
The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021



From the 11th century Bamberg Apocalypse manuscript

Recognizing the challenge as 21st century readers

Reading Revelation becomes a challenge for me once we reach the beginning of chapter 8. The destruction is about to begin and I find it very difficult to reconcile my understanding of God's compassion with John's seeming glee at seeing so much destruction of those he identifies as "of the beast". One thing that helps me while I'm reading about the destruction is remembering that John and the wider communities of both Hebrews and Christ followers were oppressed and always in fear for their lives from the Roman government and military machine. Once you live under that kind of toxicity and terror, having compassion for those who benefit from the system that oppresses you is almost impossible. Keep that in mind as we go through the chapters this week and next. The spiritual hope John offers does not negate the very human desire for vengeance.

The Seven Trumpets, Revelation 8:1 - 11:19

Following the seventh seal a new set of seven opens up, that of the seven trumpets. Stylistically there is a pattern throughout all of the revelations and lists of destruction and woes: The first four experiences happen then a break, then two more horrible experiences, then a pause to offer humanity a time for repentance, and then the final act of worship and reflection by the heavenly beings. We will see this pattern repeated a third time with the bowls in next week's study.

Chapter 8 opens with silence, the end of the first round of opened scrolls. For half an hour silence is heard in the heavenly temple, reminiscent of liturgical silences during worship. Then the trumpets begin. In Hebrew and Roman culture, the trumpet blew on high holy days, to announce the arrival of royalty, warn of trouble and to call people to war. All of these apply in Revelation.

Beginning in 8:7 the destruction begins in earnest with hail, flood and fire, and there are some similarities with the plagues visited upon Egypt. For people steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, there would be a recognition that it is going to get bad while God is at work, but what comes afterward is freedom. There is a call to hope for the future salvation while enduring current terrors.

There is also a weaving of destructive action and heavenly worship. Some Bible scholars suggest this was an effort on John's part to show heaven was worshipping in solidarity with those on earth, going through similar rituals, and showing that worship in

heaven will be like their worship on earth, only with God present for direct praise. Burning incense was another part of worship in the Temple tradition, and early followers could be assured their worship was sanctioned because that was what happened in heaven too, only in heaven the effect of this worship can be seen influencing the entirety of creation.

Destruction in thirds

The destruction being in thirds does not seem to have any deeper numerical significance, just a sense that a large area will be affected, but an even larger area is saved for further destruction. It is also important to note that in the opening of the seals, one quarter of the earth was affected. This second cycle through seven actions has increased the destroyed area to one third.

Cosmic destruction

It would seem that the destruction is heaped upon itself, but a closer look shows that the stars are destroyed in 8:12 even though they had already fallen to earth in 6:13; the grass is burned in 8:7 but is still there in 9:4. We have to use imagination when seeing the visions John is writing since they are not logical or compounded. There is no pattern here, which is why looking to Revelation as a playbook for destruction is not possible. These are isolated visions of horror rammed together to seem never ending.

If we keep in mind that Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, and accept a later date for the writing of Revelation, John could have been drawing from that experience in his vision. Ash would have blotted out the sky, the surrounding lands not destroyed by the eruption would still have endured extensive fires.

Two of the cities John mentions in the beginning, Sardis and Philadelphia, experienced massive earthquakes in 17 CE and 60 CE, again adding to the living memory of destruction shared by the recipients of this Revelation.



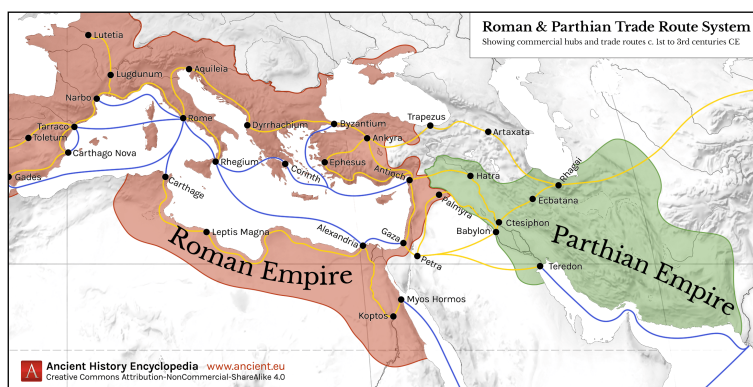
Eagle heralding the first woe

A dove is traditionally used in the Bible as a messenger from God, as seen in the dove descending on Jesus and a dove being the bird Noah used to assure everyone the flood was over. The use of an eagle instead in 8:13 is another reference to Rome, who used the eagle as a symbol of their republic. Essentially this is Rome itself recognizing that it is doomed.

