Revelation 8 to 9: Seven Trumpets and Exodus Imagery

We’ve seen that John draws on the exodus motif. Actually, a motif we’ve already seen play a role with John utilizing Exodus 19:6 and drawing on the Exodus stories in the sense the whole Exodus narrative. We’ll see this whole book play a role elsewhere in Revelation as well. But not only that, John doesn’t only go to the original Exodus story, he will also pick up, we’ll see in numerous places, I’m mentioning that since this is the first place where he begins to draw at length on the Exodus motif. Later on, John is also going to rely on Isaiah’s use of the Exodus motif where Isaiah uses it as an indication of a second or a new Exodus. Chapter 40 through 66 of Isaiah, is latent with Exodus imagery where the prophet Isaiah portrays the future deliverance of God’s people as a new Exodus modeled after the first one. So John picks up on that and then John himself goes back to the original Exodus from the book of Exodus and draws on some of the historical Exodus features now to narrate this new Exodus that Christ has inaugurated in creating a people, redeeming a people from bondage, slavery, Rome, sin and evil and now is creating a kingdom of priests. Now we see God in anticipation of their deliverance and in anticipation of their final inheritance in the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22 like he did in the days of Exodus. God is once again pouring out his plagues of his judgment on a godless wicked empire. So in the same way God judges Egypt for its oppression, wickedness, and evil, now God is doing that again in a new Exodus of his people by pouring his judgments on this wicked empire.

Apocalypse of Abraham and Exodus Plagues

This actually is nothing new with John in one sense, to read from another apocalypse, this is an apocalypse called “The Apocalypse of Abraham” and someone actually writing in Abraham’s name is recording a visionary experience and in the Apocalypse of Abraham chapter 30, notice the setting here, but I want you to notice the
numeration of plagues at the end of this, “and while he was still speaking I found myself on earth and I said, ‘Eternal mighty one, I am no longer in the glory which I was above and all that my soul desired understood in my heart, I do not understand,’ and he said to me, ‘I’ll explain to you the things you desired in your heart for you have sought to know the ten plagues which I prepared against the heathen. I prepared them beforehand in the passing of the twelve hours on earth. Hear what I tell you, it will be thus, the first plague, sorrow for much need: the second fiery conflagrations for the city, the third destruction by pestilence among the cattle; the fourth famine of the world of their generation; the fifth among the rulers destruction by earthquake and sword; the sixth increase of hail and snow; the seventh wild beasts will be in their grave; the eighth pestilence and hunger or famine will change their destruction; then ninth execution by the sword and frightened distress; and the tenth thunder voices and destroying earthquakes.’” So notice in the Apocalypse of Abraham, the ten plagues of Egypt are used as models for ten further judgments and plaques that affect more than Egypt, etc.

Exodus Plagues as Attacks on Egyptian Gods

So John now also uses the plague imagery in describing a new Exodus for a describing the plagues God now will pour upon the earth. Again I want to emphasize more important than just figuring out the details of exactly what these are and exactly what they will look like, instead is recognizing the significance as these interpret the nature and the meaning of God’s judgment by appealing to the Exodus. One further point to make that I think may be going on here as well and maybe important and that is in the same way that the Exodus plagues were at one level meant to judge the gods of Egypt, taking aim at the gods of Egypt. Many have demonstrated that behind most of the plagues was an attack on certain gods that were worshipped by the Egyptians. In the same way I wonder if the trumpet plagues here modeled on the plagues of Egypt are not also aimed at the idolatry resident in the Roman gods and things like emperor worship. It would be interesting maybe to do further work to see if certain gods could lie behind certain of these plagues. Certainly, having modeled them on the Egyptian plagues, I wonder if we’re not to see these at one level as an attack on, or judgment on, the gods of Rome on
the idolatrous worship of the Roman Empire their gods including emperor worship as well.

Trumpet Judgments and Idolatry

So having said that, what I want to do is look briefly at each of the trumpets and perhaps make some comments as to what they might indicate, what they might entail, but at the end drawing them together and trying to come up with an overall picture of what might be going on with these trumpet plagues. Let me say at the very beginning I am convinced 8 and 9 together I think are primarily aimed at the idolatry of wicked godless people and perhaps again specially at the idolatry inherent in the Roman religion, Roman rule and the whole Roman system of doing things and looking at the world.

