



"The Sealing of the Saints" by Lucas Cranach

The Servants of God

Revelation 7:1-17

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." Then

I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulon 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and around the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!" Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes - who are they, and where do they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth..." - An interlude now occurs in the apocalyptic message of judgment and doom upon the earth. Two beautiful scenes of comfort and hope are offered the people of God before the fearful message of judgment continues in the vision of the seven seals. In a sense, these scenes are the Revelator's response to the desperate question which concluded the opening of the sixth seal: ***"For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?"*** (Revelation 6:17) The calm assurance of those whom God has numbered, sealed and arrayed in white stand in stark contrast to the world's panic and fear.

"What John sees in this interlude comforts him. After the horrifying scenes introduced by the first six seals, scenes that could have melted John's heart like wax in awe and terror, he is now lifted up by what he sees next. The two scenes, the church militant and the church triumphant, would at any time and place appear



"The Sealing of the Elect" by Albrecht Dürer

beautiful, instilling peace and hope in the Christian heart. But here, in this setting, in sharp contrast to the horrors of suffering and despair and darkness and death depicted by the first six seals, these scenes appear even more beautiful to John.”
(Brighton, p. 180)

The customary phrase “***After this I saw***” signals the change in scene and sets up the contrast between the turbulent events of the sixth seal and the vision which is to follow. The phrase does not indicate a chronological sequence between the events described in the two scenes which are in fact synchronous.

“I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth...” - A triplet of fours - four angels, four corners, and four winds - opens the scene. The threefold repetition of the earth number effectively emphasizes that the whole world is involved in that which is here depicted. The reference to the “***four corners of the earth***” does not imply a particular view of the shape or form of the planet. The writer’s concern is symbolism, not cosmology. We continue to use the same kind of language today. The “***four angels***” of the text are not further identified. They are evidently angels of a rank lower than that of the four living beings or the elders. In the rabbinic traditions of the Jews, angels are the agents of God’s providence in control of the forces of nature. The apocryphal Book of Jubilees reports that on the first day of creation the Lord God created -

“the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels of the spirit of fire, and the angels of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds and darkness and snow and hail and frost, and the angels of resoundings and thunder and lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and heat and winter and springtime and harvest and summer and all the spirits of His creatures which are in heaven and on earth.” (Jubilees 2:2)

Revelation 16:5 makes a similar reference to “***the angel in charge of the waters.***” Hence the concept of angels as custodians or guardians of the forces of nature would be a familiar idea to John’s readers.

The four angels are portrayed as “***holding back the four winds of the earth.***” The verb “***holding back***” (Greek - “*krateo*”) literally means to restrain by force. The concept is that of a wild beast struggling with great power to break free from the restraint that holds it firmly in place. The implication of the verb is that if the beast is unleashed, the result will be terrible destruction. The four winds are to be



"The Sealing of the Elect" by Jean Duvet

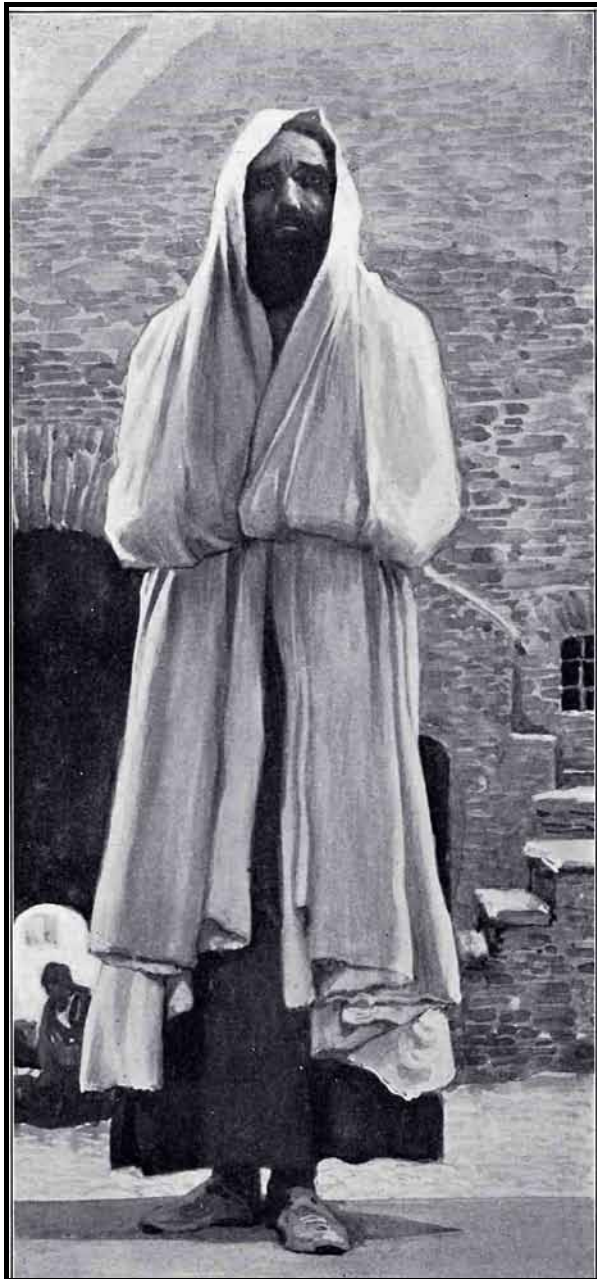
identified with the four horsemen of Revelation 6 as the agents of God's judgment upon the earth. This connection with the winds is fully consistent with the Old Testament precedents from which the horsemen themselves were drawn. It was previously noted that the imagery of horsemen in the first four seals (Revelation 6:1-8) was largely based upon Zechariah 6:1-8. There the prophet identifies the horses



“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” by Jacob von Steinle

with these words: ***“These are the four winds of heaven going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world.”*** (Zechariah 6:5) Daniel also speaks of ***“the four winds of heaven”*** which take the form of four great beasts coming forth from the churning sea (Daniel 7:2-3). Jeremiah uses the destructive power of the four winds as an image of God's judgment upon Elam: ***“I will bring against Elam the four winds from the four quarters of the heavens; I will scatter them to the four winds, and there will not be a nation where Elam's exiles do not go.”*** (Jeremiah 49:36). It is thus quite clear that the four winds here restrained by the angels are the four horsemen of the preceding vision. The implementation of their mission of judgment upon the earth is delayed - ***“to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.”*** The repetition again stresses the worldwide nature of the impending judgment upon all the earth and its inhabitants. Trees are specifically mentioned in keeping with the wind imagery because they are the part of the natural

world most susceptible to the destructive power of the wind. The purpose of the delay is to enable God to provide for the protection of His people. The identification of the four winds with the horsemen means that the sealing of believers now described must actually precede the unleashing of the four horsemen described in the preceding vision.



“Malachi” by J. James Tissot

“Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God.” - Ezekiel had foretold the coming of the glory of God upon Israel *“from the east.”* (Ezekiel 43:2). Judaism traditionally associated the blessings of God as originating in the east, the place of the rising of the sun. The rabbis taught that the Messiah, *“the Sun of righteousness,”* who will arise *“with healing in His wings”* (Malachi 4:2) would enter the temple through the eastern gate. Thus the coming of this angel from the east would suggest that he brings a blessing from God. The angel bears *“the seal of the living God.”* The identity of the seal is unspecified. Some suggest a signet ring which bore the mark or crest of the monarch (cf. Genesis 41:41-42) while others prefer a branding iron of some sort like those used to place the mark of ownership upon slaves. The text does not settle the debate. Both elements seem to be present: the possession of God’s seal marks this angel as one who functions with the authority and the power of God Himself and the seal will be used to place the mark of God’s ownership and protection upon the saints. The angel with the seal



*"The Sealing of the Elect" - 16th Century Bible
Woodcut*

commands the four angels restraining the winds : ***"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."*** The image of a protective seal on the foreheads of God's own in the face of impending disaster is derived from Ezekiel 9:1-6. The people of Jerusalem are about to be slaughtered because of their idolatry and unbelief. But before the massacre begins God commands His messenger to place His mark upon the foreheads of those ***"who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done."*** (Ezekiel 9:4) All those who did not bear the mark of God were killed. It is interesting to note that the mark placed upon the foreheads of God's own in Ezekiel 9 is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *"taw,"* which at that time was drawn in the shape of a cross. Hence those who were sealed with the mark of

the cross were saved from destruction. The incident is reminiscent of the first Passover and the marking of the doorways in Goshen with the blood of the Passover lamb (cf. Exodus 12:7,13,22-28). The sealing of the foreheads of God's people on earth is also mentioned in Revelation 9:1-6 where the seal serves to protect them from the scorpions-demons that arise from the abyss. In two other similar texts, Revelation 14:1,3 and 22:4, the people of God are designated as having the Name of God upon their foreheads.

The imagery of God's seal upon the foreheads of His servants is a promise of preservation in the faith amid all of the trials and tribulations still to come. God's people will not escape the suffering that comes upon the world as the result of sin but

they will be empowered to persevere through all adversity. The winds of judgment about to be unleashed will serve to refine and strengthen the faith of the believer. Dr. Brighton summarizes:

“The sealing here in Revelation 7 refers to the ongoing work of the Spirit through God’s Word and Sacraments by which the Christian is kept in faith and protected in godly hope through all the tribulations and sufferings and persecutions illustrated by the four horsemen. No matter how dire the dangers become for the Christian, God will not permit His people to be lost.” (Brighton, p. 187)

“Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel...” - The number 144,000, like nearly all the other numbers in the Book of Revelation, is a symbol with figurative significance. It represents the entire people of God on earth, the whole church, the full number of the elect. In the numerology of Scripture, twelve is the number of the church, based upon the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. Christ’s deliberate selection of twelve apostles was designed to mirror and reflect the tribes of the Old Testament. Thus, when a vacancy was created by the suicide of Judas, it was necessary to select a replacement so that the twelve might be restored. Twelve as the number of the church was illustrated earlier in Revelation by the twenty-four elders who surround the throne of God in heaven



“Jacob Blesses His Sons” by J. James Tissot

(Revelation 4:4). This same symbolism is reflected later in Revelation in the twelve gates and the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12-14). The names of the twelve tribes are written upon the twelve gates and the names of the twelve apostles are written upon the twelve foundations. The twelve imagery continues in the New Jerusalem as angel called to measure the city finds that it is a perfect square of 12,000 stadia and that its walls are 144 cubits thick. (Revelation 21:16-17). The number/symbol 144,000 is obtained by squaring twelve ($12 \times 12 = 144$), thus representing both the church of the Old Testament (the twelve tribes) and the church of the New Testament (the twelve apostles). This number is then multiplied by the ordinal number 10 - upon which our system of enumeration is based



"The Sealing of the Elect" - 16th Century Luther Bible Woodcut

- cubed ($10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1,000$). This is done to signify absolute completeness. Each and every one of God's people on earth is included in this number. The symbolic nature of the number 144,000 is further indicated by the fact that exactly 12,000 are sealed from each of the twelve tribes listed in the text. Thus the seal of God upon the foreheads of the 144,000 is a sign of assurance and promise. As the winds of tribulation blow throughout the earth, God will protect His own. None of those whom

God has chosen will be lost.

“144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000, from the tribe of Gad, 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh, 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000, from the tribe of Levi, 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar, 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin, 12,000.” - John indicates

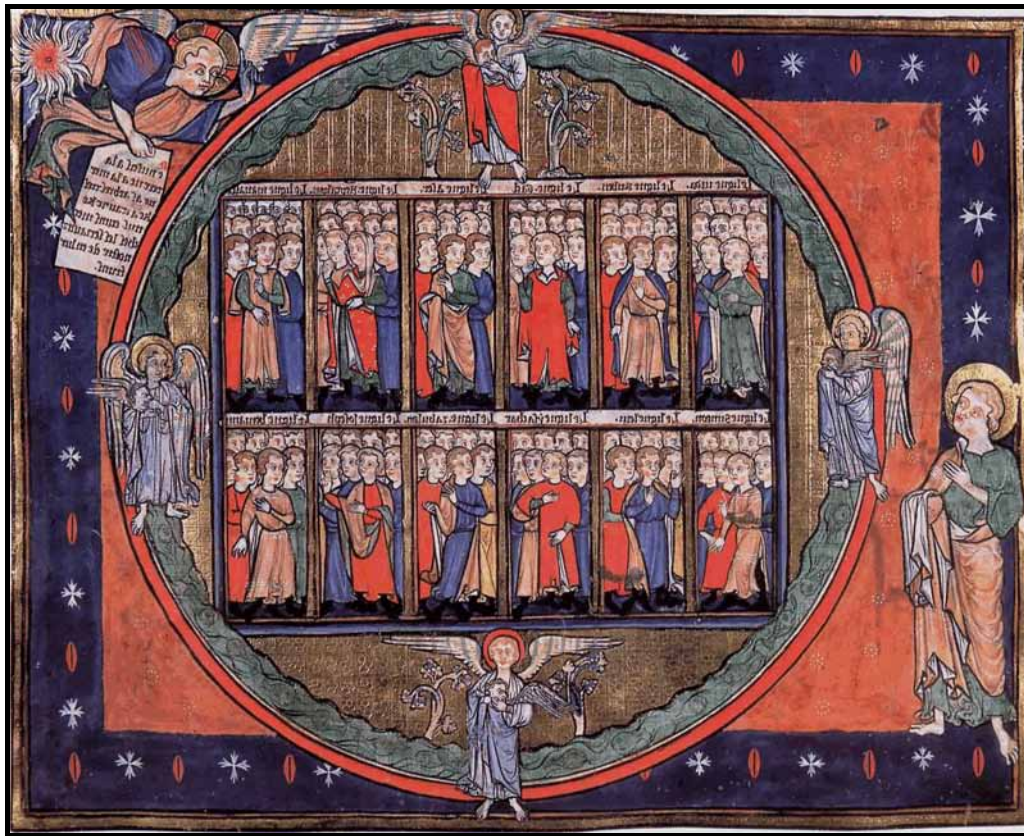
that the 144,000 will be drawn with precise symmetry from the twelve tribes of Israel. It is not uncommon for the New Testament to refer to the church, both Jews and Gentiles using the Old Testament terminology of the Children of Israel. In the Epistles of Romans and Galatians St. Paul explicitly and emphatically teaches that membership in the Israel of God is a matter of faith not blood or ethnic descent. To be a true descendant of Abraham is to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. (cf. Romans 4:1-12;

9:6-8; 11:11-27; Galatians 3:26-29). Earlier in Revelation (Revelation 2:9; 3:9) Jesus had strongly condemned those of the ***“synagogue of Satan” “who say they are Jews and are not.”*** Accordingly, the reference here is not to ethnic Israel but to all the people of God, both Jews and Gentiles. The list of tribal names and their sequence in Revelation 7 is unique in Scripture. The Old Testament includes almost twenty variations and combinations of tribes. The tribes of Dan and Ephraim are omitted in this listing. This may be the result of their traditional association with the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom in the days of Jeroboam (cf. 1 Kings 12:25-33). The tribe of Judah is listed first, although Judah was fourth in birth order (Genesis 35:23-26). But Judah is the tribe of the Messiah from which Jesus came, and thus receives the



“Judah” by J. James Tissot

position of honor in John's list. Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, were both blessed by Jacob and included in the allotment of land. Manasseh, is included in the list here while Ephraim, his brother is not. The priestly tribe of Levi, which did not receive a land allotment, is included in this list. By removing Dan and Ephraim and including Levi and Manasseh, John maintains the symbolically significant twelve.



"The Sealing of the Elect" - 13th Century Bible Illumination

The enumeration of the ranks from each tribe clearly carries a military connotation. The Revelator intends to remind his audience that the church on earth must always remain the *"Church Militant,"* constantly at war with the sinful world in which it must survive. In the Old Testament, the purpose of a census was always to determine the military strength of the nation (cf. Numbers 1:3,18,20; 2 Samuel 24:1-9; 1 Chronicles 27:23). The encampment of Israel in the wilderness was arranged by God in such a way that the tabernacle was surrounded by three tribes on each side (Numbers 2:1-34). It was, in effect, a military camp as the nation moved toward the conquest of the



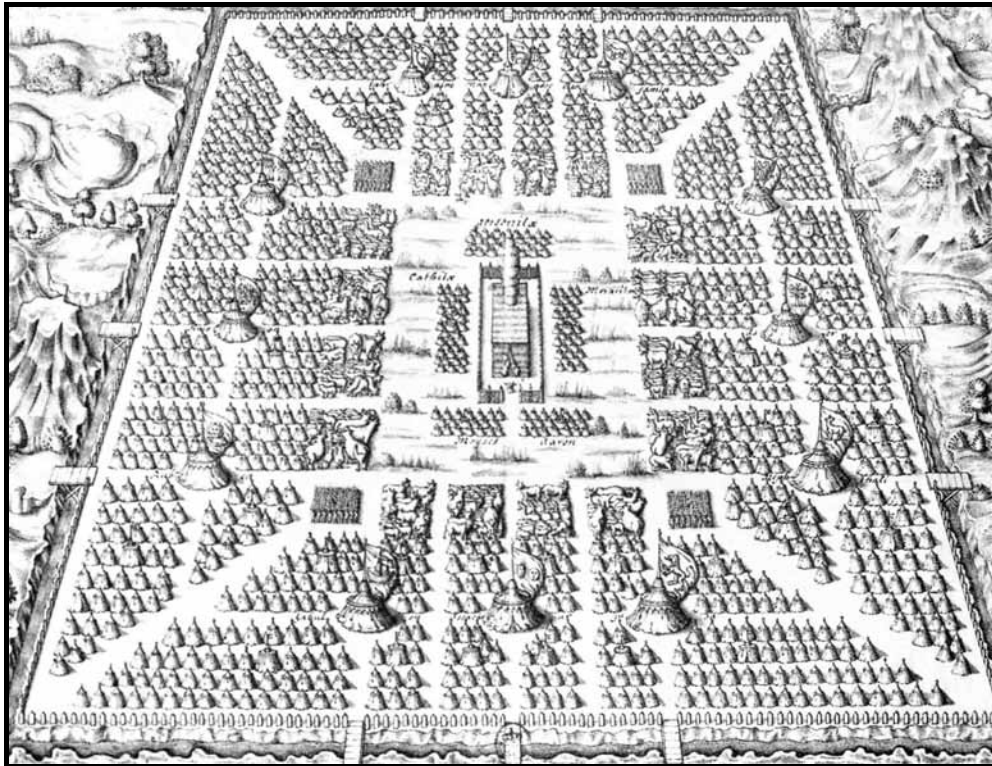
"Israel On the March Before Jericho" by J. James Tissot

promised land. This same pattern served as the order of march during the journey and the order of battle when the army of Israel went to war. Brighton concludes:

"It gives a numerical picture of God's people on earth in perfect marching order, in perfect step. It suggests that God's Israel, the church of Jesus Christ, as it advances to battle in the mission given it, is a perfect and complete army, fully equipped and ready to do God's work." (Brighton, p. 190)

"After this I looked and there was before me a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." - The characteristic phrase ***"After this I looked"*** signals the shift to the next scene in the vision. It is important to note, once again, that the phrase does not indicate a chronological sequence of events, but the movement from one scene in the vision to the next. In this instance, the scene which now follows is simultaneous to that which preceded it. The vision of the 144,000 depicted the church militant on earth poised for battle, every rank in its proper place, sealed and protected by the mark of the Almighty God. The glorious sight of the church triumphant in heaven is now presented before our eyes. The great host stands ***"before the throne and in front of the Lamb."*** Thus the elders, the four living beings, and

the ranks of angels which surround God's heavenly throne are now joined by the innumerable multitude of the redeemed. This unprecedented glimpse of heavenly glory is intended to strengthen and encourage God's people on earth, still locked in desperate conflict with sin and evil. The message is clear - Do not despair! Do not grow weary in the struggle! Evil has already been defeated! The victory celebration is already taking place in heaven.

