

Revelation 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 December 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 9 In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle.

On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold. Their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's teeth.

They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails.

They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. The first woe has passed. Behold, two woes are still to come.

Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

[1 : 53] So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand.

I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision, and those who rode them. They wore breastplates the colour of fire, and of sapphire, and of sulphur.

And the heads of the horses were like lion's heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths.

For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound. The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, nor give up worshipping demons, and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk.

Nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts. After the opening of the seventh seal, the contents of the book can finally be revealed.

[3 : 07] To herald the revelation of the contents of the sealed book, seven trumpets are blown. The first four trumpets bring curses upon various realms, after which there is an announcement of a series of three woes by the eagle from the trumpet blast that will follow.

This takes us to the beginning of chapter 9. All of this material in Revelation, the seals and now the trumpets, is a symbolic presentation of historic events in the first century.

As the spirit descended upon the church at Pentecost, the message of the gospel spread out, arousing opposition and causing division in both the land of Israel and the wider empire, leading to the martyrdom of Christians.

This leads to judgments upon the land and its rulers, and judgment upon the diaspora and the wider empire. The seals followed a 4-3 pattern, beginning with four horsemen judgments announced by living creatures.

The trumpets also follow a 4-3 pattern, with three woes concluding the sequence. Also, as with the seals, there will be a delay before the sounding of the final trumpet.

[4 : 08] The blowing of the trumpets has caused a number of judgments in and from the heavens. Hail and fire, a great mountain cast into the sea, a great star falling from heaven, judgment upon the moon, the sun and the stars.

The fifth trumpet also involves a star fallen from heaven. It clearly has similarities with the third trumpet, with wormwood, the fallen star that makes the waters bitter. There the star could have been either a human or angelic ruler who poisoned the worship of the temple.

Here the fallen star seems to more clearly be a fallen angel. Once again the fallen star is named. The first fallen star was wormwood. This star is a badon, or a polyon.

A badon, or destruction, is mentioned on several occasions in the Old Testament, as a companion of Sheol, or the grave. The blowing of the fifth trumpet releases demons to ravage the land. When the spirit of the Lord leaves King Saul and comes upon David, for instance, in 1 Samuel, Saul is troubled by an evil spirit from the Lord. Jesus warns the Jews during his ministry that the evil spirit expelled from a man, the man in question being Israel, can return with several worse spirits.

[5 : 17] As the spirit comes upon the church, Israel is troubled by demons as a sort of inverted or demonic Pentecost occurs. The temple, which is supposed to connect the earth to heaven, increasingly comes to connect it to hell.

Jewish assemblies increasingly become the synagogues of Satan, described in the letters at the beginning of the book. As Peter Lighthouse reminds us, we were told in Revelation chapter 1 verse 18 that Jesus has the keys of death and Hades.

The fact that the fallen star has the key to the bottomless pit must be because Jesus has granted it to him. This is also perhaps comparable to the casting out of the demons out of the Gerasene demoniac into the herd of pigs.

We might also hear here allusions to at least three of the plagues upon Egypt. There is the darkening of the heavens. The opening of the bottomless pit and the smoke emerging from it is like the sixth plague in Exodus chapter 9 verses 8 to 10, with the bottomless pit represented by the kiln and the smoke with its soot.

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Take handfuls of soot from the kiln and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.

[6 : 31] So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. The scorpion locusts are also more obviously like the eighth plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10 verses 3 to 6.

So Moses and Aaron went into Pharaoh and said to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, that they may serve me.

For if you refuse to let my people go, Behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country, and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field.

And they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians, as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day. Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh. At various points we have also observed loose associations between the days of creation and the corresponding seal or trumpet. Locusts and swarming things are associated with the fifth day, and here come with the fifth trumpet.

[7 : 41] The scorpion locusts form a devouring demonic cloud, much as the cherubim are within and help to form the glory cloud of Ezekiel chapter 1. The scorpion locusts are a demonic parody of this.

The description of the sound that they make, for instance, should remind us of Ezekiel chapter 1 verse 24, and the description of the cherubim in the glory cloud. And when they went, I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army.

When they stood still, they let down their wings. As composite creatures, they also parody cherubim. They bring together leonine, equine, human and aquiline features. Scorpions are like serpents, especially associated with Satan and his demonic hordes.

These locust scorpions, while being like a destroying cloud of locusts, are not powerful through their devouring of crops, but more through their demonic stings. Behind this passage, we might also hear echoes of Jesus' statement to his disciples in Luke chapter 10, verses 18 to 20.

And he said to them, The demonic star then falls from the heavens, producing demonic swarms upon the earth.

[9 : 07] But those whose names are written in heaven, those sealed on their foreheads, are not vulnerable to their ravaging. Lighthouse also notes possible parallels with the fallen star of Isaiah chapter 14, where the fall of the day star is followed by the plague of a flying fiery serpent.

In verse 29, The description of the scorpion locusts is perhaps a little perplexing.

There are a number of things that we can observe about the description that might help. First, the head-to-tail description of their appearance is what is called a wasif, such as we have of Jesus earlier in the book, and we also have of the figures in the Song of Songs.

David Chilton, who generally looks for direct correspondences with events in the Jewish war, sees a possible reference to the zealots, quoting Josephus' account of the Jewish war, book 4, chapter 9. With their insatiable hunger for loot, they ransacked the houses of the wealthy, murdered men, and violated women for sport. They drank their spoils with blood, and from mere satiety they shamelessly gave themselves up to effeminate practices, plaiting their hair and putting on women's clothes, drenching themselves with perfumes and painting their eyelids to make themselves attractive.