Trumpet #1: Hail

Trumpet number 1 is described as a fire or hail and fire mixed with blood. In my opinion clearly indicates that this is to be understood symbolically and not literally. You think about it though we might be able to think of some scientific explanation that I’m not sure first century readers would ever have caught onto. It would seem to me that to them hail mixed with fire would be contradiction in the sense and further one mixed with blood. The plague of hail here clearly resembles the seventh Egyptian plague from Exodus chapter 9. I won’t go back and read that but sometime you could go back and read and recall the plague of hail brought upon the Egyptians.

The difference, though, between the two is twofold. Notice first of all that this is not limited to the land of Egypt like the Egyptian plague, but now it is a plague that is poured out on the entire earth. Yet, only one-third of the world is affected and you’ll notice as in chapter 8, how many times one-third was repeated. One-third is to be understood as greater than the one-fourth associated with the seals in chapter 6. We said one-third also suggests limitation of judgment that is no matter how severe the judgment is, it’s to be seen as only limited that is, there is a still greater judgment to follow. The indication here of only one-third as a limitation may suggest God’s mercy but more primarily is to suggest the fact that these are preliminary judgments. These are only anticipatory of the greater judgment that is to follow. So this judgment does not affect all
of the earth, but only part of it because it’s symbolic. We should probably not, as we repeated couple times, we should probably not determine the population this present earth and imagine on third of them literally being affected by this, but again one-third simply suggesting a limitation of this judgment. It doesn’t affect all of the earth. But it’s possible when you read this judgment that it points to a famine that is even more intense and severe than the third seal of Revelation chapter 6, but, other than that, again it’s difficult to tell is this judgment by itself? Is this trumpet a physical plague or is it something spiritual or is it a combination of both? At the very end we’ll gather these together and maybe suggest overall what might be going on with some of these trumpets.

Trumpet #2: Burning Mountain and the Sea

Trumpet number 2, has a mountain that is burning is now thrown into the sea. Probably these two parts of this image, both the burning and the mountain are significant. Burning would imply a judgment. The fact that it is a mountain probably suggests a kingdom. So what we have here is God’s judgment on an evil kingdom. Judgment is pictured in terms of burning or fire.

The background from this is probably Jeremiah and chapter 51. So we’re back to the Old Testament for an understanding of our imagery. In Jeremiah chapter 51, and especially verse 25, “I am against you, O destroying mountain,” notice the imagery of a mountain, “you who destroyed the whole earth,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliffs, and make you a burned-out mountain.’” So this imagery of a burning mountain probably comes out of text like Jeremiah chapter 51 where even there mountain seems to be reflective of a kingdom. So here the mountain probably represents an evil kingdom more specifically in the first century embodied in the Roman Empire.

Furthermore, though going back to the Exodus plague, the rest of this plague says, “a third of the sea turned to blood,” which recalls the Exodus plague of turning the Nile River into blood. So a third of the sea is turned to blood. A third of the living creatures in it die and a third of all the ships, interestingly, were destroyed. So again that mention of the ships being destroyed is it possible again that this is to be seen as an attack on or a
judgment on Rome’s commerce? Again, this is a judgment on Rome’s way of doing things which will be signified in the ultimate overthrow of the empire itself, symbolized by this throwing down of the burning of mountain. And is it possible that it’s also a judgment on the gods that lie behind Rome and the gods that lie behind the Roman commerce.

Trumpet #3: Star and Water

Trumpet number 3 and as I said before, it’s difficult to tell how physical we’re to take this. Is it more physical in nature, or is the judgment more spiritual in nature since John is primarily interested in using the Exodus and the Old Testament to interpret and describe the nature and significance of God’s judgment. But trumpet number three is very similar to trumpet number two. Here the third angel sounds the trumpet and now we find the plague that is characterized as a great star that is burning that now gets cast down from the sky and it now affects the water. So notice sort of the progression from the first one that affects the earth, the grass is affected, the third of the trees, the third of earth, the third of the grass; and then two and three, now the waters, the ocean is affected. So now here with the trumpet number 3, the third angel and the great star coming down which affects all the water.

A star in apocalyptic literature is often symbolic of an angelic being. Probably the great star here symbolizes some kind of an angelic being…perhaps an evil one who now comes to do harm and the result of this star is that all the water is turned bitter, again reflecting Exodus 7 and reflecting the harming of all the water in the Exodus plague. Now, that is repeated here. Interestingly, it said that the star is called “Wormwood” that was simply a Wormwood was a bitter plant and so that the picture here is of the water turning extremely bitter even poisonous so that it is unfit to drink and would cause harm or even death for those who actually drank it.

