

Universalism: *Either the best news ever or a sad and dangerous delusion?*

Christianity has many problems. Since the separation of the Gentile Church from its Jewish brethren around the years 70-110 CE, Christianity lost its rudder, namely The TaNaK (Old Testament) and its custodians, the Jewish people, and instead became a melting pot of pagan ideas and gods. It also lost the ability to correctly read its own core and even took to editing of the New Testament to promote the introduction and establishment of the pagan preferences of its pagan leaders¹.

Fast forward to today and we see many sincere Christians trying to address the contradictions and falsehoods that now riddle this once so powerful movement of God. Many Christians acknowledge the contradictions of the Apostles letters with themselves, their contradictions with the Gospel accounts; the contradictions especially of the Gospel of John with the Torah; that is, the Books of Moses, and so on.

I don't believe these contradictions existed at all when these books and letters were first penned. However, there have many clear and verifiable corruptions of the New Testament writings over the last 1900+ years, and I would suggest a great deal more that are not easily discerned or proven.

The outcome and impact of these contradictions and distortions can be seen in the rise of over 38,000 denominations; the establishment of new movements such as the Emergent Church; and various other 'answers'.

Amongst the possible answers to these apparent contradictions and challenges is 'Universalism'², the belief that all people alive today and that ever lived will ultimately find salvation (or already have it) and will all one day live life eternal.

If this doctrine is true then it could be considered the best news that most of humanity could ever hear. This would then provide the opportunity to live forever without any need to believe anything, or to act in any proscribed manner. An amazing, and free 'get out of jail card'!

Of course the implication in this is that because this gift appears to require nothing of those who receive it, namely humanity, it would appear that anyone may act without fear of consequence³, and thus succumb to any and all lusts that they may have. If this is true, then it offers an open door to licentiousness, and this would seem to be in direct conflict with the Apostle Pauls exhortation in Romans: *"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness."* (Romans 6:12-13). Peter also warns against deception that encourages the lusts of the flesh: *"For, uttering great swelling words of emptiness, they entice in the lusts of the flesh, by licentiousness, those who are indeed escaping from those who live in error; promising them liberty, while they themselves are bondservants of corruption; for a man is brought into bondage by whoever overcomes him."* (2 Peter 2:18)

Why has the doctrine of Universalism become a popular 'new way' amongst some in the Gentile Church?

Partly this has occurred thanks to a new player who has emerged. He is Rob Bell, a very well known Pastor and member of the 'Emergent Church'. Rob Bell has now written a book, "Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived". This book asks many questions of traditional Christianity and in some ways argues for the doctrine of Universalism. From reading some reviews of his book it is my understanding that Rob Bell is not entirely sure about Universalism and therefore sees himself as a 'hopeful Universalist'.

Rob Bell does ask an important question, namely: "Will God's grace and love eventually compel all to turn to him or not?" Part of his answer appears to be an argument for a great many second chances. I will address this option as part of my response to Universalism.

¹ This is a huge and significant issue in itself, so I will leave for another time, as I don't wish it to overshadow the discussion on Universalism.

² Wikipedia definition: *"Christian Universalists ... (teach) that God (will) grant all human beings salvation ... or ... that all are already saved, including those of other faiths."*

³ Seems to seriously challenge the Apostle Pauls cry to 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling'. (Phil 2:12 & Ps 2:11)

⁴ Wikipedia definition: *"Derived from the TaNaK (is that God's justice is generally in the form of treasure for measure - see <http://www.circumcisedheart.com.au/measureformeasure.pdf>)"*

⁵ Seems to seriously challenge the Apostle Pauls cry to 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling'. (Phil 2:12 & Ps 2:11)

I am convinced however, that if Pastors and other Christians like Rob Bell properly understood the Hebraic nature of the Bible, both the TaNaK and the New Testament, the doctrine of Universalism would never have entered their heads. This doctrine is, in part, an attempt at a solution to a problem, which arises as an implication of the false doctrine of continuous punishment for the unrepentant in Hell.

