

The Book of Revelation

No. 11 The Throne Room in Heaven, Revelation 4

Remember where we are in the book – we have completed Part 1 (chapters 1-3, Christ holding the seven stars and walking among the seven churches) – we now start Part 2 (chapters 4-7, the throne room in heaven and the scroll with seven seals in Christ's hand).

Revelation 4 and 5 teach one main lesson – “The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!” (Ps. 99:1).

This is important for the people of God who are necessarily caught up in the trembling and quaking of the nations – we need to know that God reigns.

1. The One enthroned in heaven

John is caught up into a visionary state in the Holy Spirit – and the first thing he sees is “a throne in heaven”. The throne of God is mentioned 40 times in *Revelation*; 17 of these references are found in chapters 4 and 5. The impression is given of the great authority of heaven.

The impression of heaven's authority is enhanced by the furniture of John's vision:

- brightness, lightning, rumblings and thunder emanate from the throne;
- the throne is surrounded by four living creatures who worship the One seated on the throne, and 24 elders who fall down from their thrones and cast their crowns before the throne;
- songs are sung, in praise of the One enthroned because he is (4:8) and is Creator (4:11), and in praise of the Lamb because he is the Redeemer (5:9) and the King (5:10);
- every creature in the whole of creation is caught up in the acclamation of the authority the One enthroned and of the Lamb (5:13);
- the vision concludes with a majestic “Amen!” and further worship.

The point of this is that the throne gives us the proper perspective on the visions that will follow. We are shown the whole of everything from the point of view of heaven. We are shown that all things are governed by the One enthroned, and the Lamb is the executor of his plan. But all things include the trials and tribulations experienced by God's people. “That is the point. That is why the description of the throne precedes the symbolic prediction of the trials and tribulation that the Church must experience here on earth” (Hendriksen, p. 95).

The vision of the throne of God bears comparison with the visions recorded in Ezekiel 1 and 10.

Precious stones are associated with the first of the rivers that flow out of Eden (Gen. 2:12); they were used in the attire of the high priest; they reappear in chapter 21. “The stones intensify the light around the throne by reflecting the unapproachable brightness, and hence glory, surrounding God himself” (Beale, p. 321).

The rainbow is a sign of mercy which tempers judgment (Gen. 9:12-17). Together with the precious stones it hints at the beginning of the new creation.

The “sea of glass, like crystal” is probably a reference to Ezekiel 1:22 – “Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of an expanse, shining like awe-inspiring crystal, spread out above their heads.” This expanse over the heads of the living creatures is under the throne of God. See also Exodus 24:10. Perhaps the point is to impress upon us the transcendent holiness of the One enthroned. Other interpretations of the sea of glass include: (a) a reference to the laver placed between the altar and the temple in Solomon's temple; (b) the Red Sea, *cf.* Revelation 15:1-4; (c) the sea as chaos calmed by God, *cf.* Psalms 46 and 93.

2. The living creatures and the elders before the throne

God is not alone. He is surrounded by:

- four living creatures, comparable to the living creatures seen by Ezekiel;
- 24 elders, dressed in white, seated on thrones, and wearing crowns.

These are not to be taken literally – they are figurative.

The living creatures represent all animate life throughout the whole of creation – that which is regal, strong, discerning and swift. They worship the One enthroned, declaring his holiness and aseity (*cf.* Isaiah 6:3). This is the goal for which all things were created – the acclamation of the Creator.

Notice the threefold “holy, holy, holy” which is parallel to the threefold ascription “who was and is and is to come.” But “is to come” is not a reference to God's “being in the future”, but to his coming in the future – the transcendent God, who has life in himself and not from anything else, cannot be kept out of his creation, but is coming to it (with judgment and salvation).

The elders represent the whole redeemed people of God, i.e. twelve patriarchs plus twelve apostles, the whole family promised to Abraham. The elders are “the church in heaven” and remind us that believers have been raised with Christ and are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6).

Further “threes” are heard in the worship offered by the elders – God is worthy to receive “glory and honour and power” because he “created all things” and “by [his] will they existed and were created.”

“Our lord and god” was a title used by the emperor Domitian (reigned 81-96). The acclamation of the elders is therefore a polemic against human emperors and empires, which last only a few years – the true King “lives for ever and ever.”

The elders praise God because his will is determinative for the whole of creation – both its being and its course. The point is pastoral. If all things are preserved in being by the power of God and directed in their course by the will of God, then the people of God are ultimately secure. Nothing is able to cut loose and determine its own course. God rules over everything – and God gets the praise for everything. This is also the lesson of the book of *Daniel*.