But it is very difficult to tell how physically we are to take this, certainly not literally. Is this referring to a physical type of judgment, a spiritual one, or a combination of both? Is this once again a judgment on Rome’s economy? Is this a judgment on the Roman system of religion and the idolatry that lies behind it as well?
Trumpet #4: Darkness

Trumpet number 4 results in an angel blowing his trumpet and now note that the constellations in the heavens are affected. Note the repetition again of the fraction one-third suggesting limitation. This is not God’s final judgment but only a harbinger of more that is to come or the final judgment yet to come.

But with the blowing of the fourth trumpet all the constellations are affected this probably reflects the plague in Exodus 10 where there is darkness over all of Egypt except here it’s limited to one-third due to John’s purpose and his intention here. Not only the sky is darkened but all the constellations, the sun, the moon, the stars themselves a third of the day and a third of the night goes without light.

The question again is how physically are we to take this? Is it possible number one again that this is an attack or judgment on idolatry and perhaps these are to be taken as indication of God’s judgment on the gods of Rome and religious system behind it? But is it possible also that perhaps the darkness here indicates the folly or the futility and the darkness into which idolatrous humanity has now plunged? So that I think Greg Beale and his commentary understands this plague primarily in terms of the spiritual darkness and the complete futility of worshipping gods, pagan gods, of pursuing idolatry primarily for first century readers being involved in the idolatrous practices of Rome.

Trumpets 1-4 Collectively

So the first four, the first four trumpets then in chapter 8, seem to maybe a better way to approach them is to look at them collectively. Is it possible then, and I use the word “possible” because with the nature of the symbolism and the fact that John is drawing primarily on Exodus plagues, it’s difficult to tell exactly what he has in mind with each of these. Instead, more important is to focus on the theological significance, the theological meaning of God’s judgment that is in connection with the Exodus plague. Perhaps the first four trumpets are meant to demonstrate the complete futility of idolatry. Notice as I said that progression between the fact that the land is affected, the fact that the water is affected, and then in trumpet number four, the fact that all of the heavens and the constellations are affected. Is it possible then that the last one, particularly the language
and imagery of darkness, is meant symbolically to portray the futility and the darkness spiritually into which those who pursue idolatry are plunged and the futility of depending on the world’s resources and the resources of Rome and its idolatrous practices? Now you have the picture of the complete futility of relying on that and the complete spiritual darkness into which those who rely on the world’s resources and are involved in the idolatrous practices are now plunged. So now they suffer darkness, the suffering might be both spiritual and physical again it is very difficult to tell.

Trumpets in Revelation 19-20 and Revelation 2-3

One significant point with this one that I’ll come back to later is, especially verse 12, the very last of these four trumpet plagues that result in darkness is most likely this verse functions as an anticipation of the ultimate darkness in judgment that takes place in Revelation 19 and 20. So this by only affecting a third, again this is a limited judgment that functions as sort of a harbinger or an anticipation of or a warning of what the final separation from God, what the final situation of darkness, what the final suffering and futility will be like at the final judgment that gets narrated in chapters 19 and 20, “for those who refuse to repent.” I would emphasize like the seals as well, we should probably read this in light of this is not only God’s judgment on Rome, but God’s judgment on the churches who refuse to repent. Chapters 2 and 3, those churches that refuse to repent, those churches that are compromising their faithful witness, those churches that are engaged in the godless idolatrous evil system of Rome, for them they too will be recipients of these plagues.

So, the first four trumpets may collectively be a judgment on Rome’s idolatry and those who participate in Rome’s idolatry. By demonstrating the futility of relying on the earth’s resources, on the world’s resources by demonstrating the futility and spiritual darkness of relying on an idolatrous system and this spiritual darkness and the futility they’re plunged into these judgments because of their idolatrous practices.

Rev 9: Three Woes

Now in chapter 9, which we said is prophesied by this interesting word from an eagle who utters three woes. These three woes then set up the final three trumpets.
We said two of them are introduced and enacted in chapter 9, and the third one will await chapter 11.

