

Notes on Revelation 8-9

Intro: The day of the Lord has arrived for some yet unrevealed enemy of God. All we know about them is that they are from among the kings of the earth, great men, commanders, rich, strong, slave and free. They cower in fear before the Almighty as He begins to manifest his wrath. However, before this happens, we are given a picture of the spiritual Israel of God, the 144,000, God's bond-servants, the redeemed. They have been sealed with the name of God on their foreheads and thus protected from these judgments. (We will see further confirmation of this in these next two chapters.) Now the final seal is about to open. In it we expect to see the terrible events of the day of the Lord, God's historical judgment on His enemies.

Here it might be helpful to consider the structure of the book. John makes use of a technique that we would call "nesting". The opening of the seventh seal brings before us seven trumpets, seven signs, and seven bowls of wrath. These begin (6:17) and finish the wrath of God (15:1). Thus, we have in the revelation proper: 7 seals that reveal the wrath of God, 7 trumpets that begin the wrath of God, 7 signs that explain the wrath of God, 7 bowls that finish the wrath of God. This gives structure and unity to the book.

The seventh seal is opened

Silence in heaven (Cf. Zech. 2:13) It is as if all of heaven is aware of what is about to happen. It is the calm before the storm.

The seven angels who stand before God (they receive instructions from him; what they do is controlled by the throne of heaven).

Trumpets are given to them (Biblically the function of a trumpet is to sound a warning)

Joel 2:1

Eze. 33:3

Another angel (Explanatory interlude)

Altar, the symbol of sacrifice (the worship of the redeemed). It is before the throne, indicating God's awareness of his people's sacrifices. It is golden indicating what is valuable or precious. Earlier we saw the souls of those slain under the altar. The word "slain" conveys the idea of butchering as in sacrifice. The blood is poured out around the altar in O.T. sacrifice. It cries out for vengeance.

A golden censer. The angel's instrument for burning incense. He adds this to the prayers of the saints that are going up from the altar to God. It is the intercession of the Spirit or the intercession of Christ in his people's behalf? God has even more reason to act when our imperfect lives are defended by and interceded for by Christ and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26,34)

The fire of the altar is thrown to earth, followed with peals of thunder, sounds, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. All of these are Biblical symbols of wrath.

In the fifth seal the saints cry, "How long...?" Here the saints on earth send forth their petitions to God. In response the saints are being told, "I have heard you..." The message seems to be that God's responses are the result of the pleas of his people for vengeance upon their persecutors. Cf. Lk. 18:6-8

Introduction to the trumpets

As we begin, we must ask ourselves, "Are these literal descriptions of specific historic events?"

Did things such as described here ever literally happen to men?

It would be self-evident that these are not literal descriptions of some action of God. All of these pictures have unrealistic elements.

Are they symbolic portrayals of specific historic events?

It is tempting to make these symbolic portrayals of historic events.

But again we face the problem of no clear way to identify the proper interpretation.

Anything that "fits" is acceptable. For example consider some interpretations from continuous historical or preterist commentators for the trumpets:

Speck says the first trumpet symbolizes the attack of Italy by the Huns led by Alaric.

Ogden says it symbolizes Vespasian's attack of Galilee.

But what is there about the symbol itself that suggests one preferable to the other?

Second, we have the problem of consistency; if the trumpets are events, are the bowls also?

Are they symbolic portrayals of judgment in general without reference to specific historic events?"

Some commentators seem these trumpets as pagentry, or dramatic imagery calculated to declare destruction but to refer to no particular idea.

Others see it as having some symbolic import as well. Commentators like Summers, Hendrikson, and Hailey take this approach.

The latter seems to be the best view. These scenes borrow heavily from passages that describe the judgment of God on wicked nations. In those passages, the language suggests various general judgments of God without reference to specific historic events. We are being constantly reminded of the judgment of Egypt in the ten plagues or other ancient enemies of Israel like Babylon, Egypt, etc. The judgments themselves may have symbolic import, the idea being drawn from the figures used in the symbol itself.

As we proceed we see that the judgments become more severe--first falling upon the environment of wicked men, and then hurting the men but not killing them, and then finally upon men themselves bringing death.

