

Draft Notes on Revelation 9

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Four trumpets were given in Revelation 8. Trumpets five and six take up all of chapter 9. The signature fraction of the early trumpets (one third) reappears in trumpet 6 (9:18). This, with two more angels blowing trumpets, links to the previous four. However, only the last three trumpets are called woes, so we know right off that judgment is intensifying. The first four seal breakings were judgments through human agency. The first four trumpets were direct judgments of God apart from what men may do. But now a different horror emerges: a fallen angel releases demons from the abyss whose delight and pleasure is to torture. Then in number six, fallen angels are released to indulge a massive killing spree by means of a terrifying army mounted on weird hybrid horses. Though the horror is unbelievable and unprecedented, those afflicted show neither recognition of the Lord in control of these judgments, nor repentance of sin. If we are expecting suffering to correct man's spiritual condition, we will be disappointed. No one is saved by the application of justice to the sinner; only the grace of God saves. These are not contradictory principles, because in grace God gave His only begotten Son to endure the justice we deserve, so that we might enjoy undeserved grace. Instead justice for our sin was lovingly endured by our Savior Who suffered in our place for our sins, bringing thereby forgiveness.

9:1,2 Revelation is not uniform in the way it says things; in fact, variation is common, and oft repeated phrases have different word orders. But when it comes to imagery, the book is fully consistent. The lampstands are always churches, the dragon is always Satan; the whore is always Babylon; stars as intelligent agents are always angels, whether holy or evil. (Note that sometimes stars are stars, as in 6:13.) So we conclude that an angel has fallen from heaven to earth. This anticipates many statements of the fall of the devil and his angels in chapter 12. Further, Jesus said years before Revelation was written, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). In this way the Bible distinguishes the throwing down of Satan from the sending of God's Son Who voluntarily came down to do His Father's will (John 6:51, 57). This fallen angel "was given the key to the bottomless pit". Jews used bottomless pit to refer to a prison holding demons and fallen angels. (Note Jude 6.) Now in v.1 the shaft to the abyss is opened. They will be loosed to do what demons do, and that is causing suffering and misery. First, there appears smoke to high heaven, which in itself terrifies. Anything that would hide the sun is dangerous and frightening. Then as the vision progresses, this smoke has another danger – monsters emerge from it. Revelation again uses "was given", as in 6:2,8. By this use of the passive, John keeps before us that there is an authority not always in view Who is really in control, even when He is not named. He has decreed this horrible judgment and uses His enemy to execute it.¹

9:3,4 In the OT, judgment from God could come in the form of an invasion of locusts, notably the plague on Egypt in Exodus 10:3-15. The descriptions in the Prophet Joel are even closer to Revelation 9. In both the swarming "nation" has the teeth of a lion (Joel 1:4-6), is announced with a trumpet, is called an army (Joel 2:25), and has the appearance of horses with a noise like that of chariots (Joel 2:4,5). The locusts in Joel were simply grasshoppers. Without God identified as the speaker, the demon locusts in trumpet 5 are ordered not to eat grass but to torment people. This is the sort of thing the devil and his associates would be most happy to do. God does have control of the devil, so it is His judgment they perform. The picture is one of affliction of pain including stings from scorpions. In this vision locusts are not doing what locusts naturally

¹ This occurs so much in Scripture that I am reluctant to show proof of this repeatedly. There are many examples of God using the wicked as His instrument of righteous judgment: The King of Assyria was God's tool (Isaiah 10), and Nebuchadnezzar was His servant (Jeremiah 25:9)!! The Father gave His Son, and the Son offered Himself, as the devil entered into Judas to betray Jesus, so sinners could murder, and Christ thereby redeem. He went to the cross as God had determined (Luke 22:22). In God's "definite plan" Jesus was crucified by lawless men (Acts 2:22-23). In that act of murder, both Jews and Gentiles did what God predestined to take place (Acts 4:27,28). The providence of God embraces all God's creatures and all their actions. Thus in sending the Assyrians, God said of them, "*I will direct my jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in fury*" (Ezekiel 23:25). Here Gentile fury was an expression of God's jealousy. We should stop to ponder such statements. In Ezekiel 29:20 the Babylonian army was working for the Lord, though they did not know they were.

do, but are doing what locusts outside a vision cannot do. They pursue only people, and since locusts come in swarms, no one can escape them except God's protected people.

The people target is limited to those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. Adam chose a different lord. He gave up the God of life and goodness, so that any of his descendants, not rescued back into the kingdom of His Son (Colossians 1:12-14), are exposed to the sweet mercies of Satan. The devil enjoys deceit, murder, and destruction. Human suffering gives him his diabolical joy. He is the ultimate hater of God. So tormenting those made in God's image is most attractive to him. The judgment of God in Revelation 9 is the Lord simply allowing the inhabitants of the earth a dose of what Adam chose for his family.