But chapter 9 now narrates two further judgments and what I want to say very briefly is something about the woes. The woes come out of prophetic literature and they are usually used in the context of judgment. They are a woe upon someone, a pronouncement of a woe because of the judgment that is about to come. So the woes here function as sort of a wake up to pay attention to the judgments that are about to come. The woe is pronounced because of the awfulness of the judgment. So I would expect then the further trumpets in chapter 9 will perhaps be of a more hideous nature than even the first four in chapter 8. Notice also how chapter 8 begins with a couple of plagues that would be of a very different character from chapter 4. Notice how verse 13 anticipates this not only with the repetition of the woes, but note the break that occurs in verse 13 of chapter 8 suggesting that chapter 9, the chapter division of chapter 9, is not well placed at all. If anywhere, it should be at chapter 8, verse 13. Not only are we introduced to these three woes, but note verse 13 where John says, “I looked and I heard,” almost drawing attention to a new section and then as we said the final trumpets are identified with three woes. The next trumpet then, trumpet number five, or woe number one begins in chapter 9 and let me read chapter 9 which is the account of the next two trumpets or the first two woes and what you’ll notice immediately is the disproportion amount of length given to these two trumpets over against the first four of chapter 8. Remember the first four trumpets don’t even begin until verse 6 and so the first four trumpets are narrated in fairly quick succession. But now in chapter 9, the last two, the next two trumpets are expanded in quite of bit of detail perhaps suggesting their significance. In fact, I would suggest that these are to be seen as more significant and as two woes we are to understand that these are going to be horrific and significant plagues.

And so starting of verse...chapter 9 and verse 1, these are the trumpet five and six or woes one and two: “The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that has fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace.
The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads [from Revelation chapter 7 where God’s servants, the 144,000 are sealed or the church God’s people are sealed] They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it, they will long to die, but death will elude them [or escape them]. The locusts look like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they had something like crowns of gold and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair and their teeth were like a lion’s teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come. The sixth angel, [or the second woe now] sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.’ And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood--idols that cannot
see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

Trumpets 5 & 6 Overall Impact

So that is the final two trumpets in the list of the six of the trumpet sequence. As you read that, to me it sounds more like something that might be found in *The Lord of the Rings* novel or the movie or something like that and I don’t want to in a sense ruin this by simply going through and trying to deal with every detail and dissecting it. Again I want to at one level allow the text to stand and allow you to feel the effect of combining all these images of breastplates and human features and insect features and animal like features and warlike features, and beasts wearing breastplate into this one horrifying image. So that the readers would have hopefully been impacted by what they heard and John certainly would have been impacted by seeing this and now hopefully the readers share something of the effect, including us, by simply reading it as a whole. So we need to hear the vision as a whole. We need to see it as a whole. We need to visualize it as a whole and to get the effect before we simply go through and dissect its parts and try to figure out exactly what they’re referring to. In fact, I’m not sure that all of the parts of the description of these locusts and all of the parts description of these horses and riders a bare dissection or necessarily are meant to indicate distinct separate ideas, but maybe again it’s the combination of these and the effect that they have together and what they portray about these locusts and what they portray about these riders on the horses.

But I want to look at a handful of features in this description of these final two trumpets and that is the two groups, very large groups, the group of locusts and then the group of horses and the riders described in some detail in this text and look at just a handful of features and the significant features and then try to wrestle too with what might be the identity of these groups. And again are they similar? Are they the same? Are they separate features? What exactly are these things? What do they represent?

This is the text and I’ll just raise that now because I think our response to such an interpretation should be obvious, but chapter 9 is one of the texts that has very famously been identified with various instruments of modern day warfare. Even to go back earlier,
the beginning of chapter 9 begins with smoke coming out of the Abyss and the language later on with the horses of sulfur and smoke coming out of their mouths. This is often evoked imagery of nuclear warfare taking place and some have thought that’s exactly what John was predicting through the locusts indicating instruments of war in the form of certain helicopters, etc., the sound of their wings resembling the propeller blades on helicopter. So this has usually been one of those texts that we have tried to make sense of by reading it in light of modern day phenomena that is modern day military of weapons and instruments of war.

