

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

The Revelation to John

Readings: *Revelation 8:7-13:18*

Reflections:

- Wrath of God against Evil – first trumpet: The first four trumpets all reflect many if not all of the disasters that fell on Israel during the Roman Jewish War from 66 to 70 CE. The trumpet judgments parallel the plagues of Egypt and point again to God taking responsibility for the judgment falling on Israel. God had specifically warned Israel that if they rejected him, the same plagues that came against Egypt would come against them as a nation (Deuteronomy 28:59-60). The first trumpet reflects forces that bring death (blood) and destruction (trees and vegetation destroyed). We know from Josephus, the historian, that recorded these events, that the Romans cut down all of the trees of Israel for siege ramps and ultimately for crosses to crucify the inhabitants. Virtually no trees or vegetation was left after the war.
- Second trumpet: One of Jesus' prophecies (Matthew 21:21) was that the temple mountain could be cast into the sea (a symbol of destruction) by true faith. Here this same image is used by John with a double destruction image. This temple mount is set ablaze and then thrown into the sea. This mountain was the religious establishment (the temple mountain) that is judged with double destruction and results in death sweeping across the land. The reference to ships being destroyed is again a fact of history as Josephus records how the Romans destroyed most of the sailing vessels of Galilee as they wiped out the inhabitants.
- Third trumpet: This trumpet is the reverse of what happened to Israel in its deliverance from Egypt (see Exodus 15:22-27) when bitter water was turned sweet by Moses throwing a piece of wood into it. Here a star, named wormwood, brings judgment against the nation so that the water is polluted. Wormwood was a name given in the Old Testament to apostate Israel (see Deuteronomy 29:18; Jeremiah 9:15, 23:15; Lamentations 3:15-19; Amos 5:7). Apostate Israel is set ablaze and by its death the water is polluted. We know from the events of the war much of the water was polluted by the corpses of dead people. A terrible image to consider.
- Fourth trumpet: The number "one third" suggests a significant portion is impacted, although not total. The blackening of the sun and moon, and the falling of stars is imagery again from the Old Testament of the fall of rulers and the ruling class (see Isaiah 13:9-11-19, 24:19-23;

34:4-5; Ezekiel 32:7-12; Joel 2:10; 2:28-32; also see Acts 2:16-21). The image here is now that the ruling class and leaders will be destroyed as was the case in this time period.

- Next three trumpets: An eagle, a symbol of a great bird descending for the kill (see Deuteronomy 28:49; Jeremiah 4:13; Lamentations 4:19; Hosea 8; Habakkuk 1:8; also see Matthew 24:28) announces the great sadness and grief of this destruction. The Roman symbol was an eagle and so there is double meaning in this image.
- Fifth trumpet: Some scholars see this as a demonic invasion of Israel during the time of the wars as Jewish people particularly Zealots are incited to violence and murder. It is pointed out that one of the tactics of the Zealots was to dress as women so that they could approach a Roman soldier before attempting to kill the soldier. This fact is connected to the statement, "Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth like a lion's teeth." The common theme is clear. Satan is the ruling force behind the torture and destruction that is about to take place. He is previously referred to leading the Jewish synagogues in the opening to the seven churches (Revelation 2:9, 3:9). Jesus referred to the religious leaders as children of the devil (John 8:44). Whether it is the Jewish people themselves or the Roman war machine, the warning is that the powers of Satan will incite violence and torture so great that people will wish to die. What is interesting about the reference to the locust having a king is locust have no obvious leader (see Proverbs 30:27). This again points to the invisible influence of Satan and may further support the idea that the destructive forces are actually the Jewish people, particularly Zealots, causing the destruction of their own people.
- Sixth trumpet: This trumpet most likely announces the coming of the full Roman army which approached from the Euphrates. The timing of this attack is predetermined down to the very hour. This may point back to the prophecies of Daniel that spoke of specific times and days for this final judgment (see Daniel 9:24-26) as well as to statements by Jesus predicting the timing of this judgment (see Luke 21:7, 20-22, 32). The number of two million is symbolic of a force beyond any comprehension to the people.
- Description of the troops: The imagery here is of the Roman troops and their machinery moving against the nation. The image of fire, smoke and sulfur simply refers to the great destructive power of this army. Some scholars who see a future fulfillment of these passages see these images as pointing to modern war machines. This may be the case but the description also fits well with the imagery of the Roman war machine and their various machines of war.
- Survivors unrepentant: We know from Josephus that the Jews, even though they were being killed at a rate of 500 a day, in the end many by crucifixion, would not repent, even when offered life. Their false prophets continued to declare they would be saved.
- Angel with little scroll: Again the term "angel" is better translated, "messenger". This messenger is no doubt Christ in his complete lordship and authority. He is lord of land and sea, Israel and the Gentiles, over all of humanity and creation. His voice is described with ultimate power and authority. John is not to write down what he is announcing because it is

about to happen. Rather than this announcement being for a long time off and therefore the need to write it down, what he will announce is now to take place.

