

# HEBREW VISIONS OF REVELATION



Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg & Pinchas Shir

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& Pinchas Shir

JEWISH STUDIES FOR CHRISTIANS

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## Dedication

*“An excellent and formidable wife,  
who can find her? Her worth is far  
above jewels...” (Prov 31:10)*

We dedicate this book to our wives  
who love us sacrificially. May the  
joy and happiness you bring us be  
returned to you tenfold!

*“...of whom the world was not  
worthy...” (Heb 11:38)*

We also dedicate this book to all  
those of whom the world was not  
worthy. May you receive your just  
reward!

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## Introduction

Revelation is a first-century inspirational Jewish text that opposes the paganism and oppressive tyranny of the first-century Roman government. The document is packed with visions, symbols, and rich cultural imagery that presents Jesus as the ultimate Sovereign of God's worldwide kingdom. Although Revelation was written in a particular place and time for particular groups of people undergoing particular trials, its message is a powerful encouragement for God's people throughout all generations and all places.

There is a great quote that we think, to a large degree, encapsulates our own thoughts on various interpretive approaches to the Book of Revelation. Alex Davis brilliantly wrote:

John's Apocalypse (in)famously **defies interpretation**. Of course, all complex writings do so to some degree. In most cases, the interpretive difficulty seems more like a bug in the nature of

language than a feature of the work itself. But Revelation is different; more often than not, **it seems divinely inspired to resist any hermeneutical stabilization.** For nearly two thousand years, earnest and brilliant scholars have tried to demonstrate otherwise, arguing for some new structural, literary, or historical key that would be able to tame the book at last. **Ironically, their efforts as yet have best succeeded in furnishing evidence for the case they hoped to disprove: the Apocalypse, like some spooky quantum particle, defies our cleverest categories.** That it does so produces more than hermeneutical frustration; it also poses a theological question that, until recently, has been hard to hear. In short, **what might be the theological significance of an inherently, even flamboyantly, decentered text?**<sup>1</sup>

In our first book, *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*, we introduced readers to the way we read and understand John's Revelation through the peculiar insights we see in Revelation 1-5. In this second book, we turn our attention primarily to the visions of Revelation, Chapters 6-14.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Davis, "Story Without End: Perspective, Form, and Interpretation in John's Apocalypse," *Religion & Literature* 48 (2016): 71-90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26571242>.



We are convinced that modern readers must approach Revelation in its original Jewish setting—without ignoring its secondary Greco-Roman social background. Rather than conforming the Apocalypse to our contemporary cultural context, we should first seek to understand this inspirational text in light of its ancient historical context, mixed audience, and Jewish apocalyptic spirituality. As such, our approach is deeply cultural, and it assumes that though the earliest Revelation manuscripts are all in Greek, there is a natural Semitic style of communication throughout the entire book of Revelation.

Only after Revelation is understood from its own first-century perspective, its message should be applied to the lives of later generations of the faithful. And we invite you, our readers, to travel alongside us and participate as one of those faithful to whom this message is addressed today. We wrote this book with you in mind. Come.

Pinchas Shir &  
Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg

## The Seven Seals

*Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, “Come.” (Rev 6:1)<sup>2</sup>*

The message Revelation was either authored during or in anticipation of persecution of especially non-Jewish followers of Messiah (Christ) in the Roman Empire. The message of the entire book, among other things, sought to provide true encouragement for the believers who were suffering for their faith and would soon suffer even more. This passage is incredibly important for this to be accomplished. John describes seeing four horses (as we will see shortly, each one symbolizes some kind of coming devastation— conquest, sword, famine, and death).

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, we quoted from the New American Standard Bible translation of the Bible with minor authorial modifications. We feel that NASB offers a good literal reading of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, which is often helpful in the kind of analysis that we engage in.

While it's important to see what each horse symbolizes, especially in its connections with the prophetic material of the Hebrew Bible, by far the most important thing in this passage is the word "Come!" uttered by the four living beings.

While horrible things will soon come to test all believers, none of them would happen without God's knowledge and command. In other words, as we will see each time a horse leaves its abode, about to wreak havoc on the earth, it is God's angels (four living beings) that give them the command to commence their mission. The "four horsemen of the apocalypse" do not do this by themselves. They are under God's complete authority. But this is not surprising.

When we refer to the literary background of this text found in the Hebrew Bible, we discover that the four horses and their riders are also committed servants of God. They are not evil beings or demons unleashed by God to torture humanity, but in fact, are "spirits of heaven" (רְחוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם; *ruchot hashamaim*), angels of God's heavenly patrol. In Zechariah, we read about a similar heavenly patrol also on four horses:

...the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, as follows: I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which

were in the ravine, with red, sorrel and white horses behind him. Then I said, ‘My lord, what are these?’ And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, ‘I will show you what these are.’ And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, ‘These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.’ So they answered the angel of the Lord who was standing among the myrtle trees and said, ‘We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet.’ (Zech 1:7-11)

Now I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, four chariots were coming forth from between the two mountains, and the mountains were bronze mountains. With the first chariot were red horses, with the second chariot black horses, with the third chariot white horses, and with the fourth chariot strong dappled horses. Then I spoke and said to the angel who was speaking with me, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel replied to me, ‘These are the four spirits of heaven, going forth after standing before the LORD of all the earth...’ (Zech 6:1-5)

Hopefully, you see how knowing the words of Zechariah helps us to interpret what is truly

happening in Revelation. The writer draws on culturally familiar imagery, and these riders indeed serve God.

***I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. (Rev 6:2)***

As the four seals are opened, we are told about each horse. At the opening of the first seal, the white horse was commanded to come forth. The rider of this horse brings judgment by conquest. This is symbolized by a bow, which was one of the main symbols of ancient warfare. He was given a crown that symbolized successful rule and dominion over those he conquered. In the years past, God brought Israel to repentance more than once by sending foreign conquerors. Now, the conquerors themselves will also be overcome by war.

***When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him. (Rev 6:3-4)***

As the second seal was broken, a rider on the red horse came forth. The authority that God gave this rider was to bring a cessation of peace to the earth, causing a war between its residents between one neighbor and another. This is not a war with foreign

incursion but a civil war, infighting among families, close friends, and natural allies. This horse, therefore, symbolizes judgment by the sword. The cessation of peace is portrayed as a universal phenomenon and is probably a conscious reference to a reversal of the *Pax Romana* established under Augustus.

When the seventh seal is opened in Revelation 8:1, the result seems anti-climactic, with silence for half an hour. Yet the silence had a purpose. A stillness before calamity. It, therefore, appears that the seven seals, which are now opened, are but a forerunner of the plagues that are heralded by the sounding of the heavenly trumpet (Rev 8:2-11:18).

***When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come." I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine." (Rev 6:5-6)***

As Jesus opened the third seal, John reported that he saw a black horse come forth as commanded. The rider of this horse held measuring scales used for wheat and barley sales in his hand. The judgment brought on the earth by this rider was the judgment of famine. The shortage of food disrupts everything and creates havoc in society. John further reported

that he heard a voice coming from the four living creatures that spoke of particularly high market prices for wheat and barley and fear that the supply of oil and wine would be damaged.

This sudden exclamation seems to come from God. Based on some calculations, we are talking about the price for wheat and barley that was eight times higher than the average price in the Roman Empire at that time. The normal cost for a *choenix* (quart) of wheat was about one-eighth of a Greek denarius, while barley was twice as cheap (2 Kings 7:1, 16; Polybius 2.15.1). The message is unambiguous. Families would be able to survive, but they would only be able to afford the bare minimum necessary for survival (Herodotus 7.187; Cicero, *In Verrem* 3.81).

Yet what we read about here is not the sharpest price hike known in history. The prices mentioned in Xenophon's *Anabasis* 1.5.5-6 are 50 times the normal rates. Hence, we should draw a conclusion. This would be a bad time, but not as terrible as humans have endured before. No money will be left for other staples, such as wine and oil, just enough for bread. That would be difficult but possible to live without in the context of ancient society.

During the war, the conquering armies did not always destroy gardens (olive groves and grapevines) because often, the conquered people would pay tribute to the food they produced. But when the goal of a military campaign was to wreak

absolute havoc and devastation as an intentional punishment, significantly reducing the possibility of sustained existence, the sources of food were destroyed as well. According to Josephus, Titus, for example, destroyed agricultural complexes around Jerusalem in 66-70 C.E. as a form of punishment.<sup>3</sup>

The measure of a quart of wheat and three quarts of barley seem to correspond to the daily needs of a man and a horse.<sup>4</sup> This, of course, makes sense because the statement is issued directly to the horse and rider. A variety of Jewish traditions speak of significant inflation and price increases connected with the arrival of the Messiah. For example, wine will be available, but it will be costly before Messiah comes (Babylonian Talmud, *Sota* 49b). The final wicked generation before the coming of the Messiah will produce no oil or wine (Jubilees 23:18).

***When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come.” I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth. (Rev 6:7-8)***

When the pale (ashen) horse was released for its mission, John clearly saw its rider’s name – death

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus, Wars 6.7.

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus, 7.187, Polybius, 6.39.13



(incidentally, this is the only rider that had a name). John further reported that Hades was following him. Given his description, it is unclear what John actually saw. Some further background may be necessary to unravel what is written here.

Behind the Greek Θάνατος (*thanatos*) translated as “death,” and ᾗδης (*hades*), sometimes unfortunately translated as “Hell,” are Hebrew words מַוֶּת (mavet) and לְאוֹשׁ (sheol). These are key concepts to know in both Greek and Hebrew. In Hosea 13:14, we read: “Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?” It is not unusual to fuse Death and Sheol together and speak of them in almost synonymous terms. *Mot* and *Sheol* are occasionally mentioned and personified together (Is 28:15, 18; Hab 2:5, Ps 18:5-6, 49:14, 116:3).

But what is Sheol (לְאוֹשׁ, *sheol*) in the Hebrew Bible? Simply put, it is a place of darkness where all the dead go and wait until the time of final judgment and redemption. It is often translated simply as a “grave” When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the word Hades (ᾗδης, *hades*), the “underworld” in Greek, was used by Jewish sages to translate the Hebrew idea of Sheol (לְאוֹשׁ, *sheol*). Therefore, the *Hades* (ᾗδης, *hades*) idea is often idiomatic, closely connected with the idea of dying and death itself (Is 28:15, 18; Ps 18:5; 49:14; 116:3).

In the Torah, when Jacob thinks that his beloved Joseph died, he exclaims, “I shall go down to Sheol (שְׂאוֹל, *sheol*) to my son” (Gen 37:35). But even between death and resurrection, the dead in *Sheol* are not without God's presence, “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there” (Psalm 139:8). Therefore, it is clear that *Sheol* (שְׂאוֹל) is a temporary realm, a holding place in which the dead await the day of judgment and resurrection.

As explained before, Sheol (*Hades*) and Hell (*Gehinnom*) should not be conflated together. When Jesus describes “Hell” in Mark 9:48 as a place “where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,” he quotes from Isaiah's vision. Isaiah 66:22-24 describes future creation, “... new heavens and the new earth, which I make, will endure before me,” declares YHVH... All mankind will come to bow down before me; they will go out and look at the corpses of the people who have rebelled against me. For their worm will not die, and their fire will not be extinguished, and they will be an “abhorrence” (*de'raon*, דֵּרְאוֹן) to all flesh.” This “abhorrence” of the wicked is something that happens after judgment and after the resurrection of all who awaited that day in Sheol. The final destination requires a verdict, and Sheol delivers the dead for such a moment.

Daniel 12:2 also spoke of this moment in human existence, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life,

but the others to disgrace and everlasting “contempt” (*deraon*, דְּרַאֵן).” This is the everlasting contempt that people refer to as “Hell” in English, which is different from Sheol, in which both the wicked and the righteous dead all end up. Hell (*Gehinmom*) is a post-judgment place.

So, this “death” Θάνατος (*thanatos*) rider was given authority over a quarter of the earth to destroy life by 1) sword, 2) famine, 3) pestilence, and 4) wild beasts. This verse (vs. 8) is highly significant to see the big picture since it strongly connects the text of Revelation with the words of Ezekiel.

We must keep in mind that the anti-idolatry theme, which is prevalent in the early chapters of Revelation, will continue to resurface and will be developed throughout the rest of the entire book. Even here, in chapters 6 and 7, they deal with the opening of the seven seals. Compromising with paganism was always a powerful temptation in the ancient world. And Israel has struggled with this for many years. We read God’s warnings to Jerusalem about succumbing to the idolatry of the nations around her in Ezekiel:

For thus says the LORD God, “How much more when I send My four severe judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts and plague to cut off man and beast from it! Yet, behold, survivors will be left in it who will be brought out, both sons and daughters.