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No. 12 The Scroll and the Lamb, Revelation 5

Revelation 5 introduces two new factors to the vision of the throne room: (a) a scroll with seven seals in the hand of the One Enthroned; and (b) the Lion-Lamb who alone is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals. Revelation 4 tells us who reigns – the One Enthroned. Revelation 5 tells us how he reigns – through the mediatorial dominion of the Lion-Lamb.

1. The scroll in the hand of the One Enthroned (vv. 1-4)

John sees a scroll in the hand of the One Enthroned. It is in his right hand – it represents God's redemptive plan (including the judgments depicted in chapters 6-7). It is full of writing – there is nothing provisional about God's plan. It is sealed with seven seals – it remains unread and unexecuted.

The seals on the book recall the sealed book of Daniel 12, which remains sealed until the end. That the seals of the book are about to be broken shows that the death and resurrection of Christ have brought in the end of the age.

A strong angel makes proclamation with a loud voice so that the whole cosmos hears that the scroll can only be taken and its seals broken (its contents executed) by one who is "worthy". That no such person in the whole created order can be found distresses John greatly. If God's redemptive plan is not carried out, what will become of the church?

2. The Lion and the Lamb (vv. 5-7)

Comfort is found in the Lion-Lamb (v. 5).

He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:9), the Root of David (Isa. 11:1, 9). He has conquered and is therefore worthy to take and to open the scroll.

But what John sees is not a lion but a lamb (v. 6). This Lamb bore all the signs of having been slaughtered (Isa. 53:6). It also had seven horns (*cf.* the horns in the vision of the world powers in Daniel 7) and seven eyes (*cf.* the seven eyes on the foundation stone in Zechariah 3:9; 4:10).

This is the Lord Jesus. He conquered not by being a Lion but by being a Lamb and submitting to the slaughter of the Cross. But in this way he obtained all authority (seven horns) and became the Possessor and Giver of the sevenfold Spirit of God. He approaches the One Enthroned just as the Son of Man approaches the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7, and receives the Kingdom – not only does he take the scroll, but he also ascends the throne, which from now on is "the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1, 3; see also 5:13 and 7:15-17).

The fact that Jesus overcame by his death is to be a great encouragement to the church whose members are also slaughtered (6:9). We are reminded of the promises made "to the one who overcomes" (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) which use the verb which is used to say that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered (5:5).

3:21 is especially relevant – "The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" – *cf.* "The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (21:7). Once again we are confronted (albeit in a more subtle form now) with the very high value Christ places on the ordinary discipleship of his people – "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

3. The adoration of the Lamb and the One Enthroned (vv. 8-14)

The picture of the Lamb who had been slain taking the scroll from the hand of the One Enthroned depicts the ascension of Jesus after his death and resurrection. It is as the Crucified One that he is authorised to execute the redemptive plan of God.

The 24 elders, i.e. the whole redeemed church, behaves in a priestly fashion before him – the harps and the bowls of incense are tokens of the priestly functions of offering thanksgiving and prayer (*cf.* 1 Chronicle 25:6-31).

A new song is sung because the death and resurrection of Christ have inaugurated the new age.

The Lamb's dominion is the reward for his death – "for you were slain".

His blood is the purchase price by which he redeemed people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation. This way of designating the nations is taken from the book of Daniel and the political kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar. Clearly the kingdom of Christ is not a private affair – it has worldwide political ramifications. Compare 5:10 with Daniel 7:22, 27.

5:10 also uses Exodus 19:6 – "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" – delivered from sin and set apart to God to serve him and to intercede on behalf of the nations.

The whole company of all angelic beings sings. The number "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands", a designation taken from Daniel 7:10. The Lamb is declared to be "worthy" for the third time. The sevenfold ascription of "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing" to the Lamb is taken from David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:11-12. This prayer is connected to David's preparations for building the Temple, i.e. the throne of God on earth – highly appropriate to the setting of Revelation 4-5 in the throne room in heaven.

Then the whole of everything sings – praising both the One Enthroned and the Lamb – the conclusion that the Lamb himself is God is inescapable. The fourfold ascription of "blessing and glory and honour and might for ever and ever" is taken from Daniel 4:34-35.

Verse 14 literally "And the four living creatures kept on saying, 'Amen!'" They began the worship in 4:8 – they "conclude" it with their "Amen!" in 5:14. But clearly this is no "conclusion" but an ongoing round of confessional praise.

Thus the whole of everything is governed by God through the Lamb, the Mediatorial King. This dominion is about to be expressed in Revelation 6.

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No. 13 The First Six Seals are Opened, Revelation 6

Chapters 4-5 climax with the adoration of the One Enthroned and the Lamb. The Lamb is the Mediatorial King who has taken the scroll with seven seals, which contains God's redemptive plan. In chapter 6 the Lamb opens the first six seals and we see "the four horsemen of the apocalypse", we hear the cry of the martyrs, and we witness the final judgment.