Who is Sealed? In 3:12, the sealed believer is whoever conquers/overcomes. In 21:7 we discover that those who overcome/conquer enjoy an inheritance in the New Jerusalem. All believers participate in this eternal inheritance. Therefore all believers overcome, showing that all such conquerors have been sealed. If the 144,000 were restricted to a literal number of 144,000 persons, then according to the fifth trumpet, demons could attack a host of believers, not sealed and not protected. Surely Revelation is not teaching such a scenario. The sealing of the 144,000 in 7:3 is for all included in the symbolic number, and they are all who have the Name of the Lamb and the Father written on their foreheads (14:1).

9:5,6 Because the tormentors in the fifth trumpet were allowed their cruelty for five months only, and killing was prohibited, we are still reading of restrained divine judgment. Nevertheless the affliction was so terrible, people longed for death to escape it. The gloom of the lost is pathetic. They yearned to die, but death was denied them. Later we will conclude that this denial was a matter of God's great mercy, because many of these were His elect not yet brought to repentance. To such the Lord would deny death when they sought it, and in due course He would bring them to life and wipe every tear from their eyes (7:17).

9:7-10 The fifth trumpet continues by supplying more detail of locusts that looked like horses. They are hybrids. The less normal anything looks the scarier it is. Everyone hearing this read would immediately visualize the size of these locusts. The description that they were "prepared for battle" suggests their restlessness. The snorting snouts make us sense eagerness to attack. Crowns probably suggest success in warfare. The human faces and long human hair may suggest that the real assault does not come from large horse insects but by human agency. Demons have no love for their victims, and some humans are so possessed they are demonic in their passions. The devil's hapless slaves are being assaulted by the devil's strong allies with zest and zeal. The demonic intimidation includes sight, sound, and sting. These hybrid super locusts wear armour! With whirring wings, their noise is like the onslaught of chariots. A fearsome sight has been coupled with the intimidating sound of a rushing army; it is the lashing of scorpion tails. The tormenting horde overruns the citizens of the kingdom of Satan. You would think the victims would cry out to the real God for deliverance. But no, Satanic bondage includes blindness to truth, hardness of heart, and imprisonment of the will (2 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Timothy 2:26). There will be no repentance as long as they are in the strong grip of the devil. Repentance before God is intrinsically contrary to the nature of a sinner. In trumpets 5 & 6, the suffering citizens of hell cling to their idols and their sins (9:20,21).

9:11 The King of the Abyss We are introduced to a new character (one without character), the leader who emerges from the bottomless pit. He must be just one more powerful fallen angel because the abyss was his regular residence until released. That he is named in Hebrew reveals again the strong Jewish component in the churches receiving John's letter. To communicate in those times certainly required Greek as the most common language of the Roman Empire, especially of non-Jewish Christians. In both languages this angel of the bottomless pit is named Destruction. Destruction is the real policy of God's great enemy. He gives nothing good and leaves behind only a path of destruction in every conceivable expression. The Lord Jesus has warned us that the devil has been a murderer and a liar from the beginning (John 8:44). To this double vice we must add his love of destruction. Here is this vice is the name of one of his agents. These two

trumpets show the treachery of how the devil treats his friends. What is most to be feared is how the Lord treats His unrepentant enemies (20:11-15).

9:12 This reminder of three woes would be helpful for those who did not read but heard this prophecy read. The last trumpet, number 7, will appear in Revelation 11. Its placement later is deliberate. So now one woe has been given, the second will follow immediately.

The Echo of Jeremiah 51 Revelation will first mention Babylon in chapter 14 and make it the main issue in 17,18, and some of 19. There is much in the OT to prepare us for what Revelation says about Babylon. The long oracle against Babylon in Jeremiah 50 & 51 provides notable similarities with trumpets 5 & 6. Trumpet 6 speaks of a vast army, one in number far beyond any that man has ever mustered. In trumpet 5, demonic agents appear in the imagery of locusts. In number six we see a mounted invading army loosed for a killing spree. Some scholars call such passages in Revelation *echoes* of OT prophesies because one sounds remarkably like the other. Then too they say Revelation *alludes* to certain OT texts. Here is an example where one could say these two trumpets allude to and are the echo of Jeremiah:

- The LORD Almighty has sworn by himself: I will surely fill you with men, as with a swarm of locusts, and they will shout in triumph over you (Jeremiah 51:14).
- "Lift up a banner in the land! Blow the trumpet among the nations! Prepare the nations for battle against her; summon against her these kingdoms: Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz. Appoint a commander against her; send up horses like a swarm of locusts (Jeremiah 51:27).

