

SCENE 3 : Six trumpets are sounded

⁷The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burned up and all green grass was burned up.

⁸The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. ⁹A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Just as the first four seals formed a unit (6:1-8), so do the first four trumpets (see also 16:1-9 for the first four basins). The first announcement concerns the earth. The destruction, here and in the following verses, is not total ('a third', see Ezekiel 5:1-17). Hail recalls the seventh plague of Egypt (Exodus 9:23-26). We find the prophets also using imagery of hail, fire and blood:

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.

– Joel 2:30

With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones fire and sulphur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him.

– Ezekiel 38:22

The second announcement concerns the sea, for Rome was a maritime power. The sea becoming blood recalls the first plague of Egypt (Exodus 7:20).

To understand the third announcement we need to familiarise ourselves with the cosmology of the time according to which the earth and the sea was surrounded by a vast ocean. It was understood that it was the waters of this ocean which fell from above in the form of rain, and welled up from below in rivers and springs. Fresh water, too, is being polluted. Wormwood, a bitter herb, is frequently used in the Bible as a symbol for sorrow.¹ We are reminded of the bitter waters at Marah during the desert wanderings of the Israelites (Exodus 15:23).

The fourth announcement concerns the heavens, thus completing the cosmic extension of John's thought. It also recalls the ninth plague of Egypt.²

¹⁰The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

¹²The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise the night.

The eagle and the three woes

The eagle is flying in the highest part of the heavens. His message is from the transcendent God. Our eyes and ears are completely focused on the eagle and his message. It is a solemn warning to those who give their lives to the imperial cult and all that goes with it. John injects special dramatic tension into the scene, preparing us for the terrible final three announcements.

¹³Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in midheaven, 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow.'

¹ I am feeding this people with wormwood, and giving them poisonous water to drink' (Jeremiah 9:15). See also Jeremiah 23:15.

² Exodus 10:21. Compare also: 'On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight' (Amos 8:9).

¹And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit;

²he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.

³Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions on the earth.

⁴They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

⁵They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone.

⁶And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.⁴

The image of locusts recalls the eighth plague of Egypt.¹ It also picks up the extended metaphor used by Joel who likens the devastation of war to a plague of locusts.² The deadly purpose of the demonic power unleashed in war is symbolised by the scorpion.

The first woe focuses on the horrors of war, depicted here as an expression of the demonic power which opposes God and is determined to bring about the destruction of humanity. It can have power only over ‘those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads’; that is to say, over those who fail to keep God before their eyes and love God with all their minds (see 7:1-8).

The star fallen from heaven to earth symbolises power that should belong to the divine sphere of the heavens, but which has fallen from its place, and now exercises its power in a thwarted, unnatural way. It functions as a symbol of the demonic (see 6:13; 12:4).

The smoke is depicted as arising out of the bottomless pit: the abyss which symbolises the chaos which existed before the organizing, creating action of God.³ It is the source of forces that are against God’s divine order.

¹See Exodus 10:12,15.

²See Joel 1:2 - 2:17.

³Compare Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:28).

⁴See Jeremiah 8:3; Job 3:21.

The seven images of 9:7-9 underline the fact that John is speaking of organised warfare. This horrible, demonic reality claims victory, which is apparent but ultimately unreal: those perpetrating war do not have real crowns on their heads (see 2:10), but only 'what looked like crowns'. Furthermore, the crowns are not gold (see 1:12), but only 'look like gold'. They assume divine claims, thinking they can do what they like to those whom their power overtakes, but they are counterfeit.

War, too, has a 'human face,' for it is people who make the decisions and who carry out the instructions: the demonic power works through human agency.

The warriors are pictured as female: they have 'hair like women's hair'. Woman is a symbol of life-giving, of nurturing and of nature. War perverts all this, turning nature upside down, degrading everything and everyone it touches.

Horrible as war is, it does not have the final say; demonic as it is, it is not outside God's providence, as is indicated by the use of the passive: 'They were given power'(9:3), 'they were told'(9:4); 'they were allowed'(9:5). Their power is further limited to 'five months'(9:5,10); five being the symbolic number for full restitution.¹ The armies are headed by Satan, called here Adaddon² and Apollyon.³

¹The number for full restitution (Exodus 22:1; 1 Samuel 6:4).

²Meaning 'place of destruction'.

³Meaning 'destroyer'. The similarity of words effects an allusion to Apollon.

⁷In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces,

⁸their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's teeth;

⁹they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.

¹⁰They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months.

¹¹They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

¹²The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come.

¹³Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God,

¹⁴saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates’.

¹⁵So the four angels were released who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month and the year, to kill a third of humankind.

¹⁶The number of the troops of cavalry was *twice ten thousand times ten thousand*; I heard their number.

¹⁷And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the colour of fire¹ and of *hyacinth*² and of sulphur; the heads of the horses were like lion’s heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths.

¹⁸By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths.

¹⁹For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm.