But again, we have to ask ourselves and go back to the type of literature in some of our principles of interpretation. One of them being number one that John is using imagery and language that is meant to communicate symbolically. It would be language and imagery that primarily comes out of Old Testament apocalyptic texts that many of his readers would have been very familiar with. But second, we said that one of the important principles is that for any interpretation of Revelation to be compelling, it must meet the criteria that it must be something that John could have intended and his first century readers living in a pre-technological, pre-modern military, pre-nuclear age could have understood and could have made sense of. So given that, there is no way John could have been seeing or intending modern methods of warfare and intending helicopters and nuclear war. John would not have seen nor could his readers have picked up on that. So such interpretations probably should be rejected. However, there may be a little bit of violence or something like that.

Looking at when we read this we’re simply not used to locusts and things like that. What John does is to pick up, especially if you weren’t raised on a ranch or farm I’ve been to situations where there has been a locust plague and seen the devastations they cause and stripping the land of crops. So someone in that context might resonate with locust. But some who don’t have experience with locusts or have never seen something like this so it might not impact them the same way. But John is actually drawing on images that his readers would’ve understood and in a sense blowing them up into bigger than life scenarios to get his readers to understand and to respond and react appropriately.
He plays on their fears which a locust plague would’ve been a genuine fear and scorpions and vicious lions and animals and things like that and understanding what an Abyss symbolizes in the Old Testament or Jewish literature, Greco-Roman literature. John takes all that and blows them up into larger than life scenario. These are images that play on the fears and the hopes of his readers.

So we might be able to at least rescue some of what our modern day attempts do by saying what evokes fear in our mind? Well, it is a nuclear war or it is modern methods of war, the fear of possible world war that involves potential for nuclear destructions. Those kinds of things could function for us in the same way that the images do here. Not suggesting that’s exactly what John was predicting, but when we think of plagues and judgment, when we think of God’s judgment, sometimes it might be helpful to identify what things in our own modern day our things that we fear, things that indicate destruction, things that indicate widespread warfare, things that indicate chaos and evil and to look at those to help us to perhaps respond in the same way that the original readers would have responded to the images in Revelation chapter 9 without suggesting our modern day warfare and scenarios and images is what John was predicting. No, that’s not the case, but those sorts of things might help us to understand the impact of and to evoke the fears and responses in us in the same way it would’ve in John’s first readers.

The first thing John sees then in chapter 9 is another angel or another star that falls from the sky. We’ve said that especially in apocalyptic literature and elsewhere stars often indicate angelic beings and that’s probably what is happening here. What is the primary function of this angel? This is a good indication of apocalyptic nature of Revelation where angelic beings play different roles, but the function of this angel is to hold the key to the Abyss and to actually go and to unlock it to let out four other angelic beings or demonic beings from the Abyss.

Now, the “Abyss” is a term that appears to have a fairly long history in apocalyptic literature, but even in the book of Revelation, the Abyss in much of apocalyptic literature is sort of the present or the home of demonic beings. In Revelation itself, in chapter 11 we’ll see that the beast, an evil, chaotic, and demonic type of figure
comes out of the Abyss in chapter 11. In chapter 17 and verse 8, the beast is described as coming out of the Abyss which is appropriate. The Abyss is the home of or the present of evil, demonic, spiritually demonic, supernatural beings. Then in chapter 20 verses 1 and 3, Satan is locked in the Abyss and later let out of it. So that the abyss here immediately should conjure up in our minds the home of evil, demonic, satanic, supernatural beings.

Locusts and the Old Testament (Joel & Exodus)

What happens when the abyss is opened is smoke comes out and in this smoke we find basically a group of locusts, a whole cloud of locusts emerge from this smoke. The locusts are what get the attention in the rest of the description of the fifth trumpet. The locusts have at least as a symbol for judgment, as a symbol for God’s judgment, have at least two Old Testament antecedents. One of them is the locust plague from Exodus 10 and 1 to 15. The other is a locust plague from Joel chapter 1 through 2 verse 11. Actually in Joel chapters 1 and 2, we read of an invading locust plague and I’ll just read some of this, “Hear this you elders,” this is Joel chapter 1, verse 2, “Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips. A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white.”

I’ll stop right there but all the way…and I’ll jump to chapter 2 just read a few of those verse but our section compares the devastation of foreign invasion with the invasion of a locust plague. Notice the connection with the trumpet now. “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand-a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains, [notice that language of
darkness and blackness which is what the smoke produces when it comes out of the Abyss in Revelation chapter 9] “a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them.” So the idea is before they get there the land is nice like the Garden of Eden. After they get through it there’s nothing but destruction, everything has been laid waste.