Behold, they are going to come forth to you and you will see their conduct and actions; then you will be comforted for the calamity which I have brought against Jerusalem for everything which I have brought upon it. Then they will comfort you when you see their conduct and actions, for you will know that I have not done in vain whatever I did to it,” declares the LORD God. (Ezek 14:21-23)

We can clearly see that “How much more when I send My four severe judgments against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts and plague to cut off man and beast from it” is an almost verbatim quotation in Revelation 6:8b. Authority over a fourth of the earth was given to this rider, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.) As this four-fold broad judgment fell on the nations, it affected both the faithful and the unfaithful among them.

We keep stressing that the keys to the solid interpretation of Revelation are often found amidst the Israelite cultural and spiritual context. In Ezekiel, God sends four harsh judgments ( אַרְבַּעַת שְׁפָטֵי הַרְעִים, *arbaat shaftai haraim*). The first is *herev* (חֶרֶב) “sword,” a common idiom for war. Second – *ra’av* (רָעַב) “famine” suffering felt at every level of society. Third - *chaya ra’a* (חַיָּה רָעָה) “wicked beast / animal” - attacks by wild animals. The fourth is *dever* (דֶּבַר) - “a plague,” which can

mean a broad array of weather phenomena, sickness, and death. The four horses and their riders in Revelation are almost identical, only now it's not Jerusalem being judged but all the nations.

As we highlighted in *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*, idolatry was the main problem among all of the seven assemblies mentioned in John's message. Therefore, the emphasis on the seven seals of judgment is highly relevant to the charges of idolatrous worship and fits extremely well with the rest of the book. While this particular part of Revelation is probably based on Ezekiel, both books actually also draw from the Torah, from Leviticus, where harsh national disciplinary penalties for idolatry are explicitly stated (notice especially vs. 30). We read in Leviticus:

If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins... If then, you act with hostility against Me and are unwilling to obey Me, I will increase the plague on you seven times according to your sins. I will let loose among you the beasts of the field, which will bereave you of your children and destroy your cattle and reduce your number so that your roads lie deserted. And if by these things you are not turned to Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with hostility against you; and I, even I, will strike

you seven times for your sins. I will also bring upon you a sword which will execute vengeance for the covenant; and when you gather together into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, so that you shall be delivered into enemy hands... ‘Yet if in spite of this you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you, and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins... I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols, for My soul shall abhor you.’ (Lev 26:18-30)

The sin of idolatry elicits the harshest punishments because it undermines the very core of what is true. It warps reality and robs God of the glory that is due to him. The seven-fold punishment is clearly warranted in Revelation, and as the message unfolds, the charge of idolatry becomes clearer and clearer.

***When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O LORD, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:9-10)***

Not all seals had to do with a judgment that would fall on the righteous and unrighteous alike. The fourth seal was clearly meant as a judgment only against the wicked to avenge the blood and suffering of the righteous. John saw people under the altar of God waiting for justice – these are the people who were persecuted for their trust and absolute allegiance to the only living and true God. Their persecution and suffering is no doubt tied to their refusal to worship idols. What is not at all surprising is that they were demanding vengeance and justice from the holy and just God.

We see a similar anticipation and demand for justice in Psalm 58. There are other imprecatory or “judgment-demanding” psalms such as 5, 10, 17, 35, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, 140), but this one sets the stage effectively.

O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; Break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD. Let them flow away like water that runs off; When he aims his arrows, let them be as headless shafts. Let them be as a snail which melts away as it goes along, Like the miscarriages of a woman which never see the sun... The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; He will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. And men will say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely

there is a God who judges on earth!”  
(Ps 58:6-11)

Notice how this Psalm connects vengeance upon the wicked with testimony for the bystanders of the world. If the blood of the righteous is avenged, they will no doubt say – there is a God who judges the earth, and there is a reward for being righteous. It is important to see the demand for punishment of the wicked does not arise from a desire for personal revenge. Rather, the calls for justice are to protect God’s own reputation among the people who witnessed the injustices. In 1 Enoch, we see what seems to be a common theme in Jewish martyrological material – the divine avenging of the blood of the righteous:

And I saw the spirits of the sons of men who were dead; and their voices reached to heaven, while they were accusing. Then I inquired of Raphael, an angel who was with me, and said, whose spirit is that the voice of which reaches to heaven, and accuses? He answered, saying, this is the spirit of Abel who was slain by Cain his brother; and who will accuse that brother, until his seed be destroyed from the face of the earth; Until his seed perish from the seed of the human race.” (1 Enoch 22:5-8)



The same thoughts of martyrdom developed into the idea of a collective voice, beseeching God for justice. This is very similar to what we encounter in the book of Revelation. Let's look into another relevant passage from the Book of 1 Enoch:

And in those days shall have ascended the prayer of the righteous, and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the LORD of Spirits. In those days the holy ones who dwell above in the heavens Shall unite with one voice and supplicate and pray and praise, and give thanks and bless the name of the LORD of Spirits On behalf of the blood of the righteous which has been shed, and that the prayer of the righteous may not be in vain before the LORD of Spirits, that judgment may be done unto them, and that they may not have to suffer forever. In those days I saw the Head of Days when He seated himself upon the throne of His glory, And the books of the living were opened before Him: and all His host which is in heaven above and His counselors stood before Him, and the hearts of the holy were filled with joy; because the number of the righteous had been offered, and the prayer of the righteous had been heard, and the blood of the righteous been required before the LORD of Spirits.” (1 Enoch 47:1-4)

Whether in Revelation or in 1 Enoch, written three centuries prior to John's Apocalypse, the idea of martyrs who stood up and maintained the oneness of God among the idols and lost their lives, is tied to the notion of God's character and reputation. This principle of justice has been in play since the days of Cain and Abel.

***And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also. (Rev 6:11)***

Just like the twenty-four elders, "...upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments" (Rev 4:4), so are those who have been martyred because of God's word and their testimony. They also have the right to wear white garments. In Revelation 7:9, we read that John beheld "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes." White robes are a cultural image signifying purity, fidelity, and righteousness.

These righteous souls will continue crying out to God for justice. Later in Revelation 12:11, we read of the "saints" (קְדוֹשִׁים, *kedoshim*) overcoming the evil one through "the blood of the Lamb and

because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.” The reason for not avenging their blood right away is probably the same reason why God did not avenge the blood of his prophets long ago.

For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.’” (Lk 11:49-51)

We see that collective punishment for the sins of many generations is sometimes poured out upon one generation chosen for such a punishment. While we may be tempted to see this as unfair, the ancients probably saw it in terms of God’s long-suffering and withholding his anger, delaying justice on purpose. Sins go unpunished because God’s mercy and patience are great. But there is a limit to everything – certainly, God’s patience and judgment are necessary for God to be who he is.

One excellent example of such justice is presented in Genesis 15:16, where God explains to Abraham why he cannot yet take possession of the Promised

Land. This was because the “iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” God’s long-suffering should never be confused with his inability to render a fitting, in this case, a harsh, judgment. This is not a sign of weakness but strength. When Joshua finally brought the Israelites into the land 400 years later, God commanded him to wipe out everything, leaving nothing breathing, nothing alive. Seems extreme? Judgment took a very long time to come, hundreds and hundreds of years of second chances, but when it came, it was devastating.

Speaking in the name of “Isaiah” in the Ascension of Isaiah, the author reports that in the seventh heaven, where the throne of God is, there is a storehouse of all righteous people from the time of Adam. In *Sepher ha-Razim* 7:1-3, we read this most interesting idea:

“The seventh firmament, all of it is seven-fold light, and from its light, all the seven heavens shine. Within it is the throne of glory, set on the four glorious chayot (living beings). Also within it are the storehouse of lives, and the storehouse of souls.” (Ascension of Isaiah 9:7)

In a Jewish prayer for vengeance for murder, found on tombstones from Delos in Greece, dating to 1 BCE, we read something that fits well with our text:

I call upon and pray the Most High God, the LORD of the spirits and of all flesh, against those who with guile murdered or poisoned the wretched, untimely lost Heraclea, shedding her innocent blood wickedly: that it may so with them that murdered or poisoned her, and with their children: O LORD that sees all things, and ye angels of God, Thou before whom every soul is afflicted this same day with supplication: That Thou may avenge the innocent blood and require it again right speedily!<sup>5</sup>

Given the anti-pagan sentiment of the book of Revelation and its affiliation of Rome with Babylon, this parallel from Sibylline Oracles should also be considered as a fitting background:

For a heavenly eternal destruction will come upon you, O Babylon, One day, from above ... you will be filled with blood, as you yourself formerly poured out the blood of good men and righteous men, whose blood even now cries out to high heaven.” (Sibylline Oracles 3:307-313)

The idea of blood vengeance is prevalent in all Near Eastern societies. But for the Jews of the Second

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<sup>5</sup> Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum: 1181

Temple era, this was not revenge; this was (צדק, *tzedeq*) justice, equity, and righteousness restored.

***I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. (Rev 6:12-14)***

The judgment brought about by this last horse and its rider amounts to a complete dissolution of the cosmos. This description uses normal vocabulary and concepts taken from Israel's prophets. There are many relevant background passages (Is 13:10-13; 24:1-6; 19-23, 34:4; Ezek 32:6-8; Joel 3:15-16, Hab.3:6-11) but consider these two examples:

And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine, or as one withers from the fig tree.”

(Isaiah 34:4) "The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (Joel 2:31)

In the Testament of Moses, we have another apocalyptic reading that adds to the scenario:

Then shall the Heavenly One arise from the seat of His kingdom, and come forth from His holy habitation, with wrath and indignation for His children's sake. And the earth shall tremble, and quake to its utmost borders; and the lofty mountains shall be humbled and shaken, and the valleys shall sink. The sun shall give no light, and shall turn into darkness; the horns of the moon shall be broken, and she shall be turned into blood, and the circle of the stars shall be confounded. The sea shall retreat to the abyss, the springs of water shall fail, and the rivers shall be dried up; because the Most High, the Eternal, the only God, shall arise and come manifestly to chastise the nations and to destroy their idols. (Testament of Moses 159-160).

Here, we have a remarkable similarity that casts aside all doubt concerning the lack of literary dependence. John, as the human author of the book of Revelation, interacted with the Torah and the prophetic material both consciously and subconsciously. The things he saw he described in the way his mind had perceived, absorbed, and memorized the Holy Scriptures of ancient Israel. And it seems his language is similar not only to the Holy Books but to diverse Jewish sources from his era. Whether or not this is meant to be literal or

figurative is impossible to determine. The message of the prophecy and the vision is true; however, whether or not its actual fulfillment is literal is not clear.

***Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev 8:15-17)***

People sometimes erroneously say that the God of the Hebrew Bible and the God of the New Testament are very different since the New Testament portrays God as far more gracious, merciful, and long-suffering, while in the "Old Testament," the emphasis is on judgment, retribution, and law. Nothing can be further from the truth. Such sentiment is completely inaccurate on many levels.

The entire book of Revelation is a case in point when it comes to the New Testament writings. In this section, we encounter a scene of the ultimate judgment, the cosmic collapse, and the disintegration of all things as part of the disciplinary action of both God and the Lamb.



Fleeing from the presence of the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb, whose wrath has been fully and rightfully kindled, is present only here and in Rev. 20. This will indeed be a dreadful day when not only the poor, who generally are in need of protection and help, but also the mighty of this world find themselves in a situation where they need to run and hide, and they cannot find proper refuge. Their request is issued to the mountains to cover them with falling rocks. This is a terrible thing to request, but their suffering and fear pale in comparison to the dread they now feel before the LORD and the Lamb.

## REQUEST

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**In His Grace,**

**Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg**

# **One Hundred Forty-Four Thousand**

Revelation contains several chapters that are notoriously complex, and Chapter 7 is certainly among them. It begins with a reference to the 144,000 sons of Israel (Rev 7:4-8) and then transitions to speak of countless numbers of believers from all nations of the world (Rev 7:9-17). The 144,000 are evenly divided between 12 tribes, with 12,000 men in each. As with many other censuses in Israel, this numbering was done to size up Israel's army. As our study progresses, we will see what kind of army they constitute and what kinds of battle they engage in, but more about this later.

