

Revelation, Session 4

Seven Trumpets

Revelation 8:6-11:19

It is perhaps most helpful not to think of this central section of Revelation as a kind of timeline, with the drama of the seals followed by the drama of the trumpets followed by the drama of the bowls. Rather what we have here is a kind of triptych, with three panels set up beside each other. Or we can think of it as a kind of split screen motion picture with events juxtaposed against each other simultaneously.

In each case what Revelation affirms is the power of judgment and the hope of redemption. In each case the power of the judgment is presented in such dramatic, almost overwhelming images that it is hard to grasp the hope, but in each case there is a fundamental affirmation of salvation that is there if we can pay enough attention, or rally enough faith.

The depiction of the trumpet will in itself will resonate with John's readers or hearers. There is the trumpet that calls people to worship at the temple. There is the trumpet that sounded before the fall of Jericho. There is the trumpet that is regularly part of the scenario for the last days in early Christian expectation:

“For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”

(1Thess. 4:16)

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery, we will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51-52; see 1 Thess. 4:16, Matt. 24:31)

Again the seven trumpets echo the letters to the seven churches, the perfection of the letter seven, and perhaps the first century belief that the universe contained seven heavens—one assigned to each planet—and that each heaven had its own angel or angelic host. (See for instance the magical document *Sefer ha Razim*.)

Also note that as we saw in our last session the revelation of the trumpets takes place in the context of heavenly worship. The unfolding disasters and the unfailing hope are presented by God in response to the prayers of the saints, presented before the divine altar.

The First Five Trumpets: Revelation 8:6-9:12

Again in these verses we see two characteristics of Revelation's rhetoric. First, the language is imaginative, allusive, metaphor piled upon metaphor. It is a misreading of the material to try to determine exactly which feature of the vision applies to which kind of punishment or pain. To ask why the stingers in the scorpions' tails can harm people for five months rather than two months or a year and a half is to misunderstand the nature of apocalyptic, and poetic, imagery. You might want to look at some of the apocalyptic poetry of the 18th century British poet William Blake to see how this kind of poetry works, not as a code but as a kind of overwhelming torrent of imaginative possibilities. In 1793 Blake published his poem "America" one of the "Visions of the Daughters of Albion." Albion is England and more than England, America is America and more than America.

Washington spoke: "Friends of America, look over the Atlantic sea;
A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron chain
Descends, link by link, from Albion's cliffs across the sea, to bind
Brothers and sons of America, till our voices pale and yellow,
Heads deprest, voices seak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip

Descend to generations that in future times forget.”

The strong voice ceas'd, for a terrible blast swept over the heaving sea;

The eastern cloud rent; on his cliffs stood Albion's wrathful prince,

A dragon form, clashing his scales...” (In The Portable Blake, Viking, 195, 302-303:

Blake also created illustrations that tried to capture the mysterious imagery of the Book of Revelation, such as this one of the Beasts:



Second the language time and again echoes passages from the Old Testament without simply being a recital of any of those older narratives. The plagues that are to fall upon the earth remind us of the plagues that fall upon Egypt in the book of Exodus before the children of the Hebrews are led out from bondage, but Revelation does not simply replicate that list of plagues.

In all these plagues, as Christopher Rowland points out, something comes down from heaven and wreaks havoc on the earth. At the end of our story there will be new heaven and new earth but in the meantime heaven's dealings with earth look more like judgment than like mercy. The continued use of the passive tense (the angel of 9:1 who is also a fallen star "was given" the key) suggests divine activity without directly naming the Ancient of Days who is the implied actor behind all these scenarios.

It is also the case that from time to time we can see hints that the purpose of the plagues is not simply to wreak destruction but also to inspire repentance, though the option of repentance is, to put it mildly, underutilized by the inhabitants of earth. It is also clear that the author is not predicting events for future millennia but is telling his readers/hearers that the end times have begun, that the time for repentance is now.

The first two trumpet calls are accompanied by fiery destruction that consumes one third of pretty much every created thing that is, except for the grass, which is destroyed entirely. Earlier in these visions one fourth of creation is threatened, so perhaps judgment grows from worse to worse. (See Rev. 8:7, 9, 11, 12) And still perhaps there is some hope in the claim that by the time the trumpets have all sounded two thirds of most of the universe remains.

