The Apocalyptic Horsemen: A “Gazillion”

In the final plague, trumpet plague, which would be the sixth one mentioned in chapter 9. We’ve been introduced to four angels who may be the four angels holding the winds back in the beginning of chapter 7 now they are finally released and allowed to release their destructive judgment and to wreak havoc on the earth. They do so in the form of a multitude or a large group of riders on their horses and the four angels could be perceived as leaders of those riders on the horses. That’s not clear but that is possible. Certainly they are responsible for releasing them. The number of the riders on the horses or the number of this cavalry is described in at least the English translation here in the New International Version that I’m reading from as two hundred million. Literally, it is two times ten thousand times ten thousand which is kind of where we get two hundred million. Probably in the Greek text it’s meant to symbolize, it’s meant to indicate, a number that was beyond comprehension. A modern day equivalent might be for someone to say there were at least a “gazillion.” That’s not a number that anyone can count it’s just a way of saying there is so many that you can’t count it. So it’s been common in the past to attempt to ask or where do we find a nation or a country that could have two hundred million people in an army and there have even been some suggestions as to who has that many. But that’s beyond John’s point because he’s not interested in two hundred million literal members of a cavalry. He is using a number that suggests as I said something similar to our gazillion. It’s so many that you can’t count it. So we miss the point when we try and look around and find a nation or country that could conceivably have a military of two hundred million. John isn’t thinking in terms of two hundred million he is thinking in terms of a number beyond their comprehension. The description of this army or cavalry actually overlaps very closely with the locust from the previous trumpet plague. Notice they are described as having lion’s teeth. They have animal and reptile
features, and are associated with smoke and sulfur as well. So clearly this is to be understood not as a physical earthly army but once again using the symbolism of a multitude of troops using it symbolically to refer to a demonic onslaught, to refer to demonic supernatural beings, not a literal earthly army belonging to any nation.

The Effects of the Apocalyptic Horsemen

Unlike the locust, they go beyond just harming and this may be the point of having a separate group. They go beyond just harming humanity. Now they are actually put at least a third of humanity to death. One-third being an image of limitations so this is not the final judgment but in some way they’re allowed and permitted to put one-third of humanity to death. So it intensifies beyond the fifth trumpet. The question once again that’s raised is: how do we conceive of this? Is this to be understood as physical, literal death? Is this spiritual death? Is this a combination of the two? I have to admit that I am uncertain exactly what that is. It could be physical death. If it is, how is that accomplished? Certainly spiritual death would fit. You do find at the very end of Revelation people suffering both physical death but also the second death which is the Lake of Fire and complete separation from God. Is it possible that their ability to put people physically to death here is symbolic of complete spiritual death and complete separation from God. That is certainly possible, but uncertain.

These beings are responsible for, at the end of the day, deceiving humanity which is the very thing that Satan does in chapter 12. The very thing the beast does in chapter 13. So perhaps you have this image of deception, these are demonic beings deceiving all of humanity in the idolatry and the idol worship accompanied by their spiritual death and perhaps even their physical death. Again, it’s not clear how this would take place. John is more interested in exploring the theological meaning and significance of God’s judgment, and not telling us at least in the 21st century reading, this not being certain exactly what this might look like we’re we to witness it. Verses 20 and 21 play a significant role at the end of all this, and that is the plagues primarily seem to be for judgment. So adding this all together, we might say that these plagues are poured out upon the idolatry, verse 20, of humanity those who would worship idols by demonstrating the futility, the despair, the
spiritual darkness, ultimately the spiritual death perhaps physical death that results from that. To demonstrate that behind the idols they worship, behind the idolatry and the idolater system, lies this demonic onslaught that means to do them harm. So there especially we are to think about some of the readers in chapters 2 and 3 and the churches in Revelation and their temptation to want to compromise with idolatrous Rome. This now allows them to see that the temptation to compromise and worship and be involved in the idolatrous practices of Rome is not neutral it is not harmless but instead behind it lies the insidious attempt by Satan and his demons to destroy and harm God’s people and indeed the entire earth.