The sixth trumpet This second woe switches from tormentors out of the bottomless pit to an overwhelming human army mustered at the Euphrates River. They kill one third of the people on the earth. The activity continues to have a demonic source because these events do not occur until four bound angels are released. God's loyal angels are never bound, so these who have been imprisoned are fallen angels.

9:13,14 The seven trumpets began in response to the prayers of the saints which rose on the golden altar (8:3-5). This altar was located before the Lord. As the incense rose before Him, so did the prayers. All the trumpets are a response to the prayers offered there. The sixth seal begins with a voice from that altar. That could well be the voice of the angel of 8:3 who made the incense offering. The order to release the angels is an order for judgment to proceed. Revelation makes so clear that the trumpet judgments are God's response to the prayer recorded but once in 6:10, yet answered throughout the rest of the book. Remember the words, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" That prayer is the petition of all the saints. Here in 9:13 it is a singular voice issuing the release order. That also shows that the voice had the authority to do so. My understanding is that that voice is not the martyrs speaking in unison, ordering the vengeance of the sixth trumpet. We pray, but when it comes to the implementation of vengeance, we are hands off, leaving all to God to decide and act. We must never forget that the evil inhabitants of the earth are also in the mystery of God (10:7), when snatched from Satan, going to be "the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ". Additional words are coming in Revelation: "All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (15:4), and within 21:24-27, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it" (21:24). How the Lord strikes in holy vengeance against sinners is not at cross purposes with His determined agenda to save the nations. In the case of the salvation of every sinner, God moves from them being objects of His wrath to being alive in Christ, because God Who is rich in mercy, has great love for us, and saves by grace. (See Ephesians 2:3-5). Prayers for vengeance should never be pitted against the mercy and grace of God. So we see that Revelation is intricate, but following the thread about the altar draws some of the narrative together, and that brings understanding.

9:14 The four angels, ready to pounce on all mankind, were bound at the Euphrates. This passage has been saddled with unwarranted interpretations. Some think that since China is populous and is located to the east of the land of Israel that this is a Chinese army of 200,000,000 soldiers attacking Israel from the east. See below “Does Revelation 9:16 Prophecy an Invasion by the Peoples’ Republic of China”? Such a thought would be beyond the grasp of those hearing Revelation read at the end of the first century. What was vivid in their memories was the defeat and removal of Israel by the powerful army of Assyria (called a vast host in Ezekiel 23:46) and the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and captivity in it. Those strong Gentile powers in the east gave a chill to the Jewish people. Both Babylon and Assyria receive considerable attention in the OT. Reading Revelation in the light of those Scriptures does not lead us to see China in chapter 9. But there is another contemporary factor – in the time of the writing of Revelation the greatest military threat from the Euphrates was the Parthians. They too would come to mind.

Revelation is an apocalypse, so it is not giving an array of predictions, but rather images to show the nature and magnitude of the conflict of God vs. the devil with his ugly grip on the world. It is not a coded message in which events within the vision correspond to events in our history. “The apocalypse genre is ultimately a genre which lifts the veil on the world, unmasking its delusion and its arrogance by presenting it with the divine perspective” (Boxall, 149). So it shows what God is like, and the world, the devil, the Judgment Day, the care of His saints, the value of their prayers and death, the nature of man, the vanity of the world. All this and much more, but it is not a roadmap of future history, but a way to grasp by the realities of the present situation and those to come.

Does Revelation 9:16 Prophecy an Invasion by the Peoples’ Republic of China?

This popular view among a few Christians in recent years is based on the notion that Revelation is predicting such an invasion of Israel from the east. By making it a prediction, the guesswork is hopelessly off on the wrong track. The assumption is that it must be China because of China’s huge population. From the standpoint of logistics, even China could not mount an army of such a size. This view is infected by the feelings of some Westerners toward China because of its communist government. They don’t like their views and some of the conflicts in the past. Such a view prompts this kind of interpretation. It gives some people comfort to think that the Bible with amazing accuracy gives such specific information of the last days. That seems to exalt the Word of God. I am saying that wrong interpretations do damage to those who have a worthy view of Scripture. They say reading prophecy in Scripture is like reading events in the newspaper, when we all know that that is simply not so. One drawback to all this modern speculation would be that those Christians reading and hearing it 2000 years ago would have no idea what the Lord was telling them. There is a kind of arrogance involved in thinking we understand the Bible better than they did. Overlooking the matter of an army of such a huge size, how does one apply to China all it says about horses with fire, smoke and sulphur coming from their mouths, or tails like serpents. I for one would not want to go to China and tell the people there that this is what the Bible says about their country and their army. It is far better for us to read this as a picture of the kingdom of Satan and his demons, lusting to kill their own followers. That is a very fitting estimation of Satan and the dark kingdom he governs. It shows the judgment of God on sinners, and it leads to the shock of a continuing absence of repentance. Thereby, it sets the stage for a massive divine reaction in salvation, which unfolds as the narrative of Revelation progresses. In Revelation the Holy Spirit shows first the wicked kingdom, which in God’s power and wisdom will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (11:15).