- Seventh trumpet to reveal: The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is here called “the mystery of God”. No one could have ever imagined that this was God’s will even though God had announced it through the prophets.
- John eats bittersweet scroll: This passage parallels Ezekiel 3:1-3, 14 as he was also given a scroll to eat before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians. This parallel account reminds the readers of what God had previously done in judging Jerusalem. The image captures mixed feelings for the person who knows the truth of what God is going to do. It at first feels good to know of God’s righteous judgment against the rebellious but then when it actually plays out we see that it is sickening to see the terrible consequences of such rebellion. John is encouraged though that this prophetic revelation will not just stop with Israel’s judgment but will move on to encompass the world as the kingdom of God will continue its mission to reach the world. This is a statement of hope for John even as he internalizes (“eats”) the full impact of this judgment against Israel.
- Gentiles trample on holy city: The image of measuring the city is a symbol of discerning/separating the holy from the unholy (see Ezekiel 22:26; Ezekiel 40-47; Zechariah 2:1-5; also see Jeremiah 10:16; 51:19 and Revelation 21:15-16). Prior to the city being destroyed God wants to separate within the temple what is to be retained (true “worshippers” who may represent the 144,000, the symbol of Jewish Christians, the true temple of God) from what will be destroyed. The Gentiles trampling on the city was already predicted by Jesus in Luke 21:24. Three and a half years (or forty two months or 1260 days or a time, times and half a time) is recurrent through this section and parallels the same period of time recorded in Daniel 7:25 and 12:7. Three and a half years was the length of time of the famine of Elijah (see 1 Kings 17-18), of Antiochus Epiphanes’ oppression of Jerusalem in Daniel’s time, and of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Three and a half is half of seven and suggests something that is a part of a larger whole. Here we will see in Revelation that numerous events last three and half years including the destruction of the city (66 to 70 CE) and the persecution of the church under Nero (November, 64 to June 4, 68 CE).
- God’s two witnesses testify: These two witnesses have all the marks of the Old Testament prophets. The image of the two olive trees and two lamp stands comes directly from Zechariah 4:11-14. God throughout Israel’s history sent key leaders in pairs to call his people back to God. They brought warning and at times declared God’s judgment. The trees are symbolic of a long lineage and in each generation a different branch of the same tree would pour their oil (anointing of the Spirit) into the lamp stand to bring light to the nation. We might see the two trees as the king and prophet or the apostle and prophet tandem of leadership that is recurrent in Scripture. From Elijah to John the Baptizer the nation had been warned over and over again. John is saying that this judgment of the city has not come without warning. Again the length of time is three and a half years to symbolize the same image that this prophetic warning is a part of a larger whole. Some scholars have wondered

if these witnesses were actually two well known leaders within Jerusalem who warned the church and city prior to their deaths. James, the brother of Jesus and the overseer of the Jerusalem church, who was martyred in 69 CE in Jerusalem, is suggested by some scholars to be one of the two witnesses. Some scholars even suggest that Peter was executed in Jerusalem and not in Rome as later church tradition suggests. He may have been the second witness.

- Witnesses killed: These two witnesses closely parallel Jesus' own life, death and resurrection. This is an unmistakable parallel. Jerusalem is called at this time both Sodom and Egypt suggesting the depth of the spiritual sin and rebellion of this city. This account reveals the most extreme form of disrespect for these witnesses. It seems that there are at least three layers of symbol being captured in the story of these two witnesses. Jerusalem (aka the apostate religious establishment) killed the Old Testament prophets. Jerusalem killed Jesus. Jerusalem killed the key leaders of the Jesus' movement. Over and over this city has rejected God's attempts to call them back to the truth.
- Witnesses resurrected: This resurrection most clearly aligns with the life of Jesus. Is it possible that James and another witness were resurrected in 69 CE? Yes, but there is no record of this. Was this a spiritual resurrection? The key point for the readers is to know that God has the final word and those that lay their lives down for him will be saved. The prophecy of an earthquake followed by seven thousand being killed (these are two symbolic numbers combined) may again be symbolic of destruction occurring during the war or it may be an indicator of the kinds of events that will actually take place. Josephus recorded at least one major earthquake in the city during the wars. The earthquake motivated Jewish rebels to attack and they killed 8500. This second woe represents just one more step in God's judgment against the city.
- Righteousness of God seen in coming of Christ – seventh trumpet: Just as God rests on the seventh day, we see the vindication and complete authority of Christ at the blowing of the seventh trumpet. As the final act of destruction falls on Jerusalem and the temple (religion is finally wiped out) we see the complete reign of Christ is all that remains.
- Elders praise God: God's covenant people who have died all rejoice at the coming of the kingdom. Here the prayers of the martyred saints are finally vindicated by God.
- Signs heralding kingdom: As the temple is destroyed we discovered that the true signs of the ark and the temple are now within heaven and there is no need for them on earth again. All of the images of God's presence in power that were associated with the coming of the Old Covenant and the tabernacle/temple are now revealed in heaven. There is no more need for religion on earth. It has been wiped out once and for all.
- Opposition to Christ's church – Woman bears a child: A new sign appears in heaven and this indicates to the listeners that we are now starting a new vision. This vision is basically retelling the same story of the trumpets but from a different perspective. It is not a continuation but a retelling using different imagery. This vision is apparently not in strict