The Hardening of Humanity’s Hearts

So, primarily these are plagues of judgment as they were in the days of Egypt. These are to be understood as plagues upon wicked evil humanity and the world. But there’s also a slight suggestion that one of the intentions was to bring about repentance because verse 20 says the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent. So in one sense these plagues were designed to bring about repentance, yet instead, they further harden humanity in judgment much like they did in the days of Egypt. So this verse is a repetition again of the theme of the hardening of Pharaoh. In response to the plagues, Pharaoh continued to harden his heart. So now we find the same effect of the plagues on humanity. Though one of their functions could be to bring about repentance, instead they brought about judgment and further brought hardness on humanity so that they refused to repent.

One important implication of this is we said these plagues in chapters 8 and 9 anticipate they are a harbinger of anticipation almost a warning of the final judgment that is yet to come. That’s perhaps one of the reasons why it’s only one-third. This is a limited judgment and anticipates a final judgment. A limited judgment that should have brought humanity to repentance yet they refused to.

This is to be seen as an indication of or an anticipation of a warning of the future final judgment that is to come in chapters 19 and 20. Now what is significant about that is when we conceive of the ungodly nations and the evil, wicked nations in chapters 19 and
20 as going into judgment and being thrown into the Lake of Fire, we’ll look at those images when we get there, we should see that sometimes I think we conjure up the idea that they get thrown in there unfairly and they are taken away unwillingly. So that when people see and envision their final judgment they are dragged kicking and screaming and they didn’t realize things were going to be so bad etc. I think a text like chapter 9 helps us put the language and images and understanding of theology of final judgment in perspective. That is what’s going on in chapter 9 is even though humanity suffers judgment, they still refuse to repent.

So I take that at the final judgment humanity would still refuse to repent. They would still rather choose judgment, as awful and horrible as that would be, than choose life in God’s presence. They would rather face judgment then repent and acknowledge God’s lordship. So I think chapter 9 helps us to see the final judgment is not one where you have people facing judgment and not wanting to get out but instead you have people choosing judgment and eternally choosing judgment and refusing to repent because they would rather face an eternity of judgment in chapters 19 and 20 than repent and give God glory and acknowledge his sovereignty and lordship.

The Chapter Ten Interlude

Now we said the seventh trumpet in the sequence in chapter 9 is delayed until chapter 11 in verses 15 through 19. This also then will apparently be the third woe but before the seventh trumpet arrives, or the third woe arrives, later on in chapter 11 we find another brief interlude. We might call it in chapter 10, first part of chapter 11. What this interlude does as we suggested with the other interlude in chapter 7 we should not understand this as a digression or an insertion of irrelevant material or an unrelated visionary piece of the sequence but instead this interlude plays a crucial role of interpreting the meaning and the function of what has happened in chapters 8 and 9. So, chapters 10 and 11 further explore the basis for the trumpet judgments in chapters 8 and 9. In other words, I think chapters 10 and 11 are further going to unpack what’s going on in chapters 8 and 9. Why they are and also raise the question what role do Gods people play in this? What are God’s people doing during this time? What is the situation in
relationship to God’s people in chapters 8 and 9? So that means that Revelation chapter 10 and 11 do not narrate different separate events or a different time period from chapters 8 and 9. It further interprets the events it further illuminates the events of chapters 8 and 9 by bringing in God’s people and demonstrating their relationship to it.

John Recommissioned

Now in chapter 10 of Revelation we find, intriguingly, a recommissioning of John to prophesy. We already saw that back in chapter 1 John prophesies about the churches in chapters 2 and 3 John is commissioned in chapter 1 by the risen Christ to prophesy to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 and he brings the message. But now John is recommissioned in chapter 10 to prophesy about the faithful witness of the church in chapter 11, and to prophesy about the fate of the nations, all peoples, tribes and tongues and languages as chapter 10 will tell us. Also this section, chapter 10, is about the judgment that will fall on those who persecute the faithful witnesses in chapter 11. So you kind of see what’s happening.

The judgments of chapters 8 and 9 are precisely to be understood in light of God’s judgment upon wicked humanity who persecute the two faithful witnesses in Revelation chapter 11. In Revelation chapter 11 we’ll read the story of these two faithful witnesses who accomplish their witness but at the end they are put to death and the whole world gloats over their death. In other words, the author is again explaining and interpreting chapters 8 and 9. The basis for God’s judgment on wicked humanity including the Roman Empire is their rejection and persecution and even murdering of his faithful witnesses in Revelations chapter 11. Chapter 10 then introduces that. 10 kind of functions as an introduction. The commissioning of John to now prophesy about that and how to interpret the nature of God’s judgment and the function of the church’s faithful witness is found in chapter 11.

