144,000 and the Innumerable Multitude

In Revelation 7, and starting with verse 9 that we read earlier, we are introduced to a second group. We saw the first group being a 144,000. This is probably military imagery from the Old Testament, imagery of taking a census to determine the number of eligible fighting members of each of the tribes of Israel. Now that language applies to the new people of God, the church, portraying them as a mighty army that goes out and does battle in the midst of the events in chapter 6 in answer to the question: who can stand? This mighty army that has been sealed and protected for God’s purpose go out as a mighty army to do battle, but ironically they do so through their suffering faithful witness.

Now in contrast to that in verse 9, we are introduced to another group, a great multitude that was so great that no one could number it. Again we have to ask the same questions; who is this group and what is their relationship to the first group? First of all, usually the two groups are kept fairly distinct if not completely separate because note the contrast in the way they’re described. The first group is clearly numbered, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes ending up with 144,000, so the first group is clearly and explicitly numbered. The second group is explicitly said to be “unnumbered,” that is no one could possibly number it. So, because of that the two could not possibly be the same, one is numbered, the other could not be numbered. One of them is limited to the nation of Israel, the other is people from every tribe and language and tongue, so for those reasons most would keep them fairly, if not completely, distinct from one another as two separate groups. The other thing to say, notice the 144,000, as we said the scene shifts, the 144,000 now stand before the Lamb and before God’s throne and before the Lamb, evoking the throne room scene, from back in chapters 4 and 5. Now this innumerable multitude stands in the presence of God, stands in the throne room, from Revelation 4
and 5 so that now they are basically portrayed as having received the reward. They are portrayed as receiving their final salvation; they stand rewarded; they stand vindicated in God’s presence. So that in a sense again chapter 7 is beginning to answer the question of the saints, the souls under the altar who have been beheaded because of their faithfulness who cry out: “How long, O Lord?” Now in a sense we see the final vindication of God’s people. In this part of chapter 7, they now seem to reach their final destiny. They seem to enter into the reward, outstanding, vindicated before God and before his throne and before the Lamb in the heavenly court, and in the heavenly throne room. We’ll talk a little bit more about that and what that might be referring to and what that might entail a little bit later on. But again the question who are these, are these completely distinct from the group in chapter 7. Again at first initial reading it seems that that indeed is the case. One is numbered, one isn’t; one is related to the tribe of Israel, the others are people from every tribe and tongue of language; one is found on earth apparently, the other, this is a heavenly group standing before the throne.

Support for the Two Groups Being the Same

However I think there are reasons for taking these as the same group, looked at from different perspectives. The first reason is this, the first thing to draw attention to is this; that would seem to suggest identity, and I think this is the most significant one is: notice the contrast you find in this text between what John hears and what John sees. It is the same contrast that we were introduced to back in chapter 5. Now remember back, and what we said is often the case, we’ll see this a couple times throughout Revelation, John will see something or John will hear something and then he’ll turn around and see something and what he sees further interprets what it was he heard. And often what he sees and hears are the same things but just looked at from different perspectives. Z

Go back to chapter 5 again. What is it that John hears? When John is going to the heavenly throne room, he sees God seated on the throne. He sees then in chapter 5 God in his throne, with a scroll in his right hand, he goes all throughout the universe looking for someone, but can’t find anyone worthy so he begins to weep. An angel interrupts the weeping and says to him that the lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome. So John hears
that there has been someone found worthy, the lion of the tribe of Judah. But what happens when John looks and sees: what does he see? He doesn’t see a lion from the tribe of Judah, he sees a lamb as slain. Two very different figures and images, a lion and a slain lamb; yet clearly John is not seeing two different persons, two different Messiahs. It’s clear in the context he’s seeing the same thing, it’s just that what he sees and hears interpret each other. What he sees is a lion who overcomes, or what he hears is a lion who overcomes, but what he sees is a slain lamb that helps interpret and helps us to understand how he overcomes. As the lion of the tribe of Judah, how does Christ overcome? He overcomes ironically like a slain lamb, which again is the same as the mighty army in the beginning of chapter 7 overcomes. So what, so the point is what John hears and sees refers to the exact same thing yet in different images that mutually interpret each other. And I would suggest that that is exactly what is going on here. In chapter 7:1-8, this is what John hears. John says, “I heard the number,” verse 4, “I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000.” Now notice in verse 9, “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude.” Now this is what John saw. So John hears about 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel that is portraying the people of God as a mighty army. Especially if we take this as John using imagery from the Old Testament and now sort of typologically to refer to the new people of God. Then what John hears, a mighty army of 144,000, is now interpreted further by what he sees; an innumerable multitude, standing before God’s throne, victorious.

