

Rev the Book 2012 Part Two: Exposition
Lesson 118 *A Fruitful Insight/Part I of A Reflection*
Wed. July 31, 2013 *Rev the Book In Toto*

This Message characterizes much of the essence and spirit of Rev the Book in toto:

For many years I was a diehard *pre-millennial dispensationalist*. With the 21st century and a new millennium, however, my position underwent a significant overhaul. This renovation began, not by the persuasion of men, but by an insight, an internal discovery as to the real identity of *the People of God*.

I received this insight while reading and considering *The Parable of the Vineyard Owner and His Son* in Mark 12:1-9, with its parallel in Matthew 21:33-43. The *vineyard*, forfeited by “the wicked tenants,” was to be given to “others.” These *others* were more clearly identified by Jesus in Matthew 21:43, when He said to *the elders and the chief priests*, “I’m telling you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and give to a nation producing its fruit.” The “others” are also called *a nation* [ἔθνη *ethne*] or “a people.” The question arose in my mind, “Who are these *others*— this *people* who will bring forth the fruit of the kingdom of God?” It seems clear that by this parable Jesus was depicting His *Father* as the *Vineyard Owner* and *Jesus Himself* as the Owner’s *Son* and the *Heir of the vineyard*, i.e., of *the kingdom of God*. Those *tenants* who persistently refused to bring *the Owner* the portion of produce of the vineyard as “rent,” and who abused *the “slaves” or the couriers* of the Owner who were sent to them to receive the produce— these same *wicked tenant farmers*, who eventually conspired to *kill the Son* and take over the vineyard for themselves, were clearly the religious leaders who were about to call for the crucifixion of Jesus the Son of God and their rightful Messiah, i.e., *the Christ, the Son of God* (per John 20:31).

Then, in Matthew’s version, from their own lips *the leaders and chief-priests*, pronounced the judgment that was most fitting for the wicked tenants. The vineyard Owner “...will utterly destroy those horrible men,” they told Him, “and lease his vineyard to *others* who will give him his produce at the harvest.” Jesus then replied to their words as we have already said, by saying, “I’m telling you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to *a nation producing its fruit* (Matthew 21:43).” Again, the question arose in me as if arising from Another in me, “Who are these *others*?”

This is one parable in which all the players are clearly identified. *The Owner* is *God the Father*. The many *slaves whom the Owner sends* to the tenants are *the Prophets*, whom the tenant farmers abuse, beat and even kill. The *tenants* are the *people who claim falsely to have the right of ownership of the vineyard*, whose claim to be “the People of God” is false. *The Son* whom they conspire to kill and drag outside of the vineyard is *Jesus the Christ the Son of God*. *The others*, then, have to be *a people to whom the kingdom of God is to be given* and who, having a rightful claim to it, *will bring produce the fruit of that kingdom—love, joy, peace* etc. by the power of the same Spirit who empowered the Owner’s slaves and who sustained the Owner’s Son. My first answer to the question, “Who are these *others*?” was “the Gentiles.” But almost immediately, I saw that this answer was unsatisfactory. All of my study of the Scriptures argued against a *replacement* of “the Jews” by “the Gentiles” as God’s own People. No, the *others* had to be a people composed of *both Jews and Gentiles* who would bring forth the fruit of the Vineyard (i.e.,

the Kingdom of God) and accordingly be considered *worthy* of the kingdom of God. These “others” had to be “the Israel of God,” a people from all nations—not excluding Israel—who were properly disposed to *the Vineyard Owner* and properly welcoming of *His Son*.

Now, how does this change the dispensational perspective? This is how: The basis of pre-millennial dispensationalism, as I held it, was a distinction between “the Church” and “Israel,” a distinction that was regarded as a result of “rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).” But the fact that *the vineyard—or the kingdom of God—* was to be given to “others” or to “another people” was *not a prediction that the Kingdom would be given to “the Church” and taken away from “Israel.”* Rather, it was to be *given to others* who are *the true Israel*—whether Jews or Gentiles— and *taken from* those who *claimed, wrongly*, to be Israel or God’s true People based on the sandy foundation of hereditary descent from Abraham *and/or* by adherence to the letter of the Torah (Romans 2:28-29), who regardless of their avid study of the Scriptures, did not come to the Son to *have life*, the Son of whom all the Scriptures testify (John 5:39-40 *cp.* Luke 24:26-27; 44-45; Rev 19:10).

