle 4.

#### *Principle 4: Application*

Principle 4 says that any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with non-figurative and interpretive statements that John gives us. We saw in applying Principle 3 just now that John twice interprets, in other words, explains, the pool of fire as “the second death” (20:14; 21:8). Whereas “the pool of fire” is a word picture, “the second death” looks more like straightforward, non-pictorial language. Principle 4 dictates that we rely on the non-pictorial and interpretive information to interpret the material presented in word pictures. The concept of the second death, in other words, should determine how we understand the imagery of the pool of fire, rather than the word picture of the pool of fire determining how we understand the concept of the second death. As we’ve seen above, there is no way to take everything we have here literally. We either take “the second death” as an exceedingly non-literal way of talking about an everlasting and tortured form of resurrected life, or we take “the second death” as one among a number of

---

<sup>24</sup> Does this raise the question of whether the two sections are actually intended to be read as having reference to one and the same eschatological event—namely Christ’s coming in glory? I don’t think that the presence of the same compositional techniques between two sections tells us anything in particular about their relationship on the temporal timeline of the narrative. It’s just a matter of this being the way *everything* in John’s narrative works. For decisive reasons to reject the possibility that Rev. 20:7-10 is narrates the Parousia complex as a recapitulation, see *New Creation Millennialism*, Chapter 3: “Insurmountable Problems with Amillennialism,” pp. 92-106.

clues that invite us to interpret the language of “day and night, forever and ever” non-literally in Rev. 14:11 and 20:10. *Principle 4* recommends the second of these two approaches. Those who opt for the first approach must choose the less literal interpretation over the more literal, and they must be prepared to justify it in the face of a clear and meaningful alternative in the text.

### *Principle 5: Application*

Principle 5 says that any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with the teachings of Jesus above all (since he is the source of the Book of Revelation—see Rev. 1:1), but also with the teachings of the authors of the NT and the Bible in general.

It is well known that when Jesus uses the word “Gehenna” as a way of referring to the end, the final fate, of the unrepentant, he is alluding to Isa. 66:22-24.

<sup>22</sup> “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure... <sup>24</sup> And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

Far from representing a state of everlasting torment applied to individuals in some abstracted space that is separate from creation, biblical Gehenna names a place outside the New Jerusalem of the new creation where the rebellious and unrepentant attempt for the last time to attack the people of God. It is the place where all the forces of deathliness are defeated and burned up completely (Isa. 30:29-33; 66:22-24; see also Isa. 26:10). Jesus appeals to Isaiah 66, and makes it clear that Gehenna is the place where God will destroy both body and soul of his enemies (Mt. 10:28). The author of Hebrews appeals to the consuming fire of Isa. 26:10 as the fate of the stubbornly unrepentant (Heb. 10:27). For the rest of the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament), death is the main concept used to communicate the ultimate destiny of the stubbornly unrepentant. If we interpret Revelation’s multiple images of the final fate of the unrepentant so that they remain compatible with this broad and consistent biblical pattern, we will take the word pictures suggestive of complete incineration as the more literal, and the word pictures of everlasting burning as the less literal.

## Conclusion

The theme of everlasting, “day and night” torment for Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and all those who collaborate with them (Rev. 14:10-11; 19:3; 20:10) resonates very clearly with the central theme of Isaiah 34. There, the picture of never-ending “day and night” smoldering and burning is not literal, but has the function of assuring the faithful that the danger from their deadly enemies, no matter how persistent and how perennial, will at last be completely and permanently removed. This purpose of assurance is clearly carried forward in the everlasting smoking/burning/torment imagery of the Book of Revelation, and any attempt to force the imagery to bear more meaning, such as literal everlasting toxic burning, not only clashes with the promise of a new creation in which God’s life permeates all of creation, but contravenes every one of the five solid principles for discerning when to take things literally in the Book of Revelation.

## Afterword

More than the battle of the prooftexts—understanding eschatology, “the last things,” is about learning from biblical authors how to read their texts. And one biblical author that has been sorely ignored in the matter of the last things is the prophet Isaiah. People just take their literalistic notions of NT symbolism and slap them onto Isaiah and he does not get heard. He in fact has been

given the deepest revelation as to God's thinking about the final perdition of the lost. In Exod. 33:18-19, when Moses asks God, "Show me your glory, I pray," God agrees to do it. He says to Moses, "'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, The One Who Is, in your presence.' The next morning, God appears to Moses and announces his name, his own self-description: "The One Who Is! The One Who Is—a God compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin." The psalmist affirms that this is God's character in relation to every being he creates (Ps. 145:8-9). It is this God, with this fundamental character, whom we see having a conversation with those who are about to lose their lives forever, on the day when God slays the devil, that old dragon, the slippery serpent:

Isa. 27:2-5

<sup>2</sup> In that day—Sing about the fruitful vineyard!  
<sup>3</sup> I, The One Who Is, watch over it;  
    I water it continually.  
I guard it day and night  
    so that no one may harm it.  
<sup>4</sup> I have no wrath in me—  
Will someone bring me briers and thorns in battle?  
I would go to them and set them all on fire.  
<sup>5</sup> Instead, let them come to me for refuge!  
Let them make peace with me!  
Let them make peace with me!

To the very last second, God remains ready to reconcile with those who repent. There is only one reason why those created to be God's children must ultimately lose their lives, and that lies in them:

Isa. 57:19-21

Peace, peace, to those far and near,"  
    says the One Who Is. "And I will heal them."  
20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea,  
    which cannot rest,  
    whose waves cast up mire and mud.  
21 "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."