So the same group of people but looked at from different perspectives. In the first case they’re looked at from an earthly perspective as a mighty army that does battle ironically through their faithful witness even to the point of suffering and death, just as the Lamb did. And then in verse 9 and following, looking at the same group from a heavenly perspective, now from the perspective of an innumerable multitude who now stands victorious before God. They have won their battle, and now they receive their reward as now they stand victorious before God. So the same group is looked at from different perspectives.

And given the nature of the apocalyptic symbolism there’s no need to see a
contradiction between a group that can be counted and a group that can’t, because again John’s using different imagery to portray the same group from different perspectives. A mighty army on earth, who goes out and does battle even in the face of hostility, even to the point of suffering and death, and now he envisions the same group using different imagery. He views the same group as standing victorious before God’s throne and now receiving their heavenly reward.

The second thing that would support this, as well, is note that this innumerable multitude in verse 9 also ends up standing before the throne wearing white robes and holding palm branches. We said the white robes can suggest purity and righteousness and probably also victory. One of the things that palm branches could also signify was victory. So given the fact that they wear white robes and hold palm branches, this then would add to the fact that now they stand victorious. The mighty army from 1 through 8 now has won the victory through their suffering faithful witness. They now stand victorious in God’s presence. So I would suggest to you that rather than two separate groups, we have the same group of people that is God’s people made up of Jew and Gentile people from every tribe and language and tongue portrayed from two different perspectives.

Why does John Describe them as Innumerable?

Now one question is why does John describe, in verse 9, this group as an innumerable multitude, as a group of people from every tribe? And notice there’s that phrase again that occurs seven times throughout Revelation: every nation, tribe, people, and language. Some version or variation of that occurs seven times throughout the book of Revelation. Why does he describe them as an innumerable multitude, which again now stands victorious in heaven. Probably, one reason might be is for, you can imagine almost psychologically, for a group of people in the 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3, for a group of people trying to live out their faith in the Roman Empire, especially the two churches that are faithful for their suffering, often in situations of suffering and persecution, one can be tempted to think that they are simply an insignificant minority. Now by portraying them as an innumerable multitude, the author wants to demonstrate that, no, they are not
an insignificant minority; they are not just a tiny conclave that are simply at the whim of the Roman Empire but now he says actually you belong to a great multitude that cannot be numbered. That could be one function of the innumerable multitude.

Abrahamic Covenant Connection

But I think there’s another more important one. In my opinion, this language of a great multitude that no one could number also resonates with Old Testament background. If you think a little bit about the background, about the Old Testament story, and again John assumes most of it, especially the prophetic literature. But John is not restricted to prophetic literature, he often goes all the way back to the Exodus, he assumes the Exodus story, he assumes the creation story, and when you think about the Old Testament story. Where do you find a group of people or a multitude of people that cannot be numbered? You find it several times in connection with the promises made to Abraham. Remember, over and over Abraham starting in chapter 12 when God promises that he will be a great nation, from him will come a great nation, and eventually all the nations of the earth will be blessed. When that promise gets repeated in the covenant made with Abraham throughout Genesis, we find this idea stated several times that Abraham’s seed and his offspring would one day become so numerous that it would be more numerous than the stars of the sky. Or one day Abraham’s offspring would become so numerous that it would be even more numerous than the sand on the seashore.

For example, back in Genesis chapter 13 and verse 16 is one of the first iterations of that idea. To read 15, God promises him: “all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” Verse 16, “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.” The idea is who in the world could ever count specks of dust? The idea is no one. That’s how numerous Abraham’s offspring is going to be.