The distinction that the Scriptures make is not a distinction between “Israel and the Church.” It is a distinction between *inauthentic* or *merely* ethnic or ritual Israel and *authentic* Israel, the *worshippers of God in Spirit and in truth* whom *the Father* still seeks (John 4:23). An insight from God may arise, then from an inquiry of which He Himself is the First Mover. And insights create *differentiations of the consciousness*. They change a man. They re-form conceptions, they transform perspectives, they afford new standpoints from which to view a wider horizon than that which is afforded by the *closed systems* and “narrow categories” of men. They also provoke *conversions* by which false or misleading views are discarded and new and truthful views are assimilated and seep into the texture of the mind.

In my case an insight of which the Spirit was the First Mover, caused a conversion from a strong but inadequate viewpoint of men to a wider horizon afforded by *the opening of the mind to understand the Scriptures more fully*. Jesus still opens *the minds* of His disciples to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). He still frees us from the narrow categories of men and from the pseudo-orthodoxy that results from making men the measure of the truth. Such a way of thinking in which men are made the standard of the truth all too often robs people from the liberating truth that is embodied and Personified in Jesus (John 8:31-32, 36; 14:6; Ephesians 4:21).

The study of *the Israel of God* (Galatians 6:16) is not, finally, an *ecclesiological* doctrine. Nor is it, in the final analysis, an *eschatological* doctrine. The theme of *the Israel of God* does indeed embrace the idea of the distinctive People of God—His *Ekklesia*—the *Ekklesia* (Church) that is built by Jesus (Matthew 16:18), against which *the gates of Hades will never prevail*. And this theme has *eschatological* overtones in that this *people* is *the People of the Eschaton*, the People of God (1 Peter 2:10) who *inherit the kingdom of God* in its final culminative form in *a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness* is the order of the day and the love of God fully integrates the redeemed creation. *But, the Israel of God* in its purest sense is a *Christological* doctrine; and because it is essentially Christological it is *soteriological*. For the Lord Jesus Christ is our Lord and *SAVIOR* (Greek: σωτήρ *soter*), Jesus Christ, “to Whom belongs the glory both now and to the

day of eternity (2 Peter 3:18).” Jesus is *the Savior of the world* (John 4:42), *the Savior of all mankind, especially those who believe* (1 Timothy 4:10). *The Israel of God* is a *Christological* doctrine because the true, the real Israel of God is fully and ideally embodied and exemplified in the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth *a.k.a.* the Son of Man, who since the moment of His Incarnation as *the Ensarkos Logos—the Word made flesh*—is both *the God of Israel* and the “Inclusive Representative” as of God’s Israel, “the Only faithful Israelite (Galatians 2:20; Rev 1:5; 3:14),” who is faithful *for* and faithful *in* and faithful *on behalf of* all Israel, the People of Yahweh’s elective love (Rev 3:9). *The Israel of God*, then, in the present epoch, are all the people of faith (Galatians 3:9; 6:10, those who have believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God) who are incorporated into Christ Jesus, i.e., made *His Body*. He embodies them all. They, corporately and collectively, are *Christ* (1 Corinthians 12:12). *Christ is all* and He is *in them all* (Colossians 3:11). They are an integrated entity in which “Jew,” “Gentile,” “slave,” “free-born,” “male,” “female,”— and we may add *lower class, middle class, upper class, rich, poor, black, white, yellow, brown, red*— are each and every one, *inconsequential labels*, labels that are *washed off* in the *bath of regeneration* (Titus 3:5-6) and the torrent of *the love of God poured out into their hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given* equally and fully to all (Romans 5:5; cf. Ezekiel 36:27 *icw* Jeremiah 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-29; Acts chapters 2, 10 *et al*). They are *labels*, I say, that are washed off by the washing of the Word (John 15:3 Ephesians 5:26). Once you may have even been a thief, a liar, a whore, a drunk, a pervert, a junkie, a self-righteous snob. Once maybe we were greedy people, drunkards, revilers, or swindlers, the kind of people that “don’t inherit the kingdom of God,” the kind of people that you will never find walking the golden streets of the New Jerusalem, the capital of a spectacularly renovated universe in which the omnipotence of God will have reversed the seemingly inexorable march of entropy. But you were *washed*, you were *sanctified*, you were *justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*. Because when you believed that Jesus is who God says He is in the Scriptures which bear testimony to Him, then you were *washed*, then you were *justified*, then you were *made holy* by the imperative and eternal command of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Now this distinction between the Israel of God *who walk according to the rule* (Galatians 6:2, 16) of non-discriminating, integrating love and who *glory only in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* and not in rituals like *circumcision* or *the lack of it*—(see Galatians 5:6; 6:15)—this distinction, I say, between *the Israel of God* and *Israel merely after the flesh who independently from* and apart from faith (1 Corinthians 10:18; Jude 1:5) have made themselves God’s people, is not a distinction that vindicates “the Church” and damns “ethnic” or “national” Israel. Not by a long shot! For *the branches of the olive tree that have been broken off by unbelief* the Scriptural analogy in Romans 11, can be as reasonably *grafted back into the cultivated olive tree* (true Israel) when their unbelief stops (Romans 11:23), as *branches of a wild olive tree* (believing Gentiles) can be *grafted on* to the cultivated (by God) olive tree. Indeed, it is solely by *mercy* that Gentiles or Jews are the People of God (1 Peter 2:10; Galatians 6:16; Titus 3:5; Ephesians 2:4-15). *Mercy makes us the People of God*. And it is God’s expressed intent *to have mercy on all* (Romans 11:32).