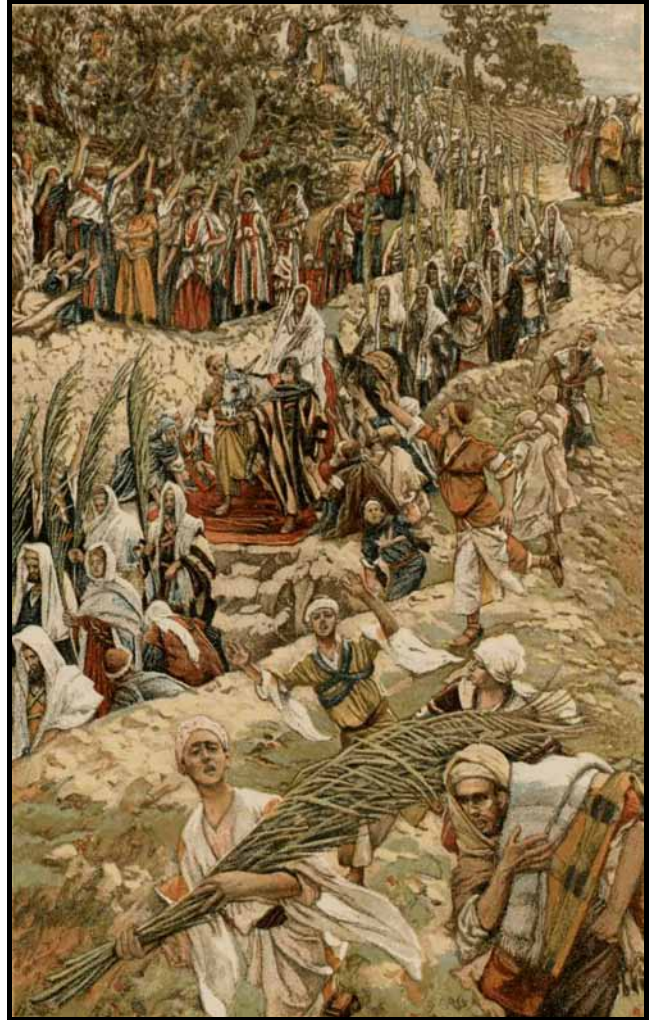


"The Encampment of Israel in the Wilderness" - 17th Century Engraving

The vast throng is described as ***"a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language."*** God had promised the patriarchs that their descendants would be as countless as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12). That promise is now fulfilled as a host beyond counting fills the halls of heaven. The phrase ***"from every nation, tribe, people, and language"*** emphasizes the universal nature of the group. The grace of God transcends all of the petty boundaries that divide the children of Adam from one another to embrace all of humanity. The specific language is drawn from the Book of Daniel (Daniel 3-7). The magnitude of this multitude contrasts with the 144,000 who were counted in the preceding scene. This appears to be a much larger group

including all the saints now in glory from the beginning of time.

The nature of this gathering is indicated by the phrase ***“They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”*** This is the victory celebration of the redeemed. This is the fifth reference in Revelation to ***“white robes.”*** They are worn by the 24 elders around God’s throne (Revelation 4:4) and the martyrs beneath the altar (Revelation 6:11). In the letters to the seven churches those who remain steadfast and faithful are also arrayed in white (Revelation 3:4-5, 18). The pure white robe represents the righteousness of God bestowed upon His people by virtue of the redemption accomplished in His blood (cf. v.14). Palm branches occur only twice in the New Testament, here in Revelation 7, and in the account of Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem (John 12:13). The use of palms figured prominently in the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles which commemorated Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:40; Nehemiah 8:13-17). During the intertestamental period palms were used in the celebration of the deliverance of Jerusalem and the purification of the temple under Simon Maccabaeus (2 Maccabees 10:5-8). G. K. Beale explains their significance:



“Hosanna to the Son of David”
by J. James Tissot

“Palm branches is an allusion to the Festival of Tabernacles. In the OT this was both an occasion of national thanksgiving for the fruitfulness of crops and a commemoration of Israel’s dwelling in tents under divine protection during the journey out of Egypt and thus a reminder that Israel’s continued existence as a nation was traceable ultimately to God’s redemption at the Red Sea and victory over the Egyptians. In 1 Macc. 13:51 and 2 Macc 10:7 palm branches signify victory over an enemy...John now applies this imagery to people of all nations, who rejoice in

their latter day exodus redemption, in their victory over their persecutors, and God's protection of them during their wilderness pilgrimage through the great tribulation." (Beale, p. 428)

The prophet Zechariah had promised that the day would come when all the nations would join with Israel in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, rejoicing together in the deliverance accomplished by God (Zechariah 8:18-23). This glorious vision is the fulfillment of that promise. When the crowds hailed Jesus on the road outside Jerusalem they were celebrating the triumphal entry of a king, the promised Son of David who had come to restore the kingdom and cleanse the temple. The palm branches in the hands of the countless host before the throne designate this gathering as a triumphant celebration of the victory of the Lamb in which every believer is a participant.



"Palm Sunday" by E. Deger

"And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, Who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." - The magnificent heavenly hymn of praise which began with the four living beings in chapter 4 is continued by the saints. Brighton aptly



“The Heavenly Praise of the Saints” by Albrecht Dürer

describes this ongoing doxology as “*the great Te Deum of Revelation*”. Dr. Brighton argues that this hymn provides a liturgical structure which continues throughout the Book.

“The great Te Deum of Revelation is a hymn of praise to God for his creation of all life and for his salvation of his people through the victory of the Lamb. Its stanzas are sung at various times and places throughout the Book. It begins with the singing of “holy, holy, holy,” (4:8) in the vision of God’s heavenly glory and of the ascension, coronation, and enthronement of the Lamb (4:1-5:14). It concludes with the Hallelujah Chorus in the vision of the bride of Christ at the end (19:1-10). This Te Deum presents a liturgical context which attends the prophetic message of Revelation as a response, a response from both the saints of God and the angelic hosts. It is an act of worship by which the heavenly choirs of saints and angels,

joined also by the suffering church on earth, laud and magnify God and his Christ. The lasting impression is given that this is the greatest activity and work of God's saints and angels; the voicing and singing of his praises...The picture presented in Revelation is that of one grand service of worship whose participants include the saints on earth, still suffering in warfare, as well as the saints and angels in glory. This worship also has a timeless quality, as though all who participate are engaged in the eternal service of God, regardless of whether they are, for the moment, still on earth, or whether they are in heaven. Striking too is the unity of this corporate worship; all participating voices blend in perfect harmony." (Brighton, p. 527)

Stanzas are added throughout the book by the various groups before and around the throne of God. In this verse of the song, the great multitude of the redeemed joyfully acknowledges God and the Lamb as the only source and basis of their salvation. The Greek text literally says - *"They kept on powerfully crying out with a great voice..."* The forceful language emphasizes not only the duration but also the intensity and the enthusiasm of this song of praise. **"Salvation"** (Greek - *"soteria"*) is used here in the comprehensive sense of complete deliverance from sin and all of its consequences. John adds the dimension of victory more prominent in the classical Greek use of the term to denote *"victorious deliverance from a desperate situation."* (Franzmann, p. 65) That deliverance is God's doing, not ours, as the saint jubilantly proclaim. The phrase **"Salvation belongs to our God..."** is what the grammarians call a *"dative of source"* which could be translated *"salvation is from our God..."* Their praise and gratitude is directed both to **"God Who sits on the throne and to the Lamb,"** to God the Father as the instigator of salvation and to God the Son as the agent through whom salvation was accomplished.

"All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God..." - The praise of the saints provokes a worshipful response from the angels, the elders, and the four living beings around the throne as the great Te Deum continues. The angels now rejoice in the mighty acts of God, as they did on the night of Christ's birth, although they themselves are not the beneficiaries of those actions. Like the 24 elders (cf. Revelation 4:10; 11:16), the angels demonstrate their reverence and awe by falling down upon their faces before the Lord. This is the proper posture of the creature in the majestic presence of the Creator.

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!" - The angels endorse and affirm

the tribute of the multitude while adding a tribute of their own. Their song opens with a mighty **“Amen!”** Their first Amen is a declaration of agreement with that which the countless host has already proclaimed. The Greek transliteration of the Old Testament Hebrew term literally means *“This is most certainly true!”* The substance of the doxology which follows is a thundering series of seven attributions of greatness to God. **“Praise”** (Greek - *“eulogia”*) literally means *“to speak well of,”* hence, *“a word of blessing or praise.”* **“Glory”** (Greek - *“doxa”*) is the honor derived from having earned a good reputation. **“Wisdom”** (Greek - *“sophia”*) is the divine knowledge of God demonstrated in His plan of salvation. **“Thanks”** (Greek - *“eucharistia”*) denotes gratitude based on the words *“well”* and *“to give freely.”* **“Honor”**

(Greek - *“time”*) is the recognition and esteem due one who has accomplished an important work. **“Power”** (Greek - *“dynamis”*) is the irresistible strength, the omnipotence which pertains to God alone and which overcomes any and all opposition. **“Strength”** (Greek - *“ischys”*) refers to innate ability demonstrated in great acts of heroism and deliverance. The final Amen affirms the truthfulness and validity of all that which has been declared about God.



“The Angel’s Praise” - 19th Century Engraving

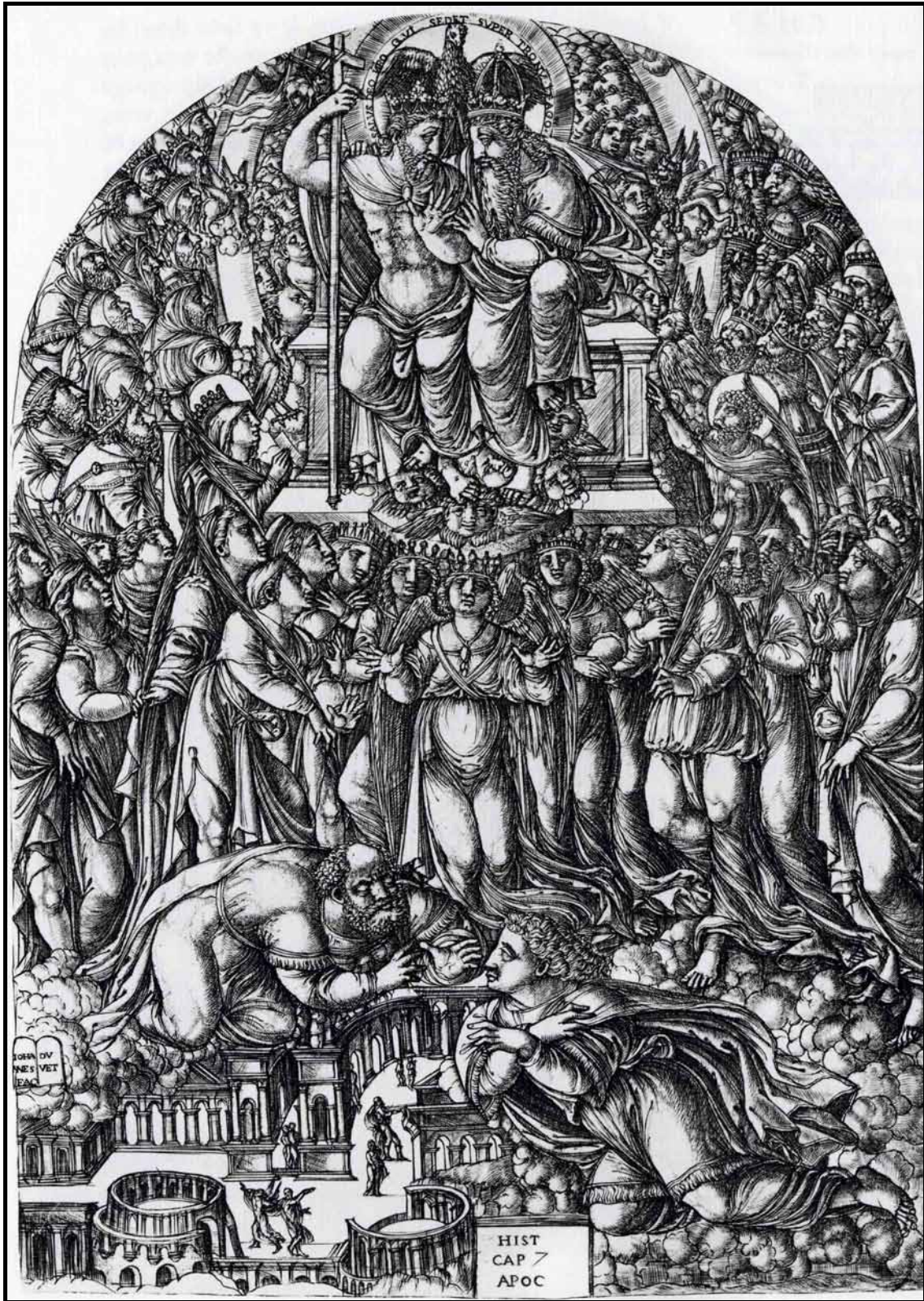
“Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes, who are they and where did they come from?” - An elder steps forward to pose a question to John. This is a common device in Old Testament prophecy to offer an explanation of the meaning of the vision (cf. Jeremiah 1:11,13; Amos 7:8; 8:2; Zechariah 4:2,5). Only two of the visions of Revelation receive a detailed explanation, the white robed multitude here in Revelation 7 and the judgment of the harlot of Babylon in Revelation 17. No identification of the elder is provided. He asks John about the identity and the origin of the people in this great host. John’s response indicates deference and respect. He



"The Adoration of the Lamb" by Albrecht Dürer

does not know the answer to the question and refers it back to the elder: ***“I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’*** John’s response is identical to that of the prophet Ezekiel in the vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:3). The prophet’s inability to answer the question validates the need for an explanation of the vision. In effect John is saying, *“You will have to answer that question for me.”* The elder then proceeds to answer his own inquiry, thus providing the information for the reader.

“And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ - The Bible teaches that constant, ongoing, tribulation will characterize the entire New Testament era. St Paul warns Timothy: ***“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days...In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”*** (2 Timothy 3:1,12-13) Scripture warns that the tribulation of God’s people will grow ever more intense as the world moves closer to judgment, culminating in a last desperate outburst of bitter opposition and persecution on the eve of the Last Day. ***“There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people - everyone whose name is written in the book - will be delivered.”*** (Daniel 12:1) Our Lord also refers to Daniel’s prophecy (Matthew 24:15) and warns of ***“the great tribulation”*** (Matthew 24: 21) that is coming during the evil days immediately preceding the Judgment. The bitter intensity of that ultimate tribulation will be such that ***“If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be shortened.”*** (Matthew 24:22) It is crucial to note, however, that the great tribulation that is to come in the future is but a continuation of what has already begun. Jesus tells us that the distress surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, God’s judgment upon apostate Israel in 70 AD, will serve as a preview of His judgment upon all of mankind at the end of time. In the same way, all of the opposition and tribulation that believers will experience throughout the New Testament era are a part of and point forward to ***“the great tribulation”*** which has already begun and is still to come. John, along with other inspired New Testament writers, argues that the fulfillment of the end times prophecies of the Old Testament began with the first coming of Christ and will continue until the day of His second coming (John 5:24-29; cf. also Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:1-7,12-13) The language of the text in Revelation 7 strongly suggests that the tribulation in question here is not to be equated with or limited to the ultimate tribulation just before the End. Rather, this is the ongoing tribulation which will characterize the entire New Testament



“The Adoration of the Lamb” by Jean Duvet

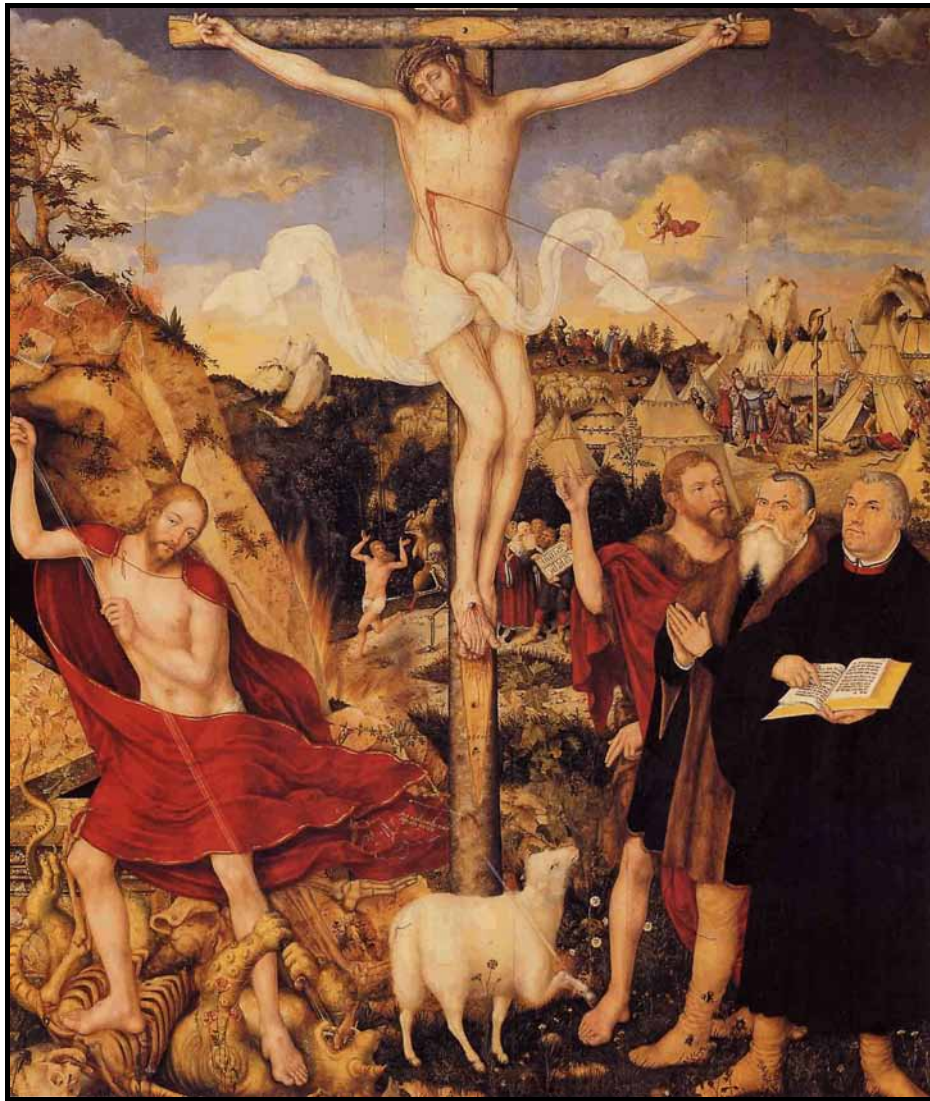
period. That includes the Great Tribulation immediately preceding the Last Day but is not restricted to it. The NIV translation - ***“they who have come out of the great tribulation”*** - fails to accurately reflect the present participle in the original text (Greek *“erchomenoi”*). The present participle denotes continuous ongoing action. Thus, the Greek text literally says - *“they who are coming out of the great tribulation.”* This is a continuous process which describes the deliverance of all of the saints throughout the New Testament era. The number included in this countless host before the heavenly throne is constantly changing as faithful saints are called home to glory, emerging from the struggles of the church militant to the celebration of the church triumphant. Note also the preposition ***“out of”*** (Greek - *“ek”*) which indicates that the saints who are being delivered were in the great tribulation. This contradicts notions of a secret rapture designed to enable the church to evade the tribulation period. In order to have come ***“out of the great tribulation”*** you must first have been in it. Millennialist fantasies about a seven year tribulation period preceded by a secret rapture of the saints and followed by a 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth find no support in this passage nor elsewhere in Scripture.