1. The four horsemen of the apocalypse (Seals 1-4, vv. 1-8)

"Rev. 6:1-8 is intended to show that Christ rules over... an apparently chaotic world and that suffering does not occur indiscriminately or by chance" (Beale).

As each of the first four seals is broken a horseman on a horse is called forth and commissioned. Their number and colours are reminiscent of the four horsemen of Zechariah 1:7-17; 6:1-8.

Each of the four living beasts summons a horseman – "Come!"

Hendriksen understands the first horseman to be Christ, going forth to conquer by means of the gospel. However, there is no distinction made between the nature of the four horsemen – they are a quartet of servants of God's redemptive purpose, released because of the mediatorial rule of Christ – and it seems easier to accept that the first is simply bent on conquest. The similarity between the horseman and Christ (the colour white, the sword, the crown, victory) may indicate a degree of satanic deception (the evil one is able to disguise himself as an angel of light, 2 Corinthians 11:14) which makes the horseman's mission all the more distressing – the harm caused by the horsemen has general reference to all men, but also special reference to the saints who are targeted for persecution.

The second horseman is red, takes peace from the earth and brings slaughter. This is general bloodletting – "that men should slay one another." However, it is likely that it includes the persecution of the church since the word translated "slay" is used in v. 9 for the slaying of the martyrs.

The third rider on the black horse brings famine. A denarius was a day's wage for a labourer, and a quart of wheat was enough for one person for one day. The price quoted in v. 6 is between 8 and 16 times the price for such food at the time when John wrote. These prices are greatly inflated, though people could just survive and no more. Meanwhile the luxuries (oil and wine) remained untouched – economic injustice! The burden of this famine probably falls disproportionately on Christians because they refuse to compromise with the world by offering incense to the genius of the emperor, and so are barred from practising their trades.

The fourth horseman is Death, and Hades follows on his heels. The number 4 probably represents worldwide extent. But death (by sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts, cf. Ezek. 14:21) is limited to "only" one quarter of mankind.

Through his death and resurrection, Christ won mastery over Death and Hades (1:17-18). He exercises that mastery, directing the forces of destruction so that their actions serve his purpose for redemption and judgment. They, and not Christ, are culpable for the evil they do – but Christ is Master nonetheless (cf. Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23).

2. The cry of the martyrs (Seal 5, vv. 9-11)

The effects of the four horsemen of the apocalypse are experienced by everyone. But the focus of the fifth seal is on their effect on Christians, especially those who are slain because of their witness – they are *martyrs*. Nevertheless, in the light of the seven letters of chapters 2-3, it is proper to understand these martyrs as all Christ's people who have resisted sin and temptation because of their allegiance to Christ (remember that the letters show the great value Christ places on ordinary, faithful discipleship).

The altar John has in mind is probably the golden incense altar which stood before the most holy place. It was there that the blood of the atonement sacrifice was placed annually (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 4:7). Thus the blood of the martyrs is associated with the blood of Christ. Their prayers are heard, and they are in a place of protection (under the altar).

The martyrs cry out for vindication (cf. Psalm 79:9-11) and are given white robes and told to wait. This is a pledge of their ultimate vindication.

3. The final judgment (Seal 6, vv. 12-17)

The promised vindication is depicted as the sixth seal is broken. The course of history is finished, and final judgment takes place.

Judgment is depicted in terms the dissolution of the cosmos – this is first depicted in the Flood (the return of the world to an undifferentiated watery state) and then in the unleashing of de-creative judgments on Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt (e.g. the imposition of an unearthly darkness on the whole land).

The judgment falls on every class of people – from kings down to slaves (cf. the final act of judgment in Egypt which effected everyone from Pharaoh down to the lowest slave girl, Ex. 11:5). No one who remains an inveterate opponent of the Lamb will be able to save him/herself by his/her authority, power, or wealth – nor can they excuse themselves by their lowly status.

Wrath has come from the very same source as grace and salvation – from the One enthroned and from the Lamb! People who stubbornly remain at Psalm 2:1-3 and who refuse the counsel of Psalm 2:10-11, are caught up in the wrath of Psalm 2:9, 12a. The depiction of the alarm of those caught up in the final judgment is taken from Isaiah 2:10, 18-21.

The final question focuses on the inescapability of judgment: "Who can stand?" The answer – only those who have taken refuge in the Lamb (Psalm 2:12b). Chapter 7 proceeds to depict the answer to this question.