Locusts

Bringing to mind the eighth plague to befall the Egyptians in Exodus, locusts were a real fear in the Middle East. In no time they could descend and destroy the agriculture in a community causing starvation. Locusts in Revelation take on an additional level of terror in that they don't attack the plants but humans without God's mark on their head. The mark itself could be a reference to the blood over the doorframe in Exodus that identified and protected the Hebrews, or it could be a reference to the blessing on the forehead during Baptism. We do not know enough about early worship to know if the anointing with oil was part of the baptism celebration of first century Christians, but this passage suggests that it might have developed by the second half of the first century.

Euphrates River



In 9:14 the angels in heaven are told to release the angels of destruction that have been waiting at the Euphrates. That was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire in the first century CE. The Parthian Empire was on the other side and they were a feared enemy of Rome. There is some historical suggestion that the Parthians

provided weapons and minor support to the Hebrew rebels in their fight against Rome, but even with that assistance the threat of the Parthians was viewed with fear. Given the history of Judah asking Egypt for help against the Assyrians, and then Egypt controlling Judah and potentially exploiting the Hebrews as unpaid labour from c. 630 - 605 BCE, another foreign invader would not have been welcome.

Power over land and sea

After the sixth trumpet has been blown and the next wave of destruction is experienced, an angel comes from heaven and puts their feet on both land and water (10:2), symbolizing that God's domain includes all land and all seas. The shouting with the voice of the lion is another statement of dominance, with thunder being the words of God rolling through creation. These are symbols we see over and over again throughout Revelation.

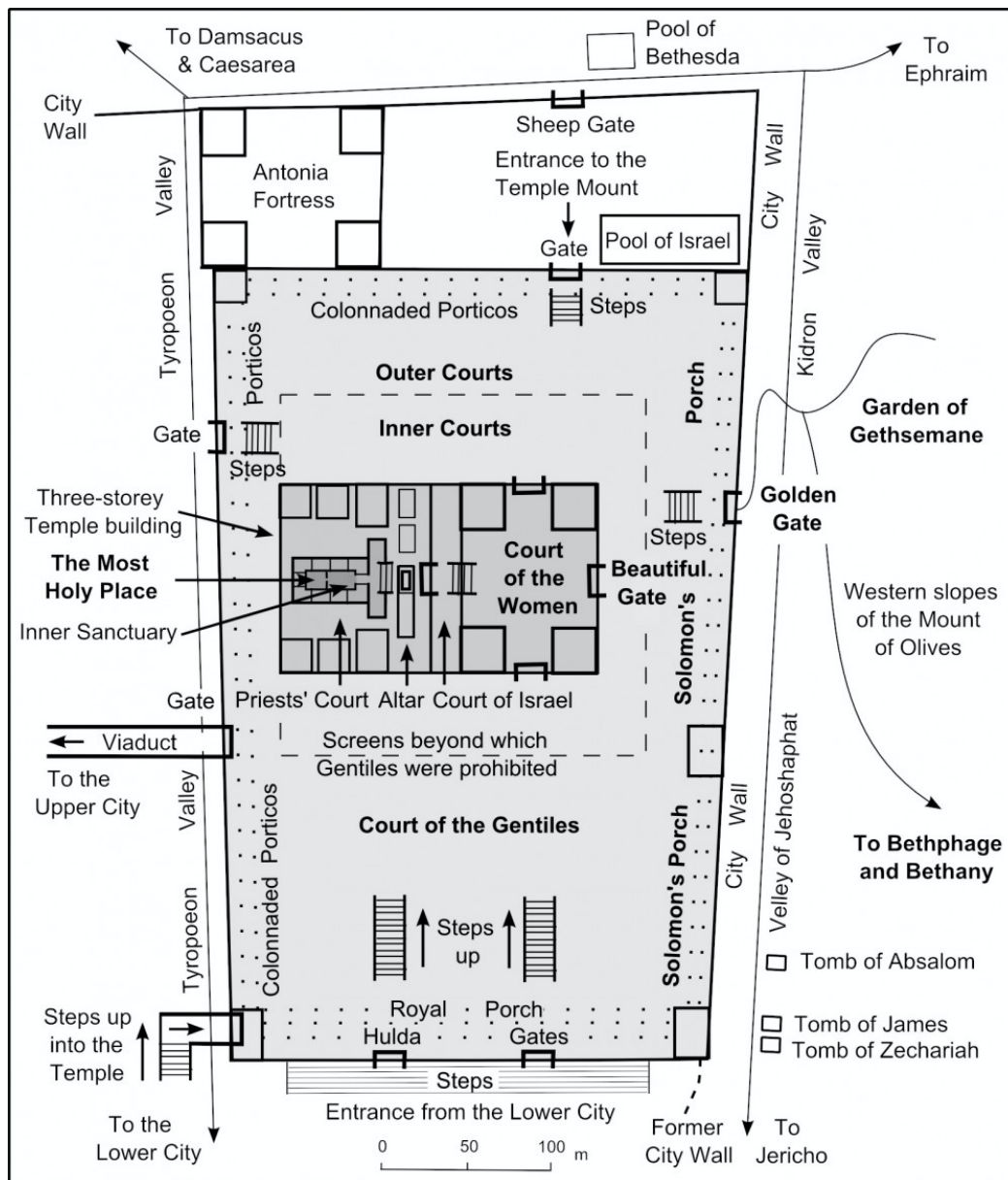
The words are not to be known as the angel stops John from recording, meaning more revelations are not to be shared with humanity at that point.

