

Revelation 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 8 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood.

A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water.

The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became Wormwood. And many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

[1 : 46] Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead. Woe! Woe! Woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow.

The Lamb opened the first six seals of the book in chapter 6. The opening of the final seal of the book was delayed in chapter 7, until the 144,000 of Israel could be sealed.

Like the preparation for the coming of the destroying angels in the striking down of the firstborn in Egypt, with the blood placed on the lintel and the doorposts, or the marking out of the foreheads of those who mourned for Jerusalem in Ezekiel chapter 9, this protects a righteous remnant from the judgment that is coming.

There are a number of occasions where an awaited judgment tarries while a remnant is being prepared. Elijah is told to prepare devastating judgment for Israel in anointing Haziel as king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his successor.

However, after he appoints Elisha, we have to wait for many chapters until any judgment falls. In the interim, the Lord blesses and forms a faithful remnant through Elisha, bringing healing and deliverance.

[2 : 59] Now, with the 144,000 sealed, the seventh seal can finally be opened. As Peter Lighthouse emphasises, the events of the seals should not be considered to be the actual contents of the book.

The contents of the book, commonsensically, cannot actually be read until all of the seals have first been opened. Likewise, the trumpets that follow the seals should be seen more as heralding the book and its contents than being its actual contents.

Throughout Revelation to this point of chapter 8, we have observed the repeated significance given to the number 7. It is a number associated with the creation week, and there is a sort of creation and decreation occurring here.

The opening of the seventh seal looks rather different from the opening of the seals that preceded it. The immediate result of it is silence, lasting for about half an hour. The Old Testament, as Greg Beale notes, contains several instances of silence prior to the judgment of the Lord.

There might be a sort of divine judgment scene being set up here. The loud worship of the last few chapters is stilled. An expectant hush comes over everyone as the long-awaited judgment is about to begin.

[4 : 10] We can see something of this in Zechariah 2, verse 13. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling. Or Zephaniah 1, verse 7.

Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. Habakkuk 2, verse 20 introduces another judgment scene with similar words.

But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. The arrival of the Lord to judge, described in the following chapter of Habakkuk, in chapter 3, verses 3 to 6, is similar to some of the descriptions of the open seals in Revelation.

God came from Timan, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light, rays flash from his hand, and there he veiled his power.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels. He stood and measured the earth. He looked and shook the nations. Then the eternal mountains were scattered. The everlasting hills sank low.

[5 : 18] His were the everlasting ways. The silence here might also be associated with Sabbath themes. Here in Revelation chapter 8, the great judgment of God comes from the Lord enthroned in his temple.

The throne is there, as is the altar of incense. These are elements of the temple scene. Why is the silence for half an hour? It's not entirely clear to me. However, it could be because we are waiting for the full hour to pass, and the completion of the substance of the seventh seal.

But the first half of that time, belonging to the seventh seal, belongs to the expectant silence. The full hour of judgment has not yet been reached. Perhaps the trumpets inaugurate the awaited hour of judgment, but don't fully bring it.

The seven angels that stand before God, to whom John now turns, are described as the angels. They may be specific archangels. Others have suggested that they are the angels of the seven churches.

Considering that the angels of the seven churches are likely human beings, and earthly messengers of the churches, this identification seems unlikely to me. However, some association almost certainly exists.

[6 : 25] What these seven angels are in heaven, the seven angels of the churches are on earth, much as the earthly lampstands of the churches correspond to the seven lamps of the Spirit before God's throne.

The seven angels are now given seven trumpets, and they will initiate the process of judgment. We might think here of the destroying angels of the Passover. Reading of seven trumpets, we might also recall the story of the destruction of the city of Jericho in Joshua chapter 6, where there are seven priests with seven trumpets who circle the city of Jericho on seven successive days. Before any trumpet is blown, however, another messenger comes and stands at the altar with a golden censer, where he is given incense to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar before the throne.

Here we ought to think back to the opening of the fifth seal in chapter 6, verses 9 to 11. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

[7 : 46] This messenger or angel, who might be the spirit himself, by whom the prayers of the saints are lifted up to God's throne, takes the prayers of the saints beneath the bronze altar of the courtyard relating to the earth and brings them up into the heavenly temple, into God's very throne presence, and to the golden incense altar before the throne.

Fire from the golden altar of incense and God's presence is then taken and cast down to earth. The scene that follows should remind us of Sinai in Exodus chapter 19 verse 16.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled. And again in Exodus chapter 20 verse 18.

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off. Christ himself speaks of the judgment that he intended to bring in terms that should make us think of this in Luke chapter 12 verses 49 to 53.

I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.

[9 : 00] Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on, in one house there will be five divided, three against two, and two against three.

They will be divided, father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Now the seven trumpets begin to be blown. There is a four and three pattern here, as the trumpets are interrupted by the announcement of the eagle. The seals also had a four and three pattern, or perhaps a four-two-one pattern, as the first four seals were announced by the living creatures. The trumpets largely seem to involve things falling down from the heavens. The trumpets might also have some associations with the days of creation, especially on day four, when the sun, moon, and stars are judged.

There is simultaneously a decreation and a new creation occurring here. There are also similarities with some of the plagues upon Egypt, as we will see. Furthermore, as Lightheart notes, there are parallels between the trumpets and the events of chapters 12 to 15 that follow.

