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Revelation Text: Chapter 8-9 (Seven Trumpets)

Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting			8:2-6						
Scene 1									
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7			11:15-18						

Where are we in the book? Maybe you guessed it. Chapter 8:2-6 marks the setting, the introduction to the third series of seven scenes, each linked with the blowing of a trumpet. Notice that 8:1 is not part of this section; it concludes the previous one. The seven trumpets won't be completed until 11:15-18 because they are interrupted by a long interlude in chapters 10 and 11, which will be the topic of a separate recording.

At the altar of incense
(8:2-6)



In the introduction to this sequence, everything is focused on the altar of incense. In the earthly temple or tabernacle, this altar had its place inside, in the sanctuary or the holy place. In other words, we are still in the heavenly temple. The incense offered on this altar is closely associated with the prayers of the saints. In fact, in 5:8 we were told that the golden bowls full of incense ARE the prayers of the saints. It shows us the importance of prayer. This is what sets the next series into motion. It is yet another exodus element in this book. In Exodus 3:7, God comes down to deliver the people of Israel because he has heard their cries. Here, it is the prayers of the saints.

Carolus (2007), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karmel-Gent-Sacrament.JPG>, CC BY-SA 3.0

Prayer



When the censer filled with fire from the altar is thrown on the earth, there follow lightning and thunder and noise and earthquake. This reminds us of God's appearance on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. They are the signs of his presence. Interestingly, God's arrival on Sinai was also announced with trumpets.

Seven trumpets will now be blown.

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Judgement
War
Warning
Gathering
Victory

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Why trumpets? In the OT, trumpets have a number of very different connotations. They have to do with judgement and war. They are used to warn or to sound the alarm. According to Numbers 10, a trumpet was used to gather God's people together. Trumpets are also associated with the idea of victory. Interestingly, when the people of Israel marched around the city of Jericho for seven days, there were accompanied by seven priests, each blowing a horn or trumpet (Joshua 6:6-8). In their case, this led to the collapse of Jericho and its takeover by the people of Israel; with the blowing of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11, as we will see, God's takeover of the kingdoms of this world is completed.

What fits best in this context, is the idea of warning, war, and judgement. The events connected with the seven trumpets are partial judgements or disasters. In most cases, only a part of something is hit or destroyed. This still leaves room for repentance.

Amada44 (2010), Yamaha Trumpet, B flat on white background,
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One trumpet, one event?



Wolfgang Sauber, 2014, CC BY-SA 4.0

At this point, we face the same question we had for the seals. Does each trumpet represent one unique event? This is how futurism understands the trumpets: a distinct series of end-time disasters, unimaginable horrors that are still in our future. No wonder some people are afraid of this book.

But what if the trumpets are to convey a more general message – a message not to the church, but to the pharaohs of this world?

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As the plagues progress, it becomes increasingly hard to take them literally in any sense. The purpose of the seven trumpets and their plagues is not to give information and to predict the future. Remember the power question. The point made with the seven trumpets is that God has unlimited resources at his disposal. His power is overwhelmingly superior. If he says: let my people go, no earthly pharaoh can hold them back.

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1. Hail: vegetation (8:7)



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It is important to notice how these plagues parallel some of the 10 plagues in Egypt. Again, what we are dealing with is an exodus, but this time it is an exodus of global proportions.

The first plague is hail, which we know from the 10 plagues, but this one also comes with fire and blood. It partly burns up the vegetation of the earth.

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2. Mountain: sea (8:8f)



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The second plague is a burning mountain, which does not have a parallel in the book of Exodus, and it hits the sea. Part of it is turned into blood, which we do know from the 10 plagues.

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3. Star: sweet water (8:10f)



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The third plague is a star falling from heaven. Its name is wormwood, a very bitter-tasting herb. This plague hits the sweet water, poisoning a third of the drinking water. These plagues are increasingly getting more grotesque and harder to take literally. A burning mountain falling from the sky? Is that a meteor? A star falling from heaven on the rivers? All of them? How are we to imagine that?

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Chernobyl



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On the other hand ... It is sometimes pointed out that the meaning of Chernobyl is wormwood. In 1986, the worst nuclear disaster ever took place in one of its nuclear reactors. It did indeed poison a large area. It also contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union shortly after, which had been an oppressive empire persecuting Christians.

This is not to say that the book of Revelation predicted Chernobyl. But it does illustrate the kind of things that can take place and bring down empires and kingdoms of this world.

Adam Jones (2016), Diorama of Damaged Reactor - National Chernobyl Museum - Podil District - Kiev – Ukraine,
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- 1 Vegetation
- 2 Sea
- 3 Sweet water
4. Sun, moon, stars (8:12)



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After earth, sea, and sweet water, the heavenly bodies are hit. Notice that the first four plagues deal with the natural or physical world; this will change with the next trumpet. A third of the sun, moon, and stars is struck. At this point, it becomes completely impossible to take this literally. If a third of the sun is hit, one would expect the light to be diminished throughout the day. Instead, one-third of the day is darkened and two-thirds remain as before. Literally and physically, this does not make sense; as an apocalyptic warning, it does.