Another example: chapter 15 and verse 5: God took Abraham outside and said, “‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them,’ then he said to him, ‘so shall your offspring be.’” That is Abraham’s offspring would be uncountable. No one could possibly number the offspring of Abraham.
One final one in chapter 22 in a reiteration of the same theme. Chapter 22 and in verse 17: “I will surely bless you, [God speaking to Abraham] and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.” So you have this theme throughout Genesis that God promises Abraham that his seed or his descendants would be innumerable. They would be so great that no one could count them. No more than you could count all the stars of the sky or the sand of the seashore or all the specks of dust. That’s how numerous Abraham’s offspring will be. I think that is the language that John is drawing on here.

So both images come out of the Old Testament; the imagery of the tribes of Israel and numbering them and also the multitude that no one could count. Those are both Old Testament images that apply to Israel. So it’s not like the first one is Israelite and the second one isn’t. Both of them come right out of the Old Testament and both apply to the nation of Israel. Here is the innumerable multitude.

I find it interesting that John does not pick up, at least in this image, he does not explicitly pick up on the theme in Genesis 12 that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations. Intriguingly instead, he picks up on the promise of Abraham’s own physical seed would be more numerous than the stars, it would be so great no one could number. But now John reinterprets, in a sense, the promise made to ethnic Israel, Abraham’s physical offspring, and now he applies it to a group made up of every nation, tribe, language, and people. So much like John did in the first eight verses, and took the language of the 12 tribes of Israel, and counting them to determine their military strength and applied that to the new people of God made of Jew and Gentile, now he does the same with this language of the great multitude that no one could number. In other words, in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham that Abraham’s physical seed would be more numerous than the stars of the sky and sand of the sea, so numerous that no one could count. John now takes that and finds his ultimate fulfillment in a great multitude that is not restricted only to physical Israel but is expanded to include people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation.
So again, my point is, I think this is important to understand, both of these images, the 144,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel and the innumerable multitude, both draw an Old Testament language referring to Old Testament Israel, now applying it to the new people of God, the church. So in fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham of innumerable descendants, now those descendants stand victorious. Interestingly, notice a couple of the texts I read, especially the last one, connected it with the victory over their enemies, especially Genesis chapter 22. Now the innumerable multitude has been victorious over their enemies through their faithful suffering witness. Now in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, his descendants stand victorious over their enemies in God’s presence and receive their reward. But again, the descendants consist of people from every language, tribe, and nation, including but not exclusively Israel.

There are two other features to draw your attention to. One of them we’ve already mentioned: the fact that they hold white robes and that they also hold palm branches. We suggested that that probably portrays military victory. Some have suggested that these also were features of the Feast of Tabernacles and what that is being portrayed in this scene is the ultimate fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles which we find celebrated in the book of Leviticus which demonstrated, for example, God’s protection of his people when he led them out of Egypt. That’s certainly possible here. Now the people have reached the goal of their Exodus and that is celebrating the Feast, now celebrating it in God’s presence. That’s possible; although again most of that is based simply on the white robes and the palm branches which it’s not certain if that’s enough to evoke the Feast of Tabernacles. It’s possible but that’s not certain so I’ll drop that right there.

The Great Tribulation

The second is notice this reference to “the great tribulation,” in verse 9. The first verse of the description of the great multitude, after this “I looked and before me was a great multitude no one could number standing there with white robes.” Actually let’s move down in the text where John begins to ask the angel who these persons were. The angel finally tells him these are those who have come out of the great tribulation, they’ve washed their robes, made them white in the blood of the Lamb, again signifying purity
and righteousness and now perhaps also victory. But what is this “great tribulation”? We’ll look at this elsewhere, I think this idea gets unpacked throughout Revelation, but probably the great tribulation, though many Christian interpreters of Revelation are prone to see this as a specific period at the very end of history, some would associate it with an actual seven year period, but many would take this as the great tribulation is a specific period right at the very end of history as a prelude to the second coming of Christ. In my opinion however, when you put the rest of the book together, I think the great tribulation probably describes the entire period of the existence of God’s people leading up until the second coming of Christ. It is a period described as one of tribulation, of trouble. It’s a period, as we’ve already seen, of suffering and even persecution at the hands of dominant empires like Rome, at the hands of the beast, which awfully has its impetus in Satan’s attempt to destroy God and his people in Revelation chapter 12.