Rev the Book 2012 Part Two: Exposition

Lesson 119 *The Field of Unknowing Wonder/ Part II of A Reflection*

Thu. Aug. 1, 2013 *Rev the Book In Toto*

The unspoken “universalism” that appears to be in Paul’s reasoning in Romans 11 is not an outright declaration of “universal salvation” of all mankind *per se*. But the intent of God “to show mercy to all (Romans 11:32)” certainly highlights the *universal saving significance* of His Son, Jesus Christ. And *the Gospel*, according to Paul in the introductory verses in Romans, is “the Gospel of God... about His Son (Romans 1:1-3).” It is because of His Son, Jesus Christ, that “we await the mercy of God to incorruptible and immortal everlasting bodily life (Jude 1:21).”

The Scripture does not hold back at all when it declares His *universal saving significance* (Mark 10:45 + Matthew 20:28 *cp.* 1 Timothy 2:1-6; 4:10; Hebrews 2:9 *cp.* John 1:29; 4:42; 1 John 2:1-2; 2 Peter 2:1). *But the Scripture does restrain itself from declaring unequivocally and unambiguously that all mankind—every person will eventually be saved.* This is not to say that a case cannot be made for “universal salvation” from the Scriptures, especially when one discovers their deepest meaning, when one’s mind is thoroughly *opened up* by Christ in the Spirit *to understand* them (Luke 24:45). That is why we must **listen** all the more attentively to the Spirit in a day when this question has been brought to the fore, even from the lips of the Roman Catholic Pope. Nor does this mean that we cannot take a stand for universal salvation when we will have thoroughly considered the comprehensive counsel of the Word and the theme of the *universal saving significance of Jesus Christ*, especially with regard to His suffering and death on the Cross.

That God’s willingness to save all mankind is the “determined” or merely the “desired” will of God is a debatable question, especially given the various nuances of meaning attached to words like θέλει *thelei* (1 Timothy 2:4). Karl Barth was, I think, in his right mind when he said, in essence, that, in his view, the Bible does not say explicitly that all men will be saved; nor does it say explicitly that some will ultimately be lost.

That there is a judgment to come is explicitly stated by the Bible. The question is whether the judgment of God on the ungodly and the unbeliever—the rejecter of the Gospel—is a judgment that is finally *destructive* and *punitive* or one that is *transformative*? Or is it both? *Fudge* and others think the judgment will be *annihilating*, reasoning from such passages as Matthew 10:28. Ethelbert Stauffer concluded that God’s judgment is to be “remedial” or curative. Still others say that it is to be a *purifying* judgment. Wolfhart Pannenberg thinks that “the scales tip” that way, reasoning especially from a broader interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 than those who consider the passage only to be for believers. Or, is it all of these? Jurgen Moltmann, who has done his systematic theological homework, has said that it will be *transformative*. He, along with Stauffer, seems to be rather decidedly universalist.