The obvious implication arrives from the basic sense of justice and love that God has given mankind. Many who consider this doctrine find it impossible to imagine that a just and loving God would condemn people to a continuous eternity of extreme pain and suffering in the 'fires' of Hell regardless of their sins. Such a God seems cruel and therefore unloving to say the least. He also seems unjust as no sin by a 'mortal man', however evil is eternal. That is, if the punishment should fit the crime in some way, then an everlasting punishment disproportionate to any sin, which because of the mortal nature of man must be limited in time and impact, seems lacking in appropriate justice⁴.

There are of course a number of possible answers to this apparent inconsistency. I will not address all these 'solutions' except to say that I believe that the Bible essentially teaches the doctrine of annihilation, that is that the unrepentant will be punished on the Day of Judgement, but that that punishment is limited in time and scope and after it these 'unrepentant sinners' simply cease to exist.

Regardless of the full and biblical answer to this question, the issue being addressed here is that Universalism appears to have only become a doctrine of consideration because of the invalid acceptance by the 'church' of the false doctrine of 'eternal punishment' as outlined above.

I am sure therefore that many who seek in Universalism the solution to the contradictions or injustices they see, are led here by what they perceive as a rational and logical analysis of Scripture. I suspect though that many are also led to this doctrine by a fervent desire to find a way for their 'lost' family members or friends to join them in eternity or even to find a way to eternity that does not require the development of such characters traits as repentance, discipline, obedience and justice.

Many appear to see Universalism as the natural consequence of the fact that God is love and that His love, being all-powerful, must overcome all obstacles and 'win' every human being into His Kingdom. This certainly appears to be the thinking of Rob Bell and other Universalists I have debated this doctrine with.

Instead, I will endeavour to elucidate below how I believe Universalism is a doctrine that, fully embraced means people can actually turn their back on God, and on responsibility, obedience and faithfulness and instead follow whatever hedonistic desires there fleshly heart wishes. Rather than being the pinnacle approach of a loving God; and the supreme testimony for those who sincerely love God, Universalism could then also be the hope of fools; the hope of the unrepentant, and selfish denier of the Holy God.

Understanding God:

God is a just God. Some of the scriptures that declare this are:

Isaiah 30:18 *"For the LORD is a God of justice ...".* Isaiah 61:8 *"For I the LORD love justice,"*

Gen 18:19 *"... (the) way of the LORD, (is) to do righteousness⁵ and justice".*

Deut 10: 17-18 *"For ADONAI your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awesome God, who has no favorites and accepts no bribes. He secures justice for the orphan and the widow; he loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing.*

Deut 32:4 *"The Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice; A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, Just and right is He."*

2 Samuel 8:15 *"And David reigned over all Israel; and David executed justice and righteousness unto all his people."*

David was a man after God's own heart - 1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22, and we see him here described as being a man of justice and righteousness. Thus, this is further confirmation that justice and righteousness are central attributes of God.

1 Kings 3:9-12, 28 *"Therefore, give your servant an understanding heart able to administer justice to your people, so that I can discern between good and bad - for who is equal to judging this great people of yours?" What Solomon had said in making this request pleased Adonai. God said to him, "Because you have made this request instead of asking long life or riches for yourself, or your enemies' death, but rather asked for yourself understanding to discern justice; I am doing what*

⁴ A teaching of Judaism, derived from the TaNaK is that God's justice is generally in the form of 'measure for measure' - see <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/measureformeasure.pdf>

⁵ Righteousness, in English this word is derived from 'right' and 'wise' and in Hebrew 'tzedakah' meaning righteousness, justice or fairness. To be right is to be true, to act with truth. It also is used to refer to 'charity', that is to supporting the poor - this can be seen in the Deuteronomy 10 reference as well.

you requested. I am giving you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has never been anyone like you, nor will there ever again be anyone like you. ... All Isra'el heard of the decision the king had made and held the king in awe, for they saw that God's wisdom was in him, enabling him to render justice properly."

Isaiah 1:27-28 *"Zion shall be redeemed with justice, And they that return of her with righteousness. But the destruction of the transgressors and the sinners shall be together, And they that forsake the LORD shall be consumed."*

Luke 11:41-43 *"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, **and pass by justice and the love of God.** These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."*

It should be clear from a little reflection upon these scriptures that God is a God of justice and righteousness or mercy.