With the third trumpet call and the fall of the star called Wormwood it is evident that not only is a third of extra human creation being destroyed but human creation along with it. The realization that heavenly or earthly pollution of springs of water deals death is not a twentieth

century discovery. The bitterness of the water here may also point ahead to the bitterness of the scroll our seer is instructed to eat in Rev. (on Wormwood see Jeremiah 9:15 in the context of another prophetic threat.)

The fourth angel brings darkness, recalling Egypt and its plagues, but also undoing creation in reverse order—first the earth and the waters, and then the heavens and the heavenly lights of Genesis 2.

In 8:13 the eagle that flies in midheaven mediates between heaven and earth, destruction in the heavens and destruction in the land. His cry mediates between the woes that have just passed and the three woes that are to come. What has gone before was bad enough; what comes now will be worse.

It is not entirely clear whether the prophetic bird is an eagle or a vulture. In any case what he cries is doom.

The trumpet call of the fifth angel brings the most elaborately described plague so far. We will see more of the meaning of the depths for our author later, but here out of the depths come forth these locust/scorpion/humanoid creatures. (See Joel 2:4 and Exodus 10:1-30)

The locusts, like all the other scourges, are ultimately set loose by God, but proximately they are under the control of a satanic figure whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon, both of which can be translated as “The Destroyer.” J. and C. Gonzalez tell us that the emperor Domitian liked to be identified with the Greek god Apollo and wonder whether these verses may not identify that emperor with the forces of cosmic destruction. The article by J. Franz in the suggested readings notes that Domitian identified himself with various of the gods. Moreover he had coins made in his own honor, with the image of Apollo on one side of the coin. This suggests one way to read Revelation’s concern with the “mark” which might seem to be an

image of Apollo but which John believes is also the image of the great Destroyer.

Apollo/Apollyon.

In any case we get in this passage what we've barely seen since the initial seven letters of our book—there is a chosen people with the mark of sanctity on their foreheads. Many will be destroyed; Abbadon will have prey aplenty, but not everyone lives under promise of nothingness.

John informs his audience that with these five punishments the first woe has past and that there are two to come. The second woe will be announced later in Revelation; for Revelation's first readers the third woe is apparently yet to come just at the end of the end. Or perhaps this is another example of John's interest in mysterious and metaphorical revelation. Perhaps we are encouraged to re-read in order to see what this third woe may be.

The Sixth Angel and a Prophetic Pause (Revelation 9:13-10:11)

The sixth trumpet brings about yet another kind of disaster, now not “natural” disaster but warfare, albeit warfare of a particularly mythological and metaphoric kind. Different commentators make different suggestions about what actual armies inhabitants of the Roman empire toward the end of the first century might have feared, or which of Israel's ancient enemies provided the background for this picture. Some of the details may be references to the armaments of John's time, so the “sting in the tail” of the locusts recalls for the readers the Parthian archers who rode and shot arrows as well. What is clear is that this is an army to outdo any other army—two hundred million horsemen.

It is also clear that the horsemen are, like all other threats of this section of Revelation, under the ultimate control of God who allows for release of the four angels who are presumably the intermediary handlers of this terrifying host. Rev. 9:15 suggests a theory of history that

comes close to predestination in the sense that the angels of war have been bound up until the pre-appointed time, known presumably only by God.

In vv. 20-21 we get one of the reminders that the purpose of all these plagues was not simply punishment but repentance, but the two thirds of humankind who outlast this warfare remain unrepentant and we can be sure that their day, too, will come.

In Revelation 10 our author reveals that he is not only a poet but a dramatist. An additional angel, beyond the seven trumpeters, now arrives from heaven. He is described in ways that remind us both of the Ancient of Days and of his Son. He has come to announce that there will be no more delay in the coming of the last days, but dramatically, his announcement itself delays the action.

The delay continues when the angel validates again for John of Patmos his own prophetic call. Like Ezekiel John is given a scroll, and like Ezekiel he eats the scroll he has been given.

“(God) said to me, ‘Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. ‘ Then I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.’” (Ezekiel 3:3)

The scroll is not that one sealed by the seven seals, but a new scroll, unsealed, presumably full of the oracles of God that John is to pronounce. Unlike Ezekiel’s scroll the sweetness of the first taste is followed by bitterness—appropriately for this first century prophet.