John’s Vision

Now in chapter 10 the first two verses what I want to do is just work through chapter 10 briefly and highlight a number of intriguing, and I think significant/important features in chapter 10. Chapter 10 verses 1 and 2. Let me read that first and then we’ll
slow down and look at a handful of details in the text. John says “Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, his legs were like firry pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay upon his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot in the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voice of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.” Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, “There will be no more delay! [or some translations might say, “and time will be no more.”] But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished [or fulfilled] just as he announced to his servants the prophets. Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: ‘Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, ‘Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.’ I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings.” And there is that fourfold description that we find seven times throughout Revelation.

Now, chapter 10 begins again with this recommissioning scene. Now John is going to be recommissioned to prophesy anew regarding the situation of the church in relation to the judgment, and to prophesy about the role of all the nations, tribes, languages, and peoples from different tribes and tongues. Chapter 10 begins this commissioning with Johns vision by another angel. So apocalypses are full of angelic beings. This angel now comes down from heaven so John still seems to be, from chapters 8 and 9, seeing things from an earthly perspective. As we’ve seen Revelation shifts back and forth from heaven to earth. Now John sees things from an earthly perspective as a
mighty angel comes down from heaven apparently down to earth. In fact, he is described as standing on the earth and the sea with one foot on the sea and one foot on the land suggesting probably his sovereignty over all things, his sovereignty over all of creation.

The “Angel”

But how this angel is described is rather unique. Your really don’t find any other angel in Revelation described in the way or to the extent that the angel here in Revelation 10 is described. Most likely when it comes to the identity of this, most likely we should probably understand this angel as Jesus Christ himself. Notice a number of things about him. For example, the fact that he was robed in a cloud perhaps recalling Christ coming up from the clouds or especially from Daniel chapter 7 the Son of Man imagery from chapter 1 in Revelation that John picks up on that. The fact that a rainbow is above his head recalling the rainbow back in Revelation chapter four and the throne room scene in connection with God. His legs as fiery pillars recalling his feet as pillars of bronze back in chapter 1 the description of Christ. Also, the fact that he now holds a scroll open in his hands, I’ll talk about that in a moment. But putting this all together, this angelic being that John sees is probably unlike any other angelic being in Revelation and that is because probably we are to understand this mighty angel as none other than the person of Jesus Christ. Who is clothed in the cloud, who has the rainbow above his head, feet like pillars and now he comes holding a scroll.

Significance of the Scroll

The significance of scroll is, I think, well first of all to back up the question arises because we’ve seen a number of books or scrolls we found that Revelation 2 and 3 which mentions the Book of Life. We were introduced to a scroll back in chapter 5 of Revelation. The scroll that was in the right hand of God contained his plan of inaugurating his kingdom and establishing his kingdom on earth bringing salvation and judgment. Now we are introduced to another scroll. It’s called the “little scroll” because the Greek word here is actually what is called the diminutive. In other words, it has an ending on it that suggests the translation to “a small” or “little scroll.” Although later on it is simply called “a scroll.” Later on in chapter 10 it is called a scroll using the exact
same word John used back in chapter 5 to refer to the scroll.

But the question is what is this one? What is this scroll that John now sees? I would suggest to you two features point to the identity of this scroll. One of them is the fact that if it is true that that we are to identify this angel with Christ then it is Christ who is holding this scroll in chapter 10. Furthermore, it’s interesting that this scroll is described as opened using a word in a similar grammatical form as the word used back in chapter 5 of the scroll as sealed. Now we find the Lamb, now we find Christ holding a scroll that is opened. So adding these two up, since if this angel is Jesus Christ, since he is holding the scroll, and since he now holds it open, we should probably identify this scroll as the same one from chapter 5. The scroll in chapter 5 was sealed and that got unsealed through chapters 6 and the seventh seal in chapter 8. Now finally in chapter 10 the Lamb who took the scroll the slain Lamb in chapter 5 who took the scroll from the right hand of God on the throne now as a mighty angel holds the scroll but now it stands opened no longer sealed like it was in chapter 5 now it stands opened. The other significant feature that suggest the identity is behind the scroll in chapter 5 and the scroll in chapter 10 lies the same Old Testament background Ezekiel chapter 2. Ezekiel 2 provides sort of the model or the intertext for the scroll in both chapter five and here in chapter 10. So that therefore, again we should see this scroll in chapter ten that the mighty angel who is Christ now holds open is the same scroll as the slain lamb was worthy to take the old scroll He was worthy to take in chapter 5. Now it has been unsealed; now it remains open. Now he will give this scroll to John himself. This probably then suggest to that the seals and trumpets are as I think the rest of Revelation will bear out, probably to be seen as preliminary judgments of more judgments to come, especially of the final judgment to come in the future.