In fact, Judaism has always maintained from its understanding of the TaNaK, that God's justice is tempered by mercy, with these two qualities perfectly balanced. Of the two names of God most commonly used in the TaNaK, one refers to his quality of justice and the other to his quality of mercy. The two names were used together in the story of Creation, showing that the world was created with both justice and mercy⁶.

With God's justice comes his righteousness. With his justice comes his mercy. Thus God's love cannot be divorced from his justice.

As parents we learn that exercising love towards our children without justice, leads only to rebellion. If we don't teach them that there are consequences to wrong actions; if we only love them and never discipline them, they reject our love and instead see it as indifference. Yes, we need to be empathetic in allowing the consequences of their actions to play out, but if we truly love them and wish them to grow, we know that consequences and discipline are needed for learning to occur. Yeshua himself learned obedience as a child. (Luke 2:51-52 *"So he went with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. But his mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Yeshua grew both in wisdom and in stature, gaining favor both with other people and with God."*

It is interesting and enlightening to observe that people like Rob Bell may use the thought that, a man like Mahatma Gandhi not being in 'heaven' but in 'hell' (based on typical Christian understanding), as an idea that invokes a sense of injustice in the listener or reader. Ron Bell appears to try to invoke this sense of injustice in order to offer Universalism as a more just belief.

However, this very argument shows a lack of knowledge of what is meant by justice and the justice of the Almighty. Even in two of the scriptures quoted above, namely Isaiah 1:27-28 and Luke 11:41-43, we see that there are consequences to rejecting God's way and that these consequences can be fixed and permanent (if sinners/transgressors are destroyed and consumed, normal language and contextual usage informs us that this is a permanent state of affairs).

To delve deeper into the justice of God and what it means in this context let us turn to the book of Amos.

Firstly, Amos as a prophet sent by God, was a man apparently unmoved by the shocking doom he was obliged to pronounce, but a man so loyal to the truth and against error that he saw the justice in the prophecies he was given.

Amos presents God as a God of justice. He spoke to a nation and people who, for the great part, thought their relationship with God was based on religious observance more than on ethical living. It was a time when the ethics of the Decalogue, the 10 Words had somehow lost their primacy.

Amos declares that as righteousness is a vital element in God's character, God will not only demand it in those who profess to be his followers, but also will enforce the demand. Amos declares that sacrifices and offerings in and of themselves are not enough. God demands ethical behaviour (see Amos 2:6-8, 3:10, 4:1, 5:7,10-15,24, 6:1-6,12, 8:4). It is a demand for justice, which, in its simplest and most natural form, includes honesty, integrity, purity, and moral compassion or mercy.

This is not legal justice as it demands the utmost consideration of the poor and weak. It is moral justice. Amos promises life and prosperity (Amos 5:4 *"For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live"*) to those who meet this demand, while all disaster is due to the wrath of Yahweh against those who fall short of this requirement (Amos 3:6 *Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?*).

The sentence of destruction, that Amos brought was not wholly unconditional. Amos pointed out a way of escape, a that was via repentance. This can be seen also in Isaiah 1:27-28 *"Zion shall be redeemed with justice, **And they that return of her***

⁶ For more on this point see <http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/12/27/les-miserables-reconciling-gods-attribute-of-justice-with-mercy/>

with righteousness. But the destruction of the transgressors and the sinners shall be together, And they that forsake the LORD shall be consumed."

Redemption only comes after repentance. Repentance means to return to God. Only some, even only some of Israel choose to return.

This is a fact of the nature of mankind, both on a spiritual and physical level. We see the physical reality in the return from Babylonian exile, and from the worldwide exile in 1948. There were estimated to be around a million Jews living in the Babylonian empire, yet only 42,000 returned — only about 5% of those that went into exile 70 years earlier went back. The remaining 95% remained in Babylon. The same thing happened in 1948 when the state of Israel was declared. There were about 12 million Jews in the world at that time and only 600,000 or some 5% settled the land. The rest, around 95% preferred to stay in exile.