## **The Tribes and Their Names**

The short introduction that sets the stage for the 144,000 depicts four powerful, heavenly beings who are about to relent from holding back the

destructive forces of nature. As they do, another powerful angel appears and instructs the four (in whom the power to destroy the earth resides) that they must continue to guard the earth until all the servants of God are marked with a special seal (Rev 7:2-3). This instruction to hold back the winds will be reversed in Rev 9:13-15 when the time is right.

In the next verse (Rev 7:4), John hears an announcement declaring that the 144,000 have received their seals.<sup>6</sup> However, before discussing the interpretive options for identifying the 144,000, we must attend to the list of tribes in Revelation.

***And I heard the number of those who were sealed:144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, and from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. (Rev 7:4-8)***

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<sup>6</sup> In Exodus 28:11, the names of the tribes are engraved on the breastplate of the High Priest. In Hebrew tradition, those names are called (פְּתוּחֵי הַחֹטֶם; *pituchei chotam*)—a term that can be translated as “seals.”

John does not see the members of these tribes; he “hears” them (Rev 7:4), presumably being announced by an angel or some other heavenly voice. After the tribal numbers are called, John will “look” to see a multitude of people from all nations that no one can count (Rev 7:9). This description of John’s audial and ocular experiences is crucial for understanding the relationship between the 144,000 of Israel and the great crowd of multinational worshipers of Israel’s God: John hears the first group (Rev 7:4-8) but sees the second (Rev 7:9-17). Readers encountered this same dynamic when John was told about the victorious Lion:

One of the elders said to me, ‘Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome... to open the scroll and its seven seals.’ (Rev 5:5)

But what John saw when he turned to look was something drastically different from what he expected: Between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders, a Lamb standing as if slaughtered. (Rev 5:6) In other words, the Lion and the Lamb were one and the same person: Jesus the Messiah.

To Eli, this vision in Revelation 5 supports the notion that the audible description of the 144,000 and the vision of the multi-national crowd refer to one and the same thing. In other words, both are pictures of the very same reality. In other words, the

144,000 represent the entire multinational coalition of worshipers of Israel's God from all nations of the earth. There is no doubt that physical Israel plays a leading role in this coalition, but its identification with the multinational crowd should not be denied (Rev 7:4-8; Rev 7:9-17). For Pinchas, however, the 144,000 are the representatives from the twelve tribes alone. The second vision, which he understands as a multinational crowd, speaks of a much larger group, which includes 144,000 (as a subset) but is not necessarily identical to it. We obviously disagree here, but these are nuances of perception, and sometimes, presenting variant perspectives will make this book a richer study for us all.

Perhaps the basis behind this question of identification or at least connection is the place or standing of the God-fearing nations in the Jewish Christ. This is a critically important relationship to keep in mind throughout the reading of Revelation. The nations intersect with the redemptive figure that comes from the domain of Israel. And their encounter is grace, an unmerited favor.

Perhaps it bears reiterating this important point here. Jesus is *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ, *yeshua*), a first-century shortened version of the name Joshua or *Yehoshua* (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ). That is Jesus' most-probable, actual name, a name by which he was known to his parents, friends, and to his followers. The name Jesus is an anglicized form of the Greek translation Ἰησοῦς (*Iesus*) that does not have a native meaning in

Greek. The Hebrew name *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ, *yeshua*), however, comes from the verb “to save” (לְהוֹשִׁיעַ, *lehoshiah*).

Christ is another thoroughly Jewish idea of someone “anointed” or literally “smeared in oil” – *Mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ), a leader who was called and set apart for a special mission. Calling someone “anointed” would not make any sense in the Hellenistic culture. For Jews and those who were close to them this word recalls that prophets, priests, and kings were anointed for the task of leading God’s people. That is what this term communicates.

In the first century CE, even the Greek term Christ (χριστός) “anointed” was not very intelligible outside of the Jewish spiritual context and would have been mixed up as simply a personal name. Messiah is a promise made to Israel, and the blessings of that promise overflow unto the nations.

Returning to the topic of Israel’s tribes and the multinational multitude of worshippers, Jeremiah prophesied that Israel’s God would make a new covenant with the house of Judah and the house of Israel (Jer 31:31-33). It was certainly with them and not with the nations of the world that the covenant was to be made. Yet prophets like Isaiah spoke about a future in which the nations will come to Israel and worship Israel’s God together with the people of Israel (Isa 2:2-4). A critical detail is that the nations do not worship on their own, but join Israel in worship without becoming Israel or

replacing Israel. Revelation merely reflects such prophetic hope. According to the apostolic vision, these nations could be now told, “But now in Christ Jesus, you who previously were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Eph 2:12-13) The nations can have a bright future with the God of Israel, but for now, let us turn to the topic of the twelve tribes of Israel for a closer look at what’s happening in Revelation 7.

### **Difference in the Tribal Lists**

Across the Scriptures of Israel, there are 24 different listings of the twelve tribes (cf. Gen 29–30, 35; 35:22-26; 46:8-27; 49:1-27; Ex 1:1-5; Num 1:5-15; 1:20-54; 2:3-29; 7:1-88; 10:11-28; 13:4-15; 26:5-50; 34:19-28; Dt 27:12-13; 33:1-29; Josh 13-19; 21:4-8; Judg 5:12-18; 1 Chron 2:1-2; 2–7; 12:24-38; 27:16-22; Ezek 48:1-29; 48:30-34). Some of these are very brief lists, while others are spread out over lengthier passages that discuss the distribution of the land, representatives of each tribe, or encampment arrangements. Each tribal list of the tribes is slightly different, usually diverging in the order of the tribes or in certain names that are included or omitted. Few of the texts have more than 12 tribes, while others (as in Revelation) omit and reshuffle the tribes for their own unique purposes. Here are the tribes in Revelation and the original list according to birth order in Genesis:

Judah (Revelation) / Reuben (Genesis)  
Reuben (Revelation) / Simeon (Genesis)



Gad (Revelation) / Levi (Genesis)  
Asher (Revelation) / Judah (Genesis)  
Naphtali (Revelation) / Dan (Genesis)  
Manasseh (Revelation) / Naphtali (Genesis)  
Simeon (Revelation) / Gad (Genesis)  
Levi (Revelation) / Asher (Genesis)  
Issachar (Revelation) / Issachar (Genesis)  
Zebulon (Revelation) / Zebulon (Genesis)  
Joseph (Revelation) / Joseph (Genesis)  
Benjamin (Revelation) / Benjamin (Genesis)

Clearly, the order and contents of the lists are not at all the same. We realize that some of our readers may not see the purpose of Israelite tribal identities in the future. Yet, God consistently frames his relationship with mankind in the context of family, in Revelation 21, we encounter the tribes, which are families:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... and names were written on the gates, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. (Rev 21:10-12)

The fact that the twelve tribes continue to play an important role in God's redemptive story from Genesis to Revelation is very significant. With the inauguration of the New Covenant in Jesus-related events, the existence and distinction of the tribes is not eliminated but upheld.

So why are some tribes omitted? Perhaps the most telling conclusion one reaches after surveying all these lists is that there was not a standardized method for counting, naming, prioritizing, or excluding members of the twelve tribes. The author of Revelation also names, reorganizes, and excludes members of the twelve tribes in his own way. To understand the possible reasons for Revelation's presentation, let us briefly review some basic facts.

There were four women in Jacob's life: two wives and two female servants. They gave birth to Jacob's 12 sons in the following chronology:

**LEAH (First wife):** Reuben (רְאוּבֵן), Simeon (שִׁמְעוֹן), Levi (לֵוִי) and Judah (יְהוּדָה)

**BILHAH (Rachel's servant):** Dan (דָּן) and Naphtali (נַפְתָּלִי)

**ZILPAH (Leah's servant):** Gad (גָּד) and Asher (אָשֶׁר)

**LEAH (First wife):** Issachar (יִשָּׂשכָר) and Zebulun (זְבֻלֹן)

**RACHEL (Second wife):** Joseph (יוֹסֵף) and Benjamin (בְּנִימִן)

In Revelation, there are two texts in which the 144,000 connected to the tribes appear (Rev 7 and Rev 14). In Revelation 7, the tribes of Dan and

Ephraim are omitted from the list. In leaving out certain tribes, the writer of Revelation follows biblical precedent. For example, Levi is omitted from seven such lists in Israel's Scriptures. Simeon, Zebulun, and Asher are all omitted once.<sup>7</sup>

One reason that Revelation might have excluded Dan is that a similar exclusion occurs at the end of the Jewish biblical canon. 1 Chron 4:1–7:40 (which, along with its counterpart 2 Chronicles, appears at the end of the Bible in the Jewish canonical order), omits Dan from a lengthy and detailed list. It could be that Revelation takes its cue from the final document in the Jewish Bible.

Coincidentally, the entire tribe of Dan is often seen in a negative light. There is a curious text that is often interpreted negatively to reinforce the connection of this image with the tribe. In Jacob's final blessing of his sons before his death, he compares Dan to a “serpent” (שָׁחָשׁ; *nachash*) (Gen 49:16-18). Since “serpents” have a sketchy history in Genesis (e.g., the garden snake of Gen 3), Bible readers might interpret this analogy as a malediction rather than a benediction.

Not all snakes are evil, however. Remember how in Exodus, Moses' staff turned into a serpent to convince Pharaoh to listen to Moses, who was obedient to the will of God? Israelites were healed

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<sup>7</sup> The tribes are sometimes called (מַטּוֹת, *matot*) or more commonly (שֵׁבִטִים, *shevatim*) in Hebrew. A שֵׁבֶט (*shevet*) means “scepter,” a visual sign of tribal authority.

from a plague by looking at a serpent set up on a pole in the wilderness (Num 21:9). As you can probably guess, it does not take much effort to read Dan's blessing in a positive light either. If we avoid an automatic, negative bias against all snakes (after all, there are a number of positive aspects to these creatures), then suddenly, Jacob's blessing could sound affirming:

Dan shall judge His people, as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned viper in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that its rider falls backward. For Your salvation, I wait, LORD. (Gen 49:16-18)

The comparison of Dan with a “snake” (נָחָשׁ; *nachash*) is probably a reference to Dan's military strength, an illustration that he is able to stand up even to the armed cavalry, the tanks of the ancient times. While there is a shared reference with Gen 3:15b (...He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.) to biting of the heel, we must be careful not to assume that Gen 49:16-18 uses it in the same negative way as does Gen 3:15b. In short, comparison of Dan to a snake in this text (rider falls backward) may speak of his abilities and strength, necessary for a judge.

If we read Jacob's words positively, noting the closing reference to “salvation” (יְשׁוּעָה; *yeshuah*) in 49:18, it will suddenly make sense. The Hebrew

name “Dan” (דָּן) means “judge,” so there is an intentional wordplay in this passage because Jacob says he “Dan (judge) will judge” (דָּן דָּן; *dan yadin*) the other tribes. Judges, before kings, were responsible for implementing the righteous rule of God over Israel. Rashi (one of the most influential medieval rabbis) connects Jacob’s prophetic words to the victories of Samson, the mighty judge of Israel who was a descendant of Dan. In a way, Sampson, as a judge, brought “salvation” (יְשׁוּעָה; *yeshuah*) to his people in violent and chaotic times.

As we can see, there is no inherent evil connected to Dan. Setting aside the circular argument (proposed by many modern Bible teachers) that the reason Dan is excluded is that the antichrist will come from the tribe of Dan, let us consider several other good reasons why Dan is not mentioned among the tribe in Revelation.<sup>8</sup>

First, the tribe is mentioned in connection with the idolatry of northern Israel (Jud 18:30; 1 Kgs 7:29; Amos 8:14). What is perhaps most significant is that in the divided kingdom, the people of Dan were part of the northern kingdom of Israel (the rebellion incidentally was led by the tribe of Ephraim, another name missing in Revelation, though still represented by Ephraim’s father, Joseph). King

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<sup>8</sup> The *Testament of Twelve Patriarchs* is a Jewish text from the first or second century BCE that presents itself as if written by the 12 heads of Israel’s tribes. The author of that text believed that Dan was the one who advised the brothers to deceive their father by saying that they had found the coat of Joseph dipped in blood (Zebulun 4, Dan 1, and Gad 1).

Jeroboam established two alternative Israelite worship centers, one in Bethel and one in Dan (1 Kgs 12:25-33).

Worship at Dan centered on a golden calf, which became one of Dan's lasting legacies. For example, the prophet Jeremiah declares:

Wash your heart from evil, Jerusalem,  
so that you may be saved... For a voice  
declares from Dan and proclaims  
wickedness from Mount Ephraim. (Jer  
4:14-15)

The most likely reason, therefore, for Dan's non-inclusion in Revelation is the tribe's embrace of idolatry. This is an especially strong argument since the condemnation of idol worship features throughout Revelation alongside severe criticism of Jesus' assemblies, for example, in Rev 2:14. You can explore this argument in depth in *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*, a prequel to this book.