Revelation 8:13 interrupts the flow: an eagle issues a threefold warning, referring to the remaining three trumpets.

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5. Smoke (9:1f)



And indeed, things get worse and even more fantastic. With trumpet five in 9:1, again a star falls to the earth. To him is giving the key to the bottomless pit. When he opens it, smoke comes out, and with the smoke a swarm of locusts.

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Locusts (9:3ff)



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Locusts were one of the 10 plagues in Egypt. They also appear in the book of Joel, where a locust plague comes as a judgement on Judah. As a natural phenomenon, a locust plague is frightening. A swarm can consist of billions of locusts and it can literally darken the sky. In a matter of minutes, the harvest of a whole year can be destroyed.

The locust plague in Revelation is far more terrible than this. These are demonic locusts (after all, they come from the bottomless pit). They are not interested in crops and grass. Instead, they torture those who have not been sealed with the seal of God. Unbelievers are open to direct demonic oppression.

Again there is a clear note of control: limitations are imposed on them. They are allowed to do this for five months. The significance or meaning of this period is not clear, but it does put a limit on their activity.

In addition, the implication is that heaven is not initiating or executing this plague. This is done by demonic powers. Heaven merely allows them, up to a point, to do what they want to do. This is true for a number of these plagues. They are not necessarily “acts of God”. When a star falls from heaven (elsewhere a symbol for an

angel, whether good or bad) or when angels are released (as with the next trumpet), it is not God but Satan and his minions who work destruction. And in other cases, it is not made clear who is the initiator or the causing agent of a plague. It may well be humans themselves.

Laika ac (2016), Locust Swarm,
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Abaddon = Destruction
(Hebrew)

Apollyon = Destroyer
(Greek)

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In 9:11, we learn who the leader of these locusts is: “the angel of the bottomless pit.” His name is given both in Hebrew and Greek. The two names are similar in meaning. Abaddon means destruction and Apollyon means destroyer. It is tempting to understand this as names of Satan, who is, after all, a murderer and destroyer. However, this is not made explicit in the text.

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Some futurists who are into highly speculative interpretation have recognized in these locusts and the horses of the next plague tools of modern warfare: helicopters and tanks equipped with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. But this makes havoc of the text – and is far from literal interpretation. We are not dealing with normal, human warfare. We are dealing with demonic plagues that are released upon the earth.

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“For the hour, the day, the month, and the year” (9:15)



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Trumpet six is even worse. This is to be expected: number six stands for the end and the final confrontation (even though, in keeping with the nature of this section, it takes the form of a partial judgement as well; one-third of humankind is killed). In 9:14, four angels are released at the Euphrates. They had been kept there “for the hour, the day, the month, and the year” (9:15). This shows us again how things are firmly under heaven’s control.

What appears is an army on horseback of unimaginable size:

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$$2 \times 10,000 \times 10,000 = ?$$

(9:16)

$2 \times 10,000 \times 10,000$. Taken literally, this makes 200 million. Even today, all the armies of the world taken together don't reach this number. And this was a time when the world population was much smaller than it is today.

An army of this size is logistically impossible. It cannot be coordinated and it cannot be supplied with what it needs.

The fact that the entire army is cavalry and that they come from beyond the Euphrates reminds us of the Parthians, the archenemies of the Romans.



But this is not a human army. These are not human invaders. These are the Parthians from hell.

All of this makes the point that God has unlimited resources and infinite power at his disposal. The aim is not to instil fear, at least not in those who belong to his church, but to show that God is able to fulfil his purpose, which is the full liberation and salvation of his people.

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This is not working!
(9:20f)



But at this point, the vision runs into a problem. This is not working. Judgement does not lead people to repentance.

The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols ..." (9:20, ESV)



"The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols ..." (9:20, ESV).

So how is God's purpose of a redeemed multitude from all nations, a multitude so large that no one can count it, to become a reality? More judgement is not an option. If these plagues don't do it, none will. It needs a different solution.

For this reason, there is a time-out, beginning with chapter 10. If God's true purpose, not judgement but redemption, is to come about, something else, something new is needed.

The seventh trumpet will have to wait. (...)



The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. (Rev. 11:15, ESV)

Except that... for the sake of convenience, I will jump ahead and discuss the seventh trumpet here. When that trumpet is blown, we are told: “The kingdom of the world has become [perfect tense] the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” (Rev. 11:15)

Mission accomplished. At this point in the vision, the kingdom and the rule of God on earth have been fully established. His will is now done on earth as it is in heaven.

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We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. (Rev. 11:17, ESV)

This leads to another round of worship, with a noteworthy deletion. There is some difference between different Bible translations. Is there a twofold or threefold phrase (as elsewhere)? Manuscript evidence is more in line with the twofold phrase as the original reading here; plus: no one would have deleted this, but someone may have considered its absence a mistake and ‘corrected’ it.

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.” (Rev. 11:17)

God still is the one who is and who was; he is no longer the one who is to come, for a simple reason: he has come. To stay with us forever.

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Revelation Text: Chapter 8-9 (Seven Trumpets)

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