Note here that if God is to exercise his mercy along with his justice, then repentance is needed. That is, God does not do it all; God never forces or coerces anyone to return to him. He does though, always offer the choice why there is still breath in our bodies.

We have been considering the justice of God and are investigating it to better appreciate it's place in the love of God. Part of the question asked by Universalism is 'does the love of God overwhelm his justice?'. This question is probably better phrased as 'does the mercy and grace of God overwhelm his justice?'

If we consider the definition of justice, we will see that part of this definition is the administration of punishment and reward. There is therefore a sense in which justice is the fair or equitable outcome of our actions. If good, then proper justice brings reward; if bad then justice brings punishment.

Immediately, you may respond with 'what about grace?'. Grace, or 'unmerited favour' can mean that we get reward even when we don't deserve it. For example, we read in scripture that *'... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, (how) much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.* (Romans 5:8-10)

Without entering the minefield of issues that Romans 5 can bring out, it may be seen here that God's grace offers a way, it offers reconciliation, but we still need to respond to it. This response is what the Apostle Paul is referring to when he states that 'we are saved by his (Yeshua's) life'.

As I have already indicated, wherever we find God's justice we tend to see his mercy at work as well. It is through the mercy of God that we are granted grace. Grace does not remove God's justice but as Amos and Isaiah (see 1:27-28 above) indicate, God's grace allows us to perform repentance (to return – teshuva).

It may be that there is some degree of dynamic tension between justice and mercy, at least as we view these attributes of God. We also experience the dilemma of these two seemingly contradictory approaches in our role as parents. Perhaps, it is of benefit if you are a parent, to consider times when you have struggled to execute justice after one of your children has been involved in some misdemeanour. You have instead been half-hearted with the justice and only wanted to show mercy or grace (with our own children, displaying mercy generally seems the easier path!). If you have experienced this challenge a few times you may also have discovered that first exercising justice before displaying grace or mercy, has always been of greater benefit to your child and especially to enhancing your relationship with them. It also has the added benefit of developing their character and fortitude.

Some may argue that God's grace is so great that his justice and righteousness must somehow be subservient to his grace. Let us consider two of the greatest acts of the grace of God that we know about.

1) The Exodus:

While the return from Egypt had been foretold by God to Abraham, it was also grace⁷ that saved the Jewish people out of Egypt but then they agreed to live by the Ten Commandments, the 10 Words (See 'Passover and Freedom' for more on this - <http://luke443.blogspot.com/2011/04/passover-and-freedom.html>).

2) Yeshua:

While most would be very familiar with the grace of God extended through Yeshua, it is vital also to recognize that having received this grace, Yeshua himself told us that to be fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God, that is, to be

⁷ **Exodus 33:6** *For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth."*

part of his family, his brothers and sisters then we must "... *do the will of my Father in heaven ...*" (Matthew 12:50). Or as John put it in Rev 14:12 "*Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus.*" Again, we see the need for action on our part – God's grace must be accepted and acted upon.

Many Universalists though seem to argue that salvation is totally an act of God; that there is nothing we could or can do that will change God's love and his desire to 'save' us. They argue therefore that 'free will' is an illusion⁸; that nothing we do or don't do, will in anyway affect the love of God and his decision to redeem every single human being who ever lived.

Another component of the Universalists argument is that while some may die unrepentant, Universalism argues that in the next life (or lives), these unrepentant sinners will ultimately experience the full love of God and turn back to him and be saved.

In addressing this argument then, we need to consider both

- 1) the involvement of a man in his own salvation, and
- 2) the reality of the next life or lives and whether the unrepentant will get another chance or even a lifetime of chances/choices.

In terms of man's involvement in his own salvation consider the story of Zaccheus. When Zaccheus and his household received salvation, was it because of the presence of Yeshua in his house, or was it because he repented?

Yeshua visited houses and people, many of whom did not repent. When Yeshua said Zaccheus and his household had received salvation, by inference there were others who did not. Have they since received salvation? Perhaps some, but there is no evidence at all, that all Jewish people let alone all mankind alive in the first century of the Common Era did receive salvation.