By the time of Solomon, the tribe of Dan seems to have assimilated with the neighboring Phoenicians (see 2 Chron 2:14), hereby losing their national identity. This, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt since 1 & 2 Chronicles is a work of a Judean public relations within wider Israel. A telling example of this pro-Judah campaign is the purposeful omission of any critical accounts of King David and his missteps (unlike in the earlier telling of David's story in Samuel and Kings). The

message of the Chronicles is that King David was a perfect leader for Israel; the tribe of Judah was now in charge.

An important detail to keep in mind is that two somewhat different ideas about the remnants of the Northern Kingdom exist in the Bible. For example, Ezekiel (followed by the Gospels of Luke and John) represents one strain of Jewish tradition, where the messianic reunification of the North and South (Samaritan Israelites and Judean Israelites) is very much expected and welcome. While Chronicles—as Matthew and Revelation—represent another view in which no such reunification is needed or welcome. If these differing views pique your interest, make sure to read *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, King of All Israel*, where this divide is considered.

But what about Revelation's omission of Ephraim and its replacement with Joseph (Ephraim and Menasseh were Joseph's sons)? As was mentioned above, there is nothing wrong with this omission in principle. Other tribal lists in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament do the same. What is different in Revelation is that Joseph was never listed together with only one of his two sons. Either the sons replaced/represented Joseph or Joseph replaced/represented them—but never quite the way Revelation presents these figures (Joseph is mentioned as a tribe together with only one of his sons, Manasseh).

One possible explanation could be that the tribe of Ephraim was instrumental in leading Israel into idol worship. In fact, it was Ephraim who led the rest of the tribes to break away and form the Northern Kingdom of Israel (with its capital in Dan) and establish its idolatrous worship practices.

Ezekiel 37, following the vision of dry bones, expects the reunion of Israel and Judah (the Northern and Southern kingdoms). Note that Israel is represented by Ephraim (and Joseph seems to be used interchangeably with Ephraim):

The word of YHVH (יהוה) came again to me, saying, “Now you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.’ Then put them together for yourself one to another into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. (Ezek 37:15-17)

Given Revelation’s pro-Judean position (see Rev 5:5), it is hardly surprising that suspicion surrounds the tribe of Ephraim, which was instrumental in the rebellion against the Judah-led United Kingdom of Israel. Moreover, Judges 17-21 presents two stories of Israel’s apostasy, both revolving around the tribes of Dan and Ephraim and the city of Bethlehem, the city of David.



The author of Judges highlights that these events took place before Israel had a king. The tribe of Dan rejected the land assigned to them by God, deeming it unfit, and instead ventured to Ephraim, where they stole idols from a household and convinced a Levite to serve in a false temple in the new land (see Jud 17:1-18:31). Thus, Dan became the first tribe in Israel to adopt idol worship.

Simultaneously, the tribe of Ephraim, the source of the idols, seized control of the territory initially designated for Dan, and aided the Danites in introducing idolatry to the land of Israel. These transgressions may have provided a legitimate cause to exclude Dan from the duty of preparing Israel and the world for the Messiah's return.

These biblical precedents, along with Revelation's strong rejection of idolatry, provide logical reasons for the omission of Ephraim and its replacement with Joseph, according to the Apocalypse. Add to this that Judah and Joseph receive the most important blessings from Jacob in Genesis (Gen 49:8-12, 22-26), and Revelation's rationale is strengthened.

### **The Mark of the Beast**

The 144,000 of Israel also appear in Revelation 14, in which John's vision is succeeded by another that is crucial to the narrative, namely the vision of the second beast who, causes all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, and the free and the

slaves, to be given a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads. (Rev 14:16)

The Jewish custom of tying God's word to the hand and forehead already existed at the time that Revelation was written. Christians may find it odd, but most Jews in both ancient history and today understood the commandment about God's word being tied on their hands and between their eyes quite literally. Besides the spiritual intent, God's words visibly mark those who are chosen and seek to be faithful to him. As we read,

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. (Dt 6:6-9)

In Jewish tradition, tiny scrolls inscribed with these commandments are placed into two small boxes called *Tefillin* (תְּפִלִּין). Pious men (and today, in some communities, women) wear *Tefillin* boxes during morning prayer, although there is no prohibition of doing it later in the day. The name of the object itself derives from the Hebrew word for "prayer" (*tefillah*, תְּפִלָּה). The custom of physically wearing God's words during prayer is quite simple but exceptionally symbolic. It's a sign of allegiance.

As we mentioned earlier, the marking by Revelation's second beast of people's hands and foreheads is best understood within this original Jewish cultural context. We will see through many other examples (just like in this one) that in Revelation, evil will seek to parody and to counterfeit the good almost routinely. This time, the beast will seek to counterfeit God's commandment of *Tefillin* with his own mark, demanding that it instead will have to be placed on the forehead and the hand.

Now that we come to Revelation 14, our knowledge of *Tefillin* as a cultural and spiritual symbol will bring further clarity:

***Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000 who had His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. (Rev 14:1)***

Mount Zion (הַר צִיּוֹן; *har tzion*) in Hebrew most likely means "the mountain [*of God's*] marking." The term צִיּוֹן (*tzion*) is best understood as the place where God dwells and where his will becomes a reality through the rule of his king. For example, in Isaiah, we read, "Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of armies, who dwells on Mount Zion." (Isa 8:18) It was also the place from which David was installed as king. According to Ps 2:6, God declares, "I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain." (Ps 2:6)

Note that in Revelation 14, the two names, the names of the Lamb and his Father, were written on the foreheads of the 144,000. An interesting custom connected to special names is described in the War Scroll found at Qumran. According to the text, the names of the tribes of Israel in birth order, the names of Levi, Aaron, and Messiah himself, were all written on the Prince's shield.

And upon the shield of the Prince of the whole congregation, they shall write his name [and] the name of Israel and Levi and Aaron and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, according to their births, and the names of the twelve commanders of their tribes. (Qumran War Scroll, 1Q33 5:1-2)

The War Scroll is called by this name because it describes the end-time conflict with the most colorful commentary. But here in Revelation, it's not the twelve names; the symbolism of two names, the Lamb and his father, is particularly significant.

We have just mentioned the custom of *Tefillin* worn during prayer to declare one's allegiance. According to ancient tradition, the box of the *Tefillin* that is placed on the head is adorned with God's name in abbreviated form, the Hebrew letter *Shin* (ש). It stands for *El Shaddai* (God the Provider or possibly God Almighty). In fact, there is not one, but two *Shin* letters that decorate the larger box.

And they are not identical! One *Shin* is deliberately altered, instead of the customary three prongs (upward strokes of the letter), it has four.

Why? There is no single or simple answer about the altered *Shin*. The custom is shrouded in mystery. But You can guess what we are going to suggest. We are offering a guess here based on material Jewish culture, but the parallel and symbolism of both names being represented on the foreheads of the 144,000 is truly beautiful and vivid.

At moments like these, we plainly see Revelation's high Christology that is so evident in the Gospel of John, which is attributed, at least traditionally, to the same author as that of the Book of Revelation.

The Lamb's location (on Zion) shows that he is connected to the Davidic throne. King Jesus, the one who brings salvation, stands with people who are fully dedicated to him and to his Father. They stand with him in the very spot of God's marking (Zion), ready to fight because the humble Lamb they serve is also a powerful King, the Lion from the tribe of Judah.

### **The New Song of the 144,000**

Then John hears the voice from heaven, loud thunder, and the playing of a harp all at once (Rev 14:2). What an incredible collection of sounds!

***And they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. (Rev 14:3)***

There is something particularly special about this song since only the marked 144,000 can learn and sing its words (Rev 14:3). Likewise, God will give a “new name” to the persecuted believers in Revelation 2:17:

To the one who overcomes... I will give him a white stone and a new name written on the stone, which no one knows except the one who receives it.  
(Rev 2:17)

The point here is that this song can only be sung by those who experience redemption shaped by the Jewish Messiah, whose leadership requires a renunciation of the worldly culture and provokes a considerable level of persecution. That is the cost of faithfulness.

***These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgin/ celibate/ pure. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. (Rev 14:4a)***

These 144,000 males are described, depending on various translations, as either celibates, virgins, or pure (παρθένοι; *parthenoi*). In certain Christian

traditions, human sexuality was seen as something unclean and sexual desire as something shameful. Much of Jewish tradition, however, has a positive view of human sexuality. Sexual relations and procreation are considered a sacred and holy duty, a divine command. Abstaining from proper sexual engagement is rarely understood as a measure of holiness or required virtue in Judaism. There are occasional ascetic notions, but these are generally exceptions to the rule. In Jewish culture, a great number of children is seen as a sign of divine blessings, something God has promised to the patriarchs.

Thus, the meaning of this qualification of celibacy, virginity, or purity of the 144,000 is not something morally superior. Yes, sexual activity in Jewish law is temporarily defiling (disqualifying from entering God's presence for a time), but it is not sinful in any way. Just like other defilements are not in any way sinful (take, for example, a menstrual period (Lev 15:19) or various infections described in Leviticus 13. Defilement is not exactly the same as sin. It's a part of life. Thus, the idea that sexual intercourse is sinful must be set aside. The 144 thousand chaste young men need to be understood within the framework of Jewish purity.

Recently, some have made claims that the original Hebrew text of Revelation has been found. The supposition is that the seventeenth-century CE Hebrew manuscript of Revelation held at Cambridge archives represents the original Hebrew

texts of the Book of Revelation.<sup>9</sup> For a variety of reasons, we are in agreement with the majority of the scholarly community that this particular manuscript is not an original but a good Christian translation from Greek into Hebrew. Even a surface look at the text reveals that the translator(s) think as Christians and not as typical first-century Jews. In other words, their Hebrew is good, but their Judaism is not.

A good example is this passage about 144 thousand and how Revelation 14:4 is rendered in Hebrew. The Greek text says, “they did not defile themselves with women.” The Cambridge Hebrew manuscript says, “they did not sin with women.” Whoever scribed this text in Hebrew was clearly not aware that within the first-century Jewish understanding of purity, any defilement with women was not considered a sin.<sup>10</sup> Intercourse is merely a temporary disqualification from the sacred duties. Because non-Jewish Christians never actually adhered to the laws of purity, for them, sin is sin. Defilement or impurity are not technical terms but simply broad and general synonyms for sin. Thus, in translating Greek into Hebrew, they unknowingly transferred their unique Christian understanding into the Hebrew text. There are other indications

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<sup>9</sup> The text is known as *Ele HaSodot* or Ms. 00.1.16.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek verb μολύνω (*moluno*) found in the Greek of Revelation 14:4 means to defile, pollute or make abominable, is an equivalent *hanupah* (הַנִּיפָה) of the priests described in Jer 23:5 or *toevah* (תוֹעֵבָה) in Jer 44:4 even a Niphal form the verb *ga'al* (גָּאֵל) as it is used in Is 59:3 and Zeph 3:1. But this sort of marring impurity is not exactly the same as sin in Hebrew.



why the Cambridge manuscript of Revelation is not an original text but a translation, but we will leave it at that.

Having said that, we actually believe that translation of ancient texts from Greek into Hebrew can be a fruitful hermeneutical exercise, and it indeed uncovers a great number of insights based on the Judaic thinking and linguistic analysis behind the Judeo-Greek texts of the New Testament. In fact, we practice this method ourselves in our commentary. We would be thrilled if a true original ancient Hebrew text of Revelation was ever found. Perhaps at some point in the future, a collection of documents will be found, something like the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which will dramatically change our understanding of the Hebrew text of Revelation. But pending such a discovery, we still think that Revelation was authored in Koine Judeo-Greek (the same kind of Greek that was used to translate Septuagint). It was written by a Jew, deeply steeped in his Hebrew culture and Judaism but most likely in Greek. This, at least to our minds, sufficiently explains the Hebraic and Judaic context of Revelation. The above-mentioned Cambridge manuscript, as a translation, simply does not rise to the level of an original text.

Let us return to the vision of multitudes. It seems that the basic idea here is that 144,000 of God's warriors are fully committed to God and, therefore, to the task that he sets before them. Whether they

should be thought of as virgins or as sexually pure men, they are constantly available for worship and spiritual warfare, never having been disqualified from worship, even temporarily. Even though it was not sinful, they have never been with a woman and therefore represent a soldier who is always ready to worship and serve.