So probably the great tribulation refers to the entire period of the existence of God’s people, the entire period of the church’s existence, until Christ comes back. So already the people in the first century were living in the period of the great tribulation. The tribulation had already been inaugurated. God’s people had already begin to suffer tribulation at the hands of the Roman Empire, at the hands of those who would persecute them, and who would resist them. People like Antipas, for example, who suffered at the hands of Rome, and many more that John was convinced would suffer because of the faithful witness in the face of hostile Roman Empire.

So the great tribulation probably should not be limited one final period although one might want to hold that this period will continue to escalate into a final outpouring of tribulation then will be cut off when Christ returns at his second coming to bring judgment and salvation. At the same time the great tribulation probably spans the whole period starting with the first century, starting with the outbreak of persecution under the Roman Empire. Maybe even before Domitian, if this book is written under Domitian, maybe even beginning back with Nero, maybe even all the way back with the death of Jesus Christ under Roman rule. This whole period now starting with Jesus’ death and the outbreak of persecution under Rome now inaugurates this period of tribulation that will
only culminate at the second coming of Jesus Christ. This whole period is the period of the great tribulation.

And now these people have emerged victorious out of this period of tribulation and they stand in heaven receiving their reward. Now one other question related to this chapter is when does this event occur? Interestingly two possibilities and maybe they’re not exclusive but this could be a scene that occurs immediately upon the death of the faithful sufferers; those who suffer because of their faithful witnesses to the point of death that immediately enter into their inheritance they stand victorious before the throne and so you have a heavenly throne scene with all of God’s faithful people dressed now in white robes as they have been promised back, for example, in the letters to the churches.

Now they stand before the heavenly throne but another possibility is notice at the very end, at the very last 2 or 3 verses, you have a song that is sung in a sense or at least you have a series of lines put in poetic or hymn-like form in most English translations. Let me read them again, “Therefore, they are before the throne of God [this innumerable multitude from every tribe, language, and tongue] and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits in the throne will spread his tent [or tabernacle] over them. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Now two things, first of all, it’s interesting that it’s described as an innumerable multitude which seems to suggest finality or seems to suggest the final complete group. But second, some of these texts I just read, intriguingly, when you get to Revelation 21, this is sort of a pastish of Old Testament texts. When you get to Revelation 21, these same texts occur again. As everyone remembers and recalls “God will wipe away the tears from their eyes.” And the language of the lamb tenting or tabernaclning over them recalls chapter 21 verse 3 where God will, in a new covenant relationship, will set up his dwelling or his dwelling will be with them. His tent and tabernacle and presence will be with his people. They will never hunger and thirst again. Leading them to springs of living water occurs in chapter 21. So I wonder if this is simply not sort of a glimpse or
snapshot of the new creation in chapter 21 and 22. That already in anticipation of the fuller description that takes place where heaven actually comes down to earth in chapter 21 and 22. Here we find kind of a snapshot, a glimpse of God’s people entering into their final inheritance. This would not be primarily, if at all, a vision of what happens immediately upon their death and saints going to heaven, but this would be a consummated scene of all of God’s people who have been faithful now receiving their reward standing before God. This innumerable multitude, now enter into their inheritance the new creation that will get picked up and described in more detail when we get to Revelation chapters 21 and 22. So it’s kind of a fast forward glimpse of what gets unpacked in more detail then.

Summarizing Rev 7

So to summarize the point of chapter 7 then is to demonstrate that during the period of tribulation and during the period of God’s judgment upon the earth, upon the wicked Roman Empire, and presumably then, any other empire that would play that role, leading up to the final judgment. Who is able to stand against that? John answers that question then in chapter 6, those who can stand are those who belong to the new people of God, the church, who is sealed and protected, who is portrayed as a mighty army in fulfillment of the imagery of Israel going out and defeating its enemies. Now God’s people go out to engage in battle and warfare but they do so through their suffering witness, almost ironically, not through weapons, but through their suffering faithful witness. Then if they do so, they will stand victorious in God’s presence. In fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the sky, sand of the sea, that they would defeat their enemies, now they stand victorious in God’s presence. Then sort of a fast forward glimpse into the future, they now receive their inheritance, that is life in the new creation; life in God’s presence, they stand rewarded and vindicated.