Thus God's grace in offering a way to be in eternal relationship with Him does not mean that all are forced to; many if not most reject God's grace - that is, they use their freewill NOT to repent, not to turn back from sin.

What about all those in Zaccheus' household? Did Yeshua mean that ALL of them were saved at that instance, when Zaccheus repented and displayed the fruits of his repentance?

I don't believe so - when the leader of the household repented so completely, his example would have ultimately led most of his household to follow suit. But again, not necessarily all. Yeshua's statement that 'salvation has come to this household' is clearly a generalisation and such a generalisation is a typical Hebraism (in the same sense that when one Pharisee accused another of 'destroying Torah' because he believed the Pharisee had some point of doctrine wrong. This typically very strong and exaggerated statement in an argument – still common in Yeshivas today – was given with the understanding that getting some even minor point of Torah wrong could impact the whole of Torah. Similarly, the Pharisee accused may reply as Yeshua did, 'No, I am fulfilling Torah'⁹).

This all leads us quite naturally into the use of the word 'all', as in 'All Israel shall be saved' (Romans 11:26). Universalists are quick to seize upon the word 'all' here and amazingly expand it to not just include all of Israel, but all of the world's people, and not just all of those alive at the time this prophecy is fulfilled, but all people of all ages who ever walked upon the earth!

This is clearly an abuse of normal language idioms. For example, if I were to say that '*all of my Christmases had come at once*' you would appreciate that I was using hyperbole. If I was to say that '*all of New Zealand will be thrilled when the All Blacks win the World Cup this year*', you would appreciate, when given time to consider it, that this is exaggeration, no matter how Rugby mad New Zealand is. You would certainly not for a moment think that the Kiwis, who now rest in the grave would also be thrilled, as you know that the '*dead know nothing*' (Ecc 9:5).

But even more than this, it is clear that the Apostle Paul did not even mean every single member of the Commonwealth of

⁸ The denial of 'free will' is a common implication of Social Darwinism and its societal effect has been disastrous.

⁹ There is clear evidence (see "Jesus" by Prof David Flusser) as to what a Pharisee or a man with a Pharisaic mindset, like Yeshua meant when he made this statement that he did not come to destroy 'Torah' but to fulfill it. Flusser explains that to 'fulfill the Torah' was to correctly interpret and enact it and to 'destroy the Torah' was to interpret in incorrectly. Thus it was apparently quite common for Pharisees in arguments with each other to shout 'You are destroying the Torah!' or 'I am fulfilling Torah!'

Two examples that I think illustrate this well are Gal 6:2 and Romans 13:10. Try reading these passages and replacing 'fulfill' with 'correctly interpret and enact' and hopefully you will see what I mean: Gal 6:2 *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* Romans 13:10 *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.* This context is of course perfectly in harmony with God's pronouncement to Moses that he would send a Prophet who would perfectly declare the Torah (that is, who would 'fulfill' it).

Israel when he made this prophecy.

How do we know this? Because he was quoting from the TaNaK. He quoted a number of passages including Isaiah 59:20-21 which states: *"Then a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Ya'akov who turn from rebellion." So says ADONAI. "And as for me," says ADONAI, "this is my covenant with them: my Spirit, who rests on you, and my words which I put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth or from the mouth of your children, or from the mouth of your children's children, now or ever," says ADONAI.*

Note here that 'those in Ya'akov (Jacob) who turn from rebellion' are the ones that are saved. Not every single soul. Just as in the return from Babylon and the 1948 return, not all, as in every single soul, returned. Similarly, not all will find redemption.

Why, we may ask, do even those, the Jewish people who have known the God of their Fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, refuse to return to him?

Consider the Babylonian exile for example. As Rabbi Spiro points out (paraphrasing): *"The destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon must have been a tremendous shock to the Jewish people. For a start they were living with the constant presence of God. His presence was always accessible at the Temple. Miracles occurred there daily and could be witnessed by anyone.*

For example, whichever way the wind was blowing, the smoke of the sacrifices always went straight to heaven. Feeling spiritual today is nothing compared what it was like to feel spiritual in the Temple. With such intense spirituality it was clear that God was with the Jewish people.