As with so many words of God the prophecies taste sweet at first but then turn sour in the mouth. Wormwood revisited. One of the great questions of this book is whether God will restore sweetness to creation once again. The last sections of our passage for today offer some hope.

The Witnesses and the Seventh Trumpet (Revelation 11:1-19)

The delay that follows the announcement that there will be no further delay continues. John is given the task of measuring the temple in Jerusalem. Clearly more is signified here than an architectural assessment (especially since by now the temple has almost certainly been destroyed.) Perhaps this is preparation for the confirmation of the final vision of new heaven and new earth when the temple is transcended. Perhaps the temple is a cipher for the faithful people who bear God's mark on their heads and who will be able to endure forty two months until the end, while those "outside" face their destruction. That number, by the way, comes from the prediction in the Book of Daniel 7:25 about the limited period of three and half years during which the Temple in Jerusalem would be subject to the desecration imposed by the Greek Seleucid King Antiochus IV.

There is at least one clear hope that God has not given up on God's people. God will provide two witnesses to bear witness for a time. The Greek word for witness, *martyrs*, has been borrowed by the English language for our term "martyr." What the term catches is that the witness not only bears witness by words but by the life the witness lives and often the death the witness dies. The witnesses are promised that for the time that God allows they will be enabled to make their testimony. But John's readers are also warned, more likely also reminded, that the punishment for the witnesses fidelity will be death and disgrace.

Whether we can imagine a particular city that is Sodom and Egypt and Jerusalem at once, or whether we see this "city" as a metaphor for earthly powers and principalities we see that for the witnesses' (as for the lamb in the midst of the throne) the price of faithfulness is suffering and death.

But as with so much of the Christian story the conclusion of the witnesses' witness is not torture and death but resurrection. The loud voice from heaven says what it said to John of Patmos at the beginning of chapter 4. "Come up here."

It is impossible to know what witnesses the author had in mind. The Gonzalez' thinks that they are symbols of the Jewish and Gentile believers in the crucified lamb. Others try to identify them with particular figures in the early church (James and John?) The olive trees that accompany them are sometimes associated with the prophets. The lamps illumine the seven churches in the first chapters of revelation. Probably again we move beyond any simple equivalence to see in the two witnesses the inspiration and remembrance of John's readers of those who have stayed faithful till the end.

And now with the translation of the martyrs to heaven and the accompanying signs and wonders some people do at last begin to give glory to God.

The interlude ends. The seventh trumpet sounds. The end of the story (which is both now and yet to come) is sung rather than proclaimed. The resurrection of the witnesses is the clue to the end of this drama—after all the tribulation, punishment and martyrdom—the kingdoms of this earth will be ratified as the Kingdom of our God.

Focus Texts: Rev 9:7–21; 11:1–19

Questions for Reflection:

1. In religious literature from the first century until now it seems easier to portray vivid judgment than to portray vivid redemption. What are some of the signs of God's promise that Revelation provides for its readers? What are some images of redemption that are helpful to you today?
2. The honored Christian virtues are faith, hope and love. In Revelation however there is also considerable emphasis on patience. How might we grow in patience in our own time and our own communities? How can we distinguish Christian patience from disappointed resignation—"things don't change"?
3. Revelation stresses the importance of "witnesses" for God. The best known religious witnesses today are probably Jehovah's Witnesses who are courageous and explicit about sharing their faith. Are there other forms of witness that might be appropriate to your own congregations and your own gifts? (Remember that in the first century as in the twenty-first faithful witness is never risk-free.)

Basic Reading

Gonzalez, *Revelation*, 59-75.

Further Reading

David Aune, “God and Time in the Apocalypse of John,” in A. Andrew Das and Frank J. Matera, *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 229–248.

G. K. Beale, “The Influence of Daniel upon the Structure and Theology of John’s Apocalypse,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984) 413–23.

Gordon Franz, “The King and I” (*Bible and Spade*)
<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/01/18/the-king-and-i-the-apostle-john-and-emperor-domitian-part-1.aspx#Article>

Allen McNicol, “Revelation 11.1-14 and the Structure of the Apocalypse,” *Restoration Quarterly* 22 (1979) 192–202.

John O’Rourke, “The Hymns of the Apocalypse,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968) 399-409.