

5. The Seven Seals

Revelation 6:1–8:5

I. The Series of Sevens

The 7 seals, 7 trumpets and 7 bowls are presented as parallel sets with many features in common.

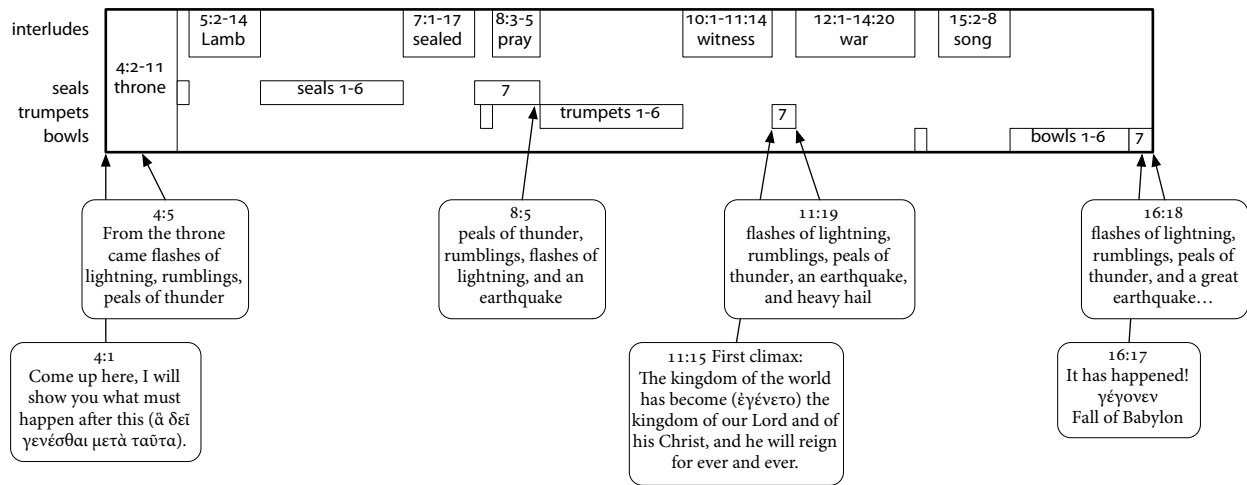


Fig. 5-1: The Structure of the Central Vision (4:1–16:21)

A. Pattern of 4+2+1

The first four of each set are presented as a unified sequence of four, followed by a less-unified pair and a climactic seventh.

- Seals 1-4 4 horsemen modeled on Zech 1:7-11; 6:1-8.
- Trumpets 1-4 affect earth, sea, fresh waters, heavenly bodies, respectively.
- Bowls 1-4 affect earth, sea, fresh waters, heavenly bodies, respectively.

B. Intensification

in the scope of judgment unleashed by the first four of each set:

- seals 1-4 ¼ of the earth
- trumpets 1-4 ⅓
- bowls 1-4 all

C. Theophany

Replicating an event associated with the vision of God's throne (4:5), each set concludes with physical phenomena heralding both the appearance of God (theophany cf. Exod 19:16-19) and the eschatological earthquake. There is intensification with each successive manifestation:

Throne room	“From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder” Καὶ ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου ἐκπορεύονται ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταὶ (4:5).
Seal 7	“And there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” καὶ ἐγένοντο βρονταὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ ἀστραπαὶ καὶ σεισμός (8:5).
Trumpet 7	“And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm” καὶ ἐγένοντο ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταὶ καὶ σεισμός καὶ χάλαζα μεγάλη (11:19).
Bowl 7	“And there were flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since men came to be upon the earth, so great was this great earthquake” καὶ ἐγένοντο ἀστραπαὶ καὶ φωναὶ καὶ βρονταὶ καὶ σεισμός ἐγένετο μέγας, οἷος οὐκ ἐγένετο ἀφ' οὗ ἄνθρωπος ἐγένετο ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τηλικούτος σεισμός οὕτω μέγας (16:18).