The same thing could be said for the land. One miracle that the land exhibited was that every six years there was a bumper crop so that the Jews could take the seventh year -- the sabbatical year -- off from labor. It was amazing..."¹⁰

And yet, despite this, after the 70 year exile only some 5% of the Jewish people decided to return to the Land of Israel!

Perhaps, some of our less impressive human traits explain this, such as our lethargy and inertia (especially as they were treated quite well for a time in Babylon). Perhaps, the hardship of the journey and re-establishing themselves again over-rode their desire to experience the presence of God again?

I suspect that fact that the King of the Universe hides himself to some degree is also a significant factor. Let me elaborate and begin with an analogy.

A young King saw a beautiful but poor peasant girl and was taken by her grace, her beauty and her joy. He desired to get to know her better and perhaps win her heart. He did not want to command her obedience or to intimidate her, but wanted her to love him for himself.

Yet if he faced her in all his finery and authority and with all his royal assembly and displayed the great breadth and majesty of his Kingdom, he would have little hope of getting to know her on level terms, of getting to develop a mutual and balanced relationship.

He must therefore disguise himself. Not in any dishonest or devious manner, but simply to find a way to let her see the man behind the Kingdom, in the hope that she might connect with his true self, his values, his character and natural beauty.

This is perhaps an analogy for how God interacts with us. He hides himself to some degree, he sets a distance between himself and us. Without such disguise, such 'hiding', we would be overwhelmed, and our relationship with the Almighty could not develop with the simplicity and normalcy that successful courtship requires.

The Almighty has 'hidden' himself from us to such a degree that he calls on us to seek him and that only by seeking him with all our hearts, minds, strength and soul will we find him.

Consider Proverbs 2:1-5

*1. My son, if you will receive my words, and store up my commandments within you;
2 So as to turn your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding;
3 Yes, if you call out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding;*

¹⁰ Rabbi Ken Spiro 'History Crash Course #23: Babylonian Exile' <http://www.aish.com/jl/h/cc/48938087.html>

*4 If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures:
5 then you will understand the fear of Yahweh, and find the knowledge of God."*

We can see here that the Almighty calls us to receive his words and by meditating of his words and commandments we will be obedient to them. We see here that we need to seek with great diligence as God's treasures are hidden.

Luke 11:9 *"And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."*
Also Jeremiah 29:13 *"And you shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your heart."*

This verse in itself is extremely powerful and I believe sums up the truth that, while God may be hidden¹¹, He can be found and we can enter into a relationship with the Creator and King of the Universe. Our King calls for our whole heart. So perhaps, in putting the onus on man to seek his King, the King of the Universe has accepted that not all will seek Him and not all will find Him.

If this is a true reflection of the path to God, then Universalism cannot possibly be part of God's plan.

One of the passages that speaks of the **restoration of all things** on the Day of the Lord is in Ephesians 1. But to show that this doesn't mean the salvation of all people from all time, Paul goes on to say in the same epistle: *"For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), **has no inheritance in the kingdom of the Messiah and God.** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."* Eph 5:5-6.

The Apostle Paul is referring to the end of this age, and yet there are still 'sons of disobedience'.

A Universalist may argue that during the Millennial Kingdom, they will see the light and repent? Will the 'King who hides' reveal himself much more in the Coming Age? Perhaps, but again, where is the evidence that the presence of the King of the Universe or the physical presence again of his Son, the Messiah will significantly change the hearts and minds of the unrepentant?

The bigger problem with this way out, with the argument that the 'unsaved' will be overwhelmed by the love of God in the Coming or Millennial Age, is that most of them won't be there. Those who die unrepentant are not resurrected to face judgment until the end of the Millennial Age. The resurrection is to take place in two stages; a resurrection of the 'saved' before the millennium and a resurrection of the unsaved at its termination (Rev 20:4-5)¹².

Some argue that judgment is restorative, that is, that when we make mistakes, when we sin and are judged and disciplined as a result of those mistakes or sin, we often learn to change and therefore are 'restored' to righteous behaviour. There is no doubt that judgment can sometimes bring restoration, if it results in repentance. The problem for Universalism though is the false hope that with enough lives and enough 'judgments' eventually restoration for all will occur. This is a false hope because scripture teaches us that 'after death, then judgment'¹³, and that those who die unrepentant will not be given a life in the Coming Age, but will be resurrected to face judgment after this time.