The Roman myth was that through military conquest they had established peace (the *pax romana*). John sees this as a lie, and the sixth trumpet reveals the terrible barbarism of the forces unleashed in the east. The author sees these, as he sees the Roman legions, as demonic in origin, part of the chaos that threatens God’s creation. At the same time they do not happen outside God’s providence (note the use of the passive ‘were released’ in verse fifteen; compare 8:2). Since they fall within God’s providence, they cannot ultimately thwart God’s design.

These terrible inflictions are brought about by the sinful arrogance of Rome, and of those who behave like Rome. John is calling the Christians to look squarely at the rotten fruit of those who arrogantly ignore God and to repent while there is still time.

There are four angels, for God’s providence extends to the four points of the compass. The Euphrates is the ideal frontier of the promised land (Deuteronomy 1:7; Joshua 1:4). Once released, the forces of destruction are no respecters of boundaries. The destruction, though cataclysmic (9:16), is limited to a third (9:15; see 8:7-12).

¹Associated with the demonic. For ‘red’, see 6:4.

²hyacinth can be different colours. Here John seems to be attempting to capture the changing colours of smoke billowing from a furnace.

John describes the sins of unrepentant mankind in terms that are traditional. He begins with sins which flow from a refusal to recognise Yahweh, the God of the Exodus, as the true God (9:20). We are reminded of the first two commandments (Exodus 20:1-7), which have many echoes in the prophetic literature. Compare also the following:

You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honoured.

– Daniel 5:23

Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

– Psalm 115:3-8

Failure to worship the true God leads to a breakdown of just human relationships. This is stated by John (9:21) in terms of the fifth to the tenth commandments (Exodus 20:13-17).

Earlier in the Apocalypse, John paused before the breaking of the seventh seal to prepare his audience for the fact that however terrible the revelation coming with the breaking of the seventh seal, the victory of those faithful to Christ was assured (7:1-17). A similar effect is achieved by the interruption of the following passage. The essential revelation of the sixth trumpet has been announced, but John wants to reassure his audience before they hear the final announcement of the risen Christ concerning God's judgment of mankind.

²⁰The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk.

²¹And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

INTERLUDE : Martyrdom and the reward of Christian leaders

**¹And I saw another angel,
mighty, coming down from
heaven, wrapped in a cloud,
with a rainbow over his head;
his face was like the sun, and
his legs like pillars of fire.**

**²He had a little scroll open in
his hand.**

**Setting his right foot on the
sea, and his left foot on the
land,**

**³he gave a great shout, like
a lion roaring. And when he
shouted, the seven thunders
sounded.**

**⁴And when the seven thunders
had sounded, I was about to
write, but I heard a voice from
heaven saying, 'Seal up what
the seven thunders have said,
and do not write it down'.**

**⁵Then the angel whom I saw
standing on the sea and the
land raised his right hand to
heaven**

**⁶and swore by him who lives
forever and ever, who created
heaven and what is in it, the
earth and what is in it, and the
sea and what is in it:**

'time should be no more,

**⁷but in the days when the sev-
enth angel is to blow his trum-
pet, the mystery of God will be
fulfilled, as he announced to
his servants the prophets'.¹**

The angel has seven characteristics, identifying it as a herald from the exalted Christ. It is described as mighty, so we can expect its message to be important (compare 5:2). It is described as coming down from heaven, thus linking history with the transcendent (compare 3:12). It is wrapped in a cloud, and so belongs to the divine in such a way as to be mysterious and beyond full human comprehension (compare 1:7). It is covered by a rainbow, reminding us of an earlier description of God (4:5).²

The face of the angel is described as being like the sun, recalling the image of Apocalypse 1:16 and indicating a participation in the radiant glory of Christ. The pillars of fire recall the presence of God among his people during the nights of their wandering in the desert (Exodus 13:21).

The small scroll represents the last piece of revelation that now remains to be given.

By setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, the angel demonstrates his dominion over the whole of the created universe (compare 1:15). The great shout demonstrates the power of what he is revealing (compare 1:10). The comparison with a lion is traditional.³ The seven thunders bespeak fullness (see 1:4), but also the ultimately mysterious nature of the revelation (see 4:5). It is beyond human comprehension and so remains, to that extent, sealed.

What will be revealed is the mystery of God, for it concerns God's design, and the revelation will be in symbols, for it can be interpreted only with the aid of divine wisdom (compare 1:20).

¹See Jeremiah 7:25; 25:4; Amos 3:7; Zechariah 1:6; Daniel 9:6.

²See also the covenant with Noah, Genesis 9:12-17.

³See Hosea 11:10; Amos 1:2; 3:8; Jeremiah 25:30.

The scroll is already opened (10:2,8), for the seventh seal has already been broken (8:1). The final meaning of history is to be announced only when the seventh trumpet sounds.¹ This is imminent but it cannot happen till the prophet, John, has heard this final revelation and absorbed it properly (10:9).² It is good news, tasting as sweet as honey; but it involves all the pain that goes with being a faithful disciple of him who was crucified.