The eschatological earthquake unleashed by the 7th Bowl brings the cry γέγονεν “It is done!” and the Fall of Babylon.

D. Interludes

Interludes or intercalations are interwoven among the sets of sevens in three different ways.

1. The initial sight of the seven seals (5:1), seven trumpets (8:2) and seven bowls (15:1) is followed by an interlude: a vision of events in heaven (5:2-14; 8:3-5; 15:2-8).
2. The sixth seal and sixth trumpet are each followed by an interlude (7:1-17; 10:1-11:13) before the seventh seal and trumpet.
 - a. At the sixth seal the recipients of divine judgment cry “Who can stand?” (6:17). The interlude of chapter 7 gives the answer:
 - i. the angels stand at the four corners of the earth to restrain the impact of divine judgment upon the saints (7:1-3)
 - ii. the saints themselves stand around the throne with the angels, elders and cherubim, offering worship to God and the Lamb (7:9-12).
 - b. The sixth trumpet shows that divine judgment only intensifies humanity's opposition to God. What will cause the world to glorify God? The interlude of 10:1-11:13 gives the answer.
3. The seventh trumpet is followed by a lengthy interlude (12:1-14:20).

Special attention should be paid to these interludes or intercalations. They give meaning to the sets of sevens.

E. Telescoping

Each successive set of seven “telescopes” out of the seventh of the previous set:

1. Seventh seal = the Seven Trumpets. The opening of the seventh seal produces a vision of the seven

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trumpets. The seventh seal is not complete until the theophany (thunder, lightning, earthquake, 8:5) after the heavenly interlude (8:3-4) following the first sight of the seven trumpets.

2. Seventh Trumpet = the Seven Bowls. Trumpet 5 = Woe 1 (9:12), Trumpet 6 (and its interlude) = Woe 2 (11:14). Woe 3 is presumably the Seven Bowls, announced by Trumpet 7.

F. Human intransigence

Throughout Scripture God's judgments are intended as redemptive: to drive people to repentance. But it becomes increasingly clear that this does not work. The human response to the judgments unleashed by the seals, trumpets and bowls is:

1. they did not repent;
2. they blasphemed God (9:21; 16:9, 10, 21).

G. Heaven vs. Babylon

The seventh seal and seventh trumpet produce a vision of heaven. The seventh bowl heralds the fall of Babylon, the antithesis of heaven.

7th seal	silence in heaven (8:1)
7th trumpet	rejoicing in heaven (11:19)
7th bowl	Fall of Babylon (16:19)

The rejoicing at the Fall of Babylon is delayed until 19:1-8, after a full exposition of the Fall of Babylon in chap. 17-18.

The Series of Sevens (ESV)

	Seals	Trumpets	Bowls
first sight	5 ¹ Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals.	8 ² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.	15 ¹ Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.
Interl	5:2-14 <i>Adoration of the Lamb</i>	8:3-5 <i>Prayer heard in heaven during half-hour silence</i>	15:2-8 <i>song of Moses/Lamb</i>
Intro		6Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.	16Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God."
1	6Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" ² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.	7The 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.	2So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.
2	3When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.	8The 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. ⁹ A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.	3The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.
3	5When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"	10The 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. ¹¹ 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.	4The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵ And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. ⁶ For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" ⁷ And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!"
4	7When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.	12The 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. ¹³ 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!"	8The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹ They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.
5	9When 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. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ 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.	9 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. ² He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. ⁷ 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, ⁸ their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹ 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. ¹² The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.	10The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

The Series of Sevens [cont.]