[10 : 09] Blood, fire, and hail correspond to the hailstorm in chapter 11 verse 19. The mountain cast into the sea corresponds with the dragon thrown down in chapter 12 verses 7 to 13.

The star that comes down and makes the rivers and the springs bitter corresponds with the dragon spewing water like a river in chapter 12 verses 15 to 16. The judgment of the stars, sun, and moon on the fourth day corresponds with the beast from the sea in chapter 13 verses 1 to 8.

The fifth trumpet with the scorpions and locusts corresponds with the beast from the land in chapter 13 verses 11 to 18. The army from the Euphrates and the witnesses in the sixth of the trumpets corresponds with the harvest of the 144,000 in chapter 14 verses 17 to 20.

And then finally, in both cases, the kingdom becomes Christ's in the seventh trumpet and then also in chapter 15 verses 1 to 4. The trumpets ramp up the events that are associated with the seals that preceded, moving from a quarter to one third of things being affected.

They intensify what the seals began, but also move the story further. Three things are cast to earth after the first trumpet. Hail, fire, and blood. This trumpet should recall the seventh plague upon Egypt in which fire was present in the midst of the hail in Exodus chapter 9 verses 22 to 25.

[11 : 36] The blood that is cast down is a clue. It is the blood of the martyrs. It comes back upon the heads of their murderers. The repeated emphasis upon the third part recalls Ezekiel chapter 5 verses 1 to 2.

And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword, use it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard. Then take balances for weighing and divide the hair. A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed.

And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them. The symbolic action of the prophet is explained in verse 12 of that chapter.

A third part of you shall die of pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst. A third part shall fall by the sword all around you. And a third part I will scatter to all the winds, and will unsheathe the sword after them.

Lightheart suggests that we should understand the trees and the green grass as different groups of people within the earth in the land of Israel. The striking of the grasses is a destruction also of food, leading to famine.

[12 : 43] It afflicts both the grass, the more general population perhaps, and the trees, the righteous or maybe the rulers. But the grass is affected much more. Perhaps like the initial plagues, this is seen to afflict everyone, even the righteous within the land, those who believe in Christ.

This recalls the famine in the land in Acts chapter 11 verse 8, a crisis for which relief has to be sent to the Judean Christians. The second trumpet casts a great burning mountain into the sea.

It turns a third of the sea into blood. We have a similar statement in Matthew chapter 21 verse 21. And Jesus answered them, Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen.

In Matthew chapter 21, Jesus might be referring to the temple mount that is just opposite. The turning of water into blood also recalls the first of the plagues on Egypt.

One of the purposes of that plague was to bring unavoidably to the surface the blood that had been shed in the river, and the great wrong that had been committed there. What is the great mountain burning with fire?

[13:54] Various suggestions have been put forward. Could it be Sinai, a mountain that flamed with God's presence? It could be the temple mountain that burns with sacrifice. Or maybe it's the burning land that follows the first trumpet.

It could be the church, as that which burns with the presence of God and is the new mountain, as it were, within the land. It is most likely that the meaning here ultimately points to the polluting blood of the martyrs that spills out into the widest sea of the Gentiles, the realm of the diaspora surrounding the land.

This is the realm of ships and of living creatures. The ships are diaspora Jews who live upon the ocean of the Gentiles, but are related to the land. The living creatures within the sea are the God-fearers, the Gentile adherents of Jewish faith.

In the book of Acts, we see this taking place. The church goes out from Jerusalem, and in all these different parts of the world, we see the judgment of God following in their wake. As in city after city, Jewish communities are shaken up by the gospel.

While many Jews accept, far more Jews reject the message of the missionaries, and the blood of the martyrs that first polluted the mountain of Jerusalem starts to spread out into the wider world.

[15:06] The third angel blows his trumpet, and a star falls from heaven, rendering the land waters bitter. This is reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 14, verses 12 to 19.

How you are fallen from heaven, O day-star, sun of dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven.

Above the stars of God I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly, in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High.

But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you. Is this the man who made the earth tremble? Who shook kingdoms? Who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities? Who did not let his prisoners go home? All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain.

[16:08] Those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot. Many have seen this figure as Satan himself, but it is the ruler of Babylon.

Nevertheless, there are clear parallels with the casting down of the dragon, of Satan from the heavens, in chapter 12 verse 9 of Revelation. After which a deadly river proceeds from his mouth. Whoever this falling star is, behind him lurks the devil himself. This falling star turns the springs and the rivers deadly. The fresh, life-giving waters of the land, symbolically associated with the temple, from which living waters were supposed to flow.

This is the inverse of Marah. There bitter waters were made sweet by casting something into them. And now, sweet waters are made bitter. Behind this text, we might also see an allusion to Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 18 following.

There, Moses gives a warning about a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit. Such a person who leads others into idolatry produces a situation where the land is afflicted and sick.

[17:11] It seems likely that this star, Wormwood, is a poisonous source of idolatry or false worship here. Following the falling down of a ruler, angelic or human, the very temple and its worship have been made bitter and unhealthy by Satan.

The fourth trumpet judges the sun, moon and stars. This is connected with the fourth day of creation and there would seem to be quite close parallel here. The sun, moon and stars also represent powers and authorities.