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No. 14 The Sealing of the 144,000, Revelation 7

Revelation 6 closes with the opening of the sixth seal – the wrath aspect of the day of judgement approaches, and those caught up by it cry out, “The great day of the wrath [of the One enthroned and of the Lamb] has come, and who can stand?” In a sense, Revelation 7 provides the answer in its representation of the grace aspect of the day of judgement.

1. The sealing of the 144,000

Four angels with sovereignty over the whole earth (its four corners) hold back the winds of judgment/destruction until people of God are sealed, *cf.* Ezekiel 9:3-6.

The sealing marks out these people as belonging to God. In this way they are identified, authenticated, and guaranteed.

The seal is the name of God (14:1). The beast also has a seal (14:9-11). The seal is thus a token of genuine membership of the community.

Notice that Aaron had a “seal” on his forehead (Ex. 28:36-38) and Aaron placed the divine name on Israel (Num. 6:22-27).

2. The number of the 144,000

The 144,000 are the redeemed (14:1-4).

The number is symbolic, not literal. They are identical with “the great multitude that no one could number” (v. 9). Those depicted are not ethnic Israel, but the whole church gathered from every tribe, language, people and nation. They are viewed first according to their perfection, and then according to the multitude.

$144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$

12×12 probably refers to the 12 sons of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church.

10×10×10 may be an allusion to the perfect cube, *cf.* the cubic shape of New Jerusalem (21:16).

3. The victory celebration of the 144,000

This vast multitude is (a) dressed in white, (b) holds palm branches aloft, and (c) sings about salvation. The implication is that they are celebrating victory.

The Red Sea crossing was celebrated with the first song sung in the Bible. Palm branches are associated with the feast of Tabernacles, which celebrates the provision and protection God afforded Israel in the wilderness, and God’s faithfulness in bringing Israel into the land of promise.

We have, then, in this picture the fulfilment of the true exodus – God’s deliverance of his people from bondage to sin and death and Satan; his protection of his people through all the persecutions visited upon them in this world; and his bringing them into the full enjoyment of the blessings of the age to come.

4. The tribulation of the 144,000

One of the elders denotes the 144,000 as “the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

The great tribulation is not a reference to climactic tribulation at the end of the age. Rather, it denotes the persecution of the church throughout this whole age. God’s people all pass through this (Acts 14:22).

The white robes washed in Christ’s blood demonstrates Christ’s gracious identification with his people in their suffering for the sake of his name. His robes too are dipped in his blood (19:13). That the robes are washed and made white with the Lamb’s blood indicates that their sins have been forgiven and cleansed. Their victory is really Christ’s victory – it is his blood, not theirs, that has brought them through the tribulation and into heaven.

5. The blessedness of the 144,000

The chapter closes with a picture of the blessed rest and reward of the people of God. Verses 15-16 anticipate pictures of their final happiness in chapters 21-22:

- their access to and service in the presence of God
- the presence and protection God affords them
- their liberty from every form of suffering and privation
- the Lamb to lead them as a Shepherd to the source of life
- the comfort of God

In summary, chapter seven’s depiction of the grace aspect of the authority of the Lamb in opening the seals on the scroll of God’s redemptive plan could not be more different from the judgement aspect depicted in chapter six.

In chapter 6 horses that go forth for conquest and war and famine and death – the whole is life-limiting, life-taking – and it ends with cries of despair because the coming of the Lamb and One Enthroned.

In chapter 7 it is the 144,000 whose songs are songs of victory (no swords here, but only palm branches) – the whole is life-affirming, life-promising, life in all its fullness – and it ends with joy in the presence of the Lamb and the One Enthroned.

And John’s point to the church is, don’t give up. No matter how hard the persecution becomes, don’t walk away from the Lamb. Your reward will be infinitely greater than any loss you can suffer. Don’t give up.

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No. 15 The Seventh Seal, Revelation 8:1-5

The Lamb opens the seventh seal – and there is silence followed by trumpets!

Remember that the opening of the sixth seal was accompanied by a depiction of the final judgment in its wrath (6:12-17) and grace (7:1-17) aspects. This came as a response to the prayers of the saints (the opening of the fifth seal of Rev. 6:5-11). The opening of the seventh seal is likewise to be seen as a response to the prayers of the saints which are mentioned again in Rev. 8:3-4. Thus the prayers of the saints act as brackets around the depiction of the final judgment.

Another set of seven — seven trumpets — is introduced. The manner of their introduction links them with the seals, especially the fifth and sixth seals and the last judgment.

1. The silence in heaven

There is “silence in heaven” – but this silence is not “nothing”.