Note that even these expressions of wrath are designed to bring God's enemies to repentance (9:20-21). They warn of impending destruction.

These judgments are not the final ones on God's enemies.

The first trumpet

Hail and fire. Both are destructive elements in the physical that symbolize God's wrath upon an enemy

Job 38:22 Hail is said to be reserved for times of distress and for the day of battle.

Is. 28:1-4, 17 uses the idea of a hailstorm to describe the judgment of God upon the northern Kingdom by Assyria.

Is. 30:27-30 God is pictured as coming in wrath against Assyria with hailstorms and fire.

Thrown to earth (indicates the heavenly origin of these); Cf. also Is. 28:2.

The mixture of blood perhaps suggests the return of the blood of the righteous under the altar on the heads of the wicked, since it is from the altar in heaven that the angel has cast forth these judgments. Cf. 8:5; Deut. 32:43 (God avenges the blood of his servants).

Note that when one accepts responsibility for the killing of another, the blood of that person is on their heads or hands (Cf. Mt. 27:25)

A third of the trees are hurt, the grass is burned.

One third perhaps indicates that these judgments are severe but not complete.

The earth, the trees and the green grass symbolize the place where people live and the things upon which they depend.

Destruction of land means loss of food and income for the people. Cf. Jer. 7:20

This symbols may convey the idea of a judgment from God that is destructive but not totally. The blood of the saints is returned upon the heads of those who have killed them, symbolizing their avenging at God's hand. The sources of livelihood for the people are destroyed.

The second trumpet

Something like a burning mountain is thrown into the sea

Mountains often symbolize the authority or power of a nation or kingdom (Cf. Is. 2:2; 11;

Cf. Jer. 51:24-25 Babylon is a burnt mountain that is covered by the waters of the sea, v. 42.

The water turns to blood

Obviously reminiscent of Egypt's plague

A third of sea life is destroyed and a third of the ships are destroyed.

This results in a destruction of a major source of food and a source of commercial profit.

The language itself may symbolize the loss that comes through the destruction of the power or authority of a nation..

The third trumpet

A great star fell from heaven.

This part of the vision is reminiscent of God's statements about the ruler of Babylon (Is. 14:12) who exalted himself but who fell from heaven. Thus the star represents proud men or perhaps rulers in general who exalt themselves against God and thus are destined to fall.

The star has a name, "Wormwood".

In Deut. 29:18, Amos 5:7; 6:12 where wormwood is a symbol of the idolatry that leads to disrespect for the principles of God's law resulting in injustice and unrighteousness.

Cf. Jer. 9:15 God's judgment on O.T. Jerusalem and its false prophets, 23:15 which depict the bitterness of judgment.

A third of the waters become bitter and bring death to many men. Waters and springs are the fountains of life itself. As men drink from this fountain there comes bitterness to the lives of those who practice it.

This trumpet seems to picture proud rulers destined to fall who corrupts the very fountain of life, substituting injustice for justice and the bitterness of sin for the sweetness of righteousness.

The fourth trumpet

A third of sun, moon, and stars are smitten so that they cannot shine.

The sun, moon, and stars represents the blessings of a world ordered by God.

The absence of these suggests the loss of blessing of a world disordered by God because of sin.

This trumpet bears strong resemblance to the prophecy of Jer. 4:19ff describing God's judgment upon Jerusalem for its wickedness. The trumpet sounds, the light is taken away, partial destruction follows. The daughter of Zion cries "Woe". Cf. also Eze. 32:7-8.

Darkness over the land both day and night.

Reminiscent of the plagues against Egypt

Symbolically this may as in Jer. 4 indicate the lack of insight and understanding and its consequences.

The language itself may suggest the ignorance and consequent sorrow and loss that comes through the loss of intelligent leadership.

Summary of the first four trumpets

These judgments affect every part of the world of the wicked--land, sea, rivers, heavens. They are devastating but not totally destructive. Each has a serious consequence in the loss of what is connected with life, grass and trees (crops), sea life and commerce, drinking water, light. Together they may be a dramatic display of God's wrath as He works providentially in his creation; but not necessarily a prediction of specific events. If

more specific events are in mind, these trumpets may depict various judgments of God occurring in the natural world that encourage man's fear of and dependence upon God (Cf. Lk. 21:25-26).