[10 : 29] They copied not merely the dress, but also the passions of women, devising in their excess of licentiousness unlawful pleasures, in which they wallowed as in a brothel. Thus they entirely polluted the city with their foul practices, yet though they wore women's faces, their hands were murderous.

They would approach with mincing steps, then suddenly become fighting men, and whipping out their swords from under their dyed cloaks, they would run through every passerby. The sort of hellish violence released in the madness of the zealots certainly recalls the description of the scorpion locus in a number of respects, from the women's hair and appearance to the hidden sword under the cloak like a scorpion sting.

Perhaps we are to think of the related madness of people like Saul prior to his conversion, murderers and assassins raised up against the church that ultimately led to Israel's demise. The description of the scorpion locus is drawn in large measure from Joel chapter 2, a passage that the Apostle Peter quotes at length on the day of Pentecost.

Within that passage, the Lord sends an army of locusts against his people and their land. Joel chapter 1 verse 6 For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number, its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.

Joel chapter 2 verses 1 to 11 Blow a trumpet in Zion, sound an alarm on my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming.

[11 : 54] It is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful people. Their like has never been before, nor will again after them, through all the years of all generations.

Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like warhorses they run.

As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle.

Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall, they march each on his way, they do not swerve from their paths, they do not jostle one another, each marches in his path.

They burst through the weapons, and are not halted. They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

[13 : 07] The Lord utters his voice before the army, for his camp is exceedingly great. He who executes his word is powerful, for the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it?

The five months might refer to the symbolic period between Pentecost and the day of atonement. The five months here are also in the fifth trumpet. Austin Farrer notes a possible connection between the description of the scorpion locus and the signs of the zodiac.

This would suggest a connection between the battle that's taking place on the earth and a battle in the heavens. Lighthouse describes an elaboration of this thesis in his commentary. Their lion teeth and feminine hair suggests another connection.

The constellations in the zodiac move from Leo to Virgo to Libra to Scorpio to Sagittarius, from the lion at the beginning to a woman through Scorpio and Sagittarius.

That is the sequence of John's description of the Locorprians. They constitute not just a single, but a series of constellations. The cash value is that these constellations stretch out over about five months of the year, the same period when the Locorprians torment those they sting.

[14:13] The sixth angel blows his trumpet, initiating the next judgment, with a new set of composite creatures coming on the scene. The golden altar was, in the preceding chapter, the place from which the angel offered incense with the prayers of the saints before the throne.

The site of the command to release the angels here might relate their release with those prayers. These creatures are described in ways that recall the scorpion locus, but their identity has yet to be determined.

They are matched to the scorpion locus in many of their features. The character of this army of fire-breathing lion horses with serpents for tails needs to be determined though. They differ from the scorpion locus in their origin.

They are not brought up from the abyss by a fallen angel, but are four angels prepared for that time, released by the sixth trumpet-blowing angel. The number of them might remind us of the numbering of the servants of the Lord in Daniel chapter 7 verse 10.

A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

[15:17] Further clues are found in parallels between the army here and the two witnesses in chapter 11 verses 3 to 6. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth, and if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumed their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed.

They have the power to shut the sky that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desire.

Their power is the power of the word. There are two of them, corresponding to the doubling of the 10,000 times 10,000 servants of the Lord from Daniel. They are, I believe, an opposing army to the scorpion locus, but both armies will afflict the land in different ways.

The angels are at the river Euphrates, which is the furthest border of the land at its greatest extent. There are four of them associated with the four corners of the land. We've already seen four angels at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth at the beginning of Revelation chapter 7, during the sixth seal.

[16:33] Now, in the corresponding trumpet, four angels who have been held back are also mentioned. The specification of the hour, the day, the month, and the year might recall Passover.

The hour, the day, the month, and the year are all specified in Exodus chapter 12, verse 29 and 41. The sealing of the 144,000 on their foreheads also recalled Passover.

The horses, once again, are likely the church, ridden by the angels of the Spirit. In developing this point, Lighthouse notes the way that Elijah and Elisha are spoken of as the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

They wear fire, sapphire, and sulfur, and they speak fire, smoke, and sulfur. God placed tongues of flame upon his servants at Pentecost, and thereafter they were to speak with fiery tongues.

Perhaps the power of their mouths is to be contrasted with the scorpion locusts, who, despite their lion's teeth, lack power in their mouths. The speech of the church, by contrast, is powerful by means of the fire of the prophetic spirit.

[17:34] Like Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 6, the church is also accompanied by myriads of angels, with horses and chariots of fire. These kill a third of mankind.

The people killed here are people within the land of Israel, and what killing here means is not entirely clear. Are they converted, or is destruction or judgment brought down upon them? Perhaps both are in view.

We should remember that the scorpion locusts were causing people to long for death, and now people are given death. These creatures have power in their mouths, but can also poison with their tails.

However, the people of the land fail to repent of their sins, idolatry especially. Perhaps the idolatry being focused upon the temple, which is increasingly being treated as an alternative object of the people's loyalty to God himself.

It's also being treated as a place in which people can take refuge from dealing with their sins, like a den of thieves. Beyond their idolatry, they also fail to repent of their murders, sorceries, sexual immorality, and theft.

[18 : 39] A question to consider. Where might we see background for this passage in the book of Acts? Thank you.