The “silence in heaven” should be understood against its Old Testament background. See for example the following, each of which comes in the context of the imminence of the execution of God’s judgment:

- “Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling” (Zech. 2:13).
- “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Hab. 2:20).
- “Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests” (Zeph. 1:7).

The implication is that the “silence in heaven” connotes the horror of God’s judgment, which is so great that it exceeds description.

Why does it last for “about half an hour”? It is possible that the point that is being made is that the judgment comes suddenly and unexpectedly – it comes in the middle of the hour, and not at the end when it might have been expected.

2. The seven angels and the seven trumpets

The seven angels who stand before God are probably the seven angels of the seven churches. They are given seven trumpets.

In the Old Testament, trumpets were especially associated with (a) the presence of God at Sinai (Ex. 19:16), (b) signals for mustering Israel for worship and for war (Num. 10:1-10).

The heavenly trumpet heard at Sinai seems particularly appropriate in this case because of (a) the presence of God, (b) the execution of judgment.

3. The golden incense altar and the prayers of the saints

An angel appears, having a golden censer. He is given “much incense” which he mixes with the prayers of the saints and offers on the golden incense altar which is before the throne of God (remember the furniture of the Tabernacle and the Temple). We have already met the “prayers of the saints” – the twenty-four elders hold “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (5:8). This is the cries of the martyrs who cry out from beneath the altar (6:9-11).

The rising up of the smoke of the incense together with the prayers of the saints before God indicates that God takes notice of and approves the prayers. But remember that the prayers are prayers for vindication (6:10). It is not surprising that judgments follow.

4. The judgment of the earth

The angel fills his censer with fire from the altar and casts it upon the earth, indicating the intimate connection between the prayers of the saints and the judgments which follow.

The judgments are presaged by “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” Immediately after these the seven angels begin to blow the trumpets. When the seventh trumpet is blown there are “flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail” (11:19). Thus these frightening phenomena act as brackets around the acts of judgment associated with the seven trumpets, and give the judgments additional solemnity and terror.

The manner in which the trumpets are linked to the prayers of the saints says something surprising – that God’s judgments against the unrepentant are in response to the prayers of his people. Of course, God’s actions are never responsive in the normal sense of the word! God is sovereign and his will is absolute, and the prayers of the saints are ordained by him. Nevertheless, prayer is not nothing – God has given us the honour of entreating him and of using our entreaties in the execution of his purpose (just as the angel with the censer is *given* the incense so that he might put it on the golden altar).

We see something like this in the Psalms. Psalm 2 threatens the judgment of God on unrepentant kings and judges. But Psalm 149 shows that this judgment is executed by God’s saints – “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written! This is honour for all his godly ones” (Ps. 149:6-9).

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No. 16 The First Four Trumpets, Revelation 8:6-13

Remember that the trumpets are linked to the seals, especially the fifth seal (the prayer of the saints for divine vindication) and the sixth seal (the wrath and grace aspects of the day of judgment). The trumpets do not follow chronologically on the seals – they are the same period of history portrayed from another perspective. The seals portrayed the trials through which the faithful pass. The trumpets portray God’s punishment of people who are inveterate and unrepentant.

G.K. Beale summarises this section thus: “God deprives the ungodly of earthly security because of their persecution and idolatry in order to indicate their separation from him.”

1. The first trumpet – hail and fire (8:6-7)

With the blowing of the first trumpet, “hail and fire, mixed with blood” are thrown on the earth. Hail and fire are elements of the seventh plague-sign performed in the land of Egypt (Exodus 9:22-25). The seventh plague also harmed land, trees and grass. The mention of “blood” in *Revelation* may be intended as an allusion to the first plague-sign (the Nile turned to blood).

2. The second trumpet – a great burning mountain (8:8-9)

With the blowing of the second trumpet, “something like a great mountain, burning with fire” is thrown into the sea. In Jewish apocalyptic writings, mountains are sometimes symbolic of kingdoms. This mountain is a destroyed mountain (burning with fire). It is an allusion to God’s judgment on Babylon Jeremiah 51:25, “Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain.” See also Jeremiah 51:63-64. The burning mountain is the *object* of God’s judgment, not the *agent*. However, its being hurled down brings death to a third of the sea.

3. The third trumpet – a star, blazing like a torch (8:10-11)

With the blowing of the third trumpet, “a great star... blazing like a torch” falls from heaven. Its name is “Wormwood” and it pollutes one third of the fresh water supplies of the earth. The burning star is an allusion to God’s judgment on the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:12-15, “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! ¹³ You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven... ¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.”

Wormwood is a bitter herb. Water contaminated by it can be poisonous if drunk over a prolonged period of time. In the Old Testament prophets, wormwood was an apt description of judgment on the polluting religious practices.