I believe that there is an answer to this question and that it will come clearly to those whose minds are opened to the Reality of Jesus Christ and His suffering and death on the Cross, and that it will be an insight that is not only from *exegesis* but from a Spirit-taught combination of *theology and exegesis*. That this question is such an evidently difficult one seems to demand, first, that we **be very reflective** about it. Secondly, it demands a

thorough **meditation** on the nature and essence of God. Thirdly, if God hasn't made an explicit statement about it, and at the same time has put *wonder* in us about it, He must desire that we continue to **inquire** about it with the **rational** and **intellective** faculties that He has graced us with as *bearers* and potential *revealers* of *His image*. And, inquiring, reflecting, ruminating is to be done *responsibly, diligently, reverently, lovingly*.

Again, the answer must be found in *the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. For *by the blood of His cross*, says Colossians 1:20 God is to *reconcile everything to Himself, whether things on earth or in heaven*. In this connection, Moltmann quotes a part of Luther's "moving 'Sermon on preparing for death' of 1519" (appearing in Elizabethan language) in which Luther said:

Thou must look upon hell and the eternity of torment, and election, too, not in thyself, not in themselves, not in those who are damned, nor shouldst thou trouble thyself about the many in the whole world who are not chosen...Look upon the heavenly picture of Christ who for thy sake descended into hell and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned, as he said on the cross, 'O my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' See, in that picture thy hell is conquered, and thy uncertain election made sure...Seek thyself only in Christ and not in thyself, so wilt thou eternally find thyself in him..."¹

Moltmann says, "Pannenberg thinks that Christ's 'descent into hell' is a way of expressing the universal significance of Jesus' accursed death, vicariously suffered."² Moltmann himself wrote with emphasis (in *italic font*):

*The true Christian foundation for the hope of universal salvation is the theology of the cross, and the realistic consequence of the theology of the cross can only be the restoration of all things.*³

We certainly have the right to ask the question: *Did Jesus Himself experience the damnation that threatens all men?* And, even if we could say "Yes" to this, what must we make of statements regarding *the wrath of God that is to come*, evidently *eschatologically*, on *the practitioners* (Galatians 5:19-21) of *unrighteousness* (Colossians 3:5-8)? What, indeed, must we make of *the present unveiling of the wrath of God* (Romans 1:18-32) *on all ungodliness and the unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness*? And how shall we interpret Jesus words in John 5:28-29 about the *resurrection to condemnation of the unrighteous* and the words of *Rev the Book* about *the second death and the lake of fire* (Rev 20:11-15)? Is it an oversimplification to say that the only *name not found written in the book of life* is Jesus' Name, and that He endured that *second death* for all?

I think that we must recall *the darkness* (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44) that descended over the earth while Jesus was *hanging, accursed, on the tree* (Deuteronomy 21:23 cf. Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24). Whatever we claim to know about the Cross and the dying and death of Jesus our Savior, there is certainly much more that we cannot claim to know—much that we *cannot* yet know—much that we *may never know*.

At any rate, we are left believing in the efficacy of His finished work (John 19:28, 30; Hebrews 2:9; 10:10-14), *glorying* in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which we

were crucified to this old world (Galatians 6:14) and to our old man (Romans 6:6; Colossians 3:3, 9).

We are left clinging intently *to hope*, to *the confident expectation* of the inevitable event of His return *with salvation to those who wait for Him* (Hebrews 9:28 *cp.* Philippians 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Titus 2:13; Rev 1:7; 22:12). And we are left with *love*, indiscriminating love for all mankind (Matthew 5:45-48; 1 Thessalonians 3:12) that contains *God's own eternal desire that all men be saved and come to the special transcendent knowledge of the truth* (1 Timothy 2:3-4) that is embodied in Jesus (John 14:6; Ephesians 4:21), in whom all Reality is summed up.

The Spirit and the Bride speak with *one voice*—in prayer that the *Lord Jesus* will *come quickly* (1 Corinthians 16:22 *cp.* 1 Corinthians 12:3; Rev 22:20). And *the Spirit and the Bride* speak with *one appeal* in the invitation *to any who have thirst to come and drink freely of the water of life* (Rev 22:17 *cp.* John 4:14; 7:37-39).