Now again, Revelation could stop here, you’ve had a scene of judgment and now you have a scene of final salvation. But as we have said this is a good example of how Revelation is cyclical. Now John is going to back up and narrate similar events and
similar situations from simply using different images and from a different perspective. So we have a long way to go yet to get to the very end but John has already reached it now only to back up and kind of take another run at the end by describing God’s judgment in the present on the Roman Empire, and on wicked humanity by describing what God’s people are to be doing, by describing the nature of their suffering witness, leading up to God’s vindication of his people, his reward of his people, and his judgment of their enemies.

Revelation 2 & 3 in Relation to Revelation 7

The other thing when you look at chapter 7, how does that relate to the churches in chapters 2 and 3? For at least two of the churches, but also some of the others who may have those who are wavering, remember some of the churches John, Jesus Christ speaking through John, did have something positive to say about them even though there were still areas that Christ was concerned about their spiritual status or their lack of witness. To those churches and to those persons, this chapter would be a source of encouragement to persevere, that even in the face of suffering, they actually are accomplishing the victory. This is God’s means of them becoming victorious and establishing his kingdom through their faithful witness even to the point of suffering. It would also remind them that if they persevere, the result is they will one day stand rewarded and they will stand faithful, as a part of a great multitude, not an insignificant small minority. However, much that may appear in the eyes of the Roman Empire, they will actually emerge as a great multitude and stand victorious and receive their reward if they persevere. For many in the churches that John addressed, they may fall on the opposite side. They may find themselves as those who are subject to God’s plagues, as those who do not stand victorious, as those who actually side with those who harm and persecute the people of God. The only option is to repent and to maintain their faithful witness in Christ, even if it means their suffering in death.

Chapter 7 as an Interlude

Chapter 8 then, following on this chapter 7 is sort of an interlude between seal number 6 and seal number 7. Chapter 8 now will resume the seal sequence. The other
thing to mention, that an interlude might do is when you read the seals of all the evil taking place and all the chaos and the visions of judgments, sometimes the seals almost function literally as a brief reprieve and kind of slows the action down and is almost a way of helping you get your breath before the next onslaught of seals. Again, that’s not the only thing that they do, we said that the interlude in chapter 7 functions as an important theological function to interpret the events and what’s going on in chapter 6 to answer the question, who can stand, in the midst of what’s going on in chapter 6. What is the relationship of the people of God to what’s going on in chapter 6? So it has an important theological role but at the same time it sort of provides almost a reprieve or a brief break in the midst of the calamitous and evil plagues that are poured out upon the earth.

Chapter 8 Seals Resumed

So that brings us chapter 8 where the seal sequence is resumed, and we said that chapter 7 answers the question: Who can stand? That may also apply to chapter 8 as well. Who is able to stand against what is going on in chapter 8? We’ll see in chapter 8 particularly that the trumpet plagues narrated in chapter 8 and 9 as well, are aimed only at those who have not been sealed, who have not received the seal from chapter 7. Again, this section then will resume God’s judgments upon the earth, having answered the question of what is the relationship of God’s people to the plagues that are going on? Now we find that the plague sequence is going to be resumed but only after the seventh seal is opened in the first few verses of chapter 8.

The Last Seal

So here’s the last seal, the seventh seal, and again after this will lead into the sequence of seven trumpets, which we’ll see likewise will get broken off between the sixth and the seventh, but we’ll look at that later. But what is interesting about this seventh seal in chapter 8, as we’ll see, is apparently nothing happens when the seal finally gets opened. But before we look at that I want to read chapters 8 and 9. We’ll read chapter 8 first, and then we’ll go on back and answer: what is the seventh seal? Because apparently nothing happens, it says there’s a half hour of silence in heaven. That’s very
different from the other 6 seals that have been opened.