There is a very interesting reference that may be important in this discussion that is found in the story describing Israelites standing before the LORD at Mount Sinai. We read in Exodus:

And Moses went up to God, and YHVH (יהוה) called to him from the mountain, saying... if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples... So Moses came and called the elders of the people... Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" ... Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also trust in you forever." ... The Lord also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their garments; and have them ready for the third day, for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all

the people... So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. He also said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman. (Ex 19:3-15)

What is clear from the text is that the visitation of YHVH to the people required special preparation on their part. This preparation had to do with purity laws (garments washed and sexual relations avoided). While impurity is not the same as sin, it is certainly undesirable, and when it comes to proximity to holy God is problematic.

***These have been purchased from mankind as the first fruits to God and to the Lamb. (Rev 14:4)***

The 144,000 are specifically called “redeemed” or “purchased” (ἡγορασμένοι; *hegorasmenoi*).<sup>11</sup> God commands Israel to redeem their firstborn males, whether sons or animals, with a special price (Ex 13:12-15; Num 18:15-16). Even today, many Jews who are ‘non-Levites’ pay a redemption price to someone in a priestly family for their sons. Numbers 3:12-13 says that the firstborn literally belongs to the LORD (יהוה) and needs to be “redeemed” with a price. The Hebrew term פְּדִיּוֹן (*pidyon*) that is used in this context, literally means “ransom.” The custom is called “redemption of the son” (פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֵּן; *pidyon haben*). In the text above (Rev 14:4), it appears that the 144,000 sons of Israel

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<sup>11</sup> The Greek verb ἀγοράζω (*agorazo*) means “to buy”.

were purchased out to be used for God's and Lamb's service in precisely this kind of cultural context.

The sole focus of these 144,000 is serving the Lord. Their attention is not divided. They were "purchased from mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb." (14:4). The idea of the first harvest (רֵאשִׁית; *reshit*) or first fruits (הַבְּכֻרִים; *habukkurim*) was an ancient Israelite agrarian concept. We see it already in Ex 23:19:

You shall bring **the choice first fruits** of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. (Ex 23:19)

In Lev 23:10, sons of Israel were to be taught something similar:

When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, **then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits** of your harvest to the priest. (Lev 23:10)

In the poetic language of John's Apocalypse, these 144 thousand are the first fruits.

***And no lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (Rev 14:5)***

The absolute commitment to truth characterizes each member of the 144,000. Why did the author choose to highlight this aspect of their character and

not some other trait like bravery, commitment to prayer, worship, or some other spiritual aspect? This is so because honesty often functions in the Hebrew Bible as a litmus test of the entire character. It is possible that the author of Revelation recalls the words of one of the prophets.

But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths... The King of Israel, ADONAI (יהוה), is in your midst; You will no longer fear disaster. (Zeph 3:12-15)

This text describes the faithful remnant of Israel. The remnant will display real faith and trust in ADONAI (יהוה). Its trust and commitment will be seen in its utter dedication to the truth. The people of Jerusalem (daughter of Zion) can rejoice because of the victory that the LORD and his faithful remnant army just had. The victory of the LORD and his army is decisive, and its territorial success is final. Notice how Zephaniah describes them –

The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. (Zeph 3:13)

This faithful remnant of 144,000 of Israel's holy warriors (be it symbolic or literal) is linked to the ultimate remnant of Israel that we read about in Isaiah 53. There, the Messiah, the Servant of God, is portrayed as the ultimate remnant of Israel – the perfect, holy warrior of Israel, the remnant of one. God's Servant dies in Isaiah 53, but with his death, he takes away the sins of many and successfully intercedes for those in need of God's forgiveness. Once he offers his powerful sacrifice, he sees the light of life again. Notice how Isaiah speaks of his character and how similarly Zephaniah describes the character of the faithful remnant, and how John portrays the character of the 144,000 – “Nor was there any deceit in His mouth” (Isa 53:9).

The question of the relationship between the vision of 144,000 virgins of Israel and the innumerable multinational gathering of people worshipping Israel's God that follows is not settled among scholars. There are various legitimate opinions, but what is 100% clear is that the Jewish character of these verses in Revelation can no longer be doubted. Revelation is indeed a Jewish, anti-Roman document that prophesies the ultimate victory of Israel's God and His people over any empire (whether the Roman Empire or all other past and future governments) that sets itself against Israel's God and His people.

## REQUEST

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**Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg**

## **The Seven Trumpets**

Throughout Revelation, John presents many sets of sevens. There are seven angels, seven assemblies, seven seals, and seven trumpets. This number carries a deep spiritual significance in this book. According to Revelation 8, when the first seal of the heavenly scroll was opened, a white horse with a rider and bow appeared, and he was given a crown to conquer. The second seal showed a red horse with a rider and a great sword, causing people to turn against one another. The third seal revealed a black horse with a rider holding scales, offering wheat and barley at high prices. The fourth seal showed a pale horse, and its rider was named Death, followed by Hades.

The fifth seal revealed people being killed for their faith, crying out for God's judgment. The sixth seal brought further judgment, including earthquakes and darkness. The people of Earth were terrified at the wrath of Israel's God. Thus, the Lamb, who is also a Lion from the Tribe of Judah, continued to



open seals one after another until it was time for the last and final seventh seal to be removed.

***When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. (Rev 8:1-2)***

The reason for this prolonged silence in heaven is most likely an occasion for reflection that was forced upon inhabitants of the heavens after the six previous seals were opened. The ‘shock and awe’ campaign against the nations who rebelled against the LORD was so breathtaking that complete silence for a prolonged period, at least in heaven, was an appropriate response. This seal that produced silence is also likely connected to the judgment of God against Jericho in the days of Joshua, which also involved the blasting of trumpets and periods of silence, but more about this later.

When this silence in Revelation was over, the seven heavenly angels who acted as priests were ready to blow their seven trumpets (ἑπτὰ σάλπιγγες; *epta salpinges*). A trumpet (σάλπιγξ; *salpigs* / Hebrew: שׁוֹפָר; *shofar*) is a wind instrument meant to awaken and or warn, to sound an alarm or to announce. We have already met these mysterious heavenly figures and realized their importance as those who sent the letter of Revelation to God’s people in Asia Minor (Rev1:4).<sup>12</sup> It would make sense if seven trumpets

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<sup>12</sup> The Seven spirits are most likely seven angels mentioned by name

were sounded by seven angels. According to Jewish tradition, there are seven archangels who are special servants of God; they are princes of angels who supervise myriads of other angels, all with special tasks assigned to them.

Rabbi Ishmael said: The angel Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence, the glory of highest heaven, said to me: There are seven great, beautiful, wonderful, and honored princes (angels) who are in charge of the seven heavens. They are, Micha'el, Gabri'el, Satki'el, Sahaki'el, Baradi'el, Baraqi'el, and Sidri'el. Each of them is a prince over a heavenly host, and every one of them is attended by 496,000 myriads of ministering angels... Under them is Galgalli'el, the prince, who is in charge of the orb of the sun, and with him are 96 angels... Under them is Opanni'el, the prince, who is in charge of the globe of the moon, and with him are 88 angels... Under them is Rahaṭi'el, the prince, who is in charge of the constellations, and with him are 72 angels... For the Holy One, blessed be he, made for them all, for the sun, the moon, and the constellations, a tent to move in by night from the west to the east. Under them is Kokabi'el, the

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in 1 Enoch 20:1-7.

prince, who is in charge of all the stars,  
and with him are 365,000 myriads of  
ministering angels... Above them are 72  
princes of kingdoms in height,  
corresponding to the 72 nations in the  
world. (3 Enoch 17:1-7)

The breaking of the seventh seal announced the time of conclusion and culmination of God's judgments. If the opening of the six seals were so terrifying, what would the final opened seal be, if not the very climax of the LORD's judgment on the wicked? Hence, silence, shock, awe, and, yes - anticipation.

There are several convincing reasons to conclude that the story of the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6 stands behind these verses about the seven trumpets. There, we read about the sounding of trumpets or, more precisely, *shofars* (שׁוֹפָרוֹת) for holy war. In Joshua, seven priests blew seven trumpets outside of Jericho; in Revelation, the trumpets are blown by seven angels who appear to be priestly figures (Rev 15:6). Most interestingly, in the Jericho texts (Josh 6:10-20), there was silence just prior to the blasts as well. It was directly linked to the final and climactic trumpet judgment, the fall of Jericho.<sup>13</sup>

***Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer, and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all***

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<sup>13</sup> G. K. Beale and David Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 172.

***the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense ascended from the angel's hand with the prayers of the saints before God. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and hurled it to the earth, and there were peals of thunder and sounds, and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (Rev 8:3-5)***

A censer is a small vessel that holds burning coals, a container used to burn aromatic incense. Incense is typically made up of a mixture of various aromatic spices, including frankincense, myrrh, and cinnamon. The burning of incense was considered a sacred activity in the temple. Like everything in the temple service, it was a symbolic action. The smoke from the incense symbolized the prayers of the people rising to heaven.

The prayers for justice of the persecuted People of God throughout history, from Adam to the final days described in the Book of Revelation, went up with one last concerted effort to reach God's ears. The prayers were helped by incense given to the angel who served before the altar in the heavenly temple (Rev 8:3). The priestly action was successful (Rev 8:4). Only then did the angel throw down to the earth the burning coals from the heavenly altar (Rev 8:5).

The Bible is filled with vivid imagery and symbolism, and the act of throwing “burning coals” (שִׂיֵּי לֶהָאֵשׁ; *gahalei eysh*) to the earth is yet another

symbolic depiction of divine wrath. The word for “censer” is *machtah* (מַחֲתָה) in Hebrew, which is very similar to the word for “terror” or “dismay”: *michtah* (מִיחָתָה). Without the vowel markings, the spelling of these two words is identical (מחחתה). Ancient biblical scrolls did not have any vowels until around the eighth or tenth century CE, so any ancient person reading this word in Hebrew would have immediately considered it to hold a double meaning.<sup>14</sup>

In Revelation, we see an angel throwing burning coals to the earth, as punishment. In the Book of Proverbs (and later in Rom 12:20), we read:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; For you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.  
(Prov 25:21-22).

The famous tale of the judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah also included raining fire upon sinners. This is yet another example of chastisement by bringing fire from heaven.

Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew

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<sup>14</sup> Many English words do the same today. Consider the word “note.” Depending on the context in which the word appears, it can mean a musical tone or a written message.

those cities, and all the surrounding area, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Gen 19:24-25)

In a truly unique text from the Dead Sea Scrolls collection called the War Scroll, we read about the final battle between the “Sons of Light” and the “Sons of Darkness.” In this battle, the “Sons of Light” are instructed to throw burning coals at the enemy, which is seen as a form of judgment from God.

And they shall hurl fiery coals at them, and they shall burn them up with blazing flames. And they shall judge them with the judgments of God, and they shall destroy all the wickedness of the Sons of Darkness. (Qumran War Scroll, 1 QM 10:17-18)

But in John’s Apocalypse, this is not a generic judgment. These burning coals are cast on behalf of innocent people. In some way, this specific judgment is related to the cries for justice from the holy martyrs in Revelation.

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained, and they cried out with a loud voice,

saying, “How long, O LORD, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who live on the earth?” And a white robe was given to each of them, **and they were told that they were to rest for a little while longer...** (Rev 6:9-11)

The vision of the opening of the seven seals most likely signifies the above-mentioned “little while longer” coming to an end. We know that sometimes, for his own reasons, God chooses to delay what is expected.

For behold, just a little while and iniquity will be removed from the earth, and righteousness will reign over us. Let no sinner say that he has not sinned, for God will burn coals of fire on the head of him who says, ‘I have not sinned before God and his glory.’ Behold, the Lord knows all the works of men, their imaginations and their thoughts and their hearts.  
(4 Ezra 16:52-54)

Yet now, there are no more delays for justice. The time for this long-awaited retribution for the victims of religious violence has finally arrived. No longer do they ask God questions like, “Why do you not judge the evildoers?” and, “Why do you not avenge the blood of those who live on earth?” At this

juncture, these questions have become null and void.

## **The Trumpets Sound**

The text of Revelation transitions from describing the opening of the seals to the seven trumpet blasts of God's judgment. Yet another angel displays God's just actions against the persecutors of His people.