Views on John’s Vision

Now having said this, what are we to make of this chapter? Richard Bauckham, I’ve referred to him several times, he understands chapter 10 like this: he says in chapter 11 together chapter 10 is sort of providing an introduction to 11. In light of chapters 6 through 9, chapter 6 through 9 have basically been characterized by judgment plagues
upon the earth. And chapter 9 ends with that statement, “those who did not die by the plague still refused to repent.” Bauckham understands 10 as sort of a new strategy for establishing God’s kingdom and reclaiming the world. That is so far judgment hasn’t done it. And Bauckham is not suggesting God tried something and it didn’t work and now he is trying something else. It’s more he is demonstrating that judgment is not enough. It’s not judgment in the form of the seals and the trumpet plagues that will bring about repentance. People don’t repent at the end of 9. But what will lead the nations to repentance. Bauckham says chapters 10 and 11 is the answer.

It’s now that John is going to prophesy a fresh prophesy, a new strategy that now it’s through the suffering faithful witness of the two witnesses in chapter 11 that God will win the world and that the world will be brought to repentance and become part of God’s rule. Now there may be some truth to that.

However, it seems that to me still even into 10 and 11 the dominate emphasis in this section is still judgment. So I think that as opposed to seeing a shift in strategy, now here’s the way that the nations will be won to repentance. Although repentance does take place at the end of chapter 11 after the witness of the two faithful witnesses although we will talk about that when we get there. At the same time, it appears that judgment is still the dominate theme. So that chapter 10 and 11 are not a new strategy for bringing the nations to repentance but instead demonstrating why the judgment of the world occurs and how God’s judgment upon the world comes. It comes as a result of his faithful witness. It comes as a result of the faithful witness whom the world rejects and whom the world persecutes and eventually puts to death. So that’s how I will peruse and continue. That’s how I understand chapters 10 and 11 is John is recommissioned to prophesy but now he is going to explain in more detail the nature of God’s judgment, how God’s kingdom is going to be established in terms of his judgment on the world and that is because the world as a result of the faithful witnesses of his two witnesses in chapter 11 the world rejects and persecutes and puts to death and that becomes his basis of judgment upon them which ends up happening in trumpet number seven which occurs in chapter 11.
The Seven Thunders

Now in verses 3 and 4 then in chapter 10, another interesting feature is we find in verses 3 and 4 another voice. Actually we find seven thunders at the end of verse 3, “he gave a loud shout… When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke.” So now we are introduced to the sound or the voices of seven thunders. What is intriguing is that doesn’t seem to tell us much there but the next verse suggests that apparently these voices said something that John understood and could have written down yet he is told not to. Instead he is told to seal them up. The rest of the book of Revelation is unsealed. At the very end of the book a text we looked at already, John is told not to seal the contents because sealing was meant to hide and cover. That is to suggest something is not going to take place or this is not for the present time. So John is told not to seal this book but in this one place he is told to seal up these seven thunders.

The question is what might these seven thunders have been and why is John told to seal them up. A couple of possible explanations and by the way note the number seven again suggesting not just the seven literal thunders but seven being the image and symbol of perfection, fullness, and completion. One possibility that some have suggested is the fact that John is not allowed to divulge the content of these seven thunders whatever they may be we don’t know because he sealed them up. The fact that John is not allowed to divulge the content suggests that God has not revealed everything. This suggests that God’s plans at some level still remain hidden. The way God is going to fulfill his purposes still remains a mystery to some degree and we don’t know everything. That’s one possibility.