“They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead.” Verse 9, “They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows. Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.”

There is an interesting connection with trumpet plague number 4. In other words, the plague number 4, the trumpet number 4 in Revelation 8 which is the stars in skies being dark and now seems to relate to the locust plague in chapter 9 and the connection is found already in Joel chapter 2. “The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?”

So John has taken based on the Egyptian plagues beginning with Exodus 10 he has taken the locust plague but also drawn in another locust plague which clearly is used metaphorically in Joel chapter 1 and 2 now to portray the extreme and complete devastation and destruction that this locust plague will now produce in chapter 9.

Even today as I have said if anyone has ever seen a locust plague or you’re a farmer or a rancher or you’ve seen evidence of the locust plague, one can understand the horror of the destruction that a locust plague blown up into larger than life could produce
in the readers. But this clearly is no ordinary locust plague. It’s a combination of insects, animal, scorpions, even human beings meant to evoke terror and horror in the readers.

Also, it’s intriguing that this locust plague does not harm the vegetation which you would expect, but instead this locust plague is unique in that it harms humanity, those who do not have seal from Revelation chapter 7. Probably when we ask the question of what or who are these locust in Revelation chapter 9, obviously they’re symbolic but symbolic of what and Greg Osborne and his commentary Revelation says this is probably the most bizarre description of anything found in the book of Revelation. How are we to identify these? Most likely, and I found that there’s fairly widespread agreement on this in commentaries, we should probably identify the locust plague as demonic beings. I think that is clear immediately from the fact that they come out of the Abyss. Again apocalyptic literature, even in the book of Revelation the Abyss is the source of the beast. It’s the source of satanic, demonic beings and supernatural beings. So we should take these locusts not as helicopters and airplanes, or not as literal physical locusts, but we should take these as symbolic of a demonic onslaught in the destruction that it causes.

Locusts Harming Humans

What then is the harm or the torment that the locust cause? A couple of times it said locusts are permitted to torment human beings. They do so by the tail that resembles a scorpion by that they have the authority to harm and torment and cause problem for human beings. Once more I think it’s difficult to tell exactly is this physical torment. So what is it? Is it spiritual torment? Is it a combination of both? Perhaps we’re to see it again in light of the fourth trumpet in chapter 8, verse 12 that is bringing darkness and causing futility so that we’re to understand this as the locusts harm and torment people by further plunging them into despair and darkness and further demonstrating the futility of their idolatry. In other words, is it possible that they are causing spiritual harms so awful that the author can say they even seek death and even death flees from them?

Locusts’ Features

But one feature I want to point to or two interesting further features about the description of the locust plague is first of all the fact that it is said that the locust were
allowed to operate for five months. Some have tried as with other numbers and time periods in Revelation to read this literally. Probably the best explanation is that five months was the typical life cycle of a locust. So we’re not to take this literally. Maybe it does again indicate limitation that this is not the final judgment, but the five months should not be taken as indicating a short period of time, nor should it be taken as five literal months, but simply it indicates that the author simply is drawing on the language of the typical life cycle of locusts. They would basically be alive for five months. So now he symbolically portrays the locusts as doing their work for period of five months, the typical life cycle of a locust in that day.

A second interesting feature is that’s unusual is that the locusts seem to have a leader in chapter 9 and verse 11. The leader is described with two words, the Hebrew word “Abaddon,” and the Greek word “Apollyon.” Both of these suggest destruction or destroyer as the name of the leader which is completely fitting for the leader of this group of locusts. So the leader probably being another angelic being, perhaps the one, the star, that falls down and opens the Abyss. The star symbolizes an angelic being. Is it possible that this is the leader of the locust. There are a couple of other possibilities for this leader who is called Abaddon or Apollyon in either Hebrew or Greek. One of them is that this may be an allusion picking up again on the Exodus plagues. This may be an allusion to the angel of death in the Exodus plagues. It may also be an allusion to an idea in the couple places in apocalyptic literature of an angel of death whom God has assigned to the underworld as responsible for the demonic beings. It could also be an allusion to this angel, to this leader, who is called “the destroyer,” one who destroys, one who brings destruction, but in either case the imagery is clear it is to add to the destructive nature of what is going on. These locusts, much like the locusts described in Joel chapter 2, seem to have a leader that is they go on in order and they go out as an army and they seem to have a leader who is also bent on destruction.