4. The fourth trumpet – darkness (8:12)

With the blowing of the fourth trumpet, the light of the sun, the moon and the stars in diminished by one third. The complete darkening of the sun was reported with the opening of the sixth seal and the commencement of the day of judgment. Here, the limited darkening of the fourth trumpet suggests that this punishment is a precursor of the last day.

The ninth plague-sign in Egypt was darkness for three days and three nights (Exodus 10:21) – this was followed by the tenth, great plague-sign and the exodus. Darkness is symbolic of separation from God (e.g. Matthew 8:12; 22:13). This is “the logical climax and emphasis of the first four trumpets” (Beale).

Conclusion to the first four trumpets (8:13)

“The first four trumpets are concerned with sufferings imposed on the ungodly that indicate their separation from God and the beginning of their judgment” (Beale). These are punishments in which the faithful have no share – they have been sealed before earth, sea and trees are harmed (7:3).

The punishment of the trumpets touches the principle elements of the created order. This is systematic de-creation – and just as the de-creation plague-signs of Egypt preceded the new creation of Israel through the Red Sea crossing, so these plagues are the necessary precursor of the new creation which will be depicted in chapters 21-22.

The natural environment has often been deified and worshipped. Mankind’s relationship with it is idolatrous. The plagues that follow the first four trumpets are judgments on this idolatry, not a sign that creation itself is bad. The environmental movement is idolatrous in its own way, and perhaps the first four trumpets warn us that we do not have the power to fix the environment that we hope we do. (This is not a reason to live in a manner that’s environmentally irresponsible – just a warning against “green idolatry”).

Having said that, there are still three trumpets to hear – and they bring no relief! “Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, ‘Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!’” (8:13).

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No. 17 Trumpets Five and Six, Revelation 9

The trumpets are divided into groups: trumpets one to four (8:6-12) are separated from trumpets five and six (9:1-21) by the report of an eagle flying in mid-heaven and crying out (8:13); trumpets five and six are separated from trumpet seven (11:15-19) by a long parenthesis (10:1-11:14). For what it's worth, this gives us a pattern of 4, 2, 1 (i.e. 2², 2¹, 2⁰) trumpets.

The eagle of 8:13 cries out so that everyone hears about the “woe, woe, woe” that is to come with the blowing of the next three trumpets.

1. The star that has fallen from heaven (9:1-11)

With the blowing of the fifth trumpet John sees “a star fallen from heaven to earth” (9:1). John does not see the star falling – rather, what he sees is a star “having fallen”, i.e. a star in the state of fallenness. This is Satan, of whom Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹ Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. ²⁰ Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:18-20).

Satan is given the key to the shaft of the abyss (9:1). This he opens, releasing smoke – a demonic host – upon the earth. The sun is darkened – deception and delusion, moral darkness and degradation.

Out of the smoke come terrible locusts. This calls to mind the eighth plague-sign in Egypt (Ex. 10:4-15) and the prophecy of Joel, especially chapters 1-2. But these locusts do not destroy vegetation – they torment men and women who have not been sealed as belonging to God. These unrepentant unbelievers are tormented to the point that they would prefer death to life!

The description of the locusts is not literal – it is hyperbolic. True to the apocalyptic style of the *Revelation*, the principle features of the locusts are all magnified to make their description all the more terrifying.

The name of the star that has fallen from heaven is now revealed – in Hebrew, *Abaddon*, i.e. *destruction*, and in Greek, *Apollyon*, i.e. *destroyer*. He does as his name suggests – he came to steal, and kill, and destroy (John 10:10).

2. Four angels bound at the Euphrates (9:12-19)

Verse 12 suggests that the intensification associated with the final three trumpets actually increases between trumpets five and six! Still worse is yet to come.

With the blowing of the sixth trumpet a voice speaks from the four horns of the golden altar. The golden altar is associated with prayer. This second woe is called forth by the intercessory ministry of Jesus, the high priest. We are also reminded

that the woes are neither the result chance events nor the initiative of the evil one – they are judgment of God on people who remain unrepentant and unbelieving. If this seems shocking, we should remember that God is holy and just (16:5).

The voice from the golden altar (probably that of Jesus, the high priest) commands the angel of the sixth trumpet to release four angels who had been bound by the great river, the river Euphrates, for this very moment. The angels are released and “twice ten thousand, times ten thousand” (a vast, symbolic number) mounted troops are released. The troops are dressed in the colours of fire, sapphire (hyacinth, dark blue), and sulphur – from the mouths of the horses come fire, smoke, and sulphur with which they kill one third of mankind. Recall the thirds which were destroyed by the first four trumpets – although the Wormwood of the third trumpet resulted in the deaths of “many people”, it is the sixth trumpet that brings destruction explicitly on one third of mankind.