Another possibility that’s been suggested is and this is true of the next two. I’ll just look at three, but the next two and that is the number seven in relationship to thunders places this in the context of the seven seals and the seven trumpets. So the seven thunders would be seven further judgments. So you would have the seven seals the seven trumpets and then the seven thunders as well. The second view suggests that by sealing them, that is, not allowing them to take place, God is graciously cutting short his judgment. So there are more judgments that could have taken place but out of his grace and mercy God has
cut short his judgment on humanity.

A third approach to this is that like the second one, the third approach says this is another series of plagues like the seven seals, seven trumpets, and now seven thunders plagues. This is another series of plagues that God could send but that he won’t do like he did with the trumpets and bowls. God will not send them. Instead, John is told to seal them up so that they won’t take place because humanity has refused to repent and that’s how chapter 9 ends. So God is not going to send any more preliminary judgments like the trumpets and bowls. Instead, things are going to march straight ahead to judgment. God is going to pour out his wrath and his judgment. No more preliminary judgments like the seals and the trumpets. Now the seven thunders, which could be representative of further judgments, are now going to be sealed up or suspended. They will not take place because God is no longer going to simply deal with humanity through preliminary judgments. But that now He will consummate his purposes for history including the final judgment.

There also may be some truth to chapter 1 that maybe one of the effects if not the primary intention one of the effects of doing this is to suggest that there is some information that we do not know that God has not divulged his full plan and so that’s a further warning against anyone with too much confidence or even arrogance claiming to know exactly how Revelation is going to be fulfilled in the future.

A Look at Future Judgments

But in verses 5 through 7 we find the angel’s words now. The angel was identified most likely with the person of Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. Now we have a different image. Jesus on the one hand was seen as the exalted Son of Man in chapter 1. He was also a lion from the tribe of Judah and then he was the slaughtered slain lamb. Now he appears as a mighty angel and the author is working with the apocalyptic imagery seeing Christ from different perspectives. Now he is the Sovereign Lord who stands over all of creation one foot in the land and one foot on the sea which is emphasized a couple of times. And in verses 5 and 7 this is what he says, “then the angel that I had seen standing on the sea. First of all he raises his hand to the heavens and swears an oath. Then he says this: “there will be no more delay” or literally time will be
“Time will be no more” and Dan 12

Again, John links his vision back to the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic text. He stands at the climax the fulfillment of the prophet tradition. Now I want to look a little bit at this language in 5 through 7 this language of “time will be no more” or “there will be no more delay.” Before we do that one more important thing to realize is much of what is going on here with this angel and the speech takes us back to the Old Testament again and that is to the book of Daniel. This time in chapter 12 verse 7 particularly, I’m going to start with verse one of chapter 12 the very last chapter of Daniel which is apparently one of the prophetic texts that John is clearly indicating will find its fulfillment. The final fulfillment and consummation of the promises of his servants the prophets including Daniel now finally is realized. So Daniel 12 begins “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects his people will arise. There will be a time of distress such as not happened since the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone who is found written in the book--will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge. Then I, Daniel looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and the other one on the opposite bank. One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters on the river, ‘How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?’ [Verse 7] The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand” which is alluded to in chapter 10 an angel lifting his hand to heaven, “lifted his right hand and his left hand towards heaven and I heard him swear by him,” the same thing that the angel does in Revelation chapter 10, “by him who lives forever, saying, ‘It will be for a time, times and half a time.’” Now it is interesting Daniel uses that language for time, times
and half a time but John says, “time will be no more.” Why, because what Daniel and the other prophets are anticipating now will finally find its fulfillment. So there is no more need of historical sequence. There is no more need for a time in which God will inaugurate these things.

Now the consummation will finally come. What the prophets promised will now finally come. There will be no more delay. So when John says “time will be no more” he is not saying time ceases to exist or just in some odd temporal existence. He is saying instead God’s progress of history finally reaches its culmination and its consummation. The end will finally come and there will be no more need for a God working in history to bring about his purposes but the consummation will come. The way to understand this is to put this all in a broader context. I think this is again partially a response back to chapter 6 verse 7 where the souls of those under the altar are told they wonder “How long, O Lord” and they are told to wait a little while longer until their number gets accomplished. Literally they are told to wait a little time or a short time.