“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” - The victory of those who now stand before the throne was accomplished ***“in the blood of the Lamb.”***

Through the sacrificial death of Christ, they have received the forgiveness of their sins and are able to stand before God in the righteousness of Christ. The imagery, as always in Revelation, is drawn from the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah had confessed - ***“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags, we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our***

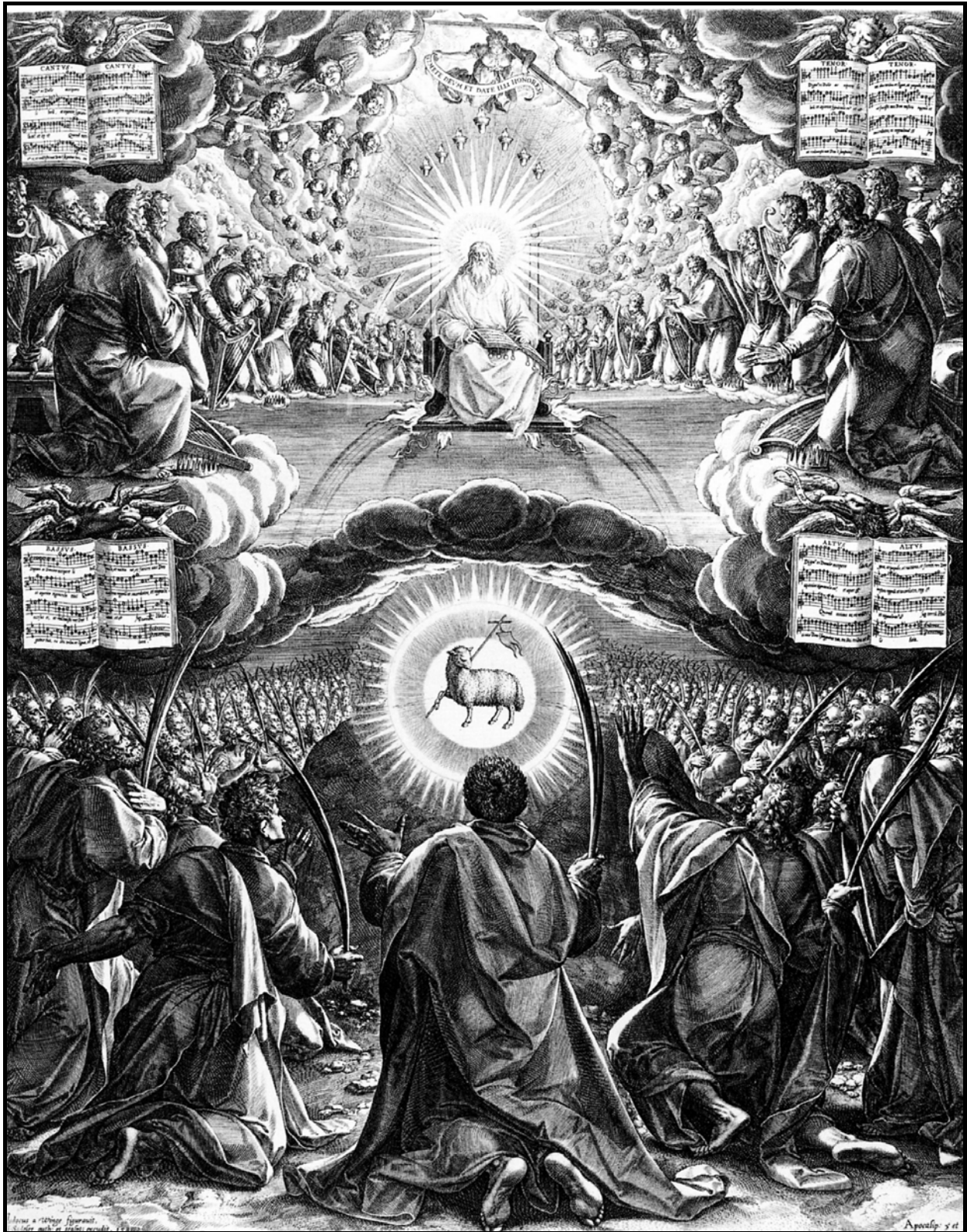


“The Sealing of the Elect” - The Brussels Tapestry



*“Christ the Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World”
by Lucas Cranach*

sins sweep us away.” (Isaiah 64:6) And yet the prophet rejoiced in the pure robe of righteousness that God had provided for His people - ***“I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in me God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.”*** (Isaiah 61:10) God’s gracious promise of forgiveness is also conveyed in the vivid imagery of color - ***“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*** (Isaiah 1:18) John indicates that the cleansing agent in the transformation of filthy rags into pure white robes is ***“the blood of the Lamb.”*** As the apostle declares in his first Epistle: ***“The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from every sin.”*** (1 John 1:7) The active verb - ***“they have washed their robes”*** presupposes the gracious activity of God.



"The Twenty-four Elders and the Elect Kneeling Before A Vision of the Holy Lamb"
by Jan Sadeler - 1550



“Jan Huss Burned at the Stake” by Hellquist Pinxit

“The active Greek verbs ‘washed’ and ‘made white’ (7:14) with the people as the subject suggest that the saints did the washing. They were the recipients of God’s grace, with the result that as they held to Christ in repentance and faith they washed their garments and made them white in His blood by means of Word and Sacrament. Yet there is no contradiction between passages which speak of Christians washing their robes and those that refer to Christians washing themselves or being washed. Since salvation is by grace alone, it is impossible for a person to wash himself or his clothes so as to actively achieve the forgiveness of sins (e.g. Jeremiah 2:22; Job 9:30-31). God alone can turn scarlet sins to white (Isaiah 1:18). God must wash the sinner clean from sin (e.g. Psalm 51:2,7; Isaiah 4:4)...Therefore, when God calls the people to wash themselves clean from sin (Isaiah 1:16) or “to be baptized and wash away your sins (Acts 22:16), and when Christians are described as having washed their robes (Revelation 7:14; 22:14), it is always with the theological understanding that God is the one who instills the desire, prompts the action (Philippians 2:13) and accomplishes the result: forgiven sins and eternal glory.” (Brighton, pp. 200-201)

The cleansing agent that renders these robes pure white is ***“the blood of the Lamb.”*** This phrase signifies the blood of Christ poured out upon the cross, that is, the redemptive death of Jesus for the sins of mankind. This may be an allusion to the prophecy of Jacob who in blessing his fourth son Judah, the father of the messianic tribe declares: ***“He will wash his robes in wine, his garments in the blood of the grapes.”*** (Genesis 49:11) This theme is carried though later in Revelation 19:13 where John says of Jesus: ***“He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and His Name is the Word of God.”***

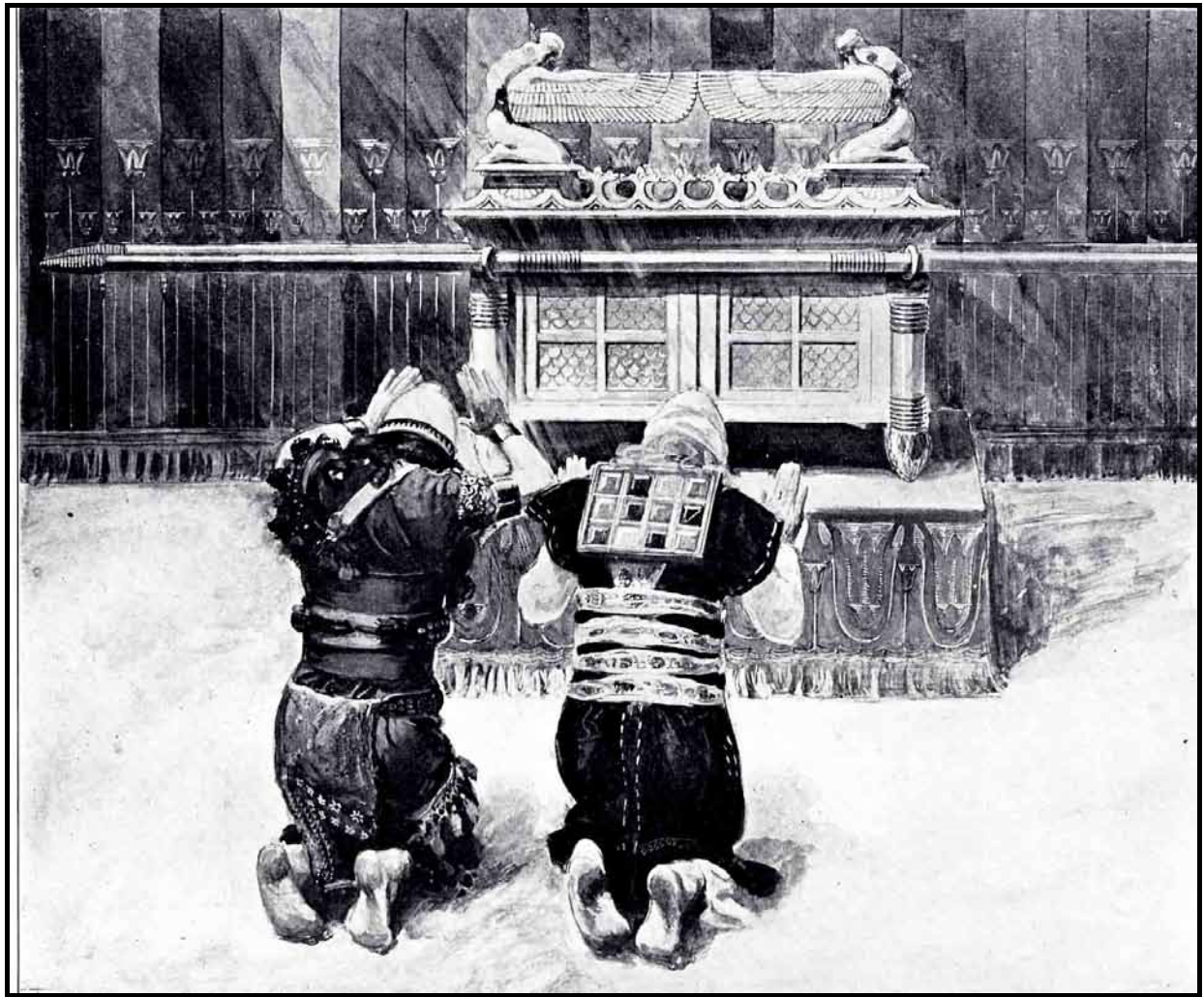
“Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them.” - A breathtaking series of ten phrases describes the bliss of the saints in heaven. This description is introduced with the conjunction ***“therefore”*** (Greek - *“dia touto”* - *“for this reason”*) which indicates that the blessings which the saint enjoy in heaven are the result of their having been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb. The price of our entry into the heavenly realms is the death of Jesus. Through His death we receive the gift of eternal life. The first three



“Vision of the Lamb”
10th Century Spanish Apocalypse

phrases emphasize that which the theologians call the ***“beatific vision”*** (the sight which brings joy). To be in heaven is to be in the immediate presence of God, restored to the harmony and intimacy with the Creator for which we were fashioned in the beginning. Like the most exalted ranks of angels, the glorified saints are ***“before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple.”*** Heaven is presented as a great temple, the dwelling place of God, and all of the saints are the priests of God who worship and adore Him. Their experience of God is permanent -

it will go on throughout all of eternity. Here on earth our time is measured and affected by the passage of day and night. In heaven that will no longer be true. The phrase *“And He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them”* is reminiscent of the language of John 1:14 - *“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.”* In both verses the verb *“skenoo”* (*“to pitch a tent”*) is used to express the love and intimacy which binds God to His people. The term means to live together as a family. It carries a clear physical connotation. In John 1:14 it presents the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the divine presence which ancient Israel had once experienced in the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. There, God deigned to dwell between the cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies. Now God dwells among us in the person of His Son who is the Word of God made flesh.



“Moses and Aaron Before the Ark Within the Tabernacle” by J. James Tissot



"The Adoration of the Divine Lamb" - 17th Century German Bible Engraving

In the heavenly temple we will live forever in the immediate presence of the Father, as beloved members of His own family - He will **"spread His tent"** over us. The future tense of the verb in this phrase points forward to the Last Day and the reunification of the souls and bodies of the redeemed.

"Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat." - The next four phrases present the bliss of heaven in terms of freedom from the effects and consequences of sin. The particular applications in the text are drawn from the reality of life in the desert like climate of Palestine. The struggle for the basic necessities of life which has characterized human existence since the Fall into sin (Genesis 3:17-19) will be over. The painful results of that struggle in hunger, thirst, and the burning heat of the sun will be no

more, the human environment having been restored to the perfection which was God's original intent for the crown of His creation. Behind the physical language of the text is the more fundamental reality of the perfect satisfaction of all man's needs, both spiritual and physical, in Christ. As Jesus declared after the feeding of the five thousand: ***"I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to Me will never grow hungry and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty...I am the Bread that came down from heaven."*** (John 6:35,41) The language of Revelation 7 is drawn from Isaiah's promise of restoration to Israel:

"Say to the captives, "Come out", and to those in darkness, "Be free!" They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside the springs of water." (Isaiah 49:9-10)



"Safe at Home" by Reginald Knowles



"Christ the Good Shepherd Tenderly Cares for His Flock" by Frederic Shields

“For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” -

In the final verse of the chapter, John explains how God will provide for His people in this marvelous way. The explanation is introduced with the conjunction ***“For”*** (Greek - *“hoti”*). God opens the gates of heaven to His people through the ministry of His Son. The Old Testament had promised that God would care for His people as a loving shepherd protects and provides for his flock (Psalm 23; 28:8-9; 78:52; 80:1; Jeremiah 31:10-11; Ezekiel 34:11-16; Micah 7:14) The image of Christ as the fulfillment of those promises, the Good Shepherd of His people the Church, is a familiar one in the New Testament (cf. John 10:11,14; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2-4). To be the Shepherd is to accept responsibility for the life and well-being of the sheep. ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me - just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father - I lay down My life for the sheep.”*** (John 10:11,14) John here adjusts the imagery in an intriguing way as the Lamb becomes the Shepherd of the sheep. The compassionate care of the Shepherd is indicated by His ability to lead the flock ***“to springs of living water.”*** In His conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well Jesus declares: ***“Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*** (John 4:14) To live with God in heaven under the care of the Good Shepherd is to be liberated from all



“The Lamb of God” by Francisco de Zurbarán - 1630

sorrow and care - ***“And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”*** This poignant image comes from Isaiah 25:7-8 where the prophet foretells the abolition of death and the final vindication of the people of God: ***“On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all the nations; He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; He will remove the disgrace of His people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.”***

The classic Norwegian Lutheran hymn *“Behold A Host Arrayed in White”* by Hans A. Brorson captures the scene perfectly, including even the harvest imagery of the Feast of Tabernacles:

*Behold a host arrayed in white, like thousand snow-clad mountains bright;
With palms they stand. Who is this band before the throne of light?
Lo, these are they, of glorious fame, who from the great affliction came
And in the flood of Jesus’ blood are cleansed from guilt and blame.
Now gathered in the holy place, their voices they in worship raise;
Their anthems swell where God doth dwell mid angels’ songs of praise.*

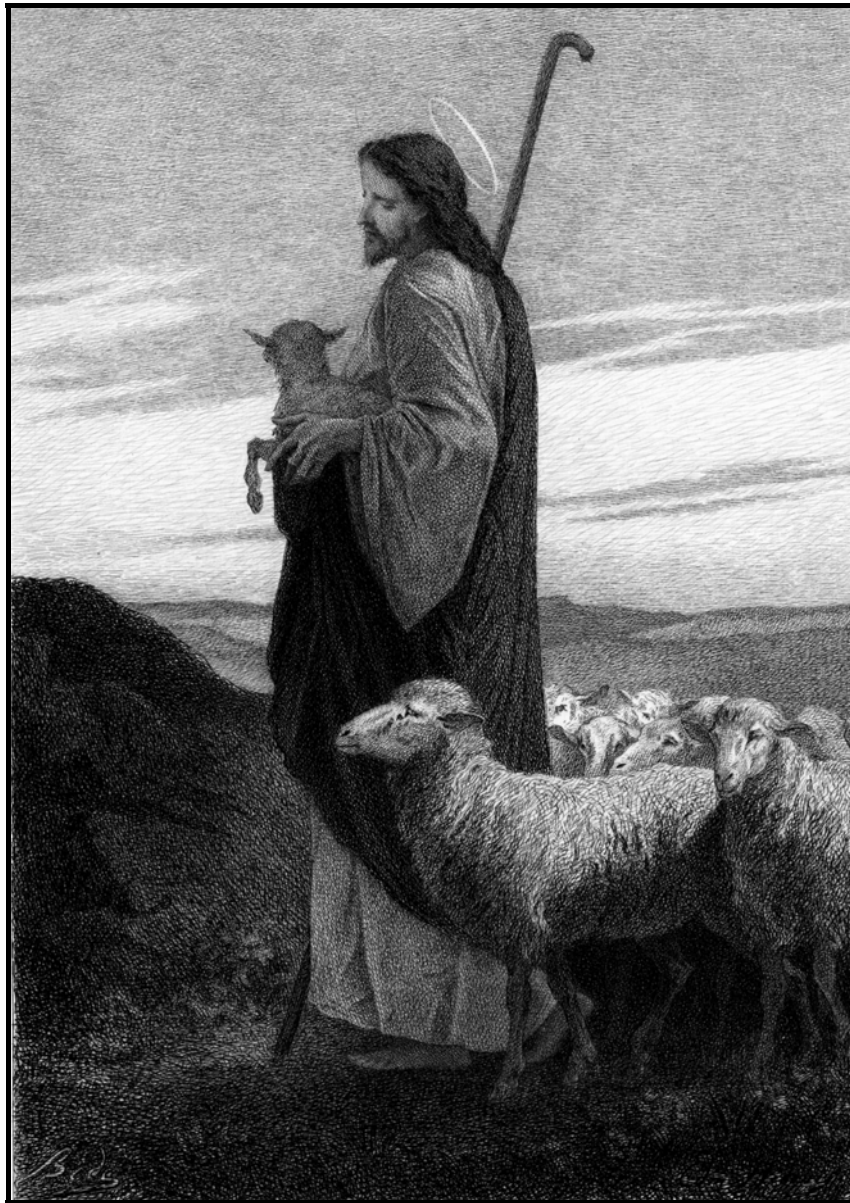
*Despised and scorned, they sojourned here; but now, how glorious they appear!
Those martyrs stand, a priestly band, God’s throne forever near.
So oft in troubled days gone by, in anguish they would weep and sigh;
At home above, the God of love for aye their tears shall dry.*



***“The Homecoming of the Elect” by
Hans Memling***

*They now enjoy their Sabbath rest, the pascal banquet of the blest;
The Lamb, their Lord, at festal board, Himself is Host and Guest.*

*Then hail! Ye mighty legions yea, All hail! now safe and blessed for aye;
And praise the Lord who with His Word sustained you on the way.
Ye did the joys of earth disdain, ye toiled and sowed in tears and pain;
Farewell, now bring your sheaves and sing salvation's glad refrain.
Swing high your palms, lift up your song, yea make it myriad voices strong;
Eternally shall praise to Thee, God and the Lamb belong.*



“Christ the Good Shepherd” - 19th Century Bible Engraving

The Third Vision - The Seven Trumpets

Revelation 8:1 - 11:19



“The Vision of the Seven Trumpets” by Lucas Cranach

Introduction - The Vision of the Seven Trumpets

The core of the Book of Revelation is a series of three visions, each with seven parts, which depict the history of mankind throughout the New Testament era. Each of the sevens - seals, trumpets, and bowls - show the hand of God at work in history and call humanity to repentance before the end. The number (3) and the structure (7) of the visions is consistent with the numerological design of the Book as a whole and serve to affirm the sovereign control of God over all of history.

The vision of the seven seals confronted us with the harsh reality of a sinful world reeling beneath the righteous judgment of God throughout the interval between the first and second comings of our Lord. The successive opening of each of the seals upon the Lamb's command assured believers that the sovereign God remains firmly in control of earth's apparently tumultuous and chaotic events. While saints and angels sing the triumph song before the throne in heaven, God's judgement upon rebellious mankind unfolds according to His plan and purpose. The interlude after the opening of the sixth seal offered the assurance to saints still in tribulation on earth that all those who have ***“washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”*** (7:14) will share in the victory already being celebrated in the heavenly courts. The opening of the final, the seventh seal, serves as the link to the vision which follows. The vision of the seven trumpets reiterates and reinforces the message of the seven seals. It pertains to the same time period - the interval between the first and second comings of Christ. Once again, it does not focus on particular individuals or historical events but presents recurring patterns, conditions, and circumstances. The point of the three visions, and the seven scenes within each of them, is not chronological sequence, but the reinforcement and development of consistent themes. The vivid symbolism of the vision is designed to strike fear into the hearts of the impenitent while offering comfort and reassurance to the believer. The progression from scene to scene in each of the three visions drives home the dual message over and over again. Judgement is at hand. The evidence of its imminence is all around us. Sinner repent! Believer persevere!



“Angel Heralds” - 19th Century Engraving



"The Vision of the Seven Trumpets" by Matthias Merian

The Opening of the Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer

Revelation 8:1-5

When He opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

"When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." - The act of the Lamb in opening the seventh seal serves both to conclude the preceding vision and introduce that which follows. The significance of the transition is indicated by the *"great hush and breathless silence"* (Mounce, p. 178) which falls



“The Vision of the Seven Trumpets” by Albrecht Dürer

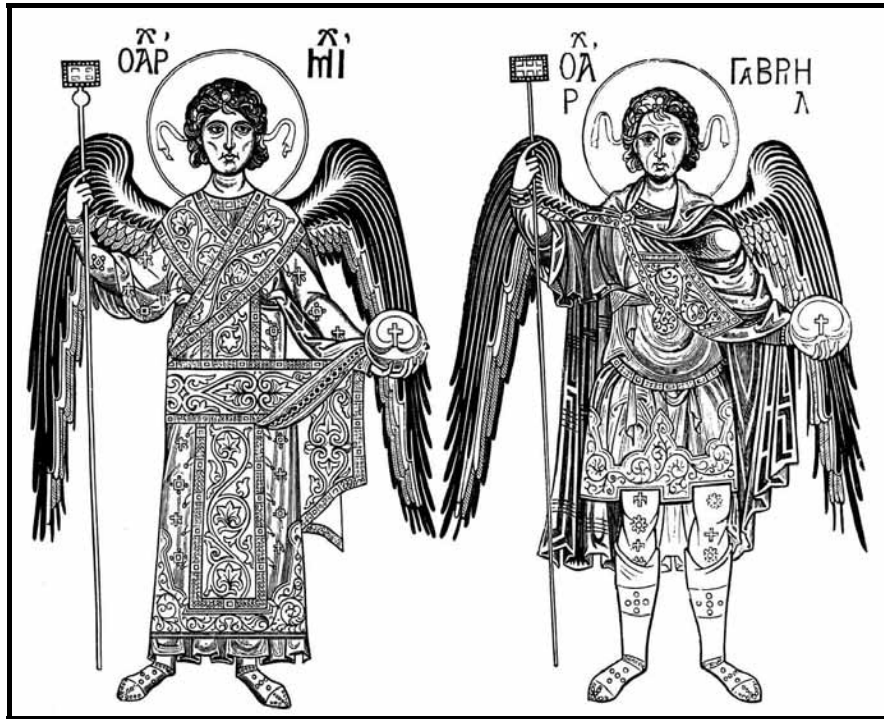
over heaven. The reverberation of the vast multitudes' song of praise is replaced by a tense and expectant quiet. This dramatic pause has the effect of building suspense and focusing the attention of all on the next scene. In the Old Testament, reverent silence was the appropriate response of the creature in the presence of the holy God. ***"But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him."*** (Habakkuk 2:20) ***"Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because He has roused Himself from His holy dwelling."*** (Zechariah 2:20) ***"Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near."*** (Zephaniah 1:7) ***"Be still and know that I am God."*** (Psalm 46:10) Dr. Brighton summarizes:

"The silence enjoined upon God's people of the Old Testament was an act of faith and worship before the awful majesty of God's action of judgment toward their enemies, which actions would also save His people. The judgment and salvation brought about in the great day of Jahweh moves God's saints to a fearful and awe-inspired silence before the mighty God as He acts for his people." (Brighton, p. 213)

The silence persists ***"for about a half an hour."*** This approximate time measure does not indicate precise temporal duration but simply a relatively brief span of time. The Old Testament Book of Daniel uses similar language to describe the prophet's reaction to impending doom of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel stands in troubled silence ***"amazed for about one hour"*** (Daniel 4:19). This brief period of silence underscores the gravity of the impending crisis.