Yes, God has infinite love and infinite power but He still doesn't force us against our will. Consider 1 Thess 4:3: *'For this is the will of God: your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality.'* Clearly, many of us have failed on this in our past, and many today practice sexual immortality. Is God's will therefore less than infinite and all powerful?

Of course not. Is His greatness somehow reduced by our impurity and failure? Again no. It is God himself who sets himself limits, such as the limit implied by his nature of truth. God cannot lie. Similarly, God cannot be unjust.

Remember the words of Ya'akov (James) *'Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.'* Works as a result of faith show that free-will needs to be exercised after salvation is gained. Free-will by definition implies that it is possible to reject God.

The 'restoration of all things' is coming, but that means a world where all will be in harmony with God, and this is not what

¹¹ For more on this fascinating concept of 'The King who hides' see <http://luke443.blogspot.com.au/2011/04/king-who-hides.html>
<http://luke443.blogspot.com.au/2011/04/king-who-hides-some-followup.html>
<http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/09/25/i-will-hide-that-i-will-hide/>
<http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/09/27/cosmic-hide-and-peek/>
<http://globaltruthinternational.com/2012/11/03/god-is-your-shadow/>

¹² There are passages elsewhere that hint at such a partial resurrection (Luke 14:14, 20:35, I Thess 4:16, Phil 3:11, I Cor 15:23) or a resurrection in two stages (Daniel 12:2, John 5:29).

¹³ Hebrews 9:27 *"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,"*

Universalism argues for.

The Father, in loving us with perfect love, chooses to give us the choice, not to make that choice for us. Only we can repent, God will not make us repent. Even if he gave us a thousand lifetimes to live, he would still give us a seemingly 'attractive' alternative so that there is a real choice to be made. Some will always choose the fake, the instant gratification of worship of the creation over the true joy of worshipping and loving the Creator and living in proper relationship with Him.

The bigger problem is though, that nowhere does the Bible indicate we will get a thousand lifetimes. We only get one. Why else would Paul say to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. After the resurrection, then the judgment. Why even bother with judgment, if all are saved, if none are found guilty? A just God implies the necessity of a judgment. If the case is a forgone conclusion, then a 'trial' and judgment is superfluous.

Is a judgment coming?

Read Revelation and tremble – when the time of Revelation has arrived, the dye is cast, the photographic film has been hung up to dry, the judgment has arrived. It is too late to change your mind. Is the doctrine of Universalism of comfort now? Or is the delusion it imparts too horrible to contemplate?

Another common misunderstanding when reading the Bible with Hellenistic glasses and not understanding the Hebrew mindset, is to fail to understand the Jewish concept of salvation, especially when speaking nationally or corporately.

The TaNaK demonstrates that 'salvation' is first and foremost a national or corporate/tribal consideration and therefore not exclusively personal.

A couple of points that may help illustrate this are the 'scapegoat' which was sent into the wilderness to atone for the sins of all Israel¹⁴. Also, the once yearly entrance of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement/Covering) was also a corporate plea for mercy for all Israel. It is a day (actually the completion of the previous 10 'Days of Awe') when Israel takes responsibility for its failures and essentially says to God; 'God it's not your fault'. Yom Kippur is a corporate day of reconciliation. All in Israel who have spent the previous 10 days repenting, making restitution, cleaning their houses, etc., can now be assured that all their past sins are covered. They can enter the 'New Year' secure in their relationship with the Almighty¹⁵.

Both these examples show the corporate nature of Israel's relationship with God and hence the understanding that when some of Israel is restored to God and returned to the Land, all of Israel is restored.

The Apostle Paul shares this understanding in Romans 9-11.

Thus, to speak of salvation was to speak of the restoration of national Israel. This then meant their rescue from national enemies; the restoration of peace amongst the tribes; the inauguration of the Coming Age or Kingdom of God; freedom from foreign occupation; the restoration of the Temple; the return to the Land of Israel, etc.