*The first sounded, and there was hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up... The second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was hurled into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood... The third angel sounded, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters... The fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be darkened and the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way. (Rev 8:7-12)*

There is a well-articulated opinion that the first five trumpets in these verses are patterned after the first five of the plagues of Egypt. The first trumpet, "hail, fire, and blood," corresponds to the hail and fire in Exodus 9:22-25. The second and third trumpet, "poisoning of the sea and waters," corresponds to the plague of the Nile in Ex 7:20-25.



The fourth trumpet, “darkness,” is a direct correlation to the plague of darkness in Exodus 10:21-23. The fifth trumpet, “locusts,” is the same as locusts in Exodus 10:12-15.<sup>15</sup> In the Egypt narrative, each plague was a judgment designed to show God’s sovereign power and to embarrass a particular Egyptian deity.

We already considered a link between the Exodus plagues and the judgments revealed through the opened seals. Now, just as with the Exodus plagues, the trumpets of Jericho serve as an ideal background to the trumpet judgments in this chapter of Revelation. The correspondence between trumpets and plagues may not be exact, but we thought the connection was worth noting.

The Egyptian judgments and those described in Revelation not only connect thematically but, more importantly, both are similar in that they do not produce true repentance. In this manner, the judgments function as testimonies of sinners’ rebellion.

If we are to allow the battle of Jericho to continue to color our interpretation of Revelation’s trumpets, the placement of the vision in Revelation is consistent with the portrayal of God’s army ready for combat (see Rev 7:3-8). The trumpet judgment coming at their heels is consistent with the holy war in the days of Jericho. In their commentary on these verses, Beale and Campbell note, “The saints wage

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<sup>15</sup> Beale and Campbell, 169.

warfare by means of sacrificial suffering, which makes their prayer of vindication acceptable to God.”<sup>16</sup>

Note that the seven new judgments marked by seven trumpets grow out of the seventh broken seal. The six opened seals were six judgments in themselves, but the opening of the seventh seal ushered in a whole series of great judgments (see Rev 8:7-11:19). All of these continue to build the case that the way to interpret these events should not be linear. We should consider these events as multi-layered, cyclical, and overlapping. We will come back to this again in the future as our study progresses.

Pinchas (Eli will explain his analogy later) compares what is happening in Revelation with a long and twisted *shofar* (שׁוֹפָר) that, today, is made from the hollow horn of a Kudu antelope. It is shaped like a spiral. Narrow at one end and wider where the sound exits. Each twist of the *shofar* appears to be very similar, but, in reality, it is unique. On the one hand, each twist is a repetition of something that already occurred; on the other hand, there is also forward movement, so each twist is new. As the air travels through each twist of the *shofar*, the sound it makes grows in intensity and changes until it comes out. We should imagine the visions of Revelation being similar. Visions may repeat, and the same messages may sound anew, but the intensity is mounting.

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<sup>16</sup> Beale and Campbell, 172-173.

The first four *shofar* blasts speak of what seems to be “lighter” judgments of the Most High. There is one common outcome in the four trumpets: one-third of the earth, sea, rivers, springs, and sun and moon are adversely affected. It is likely that “one-third” of destruction on earth refers to the fact that the judgment so far is significant, but it is not yet full. Most earthly entities (two-thirds) can still be saved and avoid the judgment of God.

Perhaps we should understand these four trumpet blast judgments as preparatory in nature since we read in Rev 8:13 that an eagle flying in midheaven announces in a loud voice:

***Woe, woe, woe to those who live on the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound! (Rev 8:13)***

As we move into Revelation chapter 9, it describes God’s further judgment but, this time, on a whole new level. The first of three woes coincide with the fifth trumpet sound.

***Then the fifth angel sounded... He opened the shaft of the abyss, and smoke ascended out of the shaft like the smoke of a great furnace... (Rev 9:1-2)***

In Greek and Jewish traditions, the bottomless pit, or abyss, is a place of confinement for malevolent

demonic beings. The shaft of the abyss is the opening or entrance to this pit, which is in the depths of the earth. When the fifth angel sounds his trumpet, a star falls from heaven and is given the key to the shaft of the abyss. The star is an angel. He opens the pit, and smoke and darkness arise from it, which signals the unleashing of ancient demonic forces upon the earth.

The concept of the abyss and demonic beings is not unique to Revelation. The Hebrew Bible also mentions the abyss and its inhabitants. In the book of Job, for example, the abyss or “deep” (תְּהוֹם; *tahom*) is described as a place of darkness and chaos, where the Leviathan and other sea monsters dwell (Job 41:31-32). In the Psalms, this deep, dark place is associated with the primordial waters and the power of God over the forces of nature (e.g., Ps 33:7). The abyss is sometimes identified with *Sheol*, the destination of the dead.<sup>17</sup>

***Then out of the smoke came locusts upon the earth, and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. They were told not to hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. And they were not permitted to kill anyone, but to torment for five months; and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings a person. And in those***

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<sup>17</sup> The Talmud also mentions the abyss as a place of punishment for the wicked, where they are tormented by demons (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 74b).

***days people will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will flee from them! (Rev 9:3-6)***

The locusts execute judgment only against the wicked people, unmarked with the seal of God. By contrast, the greenery of the earth is spared. Presumably, the land is preserved to be inherited and enjoyed by God's people in the future. According to the prophet Michah, the post-judgment peace is described this way:

Then they will beat their swords into plowshares... Instead, each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid. Because the mouth of the LORD of armies has spoken. (Mic 4:3-4)

Here is a previous scenario from Joshua in which God preserves the good things for the Israelites:

I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant. (Josh 24:13)

While God spares the trees and greenery in Revelation, the locusts deal out some heavy destruction. Indeed, these menacing locusts are far more terrifying than the ones God sent during Egypt's plagues (see Ex 10:4):

***The appearance of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle; and on their heads appeared to be crowns like gold, and their faces were like human faces. They had hair like the hair of women, and their teeth were like the teeth of lions. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots, of many horses rushing to battle. They have tails like scorpions and stings; and in their tails is their power to hurt people for five months. They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, he has the name Apollyon. (Rev 9:7-11)***

The winged, armored locusts (with human faces and lion teeth), are equipped with scorpion-like tails as they emerge from the deepest recesses of the pit. These descriptions are meant to worry the audience of Revelation. Similarly, in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the seer has a terrifying vision as he visits *Hades* (Sheol) and sees the accuser himself.

And I saw a great angel before me. His hair was spread out like the lionesses. His teeth were outside his mouth like a bear. His hair was spread out like women's. His body was like the serpent's when he wished to swallow me. And when I saw him, I was afraid of him so that all of my parts of my body were loosened, and I fell upon my face. I was unable to stand, and I prayed before the LORD Almighty,

“You will save me from this distress... I beg you to save me from this distress.” Then I arose and stood, and I saw a great angel standing before me with his face shining like the rays of the sun in its glory since his face is like that which is perfected in its glory. And he was girded as if a golden girdle were upon his breast. His feet were like bronze which is melted in a fire. And when I saw him, I rejoiced, for I thought that the LORD Almighty had come to visit me... Then I inquired of the angel, “What is the place to which I have come?” He said to me, “It is Hades.” Then I asked him, “Who is the great angel who stands thus, whom I saw?” He said, “This is the one who accuses men in the presence of the LORD. (Apocalypse of Zephaniah 6:8-17)

The global destruction that occurs in Revelation is a foreshadowing of God’s future and final judgment. It sounds familiar. In Gen 8:3, we read about the flood lasting for 5 months (150 days). Yet, after God’s promised judgment comes his abundant mercy. It is likely that the number of days in Revelation being equal to 5 months intentionally echoes the Genesis flood story. In John’s visions, Israel’s God lets the forces of the pit to be temporarily unleashed against the people who serve the Beast.

The King who rules over them has a Hebrew name *Avaddon* (אָבַדּוֹן).<sup>18</sup> The word refers to something being lost, ruined, or destroyed. In Israel's Scriptures, *Abaddon* occurs as a parallel to *Sheol*—the realm of the dead (Job 26:6 and Prov 15:11; 27:20)—or with Death (Job 28:22) or the grave (Ps 88:11). Though *Abaddon* is a place known by God (Job 26:6; Prov 15:11), it is also remote and fiery: in Job 31:12, adultery becomes “a fire that consumes [as far as] Abaddon.” It is twice personified; first, along with Death (Job 28:22), and second, along with Sheol (Prov 27:20). In Rev 9:11, “Abaddon” is personified as “the angel of the bottomless pit” and is explained for Greek-speaking readers as *Apollyon*, “destroyer.”<sup>19</sup>

Now we come to the description of the second woe and the sounding of the sixth trumpet:

***Then the sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar, which is before God, saying 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 prepared for the hour and day and***

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<sup>18</sup> Those who believe that the dominant language of Jews in the first century was Aramaic should note that John, who writes in Greek, supplies the Hebrew name. No doubt Aramaic was quite influential, but there is plenty of evidence that Hebrew remained a spoken and literary language of Jews even towards the end of the first century CE.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert G. Grether, “Abaddon,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6.



***month and year, were released, so that they would kill a third of mankind. (Rev 9:13-15)***

Once again, harm comes only to one-third of humankind. The text of Rev 7:1-3 and the quotation of Rev 9:13-15 above are a part of one unit that is meant to be understood jointly. Remember the four angels holding back the wind? Now they let go:

After this, I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind would blow on the earth, or on the sea, or on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, holding the seal of the living God; and he called out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth, or the sea, or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads. (Rev 7:1-3)

The release of the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth means only one thing: the time for sealing people for the service of God is over. The sixth angel, presumably of the famous seven archangels, gives a signal to these four angels to release the winds of judgment that were mentioned in Rev 9:13. Their job of holding back these winds is done, and now Revelation describes an angelic

cavalry riding horses that look like lions breathing fire and brimstone (Rev 9:16-17).

***The number of the armies of the horsemen was two hundred million... (Rev 9:16)***

Some details, including numbers (like this one), show that we are not seeing here a reference to a literal battle or a literal number of the cavalry. In the Bible and Jewish tradition, numbers are often exaggerated to achieve a narrative effect or make a theological point. Consider, for example, these renumerations of the angelic hosts preserved in 3 Enoch:

Thereupon a thousand thousand of them become sparks, a thousand thousand firebrands, a thousand thousand glowing coals, a thousand thousand flames, a thousand thousand males, a thousand thousand females, a thousand thousand winds, a thousand thousand blazing fires, a thousand thousand flames, a thousand thousand sparks, a thousand thousand hashmalim of light, until they accept the yoke of the kingdom of the High and Exalted One who created them all, in dread, in fear, in awe, with shuddering, quaking, anguish, terror, and trembling. Then they return to their original state.  
(3 Enoch 35:6)

Keep in mind that most people reading such a description would rarely even count past a hundred. Most ancient Jews did not engage in counting the grains of sand on the seashore but dealt with much more realistic sums and numbers in their daily lives. These numbers are meant to be simply incomprehensible. Considering this Jewish numerical convention, when John describes armies of two hundred million, he is talking about something symbolic—a force that is completely overwhelming, unstoppable, and unmatched.

We are still tracing the effects of the trumpet sounds as we read John's message. As we move into the context of Revelation 10, we are told that John sees a strong angel coming down from heaven. The angel has a cloud and a rainbow over his head, and his face is like the sun, with feet like pillars of fire. He holds a small, open scroll in his hands, places his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land. The angel roars like a lion, and seven peals of thunder utter their voices. John is about to write what the peals of thunder say, but a voice from heaven tells him to seal up their words. The angel raises his right hand and swears that there will be no more delay, and the mystery of God will be finished when the seventh angel sounds (Rev 10:1-7).

The voice from heaven instructs John to take the open scroll from the angel who stands on the sea and the land. This angel tells John to eat the scroll, which will taste sweet as honey in his mouth but make his stomach bitter. After eating the scroll,

John is told to prophesy about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. This passage symbolizes the sweetness and bitterness of God's message to humanity and the responsibility of those who receive it to share it with others (Rev 10:8-11). There is an obvious connection here with the Book of Ezekiel, where the prophet was told to eat the scroll in preparation for his ministry to the people of Israel (Ezek 3:1-15).

Just before the last trumpet sounds, John has a vision of two witnesses—to which we will surely return after our discussion of all the trumpet judgments. For now, the seventh trumpet, which comes next, announces the fact that the kingdom of heaven has finally come on earth or, in the words of the many loud voices John hears:

***The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our LORD and of His Messiah, and He will reign forever and ever. (Rev 11:15)***

Finally, as we followed this thread, the long-awaited culmination of the seventh trumpet has come. The kingdom of our broken world, once created by the Almighty but corrupted by human evil, has been reclaimed by the Maker. The LORD (יהוה) and his Anointed have assumed their reign. The words of the famous prayer, “May your kingdom come,” are finally fulfilled. As it was already in heaven, this same kingdom of God has now come to the earth.