The word of God is as sweet as honey

The smaller scroll held by the angel contains a message for humanity that John is asked to present, through swallowing the message and then sharing it on earth. The passage echoes Psalm 119:103 where the psalmist praises the word of God being sweeter than honey. It also copies the instruction to Ezekiel in 3:3 where Ezekiel is instructed to eat the scroll and prophecy to Israel. Ezekiel does not have the bitter experience in his stomach that John experiences, which highlights just how distasteful the message is that John had been asked to deliver.

Measuring of the Temple

The instructions John was given in 11:2 about measuring the temple draws a sharp divide between those Hebrew involved in the worship at the temple and the Gentile outside. The Second Temple had a series of courts that welcomed and contained visitors and adherents alike. If you look at the drawing on the next page, there is a very firm line between the Inner Courts and the Outer Courts where the Gentiles were restricted. In John's measurements those in the Gentile Court and beyond will be destroyed, while those in the Inner Courts will be protected. This again speaks to the cultural purity John is interested in preserving.



Two Witnesses

This is a reference to Moses and Elijah, the representatives of all Hebrew laws and prophets. Much like Jesus, who's historic death and resurrection is mentioned in 11:8, Moses and Elijah receive a similar fate in the political execution by Gentiles who celebrate under

their dead bodies for more than three days. There is a sense of mockery as people exchanged gifts during a celebration, giving the hearer more reason to dislike the Gentiles.

The 'breath of life' is a reference to Spirit of God (in Hebrew breath, wind and spirit are the same word: Ruah/Ruach). Once Moses and Elijah are reanimated through the Spirit, they experience a similar ascension to that of Jesus where a cloud brings them to heaven. There was a belief shared between Hebrews and the early Jesus followers, that Moses and Elijah would return to herald in the the last age. Hearers of this Revelation would recognize that the appearance of these two religious men of old meant the tide had turned, they were close to the end of their age.

Final Liturgy of the Seven Trumpets

The beginning of this section saw the final liturgy of the Seven Seals with a time of silence (8:1). The final liturgy of the Seven Trumpets in 11:15 involves several voices from heaven calling out in praise of God. Those familiar with Handel's Messiah will recognize the words found in the Hallelujah Chorus, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever".

The twenty-four elders continued to worship and praise God, summing up the actions of the seven trumpets much like a Greek chorus does in Hellenistic theatre, showing again the influence of wider culture on John's vision.

The final scene of the liturgy includes opening of God's temple in heaven to reveal the Ark of the Covenant. For listeners in the first century this would have been awe inspiring. The Ark had disappeared after Babylon destroyed the first temple and numerous rumours followed trying to figure out where it had gone. The Second Temple had a place in the Holy of Holies to hold the Ark, but it was empty. Here John answers for believers: The Ark was taken to heaven to be in God's temple.