"And I saw the seven angels who stand before God and to them were given the seven trumpets." - The identity of these seven angels has elicited considerable discussion. The use of the definite article, ***"the seven angels,"*** implies that they are well-known or familiar figures. This would suggest a connection to the prominent Hebrew tradition of seven archangels who stood before the throne of God in heaven. The apocryphal book of I Enoch speaks of these seven mighty angels and defines each of their roles:

"Then Uriel said to me...So I Enoch saw the vision of the end of everything alone; and none among human beings will see as I have seen...And these are the names of the holy angels who watch: Suru'el, one of the holy angels - for he is of eternity and of trembling. Raphael, one of the holy angels, for he is of the spirits of man. Raguel, one of the holy angels who take vengeance for the world and for the luminaries. Michael, one of the holy angels, for he is obedient in his benevolence over the people and over the nations. Saraqa'el, one of the holy angels, who are set over the spirits of mankind who sin in the spirit. Gabriel, one of the holy angels who oversee the Garden of Eden, and the serpents and the cherubim." (I Enoch 19:1, 20:1-7)

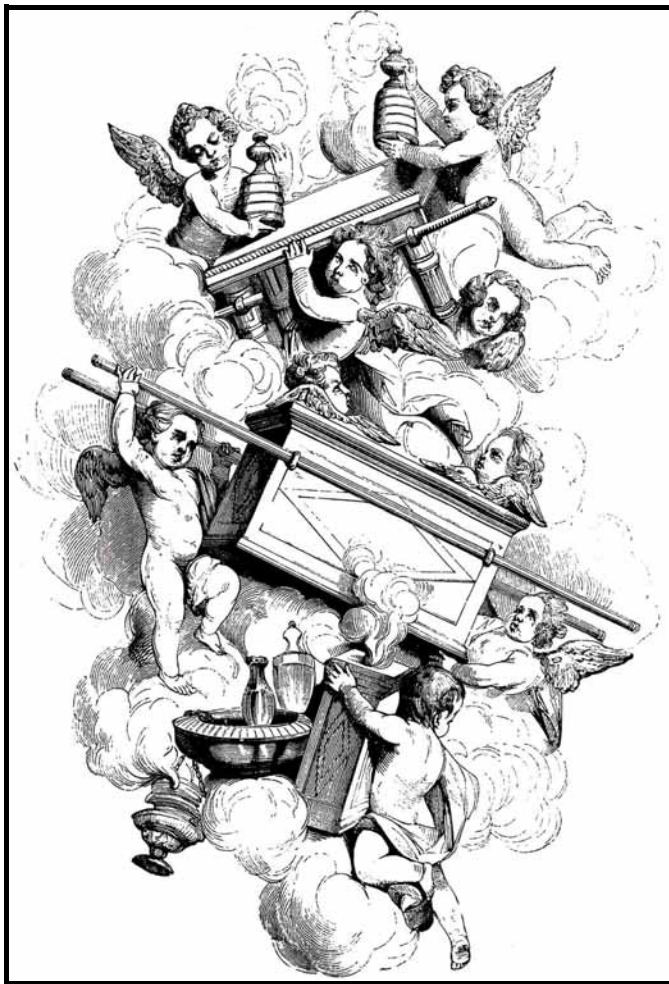


“The Archangels Michael and Gabriel” - Byzantine Mosaic

This view occurs in a variety of forms in other apocryphal books of the period. In the Book of Tobit, for example, the angel Raphael identifies himself as one of seven holy angels who enter into the presence of God and offer up the prayers of God’s people (Tobit 12:12-15). Only two of the seven - Michael (Daniel 10:13,21; 12:1; Jude 9; Revelation 12:7) and Gabriel (Daniel 8:6; 9:21; Luke 1:19,26) are mentioned in the Bible. Neither the Old Testament nor the Apocrypha use the term “*archangel*.” Nor does the term occur in Jewish apocalyptic writing until nearly the end of the first century. It does occur twice in the New Testament: in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 - “***the voice of the archangel;***” and Jude 9 - “***the archangel Michael.***” Thus, the explicit witness of Scripture identifies only one archangel - Michael. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible does not use the term archangel in reference to Gabriel whom Scripture identifies - in language very similar to that of this verse - as “***the one who stands before God.***” (Luke 1:19) John does not indulge in the speculation or elaboration characteristic of rabbinic tradition. He simply refers to “***the seven angels who stand before God.***” These magnificent creatures are now called upon to play a role in the unfolding drama of redemption and judgment - “***to them were given seven trumpets.***”

Trumpets were used in the Old Testament to summon the people for worship and for war. They signaled both triumph and catastrophe, warning and celebration. In a

positive context, the call of the trumpet gathered the people at the tabernacle and later the temple (Numbers 10:3,10) and heralded the coronation of a king (1 Kings 1:34,39; 2 Kings 9:13). But most prominently the blast of the trumpet sounded the alarm in time of war and warned of impending danger. Hence the prophet Amos declares: ***“When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble?”*** (Amos 3:6) The clear clarion call of the trumpet signaled the movement of troops upon the field of battle (1 Corinthians 14:8). Trumpets brought down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-20). Trumpets came to be associated with the impending judgment of God and the destruction of His enemies (Judges 7:16-22; Jeremiah 4:5-21; 42:14; 51:27; Ezekiel 7:14; Hosea 8:1; Joel 2:1; Zephaniah 1:16). Ultimately, the sound of the trumpet will signal the coming of the final judgment (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Accordingly, the seven trumpets given to the angels before the throne reinforce the impression of impending judgement and heighten the silent tension of the moment.



“Let My Prayers Be Set Forth before Thee As Incense” - 19th Century Lithograph

“Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar.” - The appearance of ***“another angel,”*** in addition to the seven before the throne, precedes the sounding of the judgment trumpets. This interlude serves to provide an introduction to and set the tone for the trumpet vision which follows. The angel is carrying ***“a golden censer.”*** The Greek term ***“libanoton”*** literally means frankincense. In this instance the adjective ***“golden”*** tells us that the term refers to the implement which held the incense, not the incense itself. In the furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple fire-pans, and vessels of brass, silver and gold were used in the offering of sacrifices upon the altar of incense (Exodus 27:3; 1 Kings 7:50; 2 Chronicles 4:22; 2 Kings 25:15). On the day of Atonement, the High



*"The High Priest With the Golden Censer"
19th Century Illustration*

Priest would enter the Holy of Holies with a censer full of burning coals from the altar upon which the incense would be burned before the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant (Leviticus 16:11-14). Incense played a significant role in the worship of Israel. In the imagery of the Old Testament, the sweet smell of the burning incense ascending toward heaven represented divine acceptance of the prayers and offerings of the people (Genesis 8:21; Leviticus 2:1,2; Philippians 4:18). Thus the plea of the psalmist which has been incorporated into the evening liturgy of Vespers: ***"Let my prayers rise before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."*** (Psalm 141:2) John utilized this ancient image in his description of the twenty-four elders surrounding the throne of God: ***"They were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."*** (Revelation 5:8)

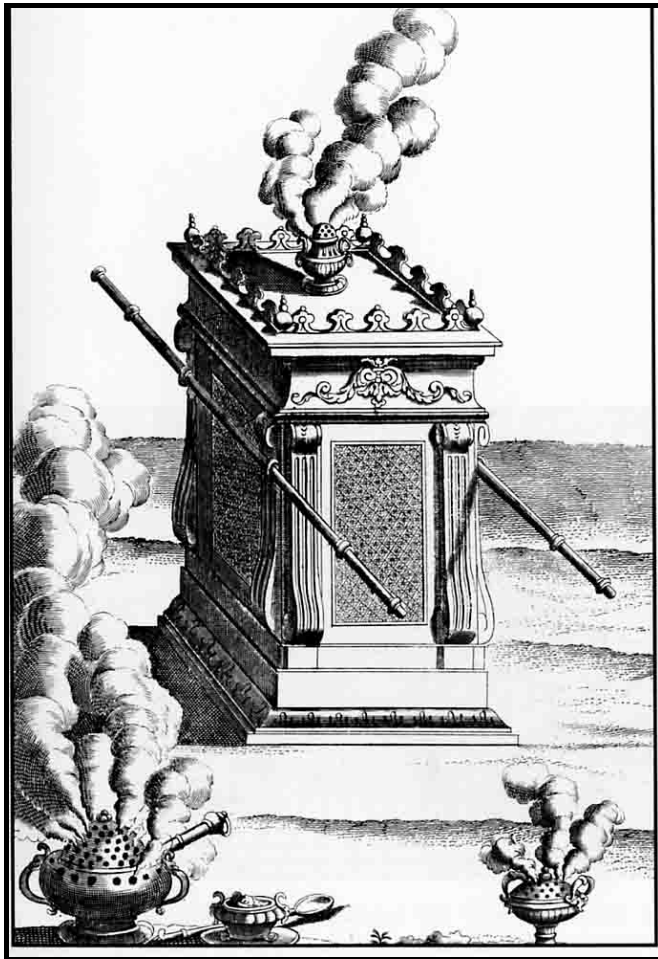
The angel with the golden censer takes his place before the altar. In tabernacle and temple there were two altars, the altar of sacrifice and the incense altar. In the imagery of Revelation only one altar, the incense altar is mentioned. Dr Brighton offers this compelling explanation for the absence of the altar of sacrifice:

"There does seem to be only one altar before God in heaven (cf. Isaiah 6:6), and even though this one altar could refer to both a sacrificial and an incense altar, most



"The Vision of the Seven Trumpets" by Jean Duvet

probably it refers to an incense altar. A chief argument for this is that Jesus, the Lamb, has already been sacrificed, and is Himself a constant reminder of the sacrificial altar, namely His cross. There thus would be no need for a sacrificial altar in heaven (see Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:11-18). But there would still be a need for an incense altar, because the prayers of saints in heaven and on earth are continually rising to God as incense.” (Brighton, p. 158)



“The Incense Altar and Its Vessels”

“He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.” - The angel does not act of his own volition or power. The abundant incense which he offers upon the altar *“was given”* to him. Although in this instance the giver is unidentified, we may assume that God is the source of the incense. This term occurs frequently in Revelation and whenever it is used elsewhere in Revelation, God is the source of the gift. The adjective *“much”* emphasizes that the gift provides all that is needed and more to accomplish its task. There is no shortage here! The angel is given *“much incense”* so that it may be added to the prayers of the saints empowering those prayers and rendering them effectual before God and acceptable to Him. That point is clearly shown in the sentence which follows: *“The smoke of the incense,*

together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hands.” The fact that the sweet smelling smoke of the incense *“went up before God”* indicates His acceptance of those prayers which are combined with the incense. That which renders the prayers of God’s people effectual and acceptable is the atoning merit of Jesus Christ.

“There can be no doubt that this incense is the merit of Christ...His atoning merit

*makes our prayers, tainted with sin as they are, acceptable to God...When John here speaks of incense that is offered up **with** our prayers, he is teaching us in symbolic language the same truth which Jesus expressed when He said, “**My Father will give you whatever you ask in My Name.**” (John 16:23) (Becker, pp.135-136)*

The incense interlude offers encouragement to the people of God in the face of impending judgment. Don't be afraid. Do not despair. God will hear and answer your prayers in the Name of Jesus. No matter how difficult your tribulation becomes God is with you and will enable you to persevere and overcome.

“Then the angel took the censer, filled it fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.” - The message of reassurance abruptly gives way to that of judgement. Earlier, the martyrs beneath the altar had prayed for the vindication of the holiness and righteousness of God in the judgement of the wicked - *“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”* (Revelation 6: 10). The dreadful imagery which follows is God's answer to their prayer. The golden censer is refilled with fire from the altar and that fire is cast down upon the earth. While saints may take comfort from the knowledge that God hears their prayers, the unbelieving world remains subject to the terror of His wrath. The fire on the altar is now the consuming flame of God's judgement (cf. Ezekiel 10:2). The verb **“hurled”** (Greek - *“ebalen”*) indicates the violent intensity and the sudden swiftness of this judgement. This judgement fire does not gently waft it way to earth - it is flung down upon unsuspecting and impenitent mankind with lightning speed. Ominous silence is replaced with the cacophony of cosmic chaos - *“and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”* These are the signs which accompanied the coming of God upon Sinai (Exodus 19:16-19). Throughout Revelation they signal the awe and majesty of God and warn of the arrival of His judgement (cf. Revelation 4:5; 11:19; 16:18).



“The Seven Trumpets” - Luther Bible Woodcut



"The Vision of the Seven Trumpets" - 15th Century Bible Illumination

The Sounding of the First Four Trumpets

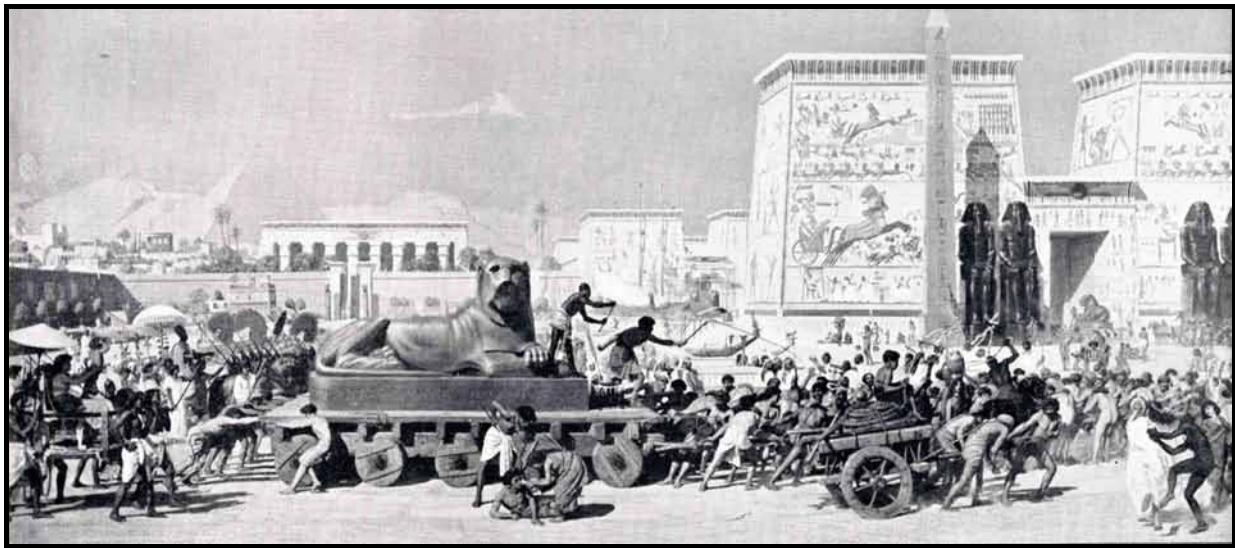
Revelation 8: 6-12

Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water - the name of the star is Wormwood.

A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. The fourth angel sounded his trumpet and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night..

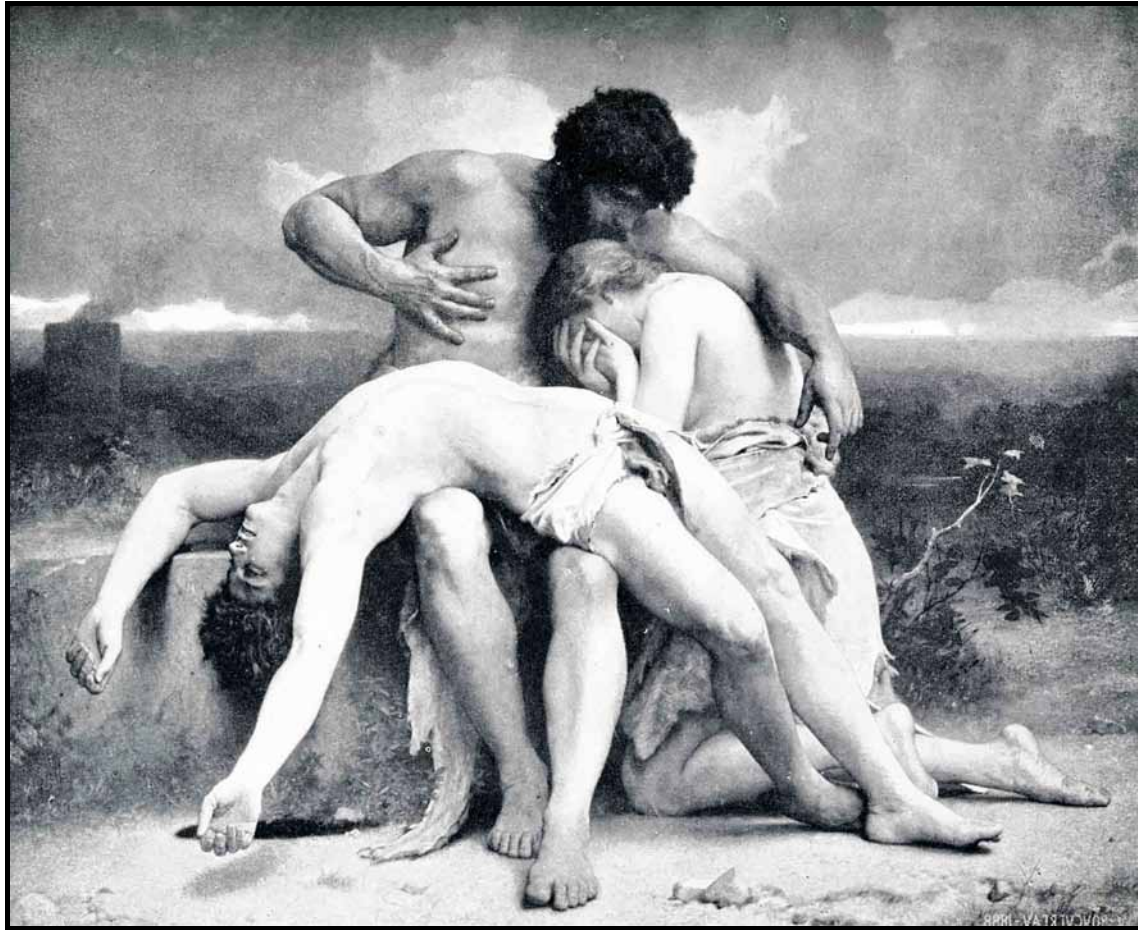
“Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.” - With the conclusion of the golden censer interlude, the text returns to the angels with the seven trumpets. The stage has been carefully set - now the trumpets will finally sound. The commentators note the similarity between the first five trumpet judgements and the plagues which God sent upon the land of Egypt:

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| the first trumpet (8:7) | — | Exodus 9:22-25 |
| the second and third trumpets | — | Exodus 7:20-25 |
| the fourth trumpet | — | Exodus 10:21-23 |
| the fifth trumpet | — | Exodus 10:12-15 |



“Israel in Bondage in Egypt” by Frederic Leighton

As the plagues of Egypt were not designed to destroy the land, but to lead pharaoh to repentance and change of heart so also the trumpet judgements of this vision are “warning judgements” designed to lead sinful mankind to repentance. The plagues of Egypt did not harm the Israelites and resulted in their deliverance. So also the trumpet judgements will not harm the people of God but are a sign of the imminence of their salvation. These judgements, so painful and devastating for the sinful world should serve to constantly remind Christians that Jesus is coming again soon and spur



“The First Death” by Adolphe Bourguereau

us on to constant readiness..