	Seals	Trumpets	Bowls
6	<p>¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"</p>	<p>¹³Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵So 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. ¹⁶The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. ¹⁷And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹For 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. ²⁰The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, ²¹nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.</p>	<p>¹²The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵("Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!") ¹⁶And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.</p>
Interlude	<p><i>7:1-17 The Lamb's people</i></p>	<p><i>10:1-11:13 Little Scroll; Two Witnesses</i> ¹⁴The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.</p>	<p><i>none</i></p>
7	<p>⁸When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then 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.</p>	<p>¹⁵Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." ¹⁶And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign." ¹⁸ The nations raged but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." ¹⁹Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.</p>	<p>¹⁷The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" ¹⁸And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ¹⁹The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. ²¹And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.</p>

II. The Seven Seals

As with the 7 trumpets and the 7 bowls, the 7 seals follow a 4+3 pattern.

The 7 seals portray a picture similar to that painted by Jesus in his Olivet Discourse (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21).

A. Seals 1-4

“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”: colored white, red, black, deathly-green. Imagery from Zech 1:7-11; 6:1-8.

- Zech 1: four horses (red, red, sorrel, white) sent by Yahweh to patrol the earth. They report that all the earth is at rest (יִשְׁבֶּת וְשָׁקֶטָת). An angel asks “how long (עַד-מָתַי ἕως τίνος) will you have no mercy on Jerusalem...against which you have been angry these seventy years.” Yahweh replies, “I am exceedingly jealous (קָנָאתִי לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלַצִּיּוֹן קָנָאתָה גְדוּלָה) for Jerusalem...and exceedingly angry (קָצַף קָצַף לְאַנְי קַצְף) with the nations that are at ease (שְׁאַנְן).” Why does God allow those who oppress his people to go unpunished and his oppressed people to go unvindicated?
- Zech 6: four chariots pulled by horses (red, black, white, dappled) go out from Yahweh’s presence as the four winds of heaven (the 4 directions) to patrol the earth, the red and white ones to the north country, the dappled ones to the south country. The angel reports that those who went to the north country have set God’s Spirit at rest (נַח hi.), i.e. they have brought judgment on Babylon for its harsh treatment of God’s people, answering the angel’s complaint.

Read against this backdrop these four horsemen bring judgment on those who oppress God’s people.

Each horseman comes out in response to a summons from one of the cherubim: “Come!” (Ἔρχου)

The “divine passive” ἐδόθη *edothē* “it was given” (3s aor. pass. δίδωμι) is used 21x in Rev. It is a

circumlocution for God, and emphasizes his sovereignty (6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:3).

The colors of the four horsemen are symbolic of the judgment they inflict: white: victory; red: slaughter; black: famine; pale green: death.

The four horsemen:

1. Rider on white horse. Given (ἐδόθη) a victor’s crown (στέφανος). He conquered (νικάω), as was his purpose.
Identity of this horseman is much disputed:
 - a. Jesus (Hendricksen, Lloyd-Jones), citing rider on the white horse in 19:11 who is clearly Christ. But a) Christ is the Lamb who opens the seal, not the rider summoned; b) since the four horsemen form a set it would be inappropriate for one to be Christ.
 - b. Antichrist (LaHaye, Michaels, Thomas, Walvoord). But this is based on assumption that the Rapture occurred at 4:1-2 and that subsequent visions describe the 7-year Great Tribulation when Antichrist is the dominant player.
 - c. Gospel (Ladd). But this doesn’t fit the other 3 horsemen; all 4 must be taken as a set.
 - d. Parthians (Boring, Fiorenza, Keener, Koester), because the Parthians were skilled mounted archers; there was widespread fear of invasion from the east, and it was rumored Nero was in hiding in Parthia and was intent on leading an invasion. But this ties the imagery too closely to 1st century events.
 - e. Invasion in general (Caird, Bruce).
 - f. Conquest in general (Barclay, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Osborne). 2-fold use of νικάω.
2. Horseman permitted (ἐδόθη) to remove peace from the earth; cf. removal of *pax romana*. Given a great sword (μάχαιρα).
3. Horseman holding balance scales. Quart (χοῖνιξ) of wheat = one day’s ration; 3 quarts of barley = one day’s ration for a horse; denarius = one day’s wage. The olive oil and wine are spared.