Now, what is interesting about this plague then is it’s as if the author is telling his readers, readers in the first century, that behind the pagan gods that they’re tempted to worship, behind the gods of Rome and the idolatrous system of Rome and its activities
ultimately lies Satan and his demons. Ironically, the very gods that they would worship and the very idolatrous images that they would worship which become clear at the very end of verse 20 and 21 where it introduces, especially 20, to the idols that they worshipped that they refused to repent from worshipping. Those very idols actually ironically turn on them and seek to do them harm and destroy them. The very gods that they follow are the very gods that ironically torment them.

So the first plague of chapter 9 then seems to be identified with a plague of evil demonic beings and the function of that plague is once again an attack on their idolatry by demonstrating the demonic nature of the idolatry and in a sense the destructive nature of it. The very gods they worship, the very idolatrous system in Rome they participate in, now turns against them to destroy them, to demonstrate the futility, demonstrate the spiritual darkness that they’re plunged in. It is something so horrid that death would be a viable alternative. This now constitutes God’s judgment on idolatrous Rome, but also on anyone who would participate in that, including the members of the seven churches of Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

Trumpet #6: Woe #2

Trumpet number 6 or woe number 2 is in verse 13. This intriguingly, this trumpet plague is introduced in a way that’s unique from the other ones although similar to the previous one. It also involves an angelic being apparently opening something up to allow something to take place. In verse 13 we’re introduced to an angel who sounds his trumpet and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar. So note we have the altar again and here the horns of the golden altar are mentioned so we’re in a sense back in the heavenly throne room and the heavenly scene and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar and here is what it says. It addresses a sixth angel who has the trumpet and what this angel is to do is this angel is to sound his trumpet and to release four angles who are bound in the river Euphrates. So now we have all kinds of angelic beings playing a role again suggesting once again that primarily this plague will be a supernatural one or this plague would involve angelic or demonic type of beings. But then what happens once these four angels that are bound in the Euphrates are released then a multitude of horses
or mounted troops, horses with their riders, now rush out and once again it’s apparent that they are meant to do harm. They mean to destroy and they mean to defeat and conquer.

Now, the first question is, who in the world are these four angels bound at the Euphrates? Who are the four angels and what do they represent? Why four of them and why the Euphrates? It may be that these four angels here are the same four angels back in chapter 7 that hold back the four winds. That are the four winds of judgment? Back in chapter 7 and 1 and 2 remember that vision before God’s throne where the four winds are allowed to blow the four plagues, God commands the angels to hold them back until he can seal his servants, those who are able to withstand this, those who will not be harmed. Now perhaps we see the four angels or the four winds released and now able to go out and cause harm. They are able to go out and wreak havoc that is the wind being symbolic of judgment. Now these four angels will be released and their judgment now will ensue.

Euphrates

The next question to ask is why the Euphrates River and many people have tried to take this literally and there’s even been a lot of interest in what’s going on in the Euphrates River in the modern day and how troops can cross it and things like that. Most likely, although is again John is drawing on symbolic imagery or language from the Old Testament and using it symbolically in his own vision to say something. The key is understanding, actually the Euphrates might play a twofold role once again it might be evocative of more than one background. The Euphrates River played a role in Old Testament prophetic texts in the expectation of an invasion from the north or invasion that would come across the Euphrates River. So there is Old Testament background where the Euphrates would be an appropriate place for an army to cross in light of Old Testament expectation. That’s where you would expect invasion from. That’s where you would expect an army to come from and invading army to come from the direction of the Euphrates River.

Also though, with the Greco-Roman Empire, the Euphrates was sort of the eastern most boundary of the Roman Empire. Another interesting thing is one of the Roman Empire’s fiercest enemies, the so called Parthian warriors, would have resided in that
region. So for Greco-Roman backgrounds someone would have seen the Euphrates as the direction from which the Parthian army, the fierce enemies of Roman would come or from an Old Testament perspective of in light of Old Testament prophetic literature that is where you would expect an invading army as well. So the mention of the Euphrates River here is not meant to be taken literally, but its mention is evocative again of an invading army.

So they hear the word “Euphrates,” as, here comes an invading army in fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, but also playing on the fears of those living in the Roman Empire. We’ll talk next a little bit more about who are these four angels, what is it they do, what is this invading army that emerges on the scene, and how might it relate to the locust plague that the author describes in the first part of chapter 9.