The first four trumpets, like the first four seals in the previous vision, are linked together thematically and structurally. They focus on the judgements of God as they are manifested by the upheavals and disasters in the world of nature. Man’s fall into sin cursed the entire universe. The physical world had been designed by a loving Creator as the perfect environment for man, the crown of His creation. The disruption of mankind’s relationship with the Creator had dire consequences for the natural world. In Romans chapter 8, St. Paul declares:

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought

into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time.” (Romans 8:20-22)

The physical world is unraveling under the impact of sin. That disintegration continues to complicate man’s struggle to survive, just as God had warned father Adam that it would in the immediate aftermath of the fall (cf. Genesis 3:17-19). Fallen man’s selfishness and sin only serves to hasten the destruction of the natural world. Jesus also urged his disciples to discern the hand of God’s judgement in the devastation and death of natural disasters. He warned them to pay careful attention to the ***“signs of the times”*** so that they might be ever prepared for the day when He would come again. Natural disasters are prominent among the signs promised by our Lord. The chaos and upheaval of the world of nature throughout the New Testament era should serve as a constant reminder that this world is passing away and that Jesus is coming again.

“There will be great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences in various places and fearful events and great signs from heaven. There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (Luke 21:11,25-28)

The judgements sounded by the first four trumpets each impact different components of the created order - the land and its vegetation; the sea and its creatures; the rivers and springs of waters; and the light of the heavenly bodies. The result is a pattern that one commentator calls ***“de-creation,”*** (Beale, p. 486) - the

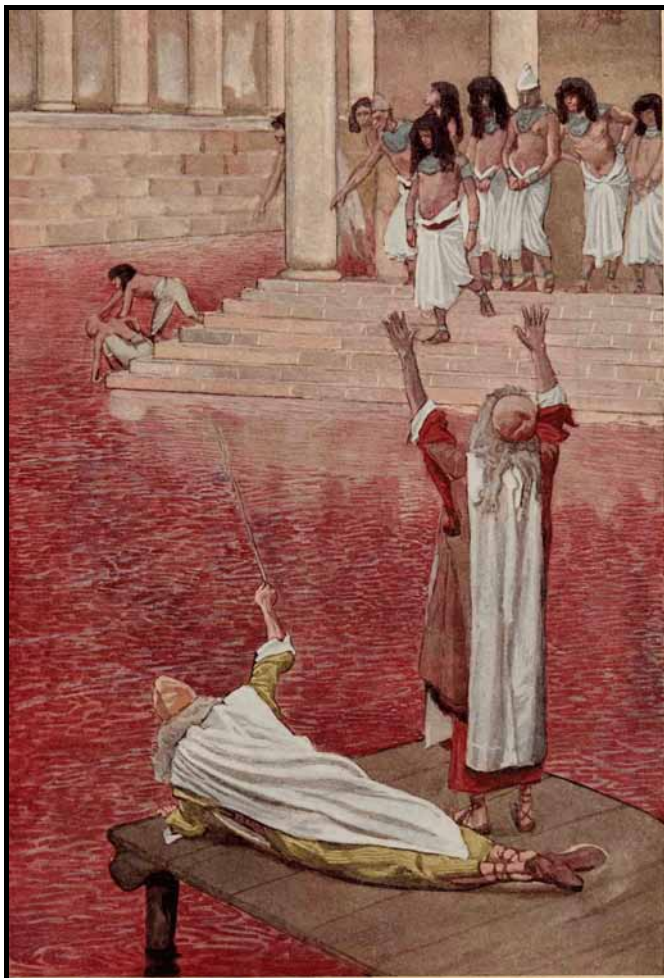


“The Plague of Hail” by J. James Tissot

deliberate undoing of that which God did in the beginning.

“The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth.” - Without further delay, the sound of the trumpets begin. Unlike the preceding vision, where each seal was opened upon command, the trumpets do not await further instruction. The call of the first trumpet summons a devastating deluge of ***“hail and fire mixed with blood.”*** The clear allusion is to the seventh plague of Egypt, that of fiery hail, with the blood as an added horror (Exodus 9:23-27). The addition of the blood heightens the impression of destructiveness and death. It also serves as a link to the final judgement and the destruction of the present universe. The prophet Joel had warned: ***“I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The***

sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” (Joel 2:30-31; cf. Acts 2:17-21). The same image of a fiery rain of blood as the herald of the last days occurs in the Sibylline Oracles, a series of apocalyptic works which originated during the intertestamental period and were prominent in both Hebrew and Christian circles: ***“For fire will rain on men from the floors of heaven, fire and blood, water, lightning bolt, darkness, heavenly night, and destruction in war.”*** (5:375) The violent destructiveness of this outpouring of judgement is emphasized by the verb ***“it was hurled down”*** (Greek - *“eblethe”*). The fiery hail of this storm does not merely fall. It is cast down, as it were, by the hand of the Almighty, to crush and destroy all in its path. This is not a natural phenomenon, to be categorized and explained through



“The Nile Turned to Blood” by J. James Tissot

the ordinary patterns of nature. One need not look for historical instances of literal ***“hail and fire mixed with blood”*** as the fulfillment of these grim words. This terrifying image encompasses all of God’s acts of judgement throughout history - wherever, whenever, and by whatever means the Lord has brought about the destruction of the earth and that which grows upon it.

The object of the rain of destruction is the land and its vegetation. Its result is that ***“a third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.”*** The devastation is not complete but preliminary and partial. Even so, it is massive in its scope. The construct of one third destruction is drawn from Ezekiel 5:1-4, 12, where God’s judgement upon His apostate people is illustrated and apportioned in the same way. The significance of the destruction of ***“all the green grass”*** in contrast to the third of the earth and the trees is unclear and may simply reflect the relative fragility of this particular object of destruction.



“The Second Trumpet” by Jean Blondel - 1373

“The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea.” - The sounding of the second judgement trumpet follows in rapid succession. In the first plague of Egypt, the Nile and all the waters of the land were turned to blood. (Exodus 7: 14-25). Now in the second trumpet a



*"A Huge Mountain All Ablaze Was Thrown Into the Sea"
Illumination from a 14th Century Norman Apocalypse*

similar fate befalls the world's oceans and seas. The awesome sight which John beholds is so far beyond his experience and comprehension that he is unable to offer a precise description. He resorts to simile and tells us of ***"a huge mountain, all ablaze."*** Some understand this to be a reference to volcanic eruption like that of Mount Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii in 79 A.D. However, John's language seems more comprehensive. R.C.H. Lenski notes: *"This is not a volcano hurling lava into the sea but a mountain that is all ablaze with fire, that is hurled into the ocean by an invisible hand, a mountain that is so great as to cause the effect described."* (Lenski, p. 279) The image of a massive meteor, hurtling down from the heavens, blazing with fire is perhaps a more adequate. But again, in any case, this is no ordinary phenomenon, whose cause or counter-part can be found in the world of nature. This awful image depicts the righteous judgement of an angry God exercising His wrath upon the earth's oceans and seas. Once more, the language of one third destruction indicates that the scope of this devastation is preliminary and partial - ***"a third of the sea turned to blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea***

died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.” This vision of maritime destruction impacts not only the sea itself, but the marine creatures that dwell within it and the ships that travel upon it.

“The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water - the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.” - The scene

produced by the third trumpet is very similar to its predecessor. In this instance, instead of a fiery mountain it is *“a great star, blazing like a torch”* which is cast down from the heavens. The difference between them may simply be one of size, the falling mountain, aimed at the great mass of the world’s oceans and seas, appearing larger than the blazing star whose target is the rivers and springs of water. Again, the image of a fiery meteor or comet blazing through the earth’s atmosphere comes to mind. The target now is the earth’s fresh water, *“the rivers and the springs of water.”* Under the onslaught of this divine judgement one third of the planet’s drinking water turns bitter and deadly. The blazing star is given a name descriptive of its effect - *“the name of the star is Wormwood.”* (Greek - *“Apsinthos”*). Wormwood is an herb renowned for its bitterness. David Aune provides the botanical background:

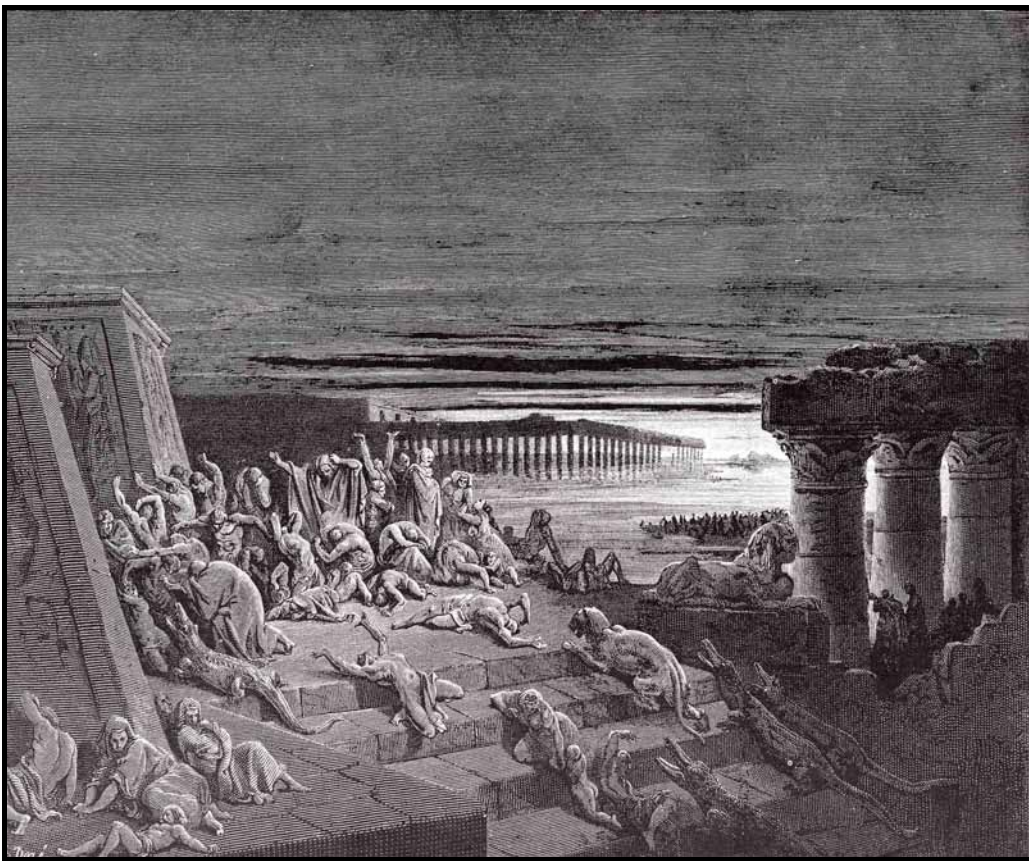


“The First Four Trumpets” by Hans Burgkmair

“The plant genus Artemisia to which Absinthe or Wormwood belongs is the type associated with the constellation of Scorpio which has a stinging poisonous tail. Wormwood belongs to the Daisy family and is native to central and southern Europe, Northern Africa, Siberia, and northwestern India. It is also found in North, South, and Central America. The spice tarragon and the plant sagebrush belong to the

same genus. ..The bitterness of wormwood was proverbial throughout the ancient world...Its name is derived from its medicinal use in expelling worms from the intestines...The German term for Wormwood, Wermut , is related to Vermouth, a wine containing an extract from Wormwood.” (Aune, p. 522)

John’s use of the term here seems to be drawn from the prophecy of Jeremiah where Wormwood is specifically linked to the poisoning of drinking water. ***“Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: “Behold, I will feed this people with wormwood and give them poisonous water to drink.”*** (Jeremiah 9:15; 23:15; cf. Proverbs 5:3-4; Lamentations 3:19). The blazing, bitter star causes the contamination of ***“a third of the waters”*** and ***“many people died from drinking the waters that had become bitter.”***



“The Plague of Darkness” by Gustav Dore

“The fourth angel sounded his trumpet and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third



"The Fall of Wormwood" - 16th Century Luther Bible Engraving

of the day was without light and also a third of the night." - The ninth plague of Egypt was the coming of thick darkness upon the land for three days (Exodus 10:21-23). As God struck down His enemies in the days of Moses, so He will act again and again to inflict His judgement upon those who dare to stand against Him. Now the sun, moon, and stars are under attack. The fractional one third again indicates that this judgement is not final or complete. The interruption of the normal reliable course of the heavenly bodies and the light which they provide is often presented in Scripture as a precursor of divine judgement. ***"On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth at broad daylight."*** (Amos 8:9) The imagery of the fourth trumpet is reminiscent of the darkness that fell upon the land for three hours during Christ's final agony and death. Dr. Brighton provides this helpful summary of the meaning of the fourth trumpet:

"It is difficult to relate this partial darkness to human experience... Partial or total eclipses of the sun or moon are, of course, common. However, eclipses of the sun or moon do not seem to correspond completely to this inability of the heavenly bodies to produce their full light for the benefit of life on earth. Could it be that, throughout the time period that Revelation covers, clouds and smog and pollution will so cover the earth that it will be increasingly difficult for the light of the heavenly bodies to penetrate?...Whatever this plague of the heavenly bodies implies and entails, it is a part of the total picture which the first four trumpet angels introduce. All through the time period covered by the message of Revelation, nature and its components are being physically struck, and as a result, humanity is being made to suffer." (Brighton, p. 228)



"The Call of Woe" - Luther Bible Woodcut

The Sounding of the Fifth Trumpet

Revelation 8:13-9:12

As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels. The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God upon their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days, men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lion's teeth. They had breastplates like

breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek Apollyon. The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

“As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair...” - This brief interlude signals a shift in the significance of the trumpet and a severe intensification of the judgements which they summon. The first four dealt with natural disasters, and horrendous though they may have been, they are not nearly as terrifying as the demonic judgements which are now revealed in the sounding of the final three trumpets.

A bird of prey (Greek - “*aetos*”) appears directly overhead, in the middle of the heavens. The Greek noun can refer either to an eagle or a vulture depending on the context. In any case, the appearance of this carrion eater is an ominous indicator of things to come (cf. Matthew 24:28 - *“Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.”*). This is the only instance in Revelation where an animal is used as God’s messenger (cf. Numbers 22:28). The image appears to have been chosen because of the bird’s association with warfare, death, and judgement (i.e. *“Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the Lord because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my Law.”* Hosea 8:1; cf. also Deuteronomy 28:49; Jeremiah 4:13; 48:40; 49:22; Lamentations 4:19; Ezekiel 17:3;



“The Fifth Trumpet” by Lucas Cranach



“The Fifth Trumpet” - Luther Bible Woodcut

Habbakuk 1:8). The message of doom which the raptor proclaims immediately confirms our sense of impending disaster. ***“Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!”*** The core of the message is the triple repetition of ***“Woe!”*** (Greek - “ouai”). The term may be used as an interjection meaning *“How horrible, how terrible!”* As a noun, “ouai” describes *“disaster,” “catastrophe,”* or *“horror.”*

“In the NT “ouai” appears forty-six times: thirty in the speech of Jesus in the synoptic gospels; fourteen times in Revelation, and only twice elsewhere, 1 Corinthians 9:16 and Jude 11. In the mouth of Jesus, the woes pronounced against people and cities indicate a final warning (often widely unheeded) before judgement and eternal ruin in hell.” (Brighton, p. 224)

It is used in double repetition in the Old Testament to warn of the most dire judgements of God (cf. Ezekiel 16:15-22; Zechariah 2:10). Its triple repetition here forms a kind of superlative denoting the most grievous doom imaginable and corresponds to the three remaining trumpets (***“because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels.”***). The same usage of triple repetition to

express the superlative can be seen in the trishagion of Isaiah 6:1-5.

“The fifth angel sounded his trumpet and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth.” - The sounding of the fifth trumpet immediately follows the warning cry. The first four trumpet judgments were briefly described in just a few phrases. The relative significance and seriousness of the last three trumpet judgements is indicated by their extended descriptions. The imagery becomes more elaborate and other-worldly and is presented in much greater detail.

The Revelator beholds ***“a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth.”*** The use of the perfect tense (***“had fallen”***) indicates that John did not actually witness the fall of this star. That fall had already occurred when the scene is revealed to him. Unlike ***“Wormwood,”*** the bitter, blazing star of the preceding trumpet (8:10-11), the text



“The Downfall of Satan” by Gustav Dore



"The Devil Rousing the Fallen Angels in Hell"
by William Blake

indicates that this star represents a mighty fallen angel who ***"holds the key to the shaft of the abyss."*** Further identification is provided in Verse 11: ***"They had as a king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon."*** The symbolic identification of the angels with the stars is common in Hebrew thought. In Job 38:7 the Creator asks the presumptuous patriarch: ***"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation...while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"*** The image of stars fallen from the heaven's to represent those angels who followed Satan in his revolt and were cast out of heaven appears in Daniel 8:10; ***"It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on***

them." John uses the same imagery later in Revelation as he tells of the Satanic red dragon whose massive tail ***"swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth."*** (Revelation 12:4). Jude describes the fallen angels as ***"wandering stars for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever."*** (Jude 13). The prophet Isaiah derisively hails the Prince of Darkness: ***"How have you fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God..."*** (Isaiah 14:12-13) Jesus celebrated the first preaching of the Gospel by the seventy-two disciples using similar language: ***"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."*** (Luke 10:18). The imagery of fallen angels as fallen stars is also prevalent in 1 Enoch, a popular Jewish apocalyptic work from this period. 1 Enoch 21 tells of ***"seven stars of heaven bound together...like great mountains and burning with fire,"*** ***"stars of heaven which have transgressed the commands of the Lord and are bound in this place...the prison house***

of the angels.”(1 Enoch 21:3,6,10) Later one of those fallen angel/stars is bound hand and foot and thrown into the “*deep, empty, dark abyss.*” (1 Enoch 88:1) Thus the fallen angel, fallen star, abyss imagery which John uses here would have been very familiar to his original audience.

This mighty fallen angel is “*given the key to the shaft of the abyss.*” Note that the key is “*given,*” implicitly by God, thereby indicating once again the absolute divine control which remains a predominant theme throughout the Book of Revelation. Everything that takes place is a part of God’s plan and under his sovereign control. The devil and his minions are not free agents. They too serve the Lord and accomplish His will. The possession of the key represents command and rule. It is bestowed by God through Christ who “*holds the keys of death and Hades.*” (Revelation 1:18). “*Neither Satan nor his evil servants can any longer unleash the forces of hell on earth unless they are given power to do so by the resurrected Christ.*” (Beale, p. 493)

The angel is identified as the “*king*” of the monstrous horde of demonic locusts and “*the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.*” Both the Hebrew and Greek titles are based upon the verb “*to destroy.*” The name thus becomes the personification of the action. Abaddon/Apollyon is “*the Destroyer - He Who Brings About Ruin and Death.*” With this grimly accurate designation of his nature and role, our ancient enemy, the devil, makes his first appearance in the dramatic visions of Revelation. The dual mention of both Hebrew and Greek names may reflect the mixed Jewish - Gentile



“*The Angel With the Key to the Abyss*”
by Hans Schaufelein



“The Greek God Apollo as Depicted on the East Frieze of the Parthenon”

composition of the congregations in Asia Minor to which the letter was originally addressed. The Greek title may also have been used as an allusion to the popular Greco-Roman god Apollo, so named because his origin as the god of pestilence and destruction. It is surely no mere co-incidence that demon horde is here depicted as a swarm of locusts for the locust was one of the symbols of this prominent pagan deity. Domitian, the emperor of Rome at this moment in history, fancied himself the incarnation of Apollo. By designating the ruler of the Abyss as Apollyon, John subtly indicates that the emperor who styles himself a god is no more than a servant of hell.