3. The rest of mankind remains unrepentant

With the blowing of the sixth trumpet, we come to the threshold of the Day of Judgment (“there will be no more delay”, 10:6). Shockingly, the rest of mankind continues unrepentant – they continue rebelliously breaking the first table of the law (v. 20) and the second table of the law (v. 21). Moreover, as chapter 11 reports, they continue to oppose the preaching of the Word of God, and they continue to persecute the church.

Remember that the trumpets report the judgments of God upon the earth through the period between Christ's exaltation and his second coming (*Parousia*). We must not think, therefore, that no one repents and believes. Of course they do – else who are we? What makes the difference? The grace of God. That is the point of the sealing reported in 7:2-4. The seal is the “seal of the living God” and the sealing is the work of God – salvation is the work of God from beginning to end – it is *monergistic* not *synergistic*.

Those, then, who are not sealed continue unrepentant and unbelieving – they hate God, oppose his Christ, and persecute his people – they are under the wrath of God and are the objects of his judgments. John presents this to us in primary colours so that we will not miss the awfulness of it. Behind all the subtle shades of daily life, it is a terrible fact that those who do not gather with Jesus are against him (Matthew 12:30), and that on the last day there will only be either sheep or goats (Matthew 25:31-32).

The Book of Revelation

No. 18 The Little Scroll and the Two Witnesses, Revelation 10:1-11:14

We are now on the threshold of the day of judgment – but John’s visionary experience steps back from the sequence of trumpets, and rather than hear the seventh trumpet, John sees a mighty angel with a little scroll, is called to measure the temple, and observes in pictorial form the prophetic task and evangelical suffering of the people of God as they await their vindication.

1. The mighty angel with the little scroll (10:1-11)

The angel John sees is of continental proportions – with one foot in the sea, the other on the land, and his head above the clouds which are wrapped about his body. His face shone like the sun and a rainbow was over his head. His legs were like great columns of fire and his voice like the roaring of a lion. His voice is heard by everybody – and when he spoke, the seven thunders replied.

Who is this? We are not told. He is Christ-like and has divine characteristics, e.g. wrapped in clouds, bright as the sun, with a rainbow about him.

The “seven thunders” are an allusion to Psalm 29 in which “the voice of the LORD” is mentioned seven times. The climax to Psalm 29 says that the LORD is enthroned over the Flood, receives glory in his temple, and gives peace to this people.

The angel swears by the name of the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth, that there would be “no more delay” – as soon as the seventh trumpet is sounded, the mystery of God will be fulfilled. The mystery (something no one can know until God reveals it; and once revealed, it can be known by even the simplest child) is the promise of the gospel, revealed to God’s servants the prophets. At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the whole of Scripture will be brought to a conclusion with the day of judgment.

The angel gives John the little scroll and instructs John to eat it – in other words, John identifies with the content of the scroll – this is what he will proclaim and nothing more. If the colossal angel is Christ, then the scroll is the redemptive plan of God, i.e. the scroll Christ took from the hand of the One enthroned, especially as it is revealed from this point in *Revelation* and forwards. Because of its grace and wrath aspects it is sweet in John’s mouth but bitter in his stomach

2. The two witnesses (11:1-14)

In the sequence that follows John reviews from a new angle the events of the period between the exaltation of Christ and the Parousia, i.e. the period of the six trumpets. He sees it now in terms of the mission of the church to proclaim the kingdom of God in a world which is hostile and unreceptive.

John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship there – but not to measure the outer court. Measuring equipment, two olive trees, and two lampstands are pictures from Zechariah 2, 4.

The measuring of the temple, etc. marks it out as sacred to God. The prohibition on measuring the outer court, trampled by the nations, marks it out as rejected.

The temple, altar and those who worship there represent the church, i.e. the true church without mixture of the world (which is outside and rejected). For the trampling of the outer court by the nations see Luke 21:24 and Zechariah 14:1.

42 months of 30 days each = 1,260 days = 3.5 years of twelve 30 day months. Notice that the bodies of the two witnesses are left exposed to 3.5 days. Three and a half is one half of seven – a time, times and half a time – which reminds us of “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN” (Dan. 5:25) = “measured twice, weighed once, divided” – in the context of Daniel this is a symbol of sudden judgment, e.g. “there will be no more delay” (Rev. 10:6). Jesus’ ministry lasted about 3.5 years.

There are two witnesses in the temple. This is the witness of the church. The lampstand imagery is taken from Zechariah 4 and reminds us that behind the witness of the church is the empowering of the Holy Spirit – Jesus told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Spirit to be given, and only then were they to commence their missionary activity, taking the message of the gospel out to the nations.