Now in chapter 10:6 through 7 we find that time is now no more. It has now reached its culmination it has now reached its fulfillment. So that when the seventh trumpet, as the angel goes on and says, is sounded the complete judgment and the complete defeat of the kingdom of this world will result in the emergence and the complete consummation and the arrival of God’s kingdom which again takes place in chapter 11, verses 15 through 20. So putting this together then Revelation 6:10 ask, “How long, O Lord.” God tells them wait a little while longer a short time a little time until the number of your persecuted is accomplished and completed.

Now in response to that cry the angel finally comes and says “time will be no more.” That is the consummation is now about to arrive. No more thunders; no more judgment. Now the final culmination the final answer to the saints cry is about to take place. The delay is now over.

So in chapter 11 the author makes clear this will actually take place through the suffering witness of the church. So it is as if the author backs up a little bit. How will this eventually arrive? How will this final judgment in answer to the saints cry arrive? It will
come about by the faithful witnesses of the church. God’s kingdom is being established ironically through his kings and priests who even suffer persecution and death because of their faithful witness and that is what will bring about the end time kingdom. That is what will bring about the final judgment.

So that now the angel looks forward to that and says, “the time is up, there is no more delay.” The cry of the saints is about to be answered and God is about to judge in response to the faithful witness of his church. In chapters 11 this will issue in God’s judgment of his people and the final vindication of his saints. The promises and messages of the Old Testament prophets is now about to reach their final culmination and time will no longer be necessary. The historical process of bringing that about will reach its end and culmination.

John Eats the Scroll

As a result of that in verses 8 through 11, “Then the voice I heard from heaven spoke to me once more:” and the voice tells him to go take the scroll. This scroll that is open in the hands of the mighty angel who is probably Jesus Christ. Now John is told to go take that scroll. So notice the chain, if this is the same scroll from chapter 5 notice the scroll is in God’s hand. Christ takes it as the one who is worthy to open the scroll. Now he has opened it, now Jesus gives the scroll to John. The first thing John is told to do is to take the scroll from the hand of the angel and then he is told to eat it. An interesting feature but something we certainly would expect in an apocalyptic type text. This imagery of eating the scroll is elaborated by the fact that John goes on and says when you eat it will turn bitter in your stomach though in your mouth it is sweet. So John begins to eat it, clearly an apocalyptic image. It is actually sweet when he is eating it, but once it gets into his stomach and he begins to digest it, it becomes bitter and it becomes sour. This language comes once again out of the book of Ezekiel in chapter 22. A book that we said forms the basis for the scroll back in chapter 5 as well and now we find it playing a role in the description of the scroll and John’s relationship to the scroll in two. Notice what happens, in chapter 2 of Ezekiel, I’ll start with verse 3: “He said, ‘Son of man, [addressing Ezekiel], I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has
rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, “This is what the sovereign Lord says.” And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid though briers and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid… You must speak words to them.’ [Verse 8] But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you.” And here’s what happens next. “Then I looked and I saw a hand stretched out to me in it was a scroll.” Again, John draws on chapter 2 back in Revelation 5. “In it was a scroll which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and words of morning.” Than chapter 3 of Ezekiel, “And he said to me, ‘Son of man [addressing Ezekiel], eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he says to me, ‘Son of man, eat the scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.” So this is the language John draws on in this scenario of him taking the scroll from this mighty angel who holds the open scroll. Much like Ezekiel took an open scroll out of the hand in Ezekiel chapter 2. Then John eats it in apocalyptic fashion modeled after Ezekiel 2 and 3. John eats it and it becomes sweet in his mouth but it becomes bitter in his stomach.

Probably this language of sweetness and bitterness is to be understood in terms of the character of John’s message that is it’s interesting that he begins with bitterness and sour in his stomach. You would think he would go the opposite direction. Starting with its sweet in his mouth but then it’s bitter in his stomach. He begins with the sourness because number one it appears to me that the sweetness and sourness probably symbolize a message of salvation but also the sourness a message of judgment. By putting the sourness first perhaps is a way of emphasizing the message of judgment that now John is to begin to speak. So sweet and bitter are meant to describe probably not the effects of actually eating a scroll, though that certainly would give one a stomach ache, but
symbolically describing the message that John is about to proclaim. It is a message of both salvation but primarily it will be a message of judgment.