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4. Horse colored χλωρός (pale greenish-gray of a sick person; cf. chlorine). Rider named Death (θάνατος מָוֶת), followed by Hades (Ἅδης = Heb. שְׁאוֹל Sheol, the abode of the dead). Given (ἐδόθη) authority to kill a quarter of the earth with the sword (ρόμφαία), famine (λιμός), pestilence (θάνατος), wild animals (θηρία τῆς γῆς). The sword (חֶרֶב), famine (בָּרָעַ), plague/pestilence (דָּבָר) and wild animals (חַיָּה רָעָה) are God's four devastating judgments (שְׁפָטֵי הַרְעָה) τὰς ἐκδικήσεις τὰς πονηράς Ezek 14:21), the archetypal acts of God's judgment against his own sinful people (esp. Ezek 14:12-21; cf. Deut 32:23-25; Jer 14:12; Ezek 5:16-17).

B. Seal 5

Cry of the martyrs for justice. They have been slain (σφάζω cf. the Lamb 5:6,9,12) because of the word of God and their witness (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον), i.e. they have been faithful witness, even to death. They are in company with others who have suffered for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus:

- John testified concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus which he saw (1:2).
- John who was on Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (1:9).
- the dragon wages war on the rest of the woman's offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (12:17).
- the souls of those beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and the word of God διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ (20:4).

“How long?” (ἕως πότε עַד-מָוֶת etc.) is a frequent cry in the OT, esp. in the Psalms (14×). They cry for God to judge (κρίνω) and avenge (ἐκδικέω) their shed innocent blood (נֶקֶם דָּם). This cry echoes through Revelation; when will it be answered? This is the cry of the angel in Zech 1.

They are given (ἐδόθη) white robes and an answer: they must wait till the full number of martyrs is complete.

Guilty party = οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς “those who dwell upon the earth.” “the inhabitants of the earth” is a technical term used 9×; = the enemies of God and his martyrs; those who are “at home in the present world order.”¹ cf. the whole earth dwelling in rest (Zech 1).

C. Seal 6

Earthquake, darkened sun, blood-red moon are cosmic phenomena recognizable to both Jew/Christian and pagan Roman as portents/prodigies marking divine judgment. Everyone (7 categories of people) recognizes these events as heralding “the great day of his wrath” and seeks shelter from the terrifying presence of God.

The Day of Wrath (*Dies Irae*) is one of a complex of OT terms that refer to the same event: the coming of the Lord in judgment and vindication, in punishment and salvation:

- The Day of the LORD יוֹם יְהוָה: OT 19×
- The Day of [the LORD's] wrath יוֹם חֲרוֹן אַפַּי יְהוָה, יוֹם אַף, יוֹם אַף-יְהוָה, יוֹם עֲבָרַת יְהוָה, יוֹם עֲבָרָה, יוֹם עֲבָרָה: OT 19×
- On that day בְּיוֹם הַהוּא: OT 211×
- At that time בְּעֵת הַהִיא: OT 69×
- In the last/latter days בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים: OT 14×

1. Caird, “The Revelation of St John the Divine,” 88..

The NT draws a contrast between two ages:

- 1. this age: ὁ αἰὼν οὗτος, ὁ νῦν αἰὼν (הַיָּמִים הַזֵּהִים). Terminated by “the end of the age” ἡ συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος.
- 2. the age to come: ὁ αἰὼν ἐκεῖνος, ὁ αἰὼν ὁ ἐρχόμενος, ὁ αἰὼν ὁ μέλλων (הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים).