If we interpret them more symbolically, based on the use of these figures in the O.T., the trumpets may symbolize the destruction and loss that comes through the revisitations of a nation's violence upon its head, the social upheavals that lead to physical and financial loss, the perversion of righteous principle that leads to unhappiness and death, the miseducation of leaders that leads to ignorance and its consequences.

An eagle pronounces "woes" to come

The eagle is often appealed to in contexts of judgment because of its speed in falling upon its prey.

This eagle announces "woes" to come. This onomatopoeic word describes the pain of those who fall under God's judgment. It translates the Hebrew word that sounds just like an expression of pain. "Oh!"

The fifth trumpet

A star from heaven which had fallen to earth

Stars may symbolize men or angels (Cf. 1:20).

A fallen star may symbolize a fallen angel.

This seems to be Satan (Cf. Lk. 10:18). Some think the description of the king of Babylon in Is. 14 is drawn from Satan's experience.

He stands in contrast to Jesus, the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16). He also holds the key of death and Hades (1:18).

A key to the abyss

The abyss is the abode of Satan and wicked spirits (cf. Lk. 8:31; Cf. also it is from the abyss that persecuting powers arise, 11:7; 17:8).

Satan "is given" power over these wicked evil forces. He has only that power given to him by God.

Smoke which turned to ravenous locusts.

Smoke seems to symbolize the darkening effect of Satan's work as the "ruler of darkness" who "blinds the minds of men" (2 Cor. 4:3).

The locusts are not natural. They do not eat plants or trees but hurt men instead.

Their power comes from Satan or ultimately from God. Scorpions themselves are used as a symbol of evil (Cf. Lk. 10:19).

The locusts themselves are described in terms that make them powerful, victorious, intelligent, attractive, strong, invincible, numerous, truly unassailable. So the devil makes his false messages seem.

The leader of the locusts is "Destroyer".

The locusts torture men.

These locusts bring harm only to those who do not belong to God. This suggests that the harm is contingent upon disobedience to God.

The torture is severe. It lasts for 5 months, not 5 minutes. Or, this may indicate that Satan's work is limited.

It is pain without death.

At this point we surely must see the locusts as symbolic of something. This argues for a symbolic rather than literal interpretation of the other agents of destruction. It seems this symbol suggests the pain and suffering that come from the influence of sin in a society, bringing misery and spiritual ruin, a fate worse than death itself!

The sixth trumpet

A voice from the four horns of the golden altar

Since the altar seems to stand for the worship of the church on earth, with its attending prayers for help. The voice seems to suggest that the trumpet judgments are the results of the prayers of the saints.

Four angels are released at the River Euphrates

The Euphrates in O.T. was the boundary of the promised land (Gen. 15:18; 1 Kg. 4:21)

In another sense it was the border of the enemies God used to destroy Israel, synonymous with Assyria (Cf. Is. 8:5ff).

Two hundred million horsemen riding on horses that can destroy with both mouth and tails.

Note that the time for this judgment is decreed by God. (Cf. Ac. 17:26-27; Dan. 4:17)

Note that men are directly affected in this judgment and are killed.

The number suggests an army of tremendous proportions, fully capable of whatever task to be accomplished. And their is a mission of destruction. Their armor is made of those things God uses for destruction, fire, sulphurous smoke and brimstone (the colors red and blue suggesting these elements).

They kill as they pass and leave pain in their wake.

Again the saints are not affected (Cf. 9:20).

Symbolically this vision indicates the combined forces of destruction, those armies used by God agents of wrath against wicked people, bring death, pain, and destruction to them.

A final look

The composite picture is terrorizing. It shows the progressive devastation of those who refuse to acknowledge God. It is the beginning of the wrath of God. It offers the possibility of repentance while manifesting the true greatness of God's wrath upon sinful men.

Conclusions: These trumpeting angels are setting forth God's wrath upon the wicked in which he warns of destruction if repentance is not forthcoming.