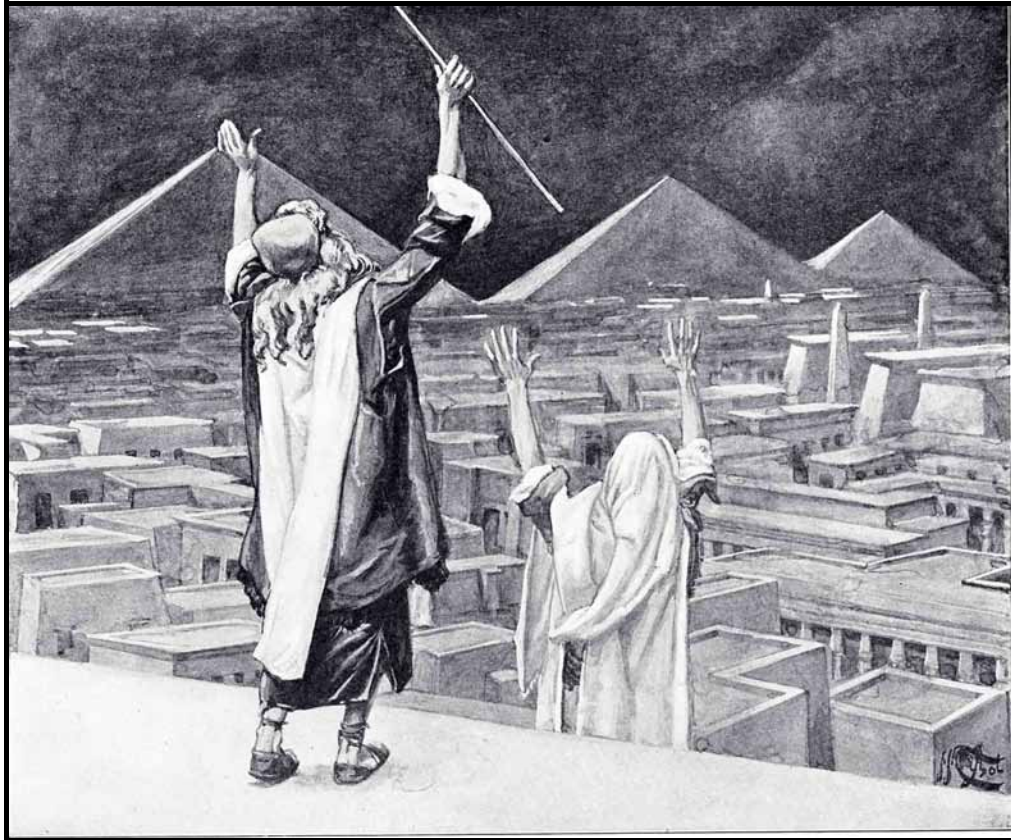
The realm of Abaddon is the “**Abyss.**” The Greek word literally refers to a bottomless pit (“a” - “no” “byssus” - “bottom”). In Revelation this term refers to Hell, the prison house of the demons and the damned. The word only occurs twice in the New Testament outside of Revelation: in Luke 8:31 in connection with the legion of demons cast out by Christ; and in Romans 10:7 where Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:13 in reference to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. John uses the word seven times in Revelation, always in reference to the place of the devil, demons, and the damned (Revelation 9:1,2,11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1,3). 1 Enoch offers this grim description of the Abyss:

“And I saw a deep pit with heavenly fire on its pillars; I saw inside them descending pillars of fire that were immeasurable in respect to both altitude and depth. And on top of that pit I saw a place without the heavenly firmament above it or earthly foundation underneath it or water. There was nothing on it - not even birds - but it was a desolate and terrible place. And I saw there the seven stars which were like great burning mountains. Then the angel said to me; “This place is the ultimate end of heaven and earth; it is the prison house for the stars and the powers of heaven. And the stars which roll over upon the fire, they are the ones which transgressed the commandments of God from the beginning of their rising...” (1 Enoch 18:11-16)

“When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like smoke from a gigantic furnace...” - The *“key to the shaft of the Abyss”* is used by *“the One Who Brings Destruction”* to throw open the gates of hell and from its depths a massive cloud of smoke and fire pours forth. The magnitude and density of this billowing smoke is *“like smoke from a gigantic furnace.”* This is the same phrase that is used in the book of Genesis to describe the smoke that rose from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah beneath the fire of God’s judgement (cf. Genesis 19:27-28). The magnitude of this massive cloud of smoke is such that *“the sun and the sky were*



“Abraham Looks Upon the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah” by J. James Tissot



“The Plague of Locusts” by J. James Tissot

darkened by the smoke from the Abyss.” This unnatural darkness warns of impending judgement - *“Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand - a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.”* (Joel 2:1,2). Lutheran commentators tend to view this reference to worldwide darkness caused by the dense smoke of the Abyss as a image of the spiritual darkness that has descended upon mankind as a result and consequence of sin. The Bible consistently uses light/darkness imagery in this context. Isaiah depicted the coming of the Messiah as the appearance of a great light in a world shrouded in darkness: *“The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”* (Isaiah 8:14) Christ declares Himself to be *“the Light of the World”* (John 8:12) and declares that those who follow Him are also to be *“the light of the world.”* (Matthew 5:14) In the prologue of his Gospel, John uses this same imagery to describe Christ’s coming into the world: *“In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”* (John 1:4-5) The truth of

God's Word is like *"a light shining in a dark place"* (2 Peter 1:19) that repudiates the darkness of unbelief and error for *"What fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?"* (2 Corinthians 6:14). That darkness is, of course, endlessly perpetuated by the devil and the demons which serve him through the instigation of wickedness and corruption and the promulgation of false doctrine, error, and unbelief. In this way, the darkening of the sun and the sky at the opening of the vision establishes the context and sets the tone for that which follows. But the ominous darkness is only the beginning - the horrific imagery continues to unfold and develop.

A plague of demonic locusts from hell emerges from the clouds of smoke. Locusts were the eighth plague upon the land of Egypt (Exodus 10:1-20). God's prophet Joel used the devastation of the land of Israel by locusts as a warning sign of the coming day of the Lord's judgement (Joel 1-2) to call the people to repentance. Throughout the Old Testament the locust is a symbol of devastation and destruction (Deuteronomy 28:42; 1 Kings 8:37; Psalm 78:46). Vast swarms of millions of these voracious insects could strip the land bare of all vegetation leaving starvation and death in their wake. But this is not a vision of natural disaster. These are not ordinary locusts and vegetation is not their target - *"They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree."* They have been sent to wreak their havoc upon unbelieving mankind, *"those people who did not have the seal of God upon their foreheads."* The reference is to the sealing of the 144,000 in Revelation 7:1-8.



"The Locusts from the Pit"
16th Century Luther Bible Woodcut

The torment inflicted by these denizens of hell is graphically illustrated by scorpion-like powers which they are given: ***“They were given power like that of scorpions of the earth.”*** The sting of the scorpion brings agonizing pain but it is normally not fatal. So also the affliction represented here brings torment and suffering but not death - ***“They were not given the power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of the scorpion when it strikes a man.”*** The verb used in this phrase - ***“torture”*** - Greek - ***“basanismos”*** - clearly signals the intent of the image. The term does not refer primarily to physical pain but to spiritual, psychological, and emotional torment and distress. That is its consistent application elsewhere in Revelation.



“The Locusts from the Abyss” - 15th Century Belgian Apocalypse

The torment inflicted is of limited duration - ***“for five months.”*** In this context, the image of a five month period may have been chosen simply because it corresponds to the typical life span of the locust. In any case the number five (one half of the ordinal number ten) in Biblical numerology often represents that which is brief or limited. This torment is not continuous. It is periodic. Brighton expresses the sense of the time concept effectively:



“The Demon Locusts from the Abyss” - 13th Century French Apocalypse

“This period of time suggests an on-again, off-again ordeal to which these demons subject their victims. Like a cat playing with a terrified and helpless mouse, so the human victims of these hordes from hell are playthings of their craft and cunning. For a period of time they may break free from their torture, only to succumb again later. But all the while fear stalks every moment of the unbelievers’ lives, to a greater or lesser extent.” (Brighton, pp. 239-240)

The intensity of the torment inflicted by the locust/scorpions is such that they will long for death to bring an end to their suffering. ***“During those days, men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.”*** Job describes the intolerable anguish of such a man, for whom life has become an unbearable burden and death is seen as the only deliverance: ***“Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?”*** (Job 3:20-22) For the tormented unbelievers of this vision, the prolonging of life provides the opportunity for the repentance which their suffering was designed by God to produce.

“The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. ..” - The text provides a graphic and grotesque description of the locust/scorpion horde. Each of the details given serves to emphasize the overall impression of unnatural and awesome cruelty and destructive power. This is a host designed to destroy, as one might expect from the legions of Abaddon. The Revelator repeatedly finds himself unable to offer a precise description of these bizarre creatures. He is compelled to resort to simile, comparing their features to other things that we have seen and can comprehend. The locust swarm ***“looked like horses prepared for battle.”*** The prophets of the Old Testament frequently used the image of locust swarms to describe the size and destructive power of human armies. The Book of Judges uses the image of a swarm of locusts to emphasize the vast numbers of the Midianites and the devastation they caused in the days of Gideon:

“They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep, nor cattle, nor donkeys. They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it.” (Judges 6:4-5)

The prophet Jeremiah warns that the cavalry of the Medes and the Persians will sweep over the city of Babylon ***“like a swarm of locusts.”*** (Jeremiah 51:27) Nahum foretells the day when mighty Nineveh will be cut down by the sword ***“consumed as by grasshoppers.”*** (Nahum 3:15-17) John reverses this popular Old Testament image that the locust swarm from the Abyss resembled a horde of cavalry arrayed and ready for battle. The language is very similar to that of Joel - ***“They have the appearance of horses, they gallop along like cavalry...”*** (Joel 2:4) The image is one of menace and fearful power. Imagine the thunder of tens of thousands of horses crashing across a battlefield, bringing a wave of death and destruction that causes the very earth to tremble, smashing all that stand before it.

“On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces.” - The power of this vast horde appears to be invincible and irresistible. They wear upon their heads ***“something like crowns of gold.”*** The Greek term is *“stephanos”* which refers not to the royal crown of a king (Greek - *“diadema”*), but to the golden wreath of the victor. This crown is the unmistakable emblem of victory. This army intends to win and gives every appearance of the inevitability of its victory. The human faces of these dreadful creatures signify their



*“The Demon Locusts from the Abyss”
Detail from the Brussels Tapestry - 1540*

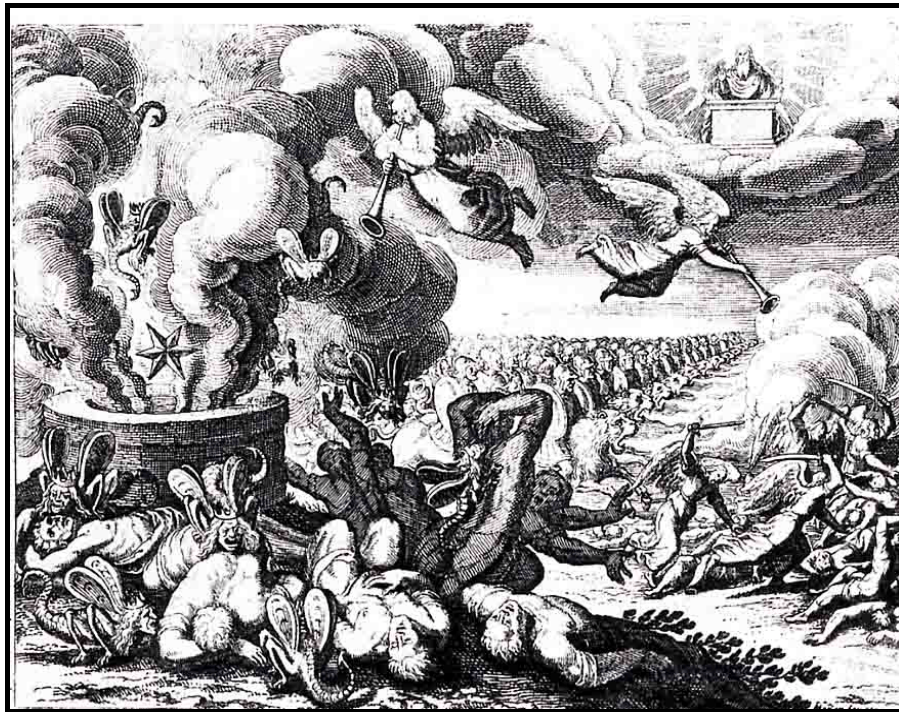
craft and cunning. These are not dumb beasts. They are animated by demonic cleverness and devilish design. Their actions are carefully calculated, each part of a plan devised in malicious hatred from the beginning. Their goal is nothing less than the damnation and destruction of the human race.

“Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth was like lion’s teeth.” - The teeth of the lion are clearly a symbol of destructive power and might. *“Like the teeth of a lion is a proverbial expression for something irresistibly and fatally destructive.”* (Aune, p. 532) Joel uses a similar phrase in Joel 1:6 - *“A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness.”* The reference to long hair like that of a woman in this context may simply allude to the long hair of a lion’s mane. In this way, the two details serve to reinforce and strengthen one another. The comparison of the long hair of a woman with the lion’s mane in this phrase as an image of fearful destructiveness is reminiscent of a description of Satan included in a 1st Century Jewish work entitled *“The Apocalypse of Zephaniah.”*

“That same instant I stood up and I saw a great angel before me. His hair was spread out like that of a lion. His teeth were outside of his mouth like a bear. His hair was spread out like that of a woman. His body was like the serpent’s...Then I asked, Who is the great angel who stands thus, whom I saw? He said, this is the one who accuses men in the presence of the Lord.” (Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 6:8,16)

“They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle.” - John’s language in this phrase appears to have been influenced by a description of the war horse as one of the marvels of God’s creation from Job 39:

“Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, clad in perfect armor, his breast glorious with courage? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground; he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.” (Job 39:19-24)



“The Fifth and Sixth Trumpets” by Matthias Merian

The iron breastplates of these demonic locust/scorpions render them indestructible and irresistible. The whirr of their millions of wings is like the sound of a mighty host of horsemen and chariots hurtling across the field of battle. The heavy cavalry of ancient times, in which both horse and rider were protected by metal armor, were virtually unstoppable. The speed and momentum of their onslaught struck terror into their opponents. That is precisely the image John intends to convey in these phrases.

“They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months.” - The image of locusts with the poisonous stingers of scorpions from vss. 3-5 is re-introduced and expanded. The five month limitation is also re-affirmed, indicating the temporary and periodic nature of this demonic oppression. The torment inflicted by this demonic horde is designed to drive sinful men to repentance.

The imagery of the fifth trumpet - the demonic locust/scorpion horde of Abaddon - sets before us the activity of the devil and his demons throughout the New Testament era in harassing and oppressing unbelieving mankind. Howard Hendrickson is correct when he categorizes the subject of this vision as *“the operation of the powers of darkness upon the souls of the wicked throughout the present age.”* (Hendrickson, p. 147) There is more at work in the events of human history than that which can be sensed or seen. The ancient conflict between good and evil rages on not only in the physical, but also in the spiritual realm: ***“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”***(Ephesians 6:12)

“The first woe is past. Two woes are yet to come!” - The horror and terror have only begun. The first woe has come and gone. The other two still remain to be seen. Let the reader beware!

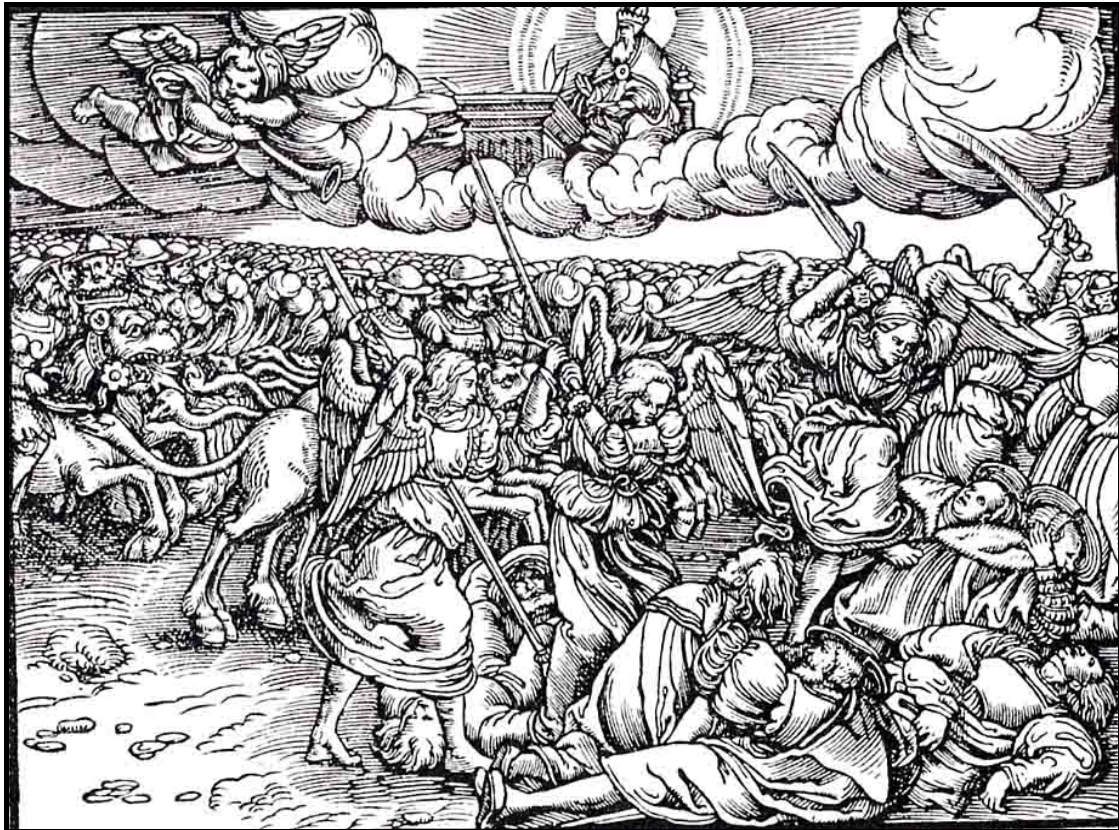


"The Final Trumpets" by Lucas Cranach

The Sounding of the Sixth Trumpet Revelation 9:13-21

The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke, and

sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of their horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood - idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

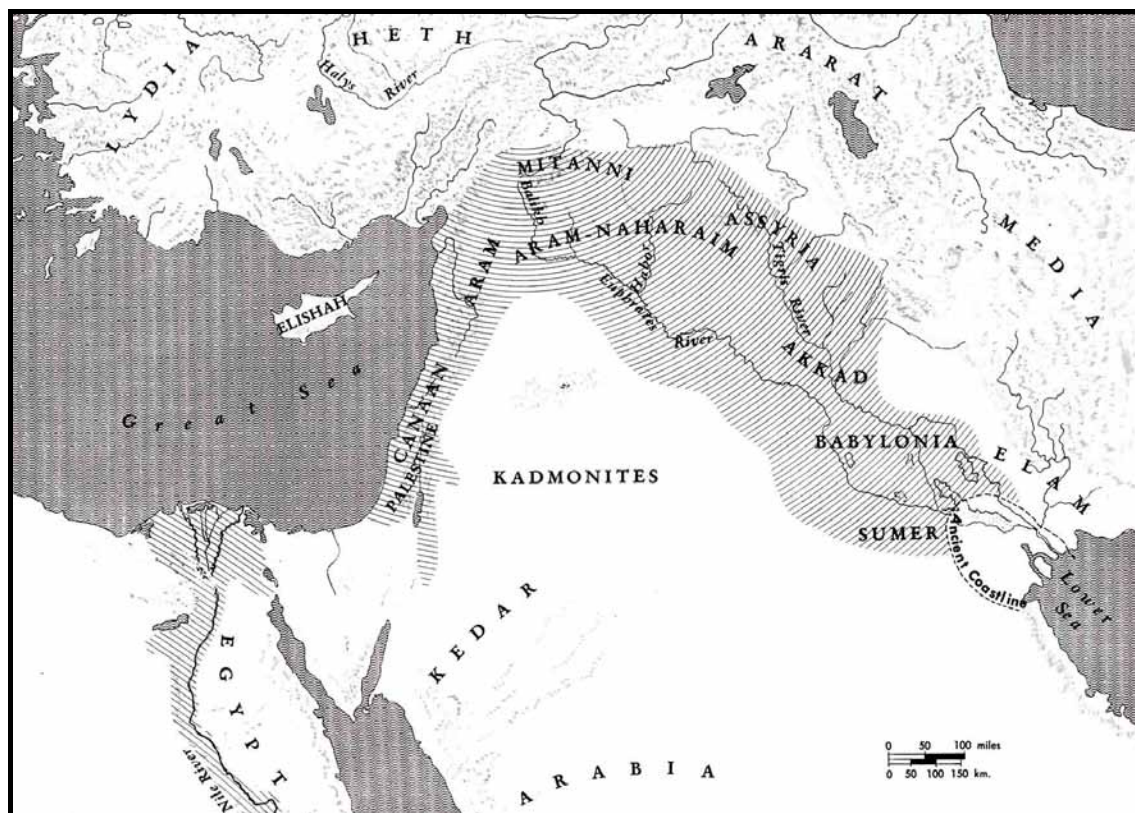


“The Sixth Trumpet” - Luther Bible Woodcut

“The sixth angel blew his trumpet and I heard a voice...” - The sixth trumpet sounds and in response a commanding voice is heard. The speaker is unidentified. John tells us where the voice originates - *“from the horns of the golden altar that is before God”* - and what the voice says - *“Release the four angels that are bound at the great river Euphrates.”* - but he does not identify the speaker. Since the voice originates at the center of the golden altar of incense, it seems probable that the speaker is the angel with the golden censer from the opening scene of this segment (Revelation 8:3-5). The strong identification of that angel with the altar of incense and with the prayers of the saints who are calling for the vindication of God in the

judgement of the wicked reinforces this view. In any case, the voice speaks on behalf of God and with His authority. The phrase ***“the horns of the golden altar”*** reflects the Old Testament practice of symbolizing the power of the God to be worshiped by constructing horns, which represent power and strength, at each of the altar’s four corners (cf. Exodus 30:1-10 for a description of the Incense Altar and its horns). On occasion in ancient Israel, the horns of the altar became a literal place of refuge for those who sought the protection of God (cf. 1 Kings 1:50-51; 2:28-34).