9:15 Since the four angels had been prepared for such a specific time and such a frightening task, it makes the readers wonder who prepared for this. Just as in the first seals, men were given their powers and victories; the literary device here is the same. It was God who gave and God who prepared these angels for their gruesome task. The devil is enjoying what he loves most, murder, while God at the same time and agency was righteously punishing sin. All in Satan’s kingdom disobey the revealed will of God as they serve in fulfilling His decrees. They would have enjoyed killing the entire population of the world, but in the composite vision of Revelation they never are allowed to retain the majority. One quarter and one third both indicate that God has restrained these powers from the victory they covet.

9:16 This verse is discussed elsewhere in comments on this chapter. Surely such a number as 200,000,000 in such a book is symbolic. It is a way of saying that the opposition to the Lord throws every resource into the battle which constitutes an awesome judgment of God and a notable failure by the fallen angels and their servants.

9:17-19 The vision now shows grotesque imagery. These soldiers in colorful armour on horses with fire, smoke, and sulphur coming from their mouths are simply terrifying. Death comes by those things, not being trampled or by a sword, as we might expect. All three are akin to what the lake of fire must be like, for fire has smoke, and sulphur is an ingredient of the lake of fire in the vision of the final judgment (20:10). This is vision through and through. No army has such horses, and we are told further that their tails are like serpents with heads; they bite. The power of the horses is in their mouths and in the serpents. Both mouths and serpent connote deceit, as in 12:15. The devil kills by deceit. He persuades others to believe him; they do and are damned.

The real Conqueror, our Lord Jesus Christ, is coming, coming to remove deceit and death from this earth. His Name is Faithful and True (19:11), and He lives up to His Name. Whoever believes in Him will never be put to shame (Romans 10:11). Trumpets 5 & 6 show the supreme vices of Satan. He is the father of murder, deceit, and destruction. He gains the trust of humans born in sin, and then he kills. God will not let him get away with it, for he will be judged. The Lord will not let him succeed, for Satan's reign will be replaced. These trumpets show the true nature of the devil. More exposure of his kind of kingdom is coming in Revelation. The judgments so far have been limited, so is the reach of the devil. Before Revelation ends, he will be out of power, influence, and opportunity to destroy. He will also be out of time and circulation. Justice is coming. Meanwhile, and briefly, the onslaught of the evil one continues. We are exhorted to be patient (13:9,10) and hopeful (18:20).

9:20-21 No Repentance, No Change The trumpet judgments do not take life from two-thirds of the world. In this vision the people of earth see what has happened to their neighbors, yet the survivors do not recognize the hand of God. They do not repent,² and their lives continue in the same sins that brought the judgment of God upon others. They made idols, described in perfect OT language as handmade idols unable to see. Note how alike this is to Isaiah 44 and Psalm 115. It is as if one were reading the Old Testament itself; the prophetic voice is so similar. The sins listed greatly affect their fellowman. The foundation of such behavior is idolatry, having gods made in the image of the sinful idol makers, gods so much like man as to be approving of whatever man desires.

What should stand out to us at this juncture is a sense of hopelessness, and that the solution for man's plight is not found in man but God. However, sinners have in His place their own gods, and there is no room for both. Judgment obviously does not cure sinners; if it did, after trumpet six all would be prostrate before their Creator. Revelation has deliberately brought us to this point. This stark situation is the background for the mighty and effective working of God, to seize the kingdom away from His great opponent. To do so, he must take man away from him. Man shall not be the eternal prize of the enemy. He was always meant to be the crown jewel of God's physical universe. At one time, God's creation was pronounced "very good". He will speak that way again (21:5). Revelation 10 brings us to the verge of our Lord's saving strategy to recover what is His from the usurper who deserves none of it.

² Of Israel, the most spiritually advantaged people on earth, Daniel 9:13 says, "*As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and gaining insight by your truth.*" In other words, divine judgment alone does not produce repentance. This hard heart of deadness to God changes only when God graciously grants "*repentance that leads to life*" (Acts 11:18).