

The main body of Revelation is built around four cycles of judgments: seven seals (6:1-8:5), seven trumpets (8:2,6-11:19), the “unnumbered visions” (12:1-15:4) and the seven bowls (15:1,5-16:21). As we’ve seen, each of these sections describes realities that exist between the first and second comings of Jesus. Furthermore, each section concludes with scenes of final judgment and/or final salvation. (seals - 6:12-17; 7:9-17; 8:1,3-5; trumpets - 11:15-19; unnumbered visions - 14:1-20; bowls - 16:17-21). So rather than giving a tight chronological sequence, the visions narrate similar events and realities, but with different emphases and imagery. And all the visionary cycles end with glimpses of the consummation of history in ultimate wrath and redemption.

Therefore, Revelation 15:1-4 likely includes *both* images of unfolding judgment (the bowls) and completed judgment (the song by the sea). The two images are interlaced to create a kind of literary “hinge” that transitions the reader from one cycle to the next. The introduction of the angels (15:1) launches the cycle of bowl judgments (chapter 16), and the song by the sea (15:2-4) concludes the unnumbered visions (chapters 12-14). The fact that both the bowl judgments and the song by the sea allude to the exodus from Egypt creates a thematic unity in the transition. A similar interlaced transition occurs between the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments (see 8:1-5).

## Revelation 15:1-4 Sermon Notes

### The Interlocking Nature of Revelation’s Visionary Cycles

How should we understand the relationship of the angels with the seven plague bowls (Revelation 15:1,5-8) to the vision of those who overcome singing by the sea (15:2-4)? The angels with the bowls appear to pouring out plagues leading up to the final judgment, and yet the vision and song of the overcomers by the sea seems to indicate that the final judgment has come and victory is accomplished. So is 15:1-8 a description of final judgment unfolding, or already accomplished and celebrated?

This tension is more evident when one considers that both the bowl plagues and the song by the sea allude back to the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Revelation’s bowl plagues are modeled on the exodus plagues, and the “song of Moses” that Revelation’s overcomers sing is an explicit allusion to the Israelites standing on the shore, victorious over Pharaoh after the Red Sea crossing. The plagues lead up to Egypt’s final destruction, and the Red Sea crossing seals Egypt’s final destruction. So again, based on this analogy, does 15:1-8 depict judgment progressing (plagues) or completed (victory by the sea)?

This challenge only exists if one assumes that Revelation has a strictly chronological structure. However, when we remember that Revelation follows a repetitive, cyclical pattern, the text makes becomes clearer.