Chapter 8 Text

But let’s begin by reading chapter 8. “When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about a half an hour [This appears to be the content of the seventh seal.] And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunders, rumblings, flashes of lighting and an earthquake. Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet and there came hail and fire mixed with blood and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded his trumpet and a great star blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water--the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blast about to be sounded by the other three angels!” And I’ll stop there but chapter 9 then probably we should not have a chapter break here because chapter 9 continues the trumpet sequence. But interestingly, as we’ll see, the next three trumpets are set off from the first four, much like the first four seals were set off from the remaining three. We find that same pattern here.
So the first four trumpets in chapter 8, form a unit and then chapter 9 will narrate the final three trumpets. As we’ve said before, much like the seals, the sixth and seventh trumpet will be separated by an interlude that again is not just a digression but we’ll see actually functions to interpret further what’s going on in chapters 8 and 9. It plays a very important theological role in the narration of the vision. But chapter 9 ends with the sixth trumpet. Trumpet 7 actually occurs later on in chapter 11, verses 15 through 19. We’ll find that the seventh trumpet finally gets sounded.

Seventh Seal: Silence

But interestingly that seventh seal is finally unsealed at the very beginning of chapter 8, and as I said, what is strange about it is apparently nothing happens. The seventh seal is opened and all it says is there was silence in heaven for about a half an hour. Hopefully, as you’ve picked up by now, we probably shouldn’t take that half an hour as a literal half an hour. If you had your watch on you could watch the minute hand go halfway around the face of the clock and then this time would be up. But half an hour probably is suggesting something significant but something limited as something that doesn’t last forever.

Now the question is: why does silence last for a half an hour? This to me at first glance does not appear really to be the content of the seal. When you read the other 6 seals, something very specific happens, except for seal 5 which is a vision of the souls under the altar who cry out. All the others are active judgments of God upon the Roman Empire, and upon evil godless idolatrous humanity that refuses to acknowledge him and instead persecutes the saints. But now all of a sudden you have a seal that’s open and there’s simply silence and nothing really happens.

Because of that, many suggest that seal number 7 actually, like we said, like a telescope that you keep pulling out, each section contains the other sections inside of it. Some would suggest seal number 7 actually contains all the next 7 trumpets inside of it. That’s entirely possible, however I wonder again if the silence doesn’t play a different role and perhaps plays a role in light of its Old Testament background. There are three possible ways I think to look at the silence as part of the seal. The first one is, and
commentaries have suggested these three, and there are others but I am simply focusing on what might be the three most likely solutions or the three most common. One of them is the silence simply provides a dramatic pause in the action. Sort of like we said in the interlude, you go back to the seals. So in rapid fire there’s just been one judgment after another and it ends with this cataclysmic scene of the dismantling of the universe as a symbolic portrayal of the final judgment of God and the seal of God’s wrath and the wrath of the Lamb. Now the silence sort of provides a reprieve or a pause in the action, before the next round of judgments that are about to take place in chapters 8 and 9. So kind of a chance again to catch your breath and get ready for what’s going to come next. That’s entirely possible and certainly makes sense here.

However, there are two other possible functions: number one or number two. Number one is a dramatic pause in the action. Number two is the silence may be the silence so that the prayers of the saints can be heard, which is exactly what happens next. After the silence we’re introduced to the angels who stand before God and have seven trumpets. But they don’t blow the trumpets for a couple more verses. Instead, you have this image of an angel bringing up to the altar and filling his laver, his censer, with the incense from the altar, which also contains the prayers of the saints, which are offered up to God. We’ve seen that theme already but the idea is the judgments that are about to follow are to be seen as in response to the prayers of the saints. We read that; remember the text we read from 1 Enoch, and especially from 4 Ezra, that the prayers of the saints, the prayers are always being offered on behalf of the saints who are suffering. So here the prayers of the saints probably go back and recall chapter 6, the cry of the martyrs. How long, O Lord? So the silence may be so that the prayer of the saints can be heard, indicating that the rest of the judgments now in chapters 8 and 9 especially, are a response to the prayer of the saints.