The power of one of the witnesses, to shut the sky so that it will not rain, reminds us of Elijah. The power of the other, to turn water into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, reminds us of Moses. Hence, “the Law and the Prophets”, i.e. the whole of Scripture, the testimony of the whole Bible.

Both witnesses are killed – but only when they have completed their mission – by “the beast that arises from the abyss” – both are raised to new life after three and a half days – both are called up to heaven. This last detail also reminds us of Moses and Elijah – Elijah was taken bodily into heaven; Moses died, but was not buried, and there is the suggestion that his body was raised and taken up into heaven. Thus the mission of the church is described as (a) Spirit empowered, (b) fiercely rejected and resisted, (c) divinely protected.

The city in which they are killed is called Sodom and Egypt – proverbially corrupt and proverbially oppressive – associated together in the crucifixion of the Lord.

3. The second woe has passed

Verse 14 (“The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come”) forms an *inclusio* with the section which began with 9:12 (“The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come”). It marks the end of the six trumpets. The seventh trumpet is about to be blown, and judgment executed.

The Book of Revelation

No. 19 The Seventh Trumpet, Revelation 11:15-19

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we come to the Day of Judgment – remember 10:7 – “in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.” The consummated, eternal kingdom of God has finally appeared on earth! It elicits praise from God’s people, but brings final woe upon the dead who are judged.

1. The consummated kingdom (11:15-17)

When the seventh trumpet is blown John hears loud voices in heaven which proclaim, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

Loud voices – because this is a message that must be heard, and because this is a message which the speakers want to be heard.

The kingdom = the rule of God. It is “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” – this is an instance in which “Lord” is not a reference to “the Lord Jesus” since he is the Christ. It is more likely a reference to Yahweh, and the proclamation of “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” would then be a reworking of Psalm 2 (“The One enthroned in heaven laughs... and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’”) and Psalm 110 (“The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”) and Daniel 7 (“one like a son of man... came to the Ancient of Days... and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom... his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away”).

The consummated reign of God is joyfully and gratefully acknowledged by the whole church.

Notice the way in which they address God. Previously, in 4:8 God was called, “the One who was, and who is, and who is coming.” Now he is called “the One who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.” In other words, God has finally come – and his coming means the full and final coming of his kingdom, his rule. It is not that God has ever been anything less than the “Lord God Almighty” whose sovereign will sustains and directs every creature to the end appointed by Himself. But the expression of God’s rule through Christ, the God-Man who died and rose again, is brought to its final, consummated form.

2. Judgment and grace (11:18)

It is necessary, therefore, that all opposition be destroyed – else there would always be a portion of creation to which “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” does not extend and in which it is not acknowledged and experienced.

Verse 18 opens and closes with expressions of judgment (“The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged... and for the destroying of the destroyers of the earth”). The centre of the verse speaks of grace for God’s people (“and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great”).

The nations raged (ōrgisthēsan) – but God’s wrath (orgē) came – a case of the punishment fitting the crime – the *lex taliones* of the Old Testament, i.e. “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”.

Every mention of wrath in *Revelation* is in connection with the Day of Judgment. That this is the Day of Judgment is confirmed by the expression “and the time for the dead to be judged” – cf. 20:12-13, “the dead were judged... Hades gave up the dead... and they were judged.”

God’s judgment is this – he will destroy (diaphthērai) the destroyers (diaphthērontas) of the earth. We have met this already in the burnt out mountain of the second trumpet – “Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the Lord, which destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain” (Jer. 51:25). So the “destroyers of the earth” are the world in rebellion, symbolised by Babylon.

The rewards granted to all God’s people is the answer to the prayer which they prayed from beneath the altar (6:10).

3. The gospel of God is fulfilled (11:19)

The lightning, thunder, earthquake and hail are theophanic, i.e. they declare the presence of God.

The whole issues from the temple of God in heaven – the word translated “temple” denotes the innermost sanctuary – that is why the ark of the covenant is seen, i.e. because the ark was housed in the most holy place.

The ark is symbolic of God’s gracious presence – it was covered with a slab of gold called “the atonement cover” because on it the high priest made atonement for the sins of the people.

We have in verse 19 the fulfilment of the goal which Moses sang about in the Song of Salvation (Exodus 15:1-18). “You will bring [your people] in and plant them on your holy mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. The LORD will reign for ever and ever” (Ex. 15:17-18).

The wilderness wandering concluded with the Conquest when the ark of the covenant marched round Jericho seven times with the blowing of trumpets announcing the destruction of God’s enemies and the entrance of his people into their rest. The appropriation of these themes to the sequence of seven trumpets in Revelation 8-11 is unmistakable.