But as we read these words, we are puzzled as to why, so early in Revelation's narrative, the author is able to say all these things. It seems too early. Would it not have been wiser to wait until later chapters of the book to make such a conclusive statement? Despite this question, we must submit ourselves to the message and flow of the text and not the other way around. As we continue to read this fascinating text, we see that the long-awaited communal declaration resulted in the twenty-four elders worshipping ADONAI (יהוה) in a special way.

***And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give You thanks, LORD God, the Almighty, the One who is and who was, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants, the prophets, and the devout [saints] and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:16-18)***

There is no doubt that the time for the dead to be judged in these verses refers to the same event mentioned in the last chapter of Daniel:

Now at that time, Michael, the great prince who stands *guard* over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never

occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time, your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt. ...but as for you, Daniel, keep these words secret and seal up the book until the end of time... (Dan 12:1-4)

The specific judgment event in Revelation is linked to the universal judgment of all those raised from the dead. Once the twenty-four elders speak, something amazing and unexpected happens:

***And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder, and an earthquake, and a great hailstorm. (Rev 11:19)***

This is the only place in Scripture that speaks about the heavenly temple being opened in a visual (not a figurative) way. The significance of this verse must not be underestimated. There is little doubt the latter part of 11:19 notes the lightning, thunder, and earthquake to echo the Exodus story of Moses and His people standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Ex 19:16-18). In Revelation, the open temple is connected to the very idea of the presence of God in

judgment and mercy, of which the presence of the Ark of the Covenant also testified.

But there is something else truly intriguing here. The Bible never discusses the Ark of the Covenant (אָרוֹן הַבְּרִית, *aron haberit*) being in heaven, unless, of course, it was the archetype of the early ark that Moses saw (Ex 25:9, 40). The only Ark of the Covenant ever known to the Israelites was the Ark in the earthly Tabernacle and, later, in the Jerusalem temple. The ark contained the stones with the Ten Commandments, a golden pot with manna from heaven, and the blossomed rod of Aaron – all signs of the LORD's presence and redemptive rule over Israel. If Moses saw an Ark of the Covenant in heaven, then it is unclear what it would have contained.

The Ark of the Covenant was presumed to be destroyed when Nebuzaradan (high official of King Nebuchadnezzar II) razed Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground (2 Kgs 25:8–10). However, in 2 Macc 2:4-8, we read that Jeremiah was able to retrieve and hide the ark in a secret cave on Mt. Nebo.<sup>20</sup> It was to remain there until a much later time:

It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should

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<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975), 228.

follow with him and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared, "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows his mercy. Then the LORD will disclose these things, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated." (2 Macc 2:4-8 NRSV)

Is this quotation from 2 Maccabees a reliable historical source about what Jeremiah may have done with the ark? Probably not. But it highlights the Jewish expectation of the recovery of the Ark as an eschatological event with messianic significance.

Is it possible that the heavenly ark of John's vision is some kind of fulfillment of this very messianic expectation? Perhaps. In any case, Revelation's combination of the presence of the Ark of the Covenant with the Heavenly Temple being opened



is a sure sign of God's gracious presence with His people and that in a truly unique way.

What's so important about this appearance of the Ark in the heavenly temple? Eli thinks that it is worthwhile for us to consider interpretative options for this passage offered by the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Unlike in Protestant interpretation, in Catholic and Orthodox theological thought, Mary is understood as the New Testament's Ark of the Covenant. These Christian brothers and sisters argue that the Gospel of Luke makes an intentional parallel between the physical Old Testament Ark of the Covenant and Mary, a descendant from the tribe of Judah, Mother of the Messiah. The Catholic argument goes like this:

The ark traveled to the house of Obed-Edom in the hill country of Judea (2 Sam 6:1-11). Mary traveled to the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39). Dressed as a priest, David danced and leaped in front of the ark (2 Sam 6:14). John the Baptist – of priestly lineage – leapt in his mother's womb at the approach of Mary (Luke 1:41). David asks, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" (2 Sam 6:9). Elizabeth asks, "Why is this granted me, that the mother of my LORD should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). David shouts in the presence of the ark (2 Sam 6:15). Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry" in the presence of Mary (Luke 1:42). The ark remained in the house of Obed-Edom for three months (2 Sam 6:11). Mary remained in the house of Elizabeth for

three months (Luke 1:56). The house of Obed-Edom was blessed by the presence of the ark (2 Sam 6:11). The word blessed is used three times; surely the house was blessed by God (Luke 1:39-45). The ark returns to its home and ends up in Jerusalem, where God's presence and glory is revealed in the temple (2 Sam 6:12; 1 Kgs 8:9-11). Mary returns home and eventually ends up in Jerusalem, where she presents God incarnate in the temple (Luke 1:56; 2:21-22).

Moreover, Catholic and Orthodox theologians interpret the following vision in Rev. 12 about the "crowned woman dressed in the sun" as both Mary/Israel/Old Testament Church, arguing, among other things, that it is linked to the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant in Rev. 11:19.

Pinchas takes a different interpretive approach when it comes to the identity of the "woman clothed in the sun". He feels that this imagery in Revelation is firmly tied to Israel as a people and, by extension, to the nations who are grafted into this covenantal relationship through the child (who is the Messiah). The Church imagery could be justified in some sense because the apostles did not see it as an entity that was severable from the people of Israel.

For Pinchas, transferring this imagery of the woman in the sky to Mary as a single individual, a Jewish woman, outside of the boundaries of the corporate identity of Israel, betrays the normative symbolism found throughout Jewish literature of that era. Just

as the image of Christ cannot be fully divorced from his status as the anointed one of Israel, so it is with the woman who carried him does not stand without her role within Israel.

While our next chapter will deal with the Two Witnesses (Rev 11), we will return to the identity of the woman closed in the sun at length. For now, it is important to mention that as we read, we don't follow traditional chapter separations. We see the existing chapter break as artificial, and sometimes, it interrupts the natural flow, obscuring us from seeing what John saw. Notice how the chapter breaks in a most unfortunate way.

And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened, and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder, and an earthquake, and a great hailstorm. A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was pregnant and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. (Rev 11:19-12:2)

These two visions could be connected. Just like many other pair visions in Revelation, such is certainly the case with the Lion from the tribe of Judah and the Lamb that was slain. Whether the ark and the Woman signify one and the same thing, too, remains to be seen, but more about this later.

## REQUEST

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## The Two Witnesses

*Then there was given to me a measuring rod like a staff; and someone said, “Get up and measure the temple of God and the altar, and those who worship in it. Leave out the courtyard which is outside the temple and do not measure it, because it has been given to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.” (Rev 11:1-2)*

As we read further, Revelation 11 begins with John reporting that he was given a measuring stick to measure the sanctuary and the altar. John is instructed not to take into consideration anything that lies outside the temple grounds because even the adjacent courtyard, for the time being, was turned over to be trampled by the nations. This measuring seems to be a prophetic action symbolizing examination, assessment, or judgment, and possibly even protection upon passing the test.

This kind of measuring is mentioned several times in the Bible, most notably in Ezek 40:2-3 (measuring the eschatological Temple) and later in Rev 21:14-15 (measuring New Jerusalem). The act of measuring of the temple is directly connected to the nations. Before we attempt to understand the period of forty-two months, let us focus on the contexts of the nations being present in Jerusalem and what that means.

By the way, the Hebrew Bible draws some distinctions that may appear controversial in a modern multicultural world. It divides all the people in the world into two groups: Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל; *yisrael*) and the “nations” (גוֹיִם; *goyim*). As far as the covenant is concerned, there are those who are a part of it and those outside of it. The nations are destined either to be blessed through Israel or be judged for opposing her purposes. The nations in the Hebrew Bible are loved by God in the sense that YHVH is committed to one day bringing them into the worshiping fold, often after the divine judgment of their actions. Any blessings the nations receive come through their relationship with Israel, the covenant people of God.

Revelation follows the prophetic tradition that contains the hope of salvation for the nations, alongside divine displeasure with nations’ opposition to Israel. In other words, the picture of the nations worshiping Israel’s God is tempered by the future judgment by Israel’s God against the rebelling nations.

Based on Revelation's indebtedness to Israel's prophetic literature, Revelation 11 cannot be understood rightly without grasping the basic message of Daniel 7, which also features the dichotomy between salvation and judgment. Daniel discusses four kings (and kingdoms) leading their nations to oppose Israel and Israel's God. The nations temporarily succeed but eventually fail miserably:

Daniel said, "I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts were coming up from the sea, different from one another... After this I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and extremely strong... It devoured and crushed, and trampled down the remainder with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. While I was thinking about the horns, behold, another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the previous horns were plucked out before it; and behold, this horn possessed eyes like human eyes, and a mouth uttering great boasts." (Dan 7:2-8)

There are various theories about what these “beasts” represent. Daniel’s Aramaic word for “beast” (חַיָּוָה; *cheyvah*) could be understood as something akin to a “monster,” but it could also refer to a “wild animal or even simply animal” – something a little less intimidating. Daniel continues,

I kept looking until thrones were set up,  
And the Ancient of Days took His seat;  
His garment was white as snow, and  
the hair of His head like pure wool. His  
throne was ablaze with flames, its  
wheels were a burning fire. A river  
of fire was flowing and coming out  
from before Him; Thousands upon  
thousands were serving Him, and  
myriads upon myriads were standing  
before Him; The court convened, and  
the books were opened. (Dan 7:9-10)

There are multiple thrones in this heavenly scene, in which the Ancient of Days (עֲתִיק יוֹמִין; *atik yomin*) is surrounded by a heavenly council. This vision depicts a judgment (דִּין; *din*) in a kind of divine courtroom setting. The books (סֵפָרִים; *sefarim*) are records that help the council judge properly.

Then I kept looking because of the  
sound of the boastful words which the  
horn was speaking; I kept looking until  
the beast was killed, and its body was  
destroyed and given to the burning fire.  
As for the rest of the beasts, their



dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time. (Dan 7:11-12)

These verses suggest that the decisions of the heavenly council are related to the wild beasts and their activity. We are told their fate considering the judgment they received, and Daniel abruptly switches to another scene:

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, honor, and a kingdom, so that all the peoples, nations, and populations of all languages might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14)

Daniel then moves from the imagery of beasts to humans to describing someone who looks like a “son of man” (בֶּר אֱנוֹשׁ, *bar enash*) in Aramaic. The phrase “son of man” is used so frequently in Ezekiel (a total of 93 times), and it refers to the prophet’s humanity (Ezek 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:2; 7:2). Yet in this passage in Daniel, the “son of man” is not some mere human, but a majestic figure. This same exalted apocalyptic figure surfaces in other Jewish

messianic texts such as 1 Enoch 46–71 and 4 Ezra 13. Jesus’ own use of the “son of man” title in the gospels simultaneously emphasizes his earthly human origin and his heavenly authority.<sup>21</sup> Compare how Mark 2:10, Matt 9:6, Luke 5:24, Luke 6:5 stress one meaning and Matt 8:20 another.

This human-looking heavenly figure receives dominion (שָׁלֹטֵן; *shaltan*) and “honor” (יָקָר; *yekar*), which can also be designated as “dignity” or “high status.” This “son of man” received the “kingdom” or, more precisely, “kingship” (מַלְכוּת; *malchut*) or “reign.” Even without being expressly told who this son of man is, it is clear from the immediate context that he is a central figure in God’s plans for humanity. His kingdom will not pass away, and it will not be destroyed. All hints point to Messiah! Unlike the wild animals (beasts) in the previous vision, the son of man will rule forever. Yet this vision disturbs Daniel:

As for me, Daniel, my spirit was distressed within me, and the visions in my mind kept alarming me. I approached one of those who were standing by and began requesting of him the exact meaning of all this. So, he told me and made known to me the interpretation of these things: “These great beasts, which are four in number,

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<sup>21</sup> The Greek equivalent is ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου (*ho huios tou abthtropou*).

are four kings who will arise from the earth. But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and take possession of the kingdom forever, for all ages to come.” (Dan 7:15-18)

These apocalyptic visions of Daniel can seem confusing, but there are some Judaic interpretive keys to understanding their meaning. We now return to the dichotomy of Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל; *yisrael*) and the “nations” (גוֹיִם; *goyim*) as Daniel sees it. Despite the current suffering and oppression at the hands of evil forces of the nations, Israel’s God will intervene by defeating the nations who are opposing Israel. The ones who take over the kingdom from the nations are called *Kodiyshei Elyonin* (קְדֵיִשֵׁי עֲלֵיוֹנִין) – “The holy ones of the Most High.” The phraseology is a bit unusual, but these are the people that God has set apart. The “holy ones of the Most High God” are the faithful remnant of Israel.