I urge caution on those who would come too hastily to a conclusion in the matter of “universal salvation.” To conclude too hastily is to close the door on *wonder*—wonder which is *the basis of inquiry*. If David desired but “one thing” from Yahweh: “to dwell in the Lord’s house all the days of his life, gazing on the beauty of the YAHWEH and seeking [i.e., *inquiring* of] Him in His temple,” then should we not consider that all the days of our sojourn on this old earth should be spent in *inquiring*, and that all the answers will not have been secured by us when we exhale our last earthly breath?

On some things, be content to wonder. God will do *far beyond what we can ask or imagine* (Ephesians 3:20). That is His *forte*. None of us knows exactly what that will “look like” on the eternal day (2 Peter 3:18b). Men’s closed systems and “narrow categories” do not hold the answers to the heart’s deepest questions. But God holds them. *All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are indeed contained and concealed in Christ* (Ephesians 3:8; Colossians 2:2-3). When the disciples asked Jesus if God was about to restore the kingdom of God to true Israel, Jesus replied that it was not for them *to know the times and seasons that the Father reserved to Himself*. (These are “the hidden things that belong to Yahweh, our God”—Deuteronomy 29:29). Rather, they were to turn their attention to the commission that they *received to be witnesses to Him in all the earth* by the Divine power that they would receive when the Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:5-8 *cp.* Rev 11:3).

We too have received the Spirit (James 4:5; 1 John 2:20, 27). We too are witnesses of Christ Jesus. We are to *go fishing* and not to keep worrying *how many fish will be caught* or *whether all the fish in the sea will be caught by the end of the day*. I choose, for now, to leave that to God. But I will not cease my inquiry. In the meantime the things that we have received by tradition from the Lord through His slaves the prophets and His apostles (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; Jude 1:17; Hebrews 2:1-4) we know for certain (2 Peter 1:16-21). The things that God chooses to remain known only to Him stay shrouded in mystery. It is not wrong to wonder about those things. Indeed it is good to wonder. For without wonder we would never inquire; and without inquiring we would never learn about Him. Jesus performed many miracles that defied the human imagination. He did so to cause *wonder* (John 5:20). It is not wrong to wonder. *It is, I think, wrong to conclude finally about things that God has not explicitly and unequivocally disclosed to us*. For that is to be wise in one’s own estimation (Romans 11:25), which reveals that one

is not wise at all. It is to be ignorant of the fact that God reserves, for now, a body of knowledge to Himself, which He may yet reveal to us, even in the course of our study of *Rev the Book*, or that He may not reveal until *we know even as we are known*.

There are some things that we will come to learn in the future that we are presently not able to bear (see John 16:12; 1 Corinthians 2:5-7; 3:1-3). It will take the building of more spiritual capacity so that we will not be reckless and wrong-headed with new found information for which we haven't (yet) the proper aptitude.

This reflection should lead us back to that which we *do* know and to that of which we have been *fully assured* (Romans 8:38-39; 2 Timothy 3:14; 2 Peter 1:19). As of right now, I do not know with virtually unconditional certainty if every human being will eventually be saved. I *do* know that *Jesus, by the grace of God, tasted death for every human being*. I do *not* know all that God knows—God who is present even now to the future which has yet to come upon us. I *do* know that any and all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, has the life of the future age NOW and that they will continue to have it into the endless ages to come (John 20:31; Ephesians 2:7-9).

In *the field of unknowing wonder* we come to know with more certainty, with more comforting assurance, with more of a consoling context, *the things that we have received and have heard* (Rev 3:3) and have *believed*. In the field of unknowing wonder we, the Israel of God, paradoxically become immovable in that of which we have been persuaded. We have cognitive invincibility, an immovable assurance in *God's love in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:35) from which we can never be separated.

¹ Moltmann, Jurgen, *The Coming of God : Christian Eschatology*, Fortress Press (paperback ed.) 2004. Translated by Margaret Kohl from the German 1996 ©, p. 253.

² Ibid. p. 251.

³ Ibid. p. 252, see note 240, Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man*, 1968, pp. 269 ff.