A third possibility too is that in the Old Testament, silence is often a silence that is in anticipation of the soon judgment to come; the intervention of God to come in the form of judgment. Silence sort of being a response of awe in light of the imminent judgment that is to come. That would certainly make sense. The seventh seal then is silence
because of the judgment that is to come, which could be then chapters 8 and 9, the trumpet judgments. Also notice, it appears to me that we have another judgment already in chapter 8, which we said, each of the series of seals, trumpets, and bowls, bring you up to the very end. In chapter 6, the very last seal, we saw the image of the dissolution of the universe and people saying, “hide us because the great wrath of God is present.” In chapter 8, the seventh seal might now bring us into the very day of the Lord. Notice what happens in verse 5; then the angel, after he takes his censer and fills it with the incense, which is the prayer of the saints, and it goes up to God. Probably the cry of vindication, the prayer that the saints would be avenged, their blood would be avenged; they’d be vindicated. Now the angel goes to the altar and fills his censer with fire, and throws it on the earth, a symbolic act of judgment. Notice again the language of judgment that again the author picks up from the Old Testament. There came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. In other words, all of this together may be the content of the seventh seal. As the seventh seal is opened, there’s judgment. Yes, there is a break in the scene, but also so the saint’s prayers can be heard and also as an anticipation of God’s judgment. Then that judgment, that final judgment, comes in the form of fire hurled upon the earth and rumbling, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

So here again, we have a summary, here we’re brought to the very end. Here we are finally again brought to the day of the Lord and to the final judgment; to just mention a couple of other things about verses 3 and 4 of chapter 8.

Actually, there are two things that I want to emphasize. First for all, notice again all the temple imagery that the heavenly throne room is portrayed as a temple. Here apparently the scene shifts again. John is back up in heaven or perhaps John still in heaven from chapter 7. Chapter 7 ended the multitude before the throne of heaven. Now from his heavenly perspective he sees the angel in the context of heaven as a temple. Notice the altar, which seems here to reflect also the altar of incense in the Old Testament. The censer was one of the utensils in the temple, and the language of the fire and the coal. So here we clearly have a picture of heaven portrayed as a temple, and perhaps the angels functioning as priests. But the primary goal here is they were involved
in not only mediating the prayers of the saints to God, the prayers that probably cry out for justice and revenge, or vindication but also in the final judgment of the seventh seal that is poured out in verse 5. Again, along with the silence, verse 5 is the judgment of seal number 7. So you have this picture of a heavenly courtroom continued in verses 3 and 4.

The other thing is, notice, and this is what makes Revelation at times so tricky to outline if that’s indeed what we’re supposed to do. It’s interesting when you look at outlines of the book of Revelation; they really struggle at these types of places. It’s interesting that 8:1 through 5 actually ends up overlapping the seventh seal and the seven trumpets, because notice, if verse 5 is part of the content of the seventh seal, notice in verse 2 it was already introduced. “I saw seven angels who stand before God and they were given seven trumpets.” But then, verses 3 through 5 seem to return to the content of seal number 7. Where the angel offers up the prayers of the saints and then prepares to pour out God’s judgment in the form of the coals from the altar. So intriguingly, the seven angels are introduced in verse 2, yet they don’t do anything. They do nothing until verse 6. So you kind of have this interlocking; scholars often call this an interlocking feature, and there are other things they call it, whatever the case. You have sections that interlock and overlap where one section ends while at the same time another one is just getting started that will continue. That makes it very difficult, including the interludes that interrupt seal six and seal seven and later on trumpet 6. These interludes, these interlocking features of Revelation make it very difficult to come up with an easy, precise outline of the book because things interlock, or there are interludes that interrupt sequences that we find with the seals and the trumpets.

So, starting in chapter 6 now that the seventh seal has been opened, the content is probably silence and also the judgment of verse 5. Now the author has brought us to the end with verse 5, the day of the Lord. Now he’s going to back up and narrates another series of judgments in the form of trumpets. In chapter 8 starting with verse 6 through the end of the chapter, and then again into chapter 9, we are introduced to the 7 trumpets and as each trumpet is blown, something happens on the earth. Something happens on the earth or the sea and also something’s going to happen in the heavens as well in one of
these trumpets.

Three Woes

We also said that chapter 9 continues the trumpet sequence, but we find 3 things going on. The first, chapter 8 introduces us to the four trumpets that are closely related to each other, like the first four seals were. Then the next 3 trumpets seem to be related to each other and seem to have a character of their own because they are introduced in verse 13 by a threefold “Woe!” uttered by an eagle. So in verse 13, we’re introduced to an eagle, and he issues a threefold woe, which he tells us corresponds to the next three trumpets. Two of those trumpets will get narrated in some detail in chapter 9 that would be trumpet 5 and 6. Then the seventh one, as we’ve already said, the seventh trumpet, presumably corresponds to the third woe. So if you’re following this, chapter 8 begins by introducing us to three woes, which correspond to the last 3 trumpets. So trumpet 5 and 6 should be woes one and two and then trumpet 7 will be woe 3. But again, trumpet number 7 is separated from 6 by an interlude consisting of chapter 10 and also much of chapter 11. Then in chapter 11: 15-19, we finally hear the blowing of trumpet number 7, which presumably then is the third woe that the eagle introduces us to here.