chronological order but rather captures the spiritual meaning of the battle taking place. The woman is God's true covenant people. The dragon is Satan. The image of a seven headed, ten horned dragon seems to be a composite of the four beasts (four kingdoms) of Daniel 7. It is symbolic of Satan's desire to rule and dominate. Jesus is the woman's son who is taken up to heaven to rule. The woman flees to the desert and is saved by God from the attacks of the enemy. These are probably the Jewish Christians who escaped out of Jerusalem when it was destroyed. They are saved from the three and a half year war.

- Satan defeated by Michael: Satan is the dragon. This part of the vision probably describes Satan's fall with one third of the angels who rebelled with him (see Ezekiel 28:11-19, Isaiah 14:12-15 and Luke 10:18 for additional passages on the possible origins of Satan).
- Triumph of Christ over Satan: We see here the triumph of Christ and the power of believers to stand against the work of the enemy through the blood of Jesus, the word of God working through them (proclaiming the Great News), and their willingness to lay their lives down and not shrink from death because of fear. The enemy is furious because he knows his days are numbered.
- Dragon pursues woman: Here we have an expanded description of how God's people are rescued. The images to describe this rescue parallel the people of Israel's escape from Egypt. Being saved on eagle's wings is taken directly from Exodus 19:4. The image of being rescued from the waters parallels their rescue from the Red Sea. The true Jewish Christians are saved even as the Israelites were saved from Egypt. The dragon now leaves pursuing the Jewish Christians and now turns his attention to Christ-followers everywhere. The dragon is again standing by the sea, a clear associate of Satan with destruction.
- Dragon gives power to the Beast: Again this does not follow a strict chronology. This is a visual image of the rise of the Roman Empire, the rule of the Caesars and coming of Nero's cruel rule. The seven heads with ten horns suggests the lineage of the Caesar. Possible the fatally wounded head that was healed represents the death of Julius Caesar and the survival of the rule of Rome even after his assassination. To worship the Beast was to worship the Roman Caesar and to worship Rome.
- Beast persecutes saints: This first Beasts rule culminates in the prophecy with the coming of Nero. His persecution of Christians in its most intense form lasted three and a half years from November 64 to early 68 CE. Only the true worshippers of Jesus refuse to worship and submit to the demands of Nero. Those that follow Jesus are called to patience. One of the greatest challenges in painful times is simply to wait for God's deliverance.
- Second beast comes from earth: There is a consistent correlation in Revelations between the Gentiles being from the sea and Israel being from the land. This second beast that submits to the first beast is from the land. It looks like a lamb and has more limited authority (just two horns). It forces those in its influence to worship the first beast. It has the power to do false miracles and to restrict the access to goods and services to those who don't submit to the first beast. This second beast is probably the same as the false prophet that comes

later in Revelation (see Revelation 16:1, 19:20, 20:10). It is most likely the religious leadership of Israel that was in league with the Romans to kill the Christians. Prior to the Jewish wars the religious leadership partnered with the Romans to persecute and kill Christians. The reference to false miracles aligns with Jesus' prophesy (Matthew 7:15-23). The image of the head that was wounded by the sword was the statues of Julius Caesar which were common as idols to worship and burn incense, particularly in Asia Minor where this letter was addressed.

- Caution regarding interpretation: Revelation is rich in Hebrew imagery and so the Hebrew practice of converting names into numbers would have been known to John's readers. The Jewish Christians would have explained it to their Gentile brothers and sisters. The Hebrew form of Caesar Nero totals 666. There are a few early manuscripts that have the number 616 and the Greek/Latin version of Caesar Nero totals 616. This code was effective at naming the Beast and yet protecting the identity from a non-Jewish, non-Christian reader. We have evidence here of how Jesus sought to protect the church even in how he reveals things to John.