There were many prophecies to this end such as Ezekiel's during the Babylonian exile. Two of Ezekiel's 'restoration' prophecies are:

Ezek 36:8-12

"But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home. For behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. And I will multiply people on you, the whole house of Israel, all of it. The cities shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt. And I will multiply on you man and beast, and they shall multiply and be fruitful. And I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you will know that I am the LORD. I will let people walk on you, even my people Israel. And they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance, and you shall no longer bereave them of children.

Ezek 39:25-29

¹⁴ Lev 16: 21-22 *And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.*

Lev 16:17 *No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the Holy Place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house **and for all the assembly of Israel.***

¹⁵ See my article on 'The Day of Trumpets & the Return of the King' for more details on this.

"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. They shall forget their shame and all the treachery they have practiced against me, when they dwell securely in their land with none to make them afraid, when I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them from their enemies' lands, and through them have vindicated my holiness in the sight of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God, because I sent them into exile among the nations and then assembled them into their own land. I will leave none of them remaining among the nations anymore. And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.

While these prophecies were fulfilled in part at least, in the initial return from Babylon and in the 1948 return, as I have already indicated, only some 5% returned. To the Hebraic understanding though, if some of the 'family', the tribe or nation are restored or 'saved' then all are. Because of the much less individualistic understanding of salvation and their relationship to God, they view any move of God that impacts them corporately, as impacting them all. They understood that they live on in their children, and their family. So when we read 'all Israel will be saved' or all will be restored, it means that even if only a few of Israel are 'saved' or 'restored', then this statement is true.

And so hopefully, it may now be clear that where any passages in Scripture appear to a Western or Hellenistic perspective to be referring to the salvation of all people, of each and every single human being, then this is not at all the case.

In conclusion, I hope I have shown that when Scripture is understood within the proper context and appropriate Hebraic mindset, Universalism is simply and emphatically not an option. Rather than potentially being the best news ever for all mankind, Universalism effectively argues that all eternal decisions have been taken out of human hands and given to God, because his love overpowers and overwhelms any free choice that man or woman may make. The implication of this essentially Calvinistic doctrine, is that man is free from considering that his actions have eternal consequences and therefore man is free to follow his lusts, his 'yetzer hara'¹⁶ and therefore to reject the greatest commandment of all, the Shema of Israel.

The consequences of accepting this doctrine and its implications could have a most disastrous effect on an otherwise righteous truth seeker.

Pastor Rob Bell & 'Love Wins':

Rather than do a review of Rob Bell's arguments or his book 'Love Wins', I think some good reviews have already been written.

So please see below some links to a few reviews which will give you a fair idea of his arguments and some of the difficulties with them (I have not read every word of these reviews and blogs and clearly don't agree with everything they say, but I found these reviews helpful in gaining a deeper insight of Universalism).

1. 'God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of "Love Wins"' - by Kevin DeYoung @ <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>
2. 'Love has already won' Dr. Michael Youssef @ <http://www.onenewsnow.com/Perspectives/Default.aspx?id=1318164>
3. 'Exploring Love Wins' by Scot McKnight @ <http://www.patheos.com/community/jesuscreed/2011/04/13/exploring-love-wins-6/#more-15702>
4. 'Final thoughts on Rob Bell's Love Wins' by Ben Irwin @ <http://benirwin.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/final-thoughts-on%C2%A0rob-bells-love%C2%A0wins-1/>

Paul Herring
April 2011

www.circumcisedheart.info
www.luke443.blogspot.com

¹⁶ Judaism teaches that man has two inclinations, one toward negativity (*yetzer haRa –the evil inclination*) and one toward positivity (*yetzer haTov – the good inclination*). That is, that we have a good heart that desires to do good and a 'fleshy' heart that easily succumbs to the lusts of the flesh. Part of the proof for this is in the Shema, in the verse, "Love God with all your *hearts*" (Deut. 6:5). The word "hearts" here is in the plural in Hebrew. This means that we must serve God not only with our 'yetzer haTov', but even with our 'yetzer haRa'. The Apostle Paul discusses this so powerfully in Romans 7.