One of the most significant issues for understanding this, just as a general comment before we look at the trumpets in a little bit more detail, or as much detail as we can. I think when you read through this, it becomes a little bit tricky trying to figure out exactly, given the symbolic nature of what’s going on, and given the language that is used, it is a little tricky to determine precisely what these trumpets entail. But clearly they are God’s judgment on the earth. But an important point to bring out at the very beginning is, when you read these, as I just have, when you read these trumpet plagues carefully, you cannot help but note, as numerous commentaries have pointed out, and if you look at some commentaries, they’ll even set it out in chart forms so you can see it easily.

Exodus Plagues Revisited

Once again we have to go back to the Old Testament in order to understand these, and that is by going back to the Exodus plagues. When you read these plagues, these
trumpet plagues in chapters 8 and 9 as well, there are parallels with the Exodus, though not in the same order as the 10 plagues in the Exodus. Again, John uses the number 7 to indicate completeness, fullness, perfection, the complete, perfect number of God’s judgments at this time on the earth. Other than different number, again John is using the number 7, and different order, most of these resemble one of the plagues that was poured out on Egypt.

For example, when you read through the first plague is a plague of hail, corresponding to one of the Egyptian plagues. Another one is turning the water into blood and making it so it could not be suitable to drink, so that even some died from drinking it. Another one is darkening the constellations as a third of the day was dark, resembling one of the Egyptian plagues. Later on in chapter 9, we will be introduced to a plague of locusts. It has more than one Old Testament background but at least one of them is one of the Egyptian plagues. So John I think is carefully modeling and we’ll also see that this is not new with John as other apocalypses often drew on Exodus plague imagery to portray end time judgments. But John is clearly drawing on the Exodus plagues from the book of Exodus to portray his own judgments.

So that what John wants to do is demonstrate, the theological significance of God’s judgment. In other words, the main point of this is not so much to predict the precise series of judgments, and in fact, I think the fact that John draws on the Exodus he is using the plagues symbolically now to describe God’s judgments on Rome and on a wicked world leading up to a second coming. That very fact makes it tricky to identify precisely what these are. Again, John’s main concern is to use the Exodus plagues symbolically to describe God’s judgment. So that’s what is more important than identifying precisely what these are, and what will they look like, is to realize the theological point John is making, and that’s not just to predict the series of specific future judgments, but theologically to say something about God’s judgment. In the same way that God judged a wicked idolatress oppressive nation that is the nation of Egypt in the past as a prelude to rescuing, redeeming his people and bringing them into the land; in the same way, God is judging the wicked, evil idolatrous nation of Rome. Any other nation
that cares to follow in their steps in anticipation of and as a prelude for God, once again, rescuing his people and leading them into their inheritance, which ends up being the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22.

So the main point of this is to evoke the Exodus motif, not to get us to speculate exactly what will they look like. Certainly not to add up all these thirds and say, “Well, we have this many people alive now, so exactly one third will be harmed or so much of the earth’s surface is covered by water and trees and here’s exactly how much…” that’s not John’s point. Again, his point is to evoke the Exodus, to say something about God’s judgment, to emphasize the theological significance by helping us recall the Exodus, by getting us to draw connections with and draw our attention back to the Exodus. In the same way God judged the oppressive evil empire in the past, so God again is judging an oppressive, idolatrous, wicked, godless empire now, as a prelude to and in anticipation of redeeming his people. We’ve already seen John using another Exodus theme, already God has created a people, a kingdom of priests, which is why God led us out of Egypt. Now once again God has created a kingdom of priests and is redeeming them out of this oppressive wicked empire and will bring them to their inheritance which again we said will be the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22.

Now next section, we will make a couple of other comments about the significance of the Exodus connection and then try to make sense of what these trumpet plagues might be suggesting in chapter 8 but also in chapter 9 as well.

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