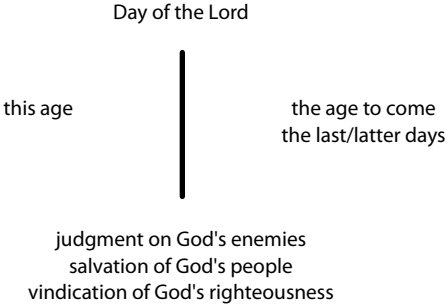


Fig. 5-2: The Day of the Lord

The Day of the Lord comes on at least three sets of occasions:

- 1. In the history of Israel and Judah, ca. 800–500 BC. Judgment upon northern (722) and southern (587) kingdoms. Restoration of Judah (538).
- 2. In Christ: the apostles saw that God had done in the middle of the age in Christ what he was expected to do at the end of the age.
- 3. At the end of this age, immediately prior to the new heavens and the new earth.

The “coming” of God in judgment is a major theme of the book:

- God is the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4,8; 4:8). Twice he is called simply “the one who is and who was” (11:17; 16:5) because at those moments he has come.
- God’s wrath has come (6:17; 11:18)
- Three woes are coming (9:12; 11:14)
- The hour of God’s judgment has come (14:7); the hour to reap has come (14:15)

This is distinct from, though linked to, the coming (*parousia*) of Jesus to his church.

The coming of the Lord is a common motif in the OT. On the day of his coming, he will judge and punish his enemies, and will vindicate and deliver his people. Both activities are simultaneous; indeed, they are flip sides of the same coin. In both activities God will demonstrate and vindicate his righteousness.

But the day of the Lord is continually coming throughout the period between the cross and the consummation, as God repeatedly pours out his judgment upon his enemies while delivering his people.

Who can stand in the day of his wrath? The answer is given in the interlude before Seal 7. Earth-dwellers try to hide from God’s face. To see God’s face (the beatific vision) is the saints’ great reward (22:3).

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can

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never be cured or disguised.²

III. Interlude (7:1-17)

Two visions:

1. Vision on earth of the 144,000 (the *heard* number) from the 12 tribes of Israel who are sealed with the protective seal of God.
2. Vision in heaven of the innumerable multitude from every nation (the *seen* number).

The identity of these two groups and whether they are the same is a major question.

1. Dispensationalists identify the 144,000 as Jews, the multitude as Gentile believers, both groups coming to faith during the Tribulation. E.g., Stedman identifies the 144,000 as “Christ’s Commandos” commissioned to special service in the Tribulation.
2. The 144,000 = the Church Militant (Christians living on earth); heavenly multitude = Church Triumphant (Christians who have died and are now in glory).
3. Earthly and heavenly perspectives on the same group. One number is *heard*; the other number is *seen*. (cf. the Lion *heard* and the Lamb *seen*, ch. 5).

Table 5-1: Correlation of chapters 5 and 7³

	ch. 5	ch. 7
heard	the Lion <i>of the tribe of Judah</i> (5:5)	the sealed of the tribes of Israel, headed by those <i>of the tribe of Judah</i> (7:5)
seen	the Lamb <i>standing</i> (5:6), who has redeemed <i>from every tribe, tongue, people and nation</i> (5:9)	the countless multitude <i>from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, standing</i> before the Lamb (7:9)

Table 5-2: The two groups of Revelation 7

	7:1-8	7:9-17
how perceived	heard	seen
venue	earth	heaven
number	144,000	countless multitude
composition	tribes of Israel	every nation, tribe, people, language
attribute	sealed	robed in white, holding palm branches
who stands?	angels to restrain judgment till God’s servants are sealed	multitude at throne

Chapter 7 gives the answer to the terrifying question of 6:17, “Who can stand?”

1. Angels can stand to restrain instruments of divine judgment until they seal God’s servants with God’s seal so that they can withstand his wrath.
2. The martyrs in heaven stand in the presence of God, offering their worship together with the angels, elder, cherubim.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

3. Bauckham, “Theology,” 216.

A. The 144,000

4 angels standing at the 4 corners of the earth restrain the 4 winds (4 = universality; = the 4 horsemen of 6:1-8) from blowing on the earth, sea or trees until God's servants are sealed. Trumpets 1-2 will harm 1/3 of the earth, sea and trees (8:7-8).