The command from the altar orders the release of ***“the four angels bound at the great river Euphrates.”*** Four, in the numerology of Revelation is the earth number, derived from the four points of the compass, and the proverbial four corners of the earth. The fact that there are four angels here indicates that the woe about to be unleashed will be of world-wide proportion. The language recalls the four angels whom we observed in Revelation 7:1, who were called upon to restrain the four winds of divine judgement until the protective sealing of God’s people on earth had been completed. In both instances, the four angels are depicted as holding back the impending judgement of God upon the earth. However, unlike the four angels in



“The Fertile Crescent”

chapter 7, these angels are not merely restraining the judgement, they are themselves the judgement and are under restraint. These four mighty angels are “**bound**” (Greek - “*dedemenous*”) that is, held in confinement, chained or tied down. This is a term that is used in Scripture only in reference to evil angels (cf. Jude 6; Revelation 20:2).

The four angels are held in confinement “***at the great river Euphrates.***” The Euphrates is the longest river in Western Asia, 1,700 miles in length. It flows down from the highlands of Armenia in Asia Minor and ends in the Persian Gulf. It is characteristically referred to in Scripture simply as “***the great river***” (Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 1:7; Joshua 1:4; 1 Chronicles 5:7-9). The Euphrates constituted the northern boundary of the original land promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 11:22-25; Joshua 1:1-5; 1 Chronicles 5:7-9). Along with its smaller counterpart, the Tigris River, the Euphrates defined ancient Mesopotamia (Latin - “*the Land Between the Rivers*”). From this region rose the great enemies of Israel, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. The two rivers formed the northern and western boundaries of the Fertile Crescent which was the cradle of civilization in the ancient Near East. Beyond them lay fierce barbarian tribes, invincible horsemen like the Scythians and the Parthians, who periodically swept down to devastate the civilized and settled lands whose people lived in dread of their coming. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, the lands beyond the rivers in the far north came to signify the abode of evil, a threatening and ominous place from which the enemies of God’s people would arise (Isaiah 8:7-8; Jeremiah 47:2). In his grim prophecies of Gog and Magog, Ezekiel warned of hordes that would come from the far north to spread across the land like a dark cloud (Ezekiel 38). Thus the Great River Euphrates and the northern boundary which it constituted came to be a powerful symbol of impending judgement. By unleashing these four angels of judgement “***at the great river Euphrates***” John makes effective use of that symbol and signals the severity of the judgement that is to come.

“And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind.” - The precision with which the moment of the angels’ release is defined emphasizes the absolute of control of God over these incredible events. “*All the forces of history are under the sovereign control of God. He is the Almighty One (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 19:15; etc.)*” (Mounce, p. 201) The sixth century Latin commentator Primasius suggests that this sequence represents the passage of time throughout the New Testament era as each of these happenings occur at precisely the time and in exactly the way that God has



"The Final Trumpets" by Albrecht Dürer

predetermined. *“Step by step days are filled with hours, and months with days, and year certainly with months.”* (Brighton, p. 245) There will be no surprises or coincidences here. God’s timetable will unfold without the slightest variation. The intensification of the judgement, in comparison to that of the fifth trumpet, is indicated by the death of ***“a third of mankind.”*** Where previously the purpose of the plagues was to torment but not to kill, now death races forward to seize its hapless prey. The *“one third fraction”* used in the earlier trumpets to signify partial destruction (Revelation 8:7-12) is called upon once again to tell us that we have not yet come to the extinction of mankind. The death caused by this trumpet judgement will be massive but partial.

“The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.” - The legions of godless spiritual forces deployed by the four judgement angels is depicted as a massive horde of grotesque cavalry (Greek - *“tou hippikou”*). No earthly origin is specified. These are not the armed forces of an earthly king or nation. This is the demon army of hell! It marshals not for mere physical war on a literal battlefield, but to wage spiritual warfare for the souls of men. The massacres and mayhem of all men’s wars serve their demonic purpose but do not exhaust it. These demons wage their warfare through falsehood and error, corruption and sin, as well as through physical violence. The end result for all those who are not signed with the seal of Christ is always the same in any case, death in time and in eternity. The unimaginable magnitude of this host is ***“two hundred million”*** (Greek - *“dismyriadon myriadon”* literally *“twice ten thousand times ten thousand.”*) The number represents incalculable immensity. The image recalls the demon’s defiant response to Christ: ***“My name is legion, for we are many!”*** (Mark 5:9). The number is also reminiscent of the angel throngs that surrounded the Lord upon Sinai (Psalm 68:17; Deuteronomy 33:2; Daniel 3:10). However, lest the reader imagine that John is guilty of exaggeration, he carefully affirms that he received this number by revelation - ***“I heard their number.”***

“The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur...” - A detailed description of the hellish cavalry in a manner similar to that of the locust/scorpions in the preceding vision, now ensues. *“Here again, the piling up of monstrous metaphors emphasizes that the demons are ferocious and dreadful beings that afflict people in a fierce, appalling, and devastating manner.”* (Beale, p. 510) John specifically emphasizes that these are scenes in a vision - ***“I saw in my vision”*** - so that their symbolic nature can not



"The Final Trumpets" by Jean Duvet

be misconstrued. The armor of this demonic cavalry - ***“fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur”*** - corresponds to the ***“fire, smoke, and sulfur”*** which billows out of the horses’ mouths. ***“Fiery red”*** (Greek - *“purinous”*) is the bright red of burning flames. ***“Dark blue”*** (Greek - *“hyakinthinos”*) is the deep blue color of sulfurous smoke. ***“Yellow as sulfur”*** (Greek - *“theiodeis”* - traditionally - *“brimstone”*) is the pale yellow color of sulfur. The association of these three colors with the undying fires of hell is of longstanding in Scripture (cf. Genesis 19:24-28 - the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah). They are to be consistently associated in Revelation with final and decisive judgment upon the devil and all those who follow him (cf. Revelation 14:10; 21:8; 19:20; 20:10). If the infernal place of damnation were ever to commission a flag, these would be its colors.



“The Attack of the Huns” by Checa

“The heads of the horses resembled lions...” - This image conveys a sense of fearsome destructiveness - the speed and mobility of the horse combined with the rage and killing power of the lion. Long ago Habakkuk the prophet had warned of the deadly onslaught of Babylonian cavalry: ***“Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture swooping to devour; they come all bent on violence.”*** (Habakkuk 1:8) But these grotesque horsemen from hell far surpass the terror of any human assault. ***“A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths.”*** The imagery of judgement



*"The Sixth and Seventh Trumpets"
15th Century Bible Illumination*

fire from the mouth of God is familiar in the Old Testament (i.e. Psalm 18:8). John's use of the term "**plagues**" to describe the "**fire, smoke, and sulfur**" which devastates humanity reinforces the link between the trumpet visions and the plagues of Egypt. The destructive power of these fearsome beasts is further represented by their tails which are like venomous serpents: "**The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.**" The language is similar to the description of the scorpion stingers in the previous vision (Revelation 9:10). The mention of poisonous snakes also serves to link these demons to their Satanic master, "**the ancient serpent**" who brought death to the whole world. Many commentators see the reference

to the deadly tails of these creatures as an allusion to a tactic developed by the horsemen of central Asia, the Scythians and the Parthians who proven to be Rome's most fearsome enemies in the East. These skilled bowmen would attack their foes in a terrifying charge that would literally darken the sky with clouds of arrows. Then, before a counter-attack could come, they would turn and wheel away on their speeding horses; as they did, each horseman would reverse himself on the back of his mount and continue firing while the host retreated. The tactic struck terror into the hearts of their enemies. The Parthians, it is said, even braided the tails of their horses to make them look like writhing serpents. The Huns and the Mongols would later use this same tactic with devastating effectiveness.

The fire-breathing monsters of John's vision are reminiscent of the fearsome "**Leviathan**" of the Book of Job - "**Firebrands stream from his mouth; sparks of fire shoot out. Smoke pours from his nostrils...His breath sets coals ablaze and flames dart from his mouth.**" (Job 41:19-20) or the dreaded Chimera of Greek mythology who breathed fire with the head of a lion, the body of a ram and the tail of a dragon.

"A third of mankind was killed..." - The devastation wrought upon humanity is massive in scope.

"They kill the whole person, both physically and spiritually. They carry out not the final judgement, but one that is linked to it and that prepares for it. They cause the physical death of idolaters, compromisers, and persecutors of the church who are already spiritually dead. This plague of death includes all the forms of death that the ungodly undergo (from illness, tragedy, etc.). The death stroke against their bodies makes certain their spiritual death for eternity, since those who physically die in an unbelieving state remain in that condition forever. In this sense, it can be said that death here is both spiritual and physical." (Beale, p. 512)

"The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands..."

- Despite the fearful devastation and death brought about by the onslaught of the demonic horde, the surviving portion of unbelieving mankind remains steadfast in its impenitence. **"The work of their hands"** is an expression typically used in Scripture to denote idolatry, dismissing the idol as a false god which man has concocted for himself. The Psalmist derides such idiocy:

"Our God is in heaven, He does whatever pleases Him. But their gods are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but



"The Destruction of Leviathan" by Gustave Doré

cannot speak, eyes but they cannot see; they have ears but they cannot hear, noses but they cannot smell, they have hands but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” (Psalm 115:3-8; cf. also Deuteronomy 4:28; 27:15; 31:29; 2 Kings 19:18; 22:17; 2 Chronicles 32:19; 34:25; Psalm 135:15; Isaiah 2:8; 17:8; 37:19; Jeremiah 1:16; 10:3,9; 25:6,7,14; 32:30; 44:8; Hosea 14:3; Micah 5:13; Haggai 2:14; Acts 7:41).



“Pazuzu - Sumerian Lord of the North Wind, Pestilence and Plague”

In this context the phrase *“did not repent of the work of their hands”* indicates a refusal to turn away from the worship of idols. *“Repent”* (Greek - *“metanoeo ek”*) refers to a change of mind or of heart that results in the rejection of someone or something - in this instance, the worship of idols. Mankind’s defiant idolatry continues as in place of the one true God they choose to worship *“demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood - idols that cannot see or hear or walk.”* While Scripture derides and ridicules the worship of idols as foolishness, the Bible also clearly recognizes the role of the demonic (Greek - *“ta daimonia”*) in idol worship. Whatever real spiritual power these man-made gods may have is simply that of the demon, masquerading behind the face of the idol (cf. Deuteronomy 32:15-18; Psalm 106:37; John 8:39-44; 1 Corinthians

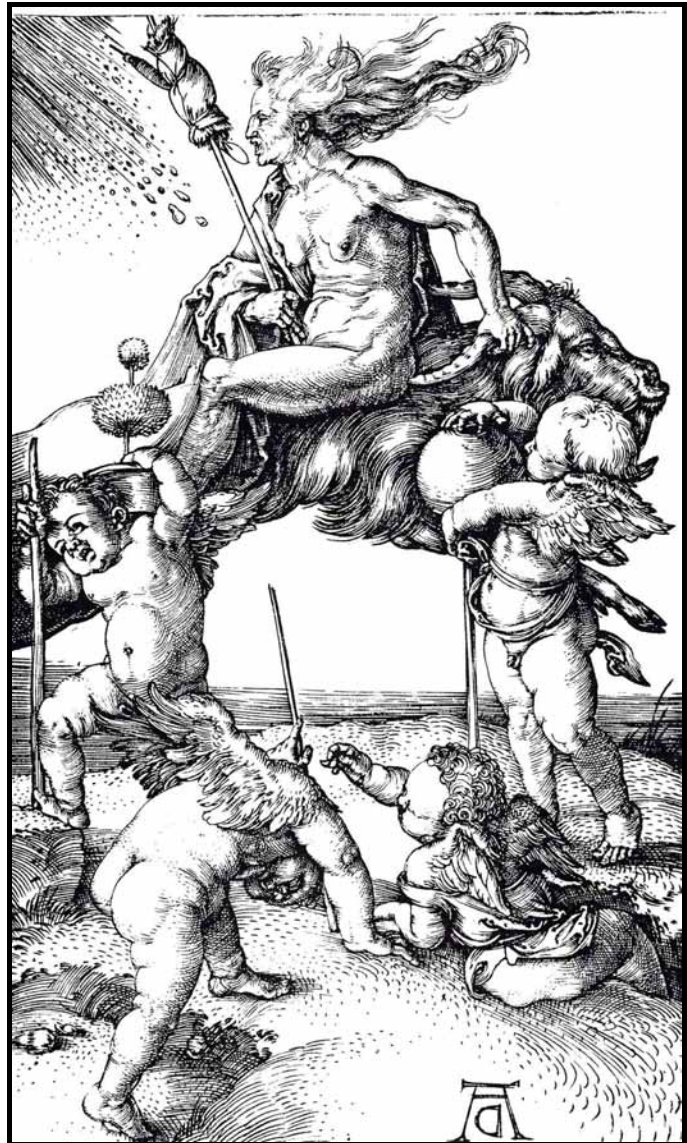
10:21; 1 John 3:7-10; Revelation 13:3-4, 11-15).

Idolatrous rejection of the true God inevitably results in immorality - *“Nor did they*

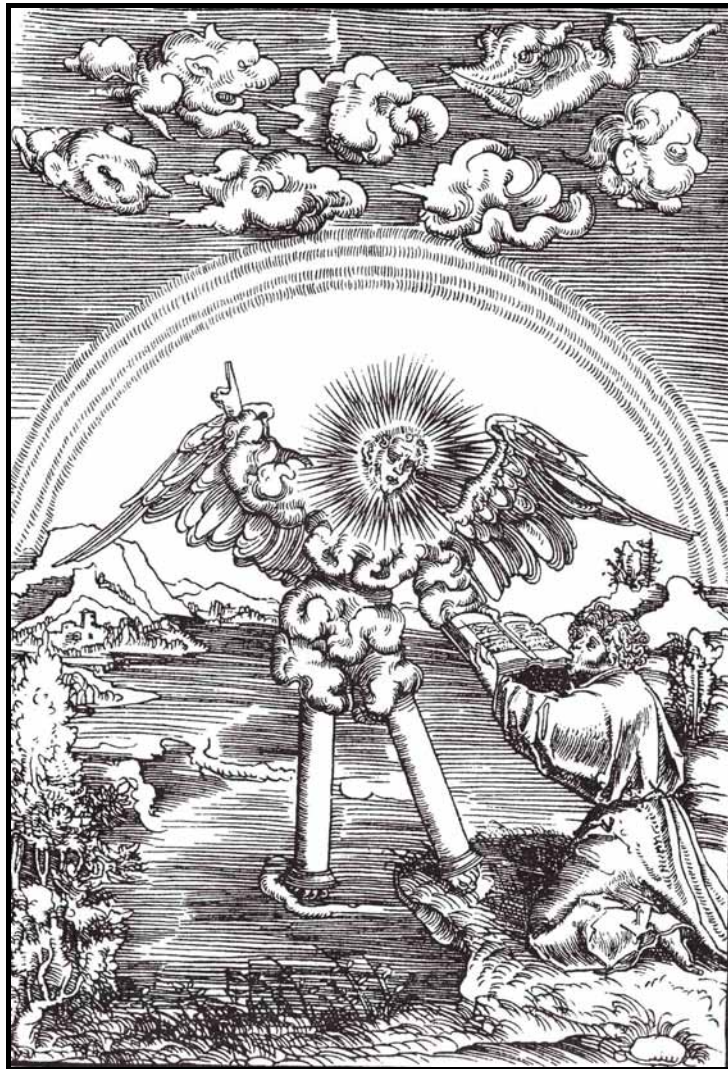
repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts.” John specifies violations of the fifth (“**murder**”- Greek - “*ton phonon*”), sixth (“**sexual immorality**” Greek - “*tes porneias*”), and seventh commandments (“**thefts**” - Greek - “*ton klemmaton*”). Also included in the vice list is “**their magic arts**” - Greek - “*ton pharmakon*”). This term is sometimes used positively in reference to medicine but in this negative context it applies to any form of sorcery, witchcraft, or spiritism, including the use of poisons, drugs, amulets, necromancy and incantation. These particular sins may have been listed because of their direct connection to various forms of idol worship.

The sounding of the sixth trumpet intensifies and expands the vision of God’s judgement upon sinful mankind. In the face of continued obstinate impenitence that judgement moves forward toward its inevitable conclusion. The vast horde of demonic cavalry is let loose to wreck devastation and death upon impenitent mankind. The grotesque detail in which this host is described serves to emphasize the incredible destructiveness of which these servants of hell are capable. Martin Franzmann observes:

“The very exuberance of these wild prophecies of torturing locusts and resistlessly destructive calvary is a salutary warning against all attempts to trace out “fulfillments of them in the transparent facts of history. These prophecies show us the futility of such attempts. God in His judgemental wooing of man-gone-wrong can work in heights and depths and with means which the transparent facts of history conceal rather than reveal.” (Franzmann, p. 74)



*“Wahlpurgisnacht - The Witch’s Sabbath”
by Albrecht Dürer*



"The Angel and the Little Scroll" by Lucas Cranach

The Angel and the Little Scroll

Revelation 10:1-21

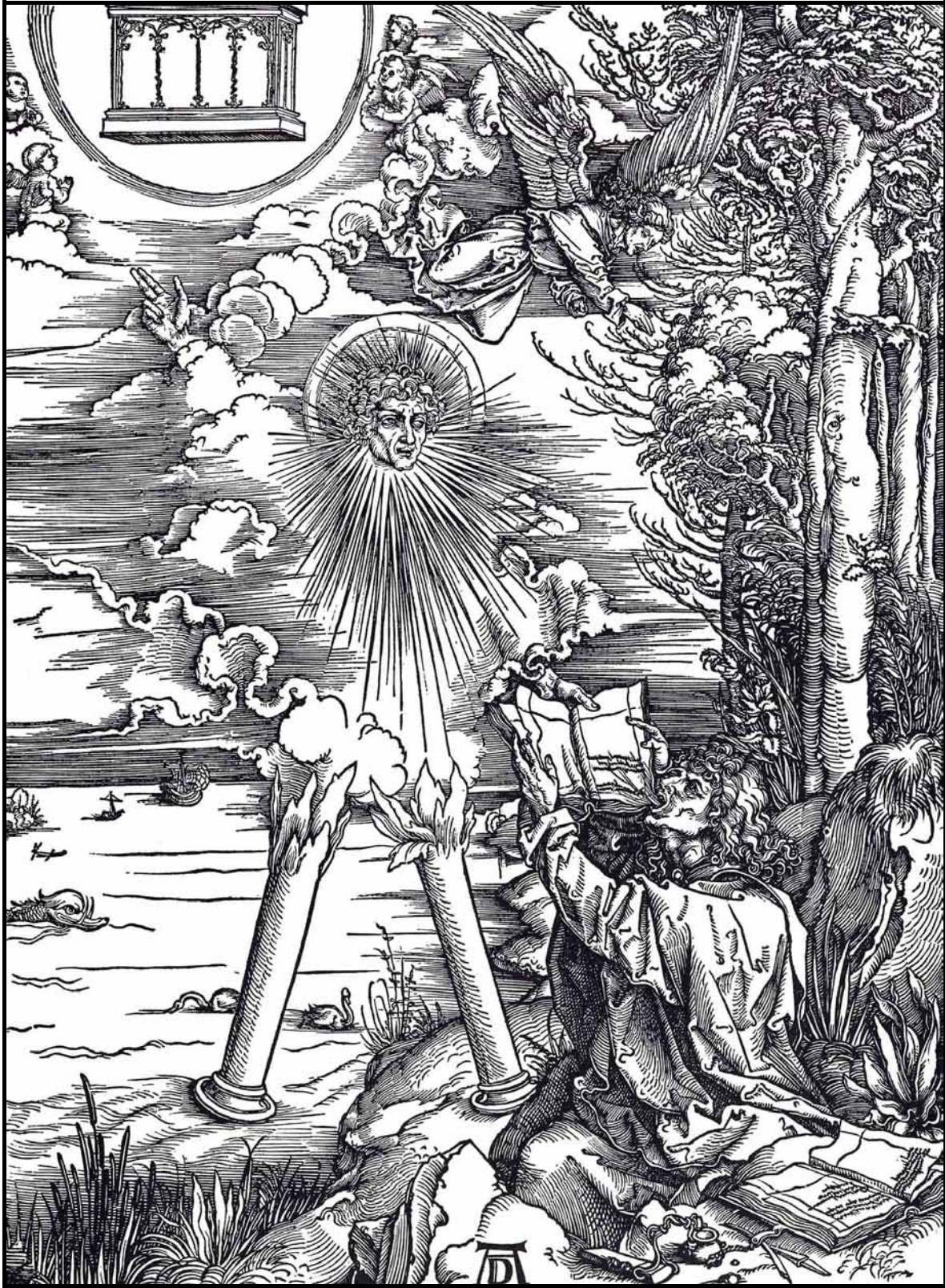
Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. He was holding a little scroll which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say; "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." Then the angel I had seen, standing on the sea and on the land

raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said; "There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as He announced to His servants, the prophets." Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more; "Go take the scroll that lies open in the hands of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in you mouth it will be as sweet as honey." I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings."

"Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven." - There was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, a pause which assured the church of its preservation and victory (Revelation 7). In the same way, there is now an interlude of assurance for both the prophet and the church between the sounding of the sixth and the seventh trumpets. First, St. John is reassured of his commission and call from God. He is reassured that the word which he reveals is the Word of the Lord which will most surely come to pass. A *"mighty angel"* descends from heaven. This is the second of three such angels which appear in the Book of Revelation (Cf. Revelation 5:2; 18:21). The text stresses the fact that this is *"another mighty angel,"* not the same creature that appeared in Revelation 5:2. In fact it is immediately evident that this messenger *"coming down from heaven"* is no ordinary angel. He is, instead, the Lord Jesus Himself. The adjective *"mighty"* (Greek - *"ischyron"*) signifies strength that belongs to God alone. In the



"The Glory of the Lord Upon Mt. Sinai" by Carolsfeld



"The Angel and the Little Book" by Albrecht Dürer

Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the use of this word in the heavenly sphere was reserved only for God Himself. The Gospel writers use the same term to describe Jesus as the One who is ***“mightier”*** than John the Baptist (cf. Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16). The divine aura of this being is further indicated by his apparel. The ***“mighty angel”*** is ***“robed in a cloud,”*** ***“clad in the cloud panoply of heaven.”*** (Franzmann, p. 75) Throughout the Old Testament only the coming of God is surrounded by the clouds of heaven. The Psalmist declares: ***“He makes the clouds His chariots and rides on the wings of the wind.”*** (Psalm 104:3). In the pillar of cloud and fire, the Lord led Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21; 14:19-20; Numbers 9:17-21) and the ***“Shekinah,”*** the glory cloud of the divine presence rested over the ark of the covenant in tabernacle and temple (Exodus 40:34-35; Leviticus 16:2; 1 Kings 8:10; 2 Chronicles 5:13). The ***“Angel of the Lord,”*** that is, the pre-incarnate Christ, is also associated with the cloud of God’s glory (Exodus 14:19-20). In Daniel 7:13, the Son of Man approaches the Ancient of Days surrounded by the clouds. God speaks to Jesus from the cloud at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). When Jesus returns to judge the earth He will come ***“on the clouds of heaven.”*** (Matthew 24:30). Thus, without exception, throughout Scripture, only God is ever spoken of as having been ***“robed in a cloud.”*** (Cf. Lamentations 3:42-44; Ezekiel 1:4,28).

The second divine identifying mark of this angel is the rainbow above his head. In Revelation 4:3 a rainbow encircled the heavenly throne of God. In Ezekiel 1:28 the prophet tells us ***“Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around Him.”*** The rainbow had originally been given as a gracious reminder of God’s covenant promise not to destroy the world again by a flood (Genesis 8:22; 9:13-17). Malachi had foretold the coming of ***“the messenger*** (“angel”) ***of the covenant whom you desire.”*** (Malachi 3:1). Now this angel comes, crowned by the rainbow, as the covenant messenger of God.

The Christological character of this angel is further corroborated by his facial appearance - ***“His face was like the sun.”*** This again is language that Scripture reserves for God alone. The sun is a common image for the glory of God in the Old Testament (cf. Isaiah 60:1-3,20; Psalm 84:11). Malachi designates the coming Messiah as ***“the Sun of Righteousness.”*** (Malachi 4:2). On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus’ face ***“shone like the sun.”*** (Matthew 17:2). When the exalted Christ appears to John in Revelation 1, ***“His face was like the sun shining in all of its brilliance.”***



"The Angel and the Little Book" by Jean Duvet

One final detail completes the awesome image of the Christophany - ***“and His legs were like fiery pillars.”*** Once again, the language recalls the description of the glorified Christ in the Prologue - ***“His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace.”*** (Revelation 1:15). The Son of Man in Daniel’s vision had ***“legs like the gleam of burnished bronze.”*** (Daniel 10:6) The slight shift in language here serves to evoke even more strongly the image of the fiery pillar with which the Lord led the Children of Israel on their way to the land of promise. In this way, the image of fiery pillars serves to express the strength and power of Christ as He serves to guard and guide His people.

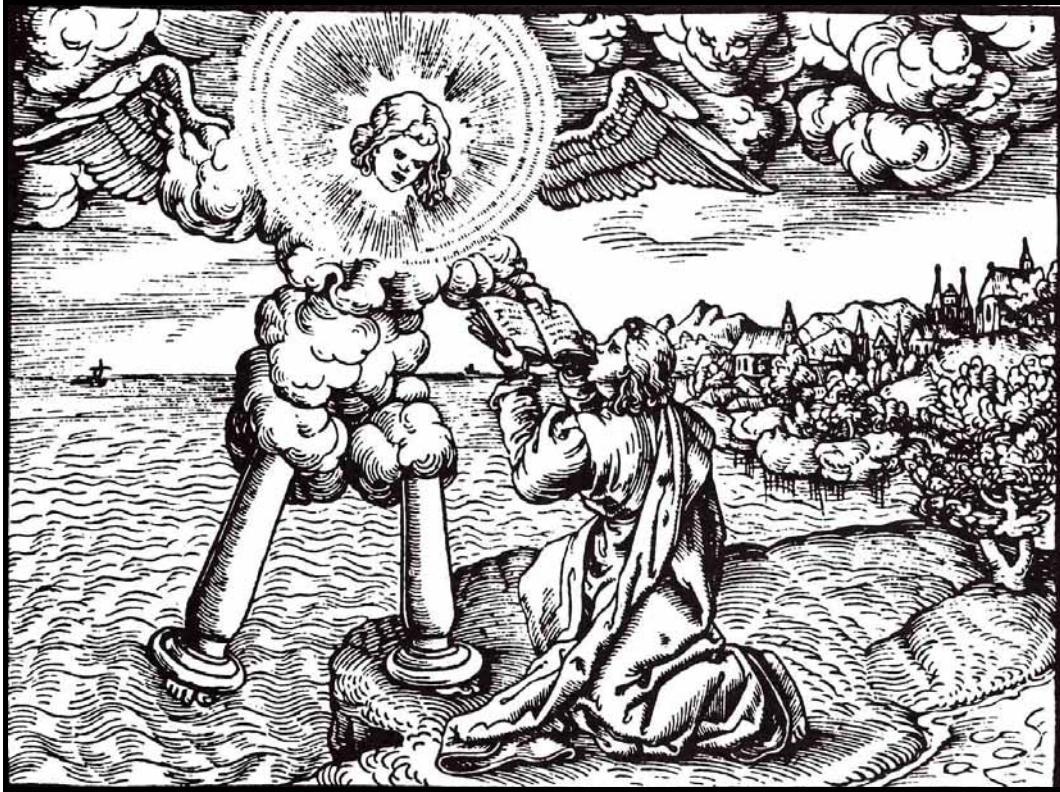
“He was holding a little scroll which lay open in His hand.” - A “little book” (Greek - “biblarpidion”) lays open in the Angel of the Lord’s hand. It is carefully introduced at this point to highlight its role as a central component in the scene. This is, in all probability, the seven sealed scroll, with its prophetic message of the unfolding plan of salvation and judgement throughout the New Testament era which had been opened by Christ in the preceding vision. Thus the verb ***“which lay open”*** is a perfect passive participle, literally, *“which has been opened,”* action completed in the past the effect of which continues into the present. The contents of the scroll are known to John. They open before him.



“The Angel and the Little Book”
Luther Bible Woodcut

“He planted His right foot on the sea and His left foot on the land.” -

The Angel of the Lord stands astride both land and sea. He is a giant colossus. His stature and His stance denote Christ’s absolute sovereignty over all who dwell upon



"The Angel and the Little Book" - Luther Bible Woodcut

the earth and the profound significance of the mission of salvation and judgement entrusted to Him. As this gigantic figure dominates the vision with one foot on the sea and the other on the land so the Lord rules over the totality of the earth. In the visions to come, we will see dragons and beasts arising from both land and sea. The mighty Angel of the Lord remains in control nonetheless.

"And He gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When He shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke." - The magnitude of the Angel's cry - ***"like the roar of a lion"*** - indicates that He speaks with the full power and authority of God. It is no mere co-incidence that when the Lamb of God takes possession of the seven sealed scroll in chapter 5, He is further identified as ***"the Lion of the Tribe of Judah."*** (Revelation 5:5) The lion metaphor as an expression of that power is drawn from the Old Testament. Job complains to God: ***"If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion and again display your awesome power against me."*** (Job 10:16) Amos declares that he must prophesy because the Word of the Lord has been entrusted to him: ***"The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken - who can but prophesy?"*** (Amos 3:8) When the Lord promises that He will speak to

His people with saving power, it is through the imagery of the lion's roar: *"They will follow the Lord, He will roar like a lion. When He roars, His children will come trembling from the West. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord."* (Hosea 11:10) The inevitability of God's judgement upon His rebellious people is compared to the fearless presence of the lion over his prey:

"As the lion growls, a great lion over his prey - and though a whole band of shepherds is called together against him, he is not frightened by their shouts, or disturbed by their clamor - so the Lord Almighty will come down to do battle on Mt. Zion and on its heights." (Isaiah 31:4)

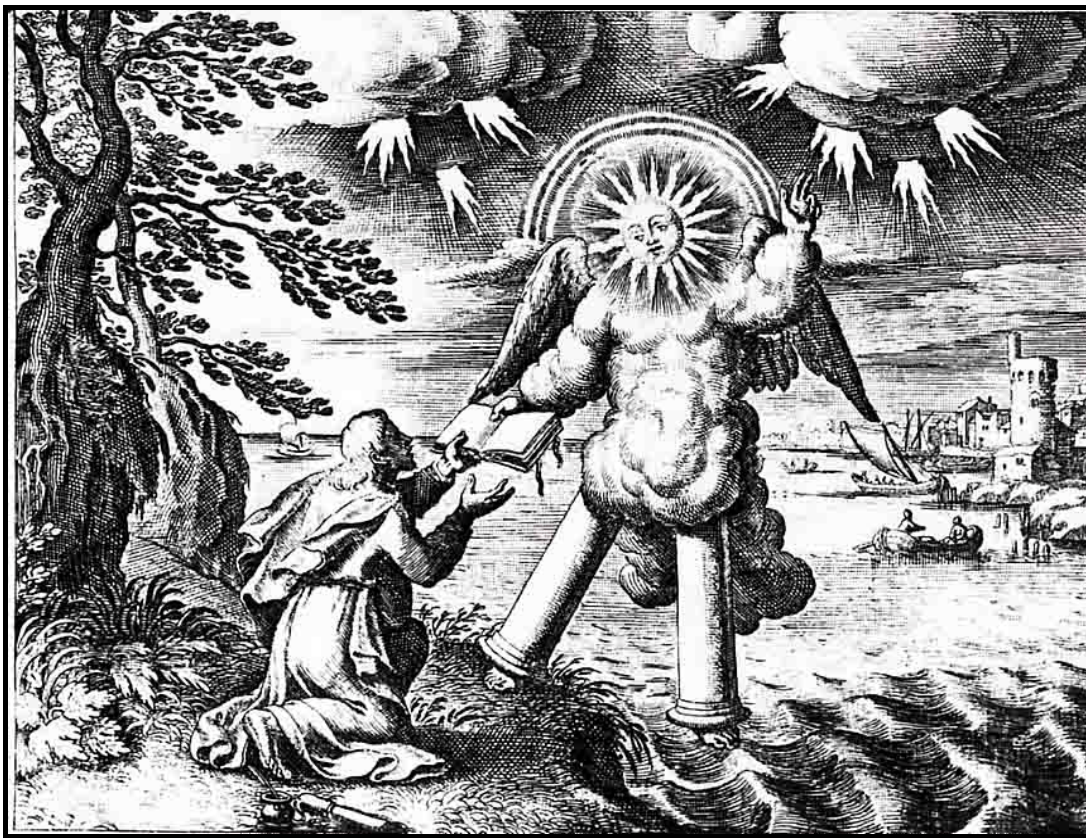
In the Fourth Book of Ezra, a Jewish apocalyptic book written about 100A.D., it is the Messiah who speaks with the roar of the lion: *"And as for the lion that you saw rousing up out of the forest and roaring and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness, and for his words that you have heard, this is the Messiah."* (4 Ezra 12:31) The point of the image here in Revelation is clear - that which the Angel of the Lord speaks is the Word and command of God. It is proclaimed with convincing power from on high. That image of power and authority is further enhanced by the *"voices of the seven thunders"* which reverberate to the sound of the Angel's voice. There is no specific reference elsewhere in Scripture to *"the seven thunders"* although John's use of the definite article - *"the seven thunders"* seems to indicate that he was referring to a phenomenon with which his readers would be familiar. Perhaps the allusion is the rumbling thunder of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16-



"The Angel and the Little Book"
by Hans Burgmair

19). Rabbinic tradition referred to God's voice of thunder at Sinai which divided itself into seven voices, representing the holiness and completeness of the Law. Reflecting this tradition, Psalm 29 presents a sevenfold song of praise to the thunder of God's voice -

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the glory of God thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars...The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning. The voice of the Lord shakes the desert...The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in His temple all cry, “Glory!” (Psalm 29: 3-9)



*“The Angel and the Little Scroll” 18th Century Bible Engraving
by Matthias Merian*

The context of John's vision strongly suggests that *“the voices of the seven thunders”* are indeed the voice of God. They *“act as God's imprimatur on the*

angel's voice and mission." (Brighton, p. 269) When John heard the message the thunders proclaimed, he prepared to record their words - ***"And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write..."*** The Revelator is prevented from doing so by a command from heaven - ***"But I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."*** Everything that John wrote was revealed to him by God but evidently not everything that was revealed was to be written. The Bible is complete but it is not exhaustive (cf. John 21:25). *"Even the inspired prophet proclaims not everything which he, or God's people, wish to know, but all that they need to know."* (Franzmann, p. 76) Perhaps that which was revealed by the seven thunders was necessary for the prophet himself, in preparing him for that which he still must write or do, but it was not intended for the prophet's audience. It is God alone Who controls and determines the content and the extent of His Revelation.

"Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised His right hand to heaven." - The focus of the scene now returns to the mighty angel Himself. A solemn oath to implement judgement upon the wicked is about to be taken. This is signified by the customary raising of the right hand (cf. Psalm 106:26). In Deuteronomy 32:40, God takes a formal oath to reassure His people that He will surely bring judgement upon the wicked: ***"I lift My hand to heaven and declare: As surely as I live forever, when I sharpen My flashing sword and My hand grasps it in judgement, I will take vengeance on My adversaries and repay those who hate Me."*** A similar scene occurs in Daniel 12:7 where we read: ***"The man clothed in linen who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by Him who lives forever."*** In both instances, the substance of the God's promise is that His judgement will not fail to overtake those who have defied and denied Him. The oath of the Angel of the Lord in Revelation 10 is similar in its context and content. It is not uncommon for God to use the solemn formality of an oath as a means of comforting His people and strengthening their faith (cf. Genesis 22:16; Exodus 32:13; Isaiah 45:43; Jeremiah 49:13; Ezekiel 20:5; Amos 6:8; Hebrews 6:13). As Thomas Kingo's classic hymn affirms: ***"He by His oath hath sworn, I on that oath depend."*** (ELH # vs.4)

"And He swore by Him who lives forever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said..." - The majestic language of the oath identifies the eternal and omnipotent Creator as the guarantor of the promise. Only the God who is transcendent,



*"The Angel and the Little Book"
Luther Bible Woodcut*

absolutely beyond time and space - the God who is the source of everything that exists throughout the entire universe - has the power and authority to make such a promise and to keep it. The triple specification of heaven, earth, and sea, stresses the universal scope of that divine power. The fact that the oath is made by Christ, the Angel of the Lord, serves to emphasize His absolute rule over the universe in the last days and His crucial role in the establishment of the new creation. That which was symbolized by the great Angel's stance astride the land and the sea, is given explicit expression in the language of the oath.

***"There will be no more delay!
But in the days when the seventh
angel is about to sound his
trumpet, the mystery of God will
be accomplished, just as He
announced to His servants, the***

prophets." - The substance of the oath follows the pattern of its Old Testament precedents. The commitment is given that the promises of God will most surely be kept. His plan and purpose for the salvation of His people and the judgement of the wicked will be completely fulfilled. The opening phrase of the oath literally says *"there will be no interval of time!"* - that is to say, nothing shall interrupt or prevent the accomplishment of God's purpose. The imminent sounding of the seventh trumpet will carry us forward to the end of time when ***"the mystery of God will be accomplished."*** The word *"mystery"* (Greek - *"mysterion"*) refers to that which cannot be known by natural means, apart from divine revelation. St. Paul uses the term, most prominently in his letter to the Ephesians, to include the entire plan of

salvation by grace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John's use of the word here in Revelation 10 is similarly broad. It includes the plan of salvation as it was outlined throughout the Old Testament by the prophets and now comes to its culmination and completion in the prophecies of Revelation itself. It is significant to note that the verb ***"announced"*** in conjunction with God's message to the prophets is the Greek word *"euangelisen"* which literally means *"to preach or proclaim the gospel."* This is the only use of the term in the book of Revelation. The Old Testament is, as Luther remarks, the cradle which holds the Christ child. It is a proclamation of the Gospel from the first promise of Genesis 3:15 to the closing verses of Malachi. The martyrs beneath the altar and the saints before the throne had cried for the vindication of God and the coming of His kingdom. The assurance of the angel's oath is that all the promises made through God's prophet's will be kept without fail.

"Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel..." - The heavenly voice which had spoken previously to forbid the message of the seven thunders (10:4) now commands John to approach the Angel of the Lord and take up the scroll that lies open in His hand. The scroll represents the message that it contains. The command to take the scroll represent a reaffirmation of John's call and commission as a prophet of God.

When asked for the scroll, the angel provides it with the instruction that John is to take the scroll and eat it - ***"Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey."*** The incident is based upon the call of the



"The Prophet Ezekiel" by J. James Tissot

prophet Ezekiel. There, too, the call of God's spokesman to proclaim the Word of the Lord was enacted in a visionary command to consume a scroll with the words of God written upon it. Thus. In the graphic imagery of the vision, the prophet digests God's words so that he may regurgitate them again before the people to whom God sends him.

“Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and warning and woe. And He said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the House of Israel. So I opened my mouth and He gave me the scroll to eat. Then He said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” (Ezekiel 2:9-3:3)



***“The Call of the Prophet Ezekiel” - 19th Century Bible Illustration
by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld***

The Greek verb “*kataphage*” (“**Eat!**”) is most emphatic. It should be translated “*Devour!*” Jeremiah once used the same image to express his acceptance of his prophetic responsibility to faithfully proclaim the Word of God: “***When your words came, I ate them, they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear Your Name, O Lord God Almighty.***” (Jeremiah 15:16) The symbolic action of eating the scroll indicates not only the acceptance of the prophetic role, but also the necessity that the prophet himself “*inwardly digest*” the Word that he has been called to proclaim. In fact, this Greek verb is often used in precisely that sense “*to receive and contemplate knowledge,*” or “*to digest information.*” The prophet is never personally detached from the message that is preached. That Word impacts and affects him as much as it does his audience. That is the point of the bitter/sweet imagery in the text. The sweet (Greek - “*glykys*”) message of the Gospel offers the same comfort, hope, and joy to both speaker and hearer. In the same way the sharp bitterness (Greek - “*pikros*”) of the Law pierces the hearts and consciences of all. Bitterness may also be the result of the rejection of that message by the audience to whom it is addressed which all too often resulted in the rejection and persecution of the faithful messenger (cf. Jeremiah 12:1-13; 20:7-18; Ezekiel 3:4-9). “***I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.”***” - John complies with the angel’s instruction, and it is just as it was foretold - the scroll is sweet and then bitter. Franzmann notes:

“He finds the high privilege sweet to the taste, but he knows that his office means that he will be “a torment to those who dwell on the earth” (11:10) and will leave him with a bitter bellyful. John is assured not that his office will make him happy, but that it will prove valid and effective.” (Franzmann, p. 78)

The prophet’s obligation to faithfully convey the Word of God that has been entrusted to him is absolute - “***you must prophesy again...***” This is a message of vital importance for all of humanity - “***many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.***” This fourfold classification, representing the entire human race, is characteristic of the Book of Revelation (cf. Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15).

The symbolism of the Mighty Angel interlude, the oath and the eating of the little scroll, serves to validate the overall ministry of the prophets and to reaffirm the specific responsibility of John as a prophet of God in terms of this particular book of prophecy.