Revelation 11 as the Scroll Message

Chapter 10 then this recommissioning scene provides the setting and provides the backdrop for chapter 11. Chapter 11 probably can be seen as the main part of the content of the scroll. There’s a lot of speculation as far as what precise content of the scroll is. If the seals and the trumpets are sort of preliminary judgments. In chapter 10 John is recommissioned to prophesy primarily a message of judgment. Where do we find the contents of that scroll that John gets and that John eats in chapter 10. At the very least it encompasses chapter 11 and some have suggested it may go on all the way through chapter 19 which still is a judgment scene. Others have suggested that it may go all the way through the end of 22. And we’ll return to that a little later but at the very least chapter 11 seems to be at the heart of John’s message or the message of the scroll that John now eats. But at the same time I’m not sure we can limit it just to that. I think you can make a compelling case that maybe the rest of the book all the way to chapter 21 and 22 would comprise the content or the message of the scroll that John eats. It is a message consisting of both judgment but also salvation as well. Now chapter 11 following John’s commission in chapter 10 this is the message or at least the beginning of the message that John is to deliver.

The question that it answers and raises is how is God going to bring about his purposes for establishing his kingdom particularly his purpose that we find in the seals and in the plagues. For example, it is his purpose of judging humanity as a response to the cries of his people. How is it that God will consummate his purposes in the world? Chapter 11 answers that by introducing us to the two faithful witnesses that God has established and appointed to be his witnesses. It’s through his witnesses that God will consummate his purposes for establishing his kingdom. It’s through his witnesses who are rejected and persecuted and even put to death that God is going to bring about his judgment on the entire world which then culminates in the seventh trumpet in chapter 11. So again chapter 11 is playing a crucial role in forming the basis. What role does the
church play in the context of all these judgments? On what basis is God pouring out his judgments? How will that lead to God establishing his kingdom and judging wickedness answering the cry of the saints to avenge them. It’s through the suffering witness of his people who are rejected and treated with hostility and eventually put to death in Revelation chapter 11.

Two Images: Temple and Two Witnesses

Now Revelation chapter 11 introduces us to two images that once again we have to deal with. We’ve seen John do this quite a bit. He introduces us to different images yet sometimes referring to the same thing sometimes referring to other things. But here in chapter 11 we are introduced to two different images. One of them is of a temple that gets measured in chapter 11. It begins by John being given a reed and told to measure a temple. The second image is one of two witnesses starting in verse 3 where God then gives his power and authority to his two witnesses to go out and prophesy. Now one of the questions we need to answer again as we have in many chapters is what are these two images? What are their background and meaning? What might they refer to? Who are the two witnesses? What or who is this temple that gets measured? How do these images relate to each other? What do they signify? How do they relate to what’s going on in this broader section of chapter 10 and chapter 11? But before we go on then let me read the section and I will simply read the section up until verse 14 where starting with 15 we are introduced to the trumpet.

Revelation 11:1-13

I will read that section later but I will stop at verse 13 and we will simply go that far. Chapter 11 verse 1, “I was given a reed like a measuring rode and I was told, ‘Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court, do not measure it, because it has been given over to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for forty-two months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.’” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire will comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how
anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time that they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation, [there’s that fourfold phrase again] will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. But after these three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. At that very hour there was a great earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and they gave glory to the God of heaven.”

Question Prompted on Rev 11:1-13

Now in this section then we are introduced to a description of these two features. John is told to measure a temple and he is given a rod to do so. Intriguingly he only measures part of it. The rest is thrown out to the Gentiles. How do we understand that? How do we understand this period of forty-two months that the part of the temple that is thrown out to the Gentiles would be trampled? And then, who are these two witnesses? How do we understand this period of 1,260 days that they are allowed to prophesy? How are we to understand their ministry of being able to devour enemies with fire that comes out of their mouths and shut the sky so that it doesn’t rain? How are we to understand this beast coming out of the Abyss and putting them to death and lying in the streets so that all the world can see for three and a half days till finally they are raised at the very end of this before the whole world? So there are a number of issues that we need to wrestle with
in figuring out: what is going on in chapter 11 and what is the relationship between these two images and what are they saying about this message that John is about to proclaim?

Preview

So in the next section we’ll take up the question of the identity of these two images and some of the other issues that we need to deal with in trying to make sense of Revelation chapter 11.