The reference to kings (compare 1:5) highlights the importance of the following message for those exercising power in the world without due dependence on God's will.

¹compare: 'He raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven. And I heard him swear by him who lives forever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished. I heard but could not understand; so I said, "My lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?" He said, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end".' (Daniel 12:7-9)

²'He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you, and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey' (Ezekiel 3:1-3) 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth' (Psalm 119:103).

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, 'Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land'.

⁹So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, 'Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth'.

¹⁰So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter.

¹¹Then they said to me, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.'

¹Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, 'Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,

²but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months.

³And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth.¹

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

⁵And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner.

The contents of the final revelation prior to the announcement of the seventh trumpet concerns two witnesses (Greek: *martys*, whence English 'martyr'), who are spoken of as olive trees and lampstands. The allusion is to the prophecy of Zechariah who writes of:

A lampstand all of gold ... and by it there are two olive trees ... These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.

– Zechariah 4:2,3,14

The reference in Zechariah is to Joshua the highpriest in the period immediately after the Babylonian exile, and Zerubbabel, prince of the house of Judah, who was appointed governor of Judah by the king of Persia.

John speaks of two witnesses, so he is referring neither to one historical individual, nor to the whole Christian community in any particular church. It seems that he is focusing attention on the leaders of the local community who stand before God and have a special function of leadership in the public worship of the assembly. Were the author writing to Rome, his words would apply very fittingly to Peter and Paul, and their successors. He seems to intend that each local church community fill in the names for itself from its local experience.

The scene opens with a measuring rod.² Whatever is announced by the imminent seventh trumpet, no harm will come to the Christian community gathered in prayer. It is intimately known to God and is under his personal protection.

The holy city symbolises the people of God in the period before the end; namely, those who are in love with Christ and are awaiting the wedding feast. They will be subjected to persecution, but for a limited period.

Forty-two months and one-thousand-two-hundred-sixty days equal three-and-a-half years. The number three-and-a-half is, like all the numbers in the Apocalypse, symbolic. It is half seven and represents a period of trial that is limited in time and in its effects. Persecution, however successful, is unable to put a stop to the divine communion of the faithful expressed in their cult.

¹ Compare Isaiah 20:2; Jonah 3:6,8.

² Compare Ezekiel 40; 43:13; 48:30; Zechariah 2:5.

All throughout this time of persecution God will ensure that there will be leaders in the church who are able, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to reveal his word. They will exercise the prophetic power of Elijah,¹ being to the enemies of God like a devouring fire.² They will also have the power that Moses and Aaron exercised against the pharaoh.³

However, in this time before the end, as the local churches of Asia knew from their own experience, the churches and their leaders are vulnerable to persecution: the prophets are still being murdered. The power that attempts to destroy the church is likened to a beast. It is irrational and incomprehensible. The imagery is from Daniel⁴ and will be used in greater detail by John in the coming chapters. The power of the beasts is demonic: they come from the bottomless pit (see 9:1).

The great city is Babylon. Here, under the enlightenment of the Spirit, it is referred to as Sodom, because of the corruption associated with it; as Egypt, because of the oppression and slavery for which it is responsible; and as Jerusalem, 'where their Lord was crucified', because the persecution carried out against the Christian community repeats what was done to Jesus himself in Jerusalem. Babylon is a symbol for Rome and for any city that does not act in accordance with God's will.

The three-and-a-half days during which evil appears to have triumphed bring delight to the persecutors. They are at last free from the criticism of the prophets who opposed them in God's name.

⁶They have authority to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

⁷When they will have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them,

⁸and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is called *under the influence of the Spirit* Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

⁹For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations they gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb;

¹⁰and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

¹ 2 Kings 1:10,12; also 1 Kings 17:1 re shutting the sky.

² Compare: 'I am now making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them' (Jeremiah 5:14).

³ See Exodus 7:17,19-20 concerning the first plague of Egypt: turning water to blood.

⁴ Four great beasts came up out of the sea ... made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them' (Daniel 7:3,21).

¹¹But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified.

¹²Then 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 watched them.

¹³And at that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

¹⁴The second woe had passed;. The third woe is coming very soon.

But the delight is short-lived, for the period of death is followed by the resurrection (compare Ezekiel 37:10). The persecutors are filled with dread at the action of God.

This is the climax of the revelation contained in the small scroll. The first six trumpets, as we have seen, call for repentance. They appeal to fear, for they describe the terrible destruction that is being perpetrated by the Roman system which some Christians are being tempted to embrace.

The small scroll appeals to hope by holding up before the community the goal of their Christian life. Even if it leads to martyrdom, they, like Jesus, will be taken up by God into glory,¹ where they will stand victorious (compare 5:6) and bring about God's reign.

The effect of this revelation on earth is described in terms of an earthquake (compare 6:12). It is to be noted that only one-tenth fall; nine-tenths of those dwelling on the earth are moved to accept the opportunity

¹'When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight'(Acts 1:9).