An angel with the seal of the living God places a seal on the foreheads of God's servants. The imagery is drawn from Ezekiel 9 where a mark (סֵם σημεῖον) was placed on the forehead of those who lamented the abominations in Jerusalem to protect them from God's judgment (Babylonian capture of Jerusalem).

It is important to recognize that all people in Revelation are sealed or marked on their forehead. John carefully distinguishes two groups:

1. God's servants: sealed (σφραγίσω) with the seal (σφραγίς) of God, which is the name of God and the Lamb (14:1). They worship God and the Lamb. They are protected from judgment (9:4). They do not bear the mark of the beast (20:4). Alongside the beatific vision (we will see God) our reward is to bear God's name on our forehead (22:4), cf. "Holy to the Lord (קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה Ἁγίασμα κυρίου)" engraved on gold plate worn on Aaron's forehead (Exod 28:36-38).
2. earth-dwellers: mark (χάραγμα 7×) of the beast, which is the name of the beast and his number (13:16, 17). They worship the beast (14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20).

God's seal confers ownership and protection from the impending harming of the earth, sea, trees, cf. blood of Passover lamb protected Israelites from slaying of firstborn.

Numbering: OT numbering of tribes is always a military census (Num 1, 26; 1 Chr 21:1-6). This is the army of the conquering Lion of Judah. Symbolic number: 12^2 (people of God) $\times 10^3$ (large number; אֶלֶף "thousand" is also used for a clan of the Israelite tribes). This army is seen again: 14:1-5; 19:12; 19:19.

1. 14:1-5 144,000 with Lamb standing on Mt Zion, with his name on their foreheads, singing a new song known only by those redeemed from the earth, virgins (cf. OT holy war), who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.
2. 19:12 armies of heaven (τὰ στρατεύματα [τὰ] ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ) on white horses following the rider on the white horse.
3. 19:19 beast and kings of the earth and their armies gathered to war against rider on horse and his army.

These are best understood as referring to the same group of people.

B. The Innumerable Multitude

Seen in heaven: vast multitude for every nation, tribe, people, language (4-fold phrase that occurs 7×).

Fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham:

- descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, the sand on the seashore, the stars in the sky, which are beyond numbering (Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; cf. 32:12).
- blessing extending from Israel to all nations (Gen 12:3 etc).

Wear white robes:

Hold palm branches:

They join the creatures of heaven (4 cherubim, 24 elders, myriads of angels) around the throne in praising God and the Lamb. This song is sung again:

1. The 144,000 sing a new song known only by the redeemed from the earth (14:3).
2. The victors (οἱ νικῶντες) over the beast sing the song of Moses (cf. Exod. 15) and the Lamb (15:2-4).

IV. Seventh Seal: Prayer Heard in Heaven (8:1-5)

Seal 7 both completes the Seven Seals and introduces, even constitutes, the Seven Trumpets. It is not complete until the theophanous eschatological earthquake after the interlude following the first sight of the seven trumpets:

1. Seal 7 opened: half-hour silence in heaven (8:1)
2. 7 trumpets seen (8:2)
3. interlude: prayers of saints heard in heaven and answered (8:3-4)
4. theophany: climax of Seal 7 (8:5)

The Trumpets are God's response to the prayers of the saints, who cried out, "How long?" (6:10).

The Apocalypse is a fusion of vision and prayer. When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. A climax has been reached. The silence prepares the imagination to receive an incredible truth. While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were ranged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn't they have mental breakdowns? Why didn't they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar of God with a censer. He mixed the prayers of the Christians with incense (which cleansed them from impurities) and combined them with fire (God's spirit) from the altar. Then he put it all in the censer and threw it over heaven's ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were "peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake" (Rev. 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert's phrase, as "reversed thunder." Prayer reenters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it.⁴

Prayer

Prayer the Church's banquet, Angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almighty, sinners' tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world-transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

George Herbert, 1593-1633⁵

4. Peterson, "Reversed Thunder," 87-88.

5. George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991), 45-46..