In the vision of the approaching “son of man,” God brings back to Israel His powerful and exiled King, a son of David, to rule over them eternally. Though Daniel lives in a period of oppression, divine salvation is ordained through this coming messianic figure. God’s people will eventually be vindicated and rule together with God’s own King. And the end-time message found in Daniel 7 is the same one we find in Revelation: a transition of power will take place.

The context is God's unquestionable sovereign control over history while he temporarily permits unspeakable evil. We believe that John's following statement is made with this context in mind.

***And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. (Rev 11:3)***

We previously read that "The nations... will trample the holy city for forty-two months" (Rev 11:1-2). This is the same period of time assigned for the ministry of the two witnesses (42 months equals 1,260 days). So let us consider the witnesses and this time reference, but allow us to explain the big picture.

Most interpreters of Revelation fall into three basic groups when they seek to explain the identity of the two witnesses. The first group interprets the two witnesses in a literal way – as a pair of people, either carrying out their prophetic roles in the past (first century CE) or in the future (usually not-so-distant future). The second group thinks that the two witnesses are not literal people; instead, they represent the collective witness of God's people throughout history. The third group of interpreters allows for both scenarios to be possible simultaneously.

Do you remember how we mentioned before that Eli and Pinchas don't always see things from the same vantage point in Revelation? Do you

remember how Pinchas suggested that the events of Revelation are like a *shofar* moving from the beginning to the end in a cyclical fashion, becoming more and more pronounced? (More on this can be found when the discussion on Rev 8:7-12 takes place in this book.) Now, consider another analogy.

Eli doesn't think that the *shofar* analogy tells the whole story when it comes to Revelation. He sees the author of Revelation as a master painter, working slowly on his masterpiece in a multilayered way. Very often, he talks about the same exact events and ideas in different ways and shows the main storyline from different angles multiple times, revisiting the same images.

Eli feels that to someone who is used to linear thinking with a sequential progression, this non-linear form of communication is very uncomfortable. In fact, it is frustrating to people that John discusses something only to come back to it later and to discuss the same exact scenario from a completely different vector again (and again).

This is to say that while Eli does not rule out the physical two witnesses appearing in some shape or form, he is much more comfortable seeing the two witnesses as yet another picture of God's people persecuted but triumphant. As in many other images in Revelation, God's persecuted people are being unsuccessfully assailed by the powers of darkness only to be resurrected and vindicated in the end. Let's continue our reading:

***These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the LORD of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire flows out of their mouth and devours their enemies; and so if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this way. (Rev 11:4-5)***

The comparison of witnesses with olive trees and lampstands is reminiscent of the words of another prophet. In a vision of Zechariah, the prophet encourages the people involved in rebuilding the Temple and does so with imagery similar to what we see in Revelation:

Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel, saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of armies...” Also, the word of YHVH (יהוה) came to me, saying, “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it... Then I said to him, “What are these two olive trees on the right of the lampstand and on its left?” [...] Then he said, “These are the two anointed ones, who are standing by the LORD of the whole earth.” (Zech 4:6-14)

Even though the parallels with Revelation seem to be clear, they are not exact. In Zechariah 4, there are two lamps and two olive trees. In Revelation 11,

there are two olive trees but only one lampstand. In both texts, it is likely that the olive trees and lampstands (or menorahs) symbolize God's servants. Based on the historical context of Zechariah, the two anointed ones standing before the LORD are Yehoshua, the high priest (Zech 3:1-10), and Zerubbabel, the Davidic leader of the returning exiles.

Zerubbabel was a descendant of David and governor of the Achaemenid Empire's province of Yehud. He led the first group of Jews, numbering over forty-two thousand, who returned from Babylonian captivity in the first year of Cyrus the Great. He also laid the foundation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. In all the biblical accounts that mention Zerubbabel, he is always associated with the high priest Yehoshua (or Joshua), who returned with him.

There is a common denominator between the olive trees and lampstands that Zechariah mentions: both have oil. Oil (שֶׁמֶן; *shemen*) was the substance with which Israel's kings and priests were anointed. It is a vivid symbol of God's Spirit and divine presence resting on people, endowing them with authority to lead.

Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first wave of Jewish returnees from exile and began to rebuild the Temple. So, despite the similarity of Zechariah 4 description of two anointed men standing before God, it is very unlikely that Revelation refers to the

same historical event, nor is Zechariah prophesying the events depicted in Revelation. Instead, Revelation utilizes Zechariah's familiar picture of two servants of God to suggest that the history of Israel is progressing toward a crescendo.

The two witnesses of Revelation take part in the final stages of a new creation, including the construction of an eternal temple. In doing so, they continue the great ministry of past Israelites like Joshua and Zerubbabel. All four serve essentially the same purpose – bringing the heavenly holiness of Israel's God to earth, the first pair temporarily brings that holiness, and the second pair announces the presence of God abiding on earth forever.

Now, let's return to the question of 42 months or 1,260 days. One major interpretive position needs to be mentioned but ultimately rejected. Some interpreters of Revelation link the vision of the two witnesses with the 3.5 years of Jewish war against Rome, or what historians call the First Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE). Those who connect the apocalyptic vision to the war note what appear to be similar timespans. In their judgment, the second coming of Messiah had already occurred in 70 CE when the God of Israel judged Jerusalem by allowing Roman armies to destroy it. In this view, Jesus came "with the clouds of heaven," as he promised to that generation that was still living during his first coming (Mk 14:62). Messiah's "arrival" is not literal in this case; instead, he "came with the clouds of heaven" insofar as God judged



all those who rejected him. The result of the judgment was the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple some 40 years after Jesus' death.

This interpretation links the events of Revelation 11:1-3 with the so-called Olivet Discourse (cf. Mk 13; Matt 24; Lk 23) in which Jesus predicts the onslaught of the Roman armies against Jerusalem. Even though this may sound plausible, such an explanation should be rejected for multiple reasons. One reason is methodological inconsistency. For example, while arguing for the literal fulfillment of judgment (Romans trampling Israel for 42 months), this interpretation argues for the non-literal return of Christ in first-century judgment.

The First Jewish Revolt was the result of many separate conflicts between local Jewish groups and Romans. They were sporadic attacks that grew and spread, and eventually, Rome responded with severe countermeasures. Even though this war went on for 3.5 years, it cannot be said that Jerusalem was occupied (trampled on) for this entire period. In the fall of 66 CE, Jewish forces succeeded in expelling the Romans from Jerusalem. Vespasian was dispatched by Emperor Nero to crush the rebels, but that took some time. Vespasian was then joined by Titus and in 70 CE, Jerusalem fell, the Temple was burned, and the short-lived independent state of Israel collapsed. Yet, the Romans could not put a complete end to the rebellion until 73 CE, when the fortress of Masada in the Judean desert was finally taken. Fortunately,

we have many sources that mention the events of those days, so we can be confident that the historical evidence does not line up with this interpretation of Revelation 11.

The prevailing position among many Christians (especially evangelical Christians) sees the two witnesses as two individuals operating during a literal period of 1,260 days but concludes that these days are yet to come. This interpretation is like the one we just discussed insofar as it interprets the two witnesses and the trampling of Jerusalem as actual people and literal events. The key difference is when (timewise) this scenario takes place. The first interpretation places these events in the past (the first century CE), and the second current interpretation places these events in the future.

Both of us invite you to at least consider that there is a good possibility that the two witnesses are not stand-alone personalities but instead represent the persecuted but triumphant people of God. As such, the witnesses may not be connected to some particular chronological sequence of the events but rather picture (in another way) God's people's eventual vindication and triumph!

Why specifically two witnesses? In our opinion, the pair of witnesses in Revelation 11 carry deep semiotic symbolism. The biblical principle of any matter being established through the testimony of two or three witnesses could be the guiding

principle (cf. Dt 17:6; 19:15).<sup>22</sup> Apostle Paul, writing to his disciple Timothy, recalls this legal principle, saying, “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.” (1 Tim 5:19)

The two witnesses are the minimum. In Deuteronomy 4:26, 30:19, and 31:28, Moses calls heaven and earth as two witnesses against the Israelites. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus instructs his disciples to confront a sinner privately, and if he does not listen, go to him in the company of two or more. Jesus follows this suggestion by noting that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (Matt 18:20).

What sorts of things do these witnesses preach or prophesy? The witnesses of Revelation 11 wear sackcloth, and this cultural image communicates that their message conveys repentance, doom, and mourning through their personal example. Perhaps their prophecies are no different from the words of many prophets sent by God before them, calling their listeners to repent, to return to God, or prepare to face the consequences. Yet, what may set Revelation’s witnesses apart from their predecessors is the fact that these two prophets cannot be silenced. Moreover, they can project fire

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<sup>22</sup> The witnesses are called *edim* (עֲדֵימָי) in Hebrew. In Gen. 15:9-10 God confirms a promise of a son to Abraham through a covenant ceremony of cutting animals in two. There also were two tables of testimony in the Ark of the Covenant. We already mentioned the two names with which the 144,000 were sealed. There are so many relevant pairs.

out of their mouths and burn up those seeking their harm—actions that argue strongly for a non-literal understanding of the two witnesses.

While miraculous and supernatural events are certainly real and should never be ruled out, it is far more likely that this mention of fire is a symbolic language that the effect of their proclamation of God’s words is like a fire that burns anyone who opposes it. In fact, we read in Jer 23:29 the following description of the power of the word of God: “Is My word not like fire?” declares ADONAI (יהוה), “and like a hammer which shatters a rock?” (Jer 23:29) Revelation goes on to describe the witnesses in this manner:

***These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they desire. (Rev 11:6)***

The two witnesses are imbued with miraculous prophetic power (not unlike that of Elijah and Moses), but also in terms similar to the sweeping powers that Jesus gave to his own disciples. He said that anything his disciples will bind (tie or forbid) on earth will be bound in heaven, and anything that they will lose (untie or permit) on earth will, in fact, be also loosened in and by heaven (Matt 18:18).

What matters most here is not the precise identity of the two witnesses but that they are endowed with God's authority as they call the nations to repentance and faith. What will happen to these two witnesses later is also extremely important. Their ultimate vulnerability is essential for understanding the meaning of their witness. Even with their power and high standing before God, they are not immune to suffering or even becoming victims of the beast. Moreover, after they are martyred, their bodies are dishonored by those to whom they bore their witness. But this defeat, as we will see, is temporary but nevertheless real.

If the two witnesses stand for all persecuted people of God (especially those in the first century) then the message of their suffering, defeat, and eventual triumph becomes truly relevant to all future generations.

***When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them. And their dead bodies will lie on the street. (Rev 11:7-8a)***

The beast cannot overcome the witnesses until their ministry is over and their mission of bearing testimony to the people is complete. On the one hand, they're vulnerable. While they are protected, they are not invincible even as they carry out God's very mission. On the other hand, anything that happens to them must be allowed by the sovereign LORD of Heaven and Earth. That, indeed, is

reassuring! They can be defeated only after their mission is complete.

***And their dead bodies will lie on the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. Those from the peoples, tribes, languages, and nations will look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not allow their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who live on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who live on the earth. (Rev 11:8b-10)***

The second part of verse 8 deserves our special attention since, historically, it was used to justify Christian replacement theology and even theological anti-Judaism among Christians. This verse is of equal significance to Jewish-Christian relations as Revelation 2:9, the so-called “Synagogue of Satan” passage. With Revelation 2:9, we can argue for mistranslation bias as the reason for anti-Judaic interpretation. The same exact word from Greek (συναγωγή) in a positive context (James 2:2) is translated as a “meeting” or “assembly” or “congregation,” while in a negative context it is rendered as “synagogue.” (Rev. 2:9) Here, in verse 8, however, we can make no such (fairly simple) argument. Thus, the untangling of this reference may require some effort and patience.

The Greek text of Revelation 11:8 describes the dishonorable treatment of the bodies of the two witnesses in the “great city” (τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης; *teis poleos teis megaleis*,) where the Lord (*kurios*, κύριος) of the witnesses was crucified. The bodies of the witnesses remained on the streets of this great city. A crucial detail is that this city is “spiritually/ mystically/ symbolically called” (*kaleitai pneumatikos*, καλεῖται πνευματικῶς) Sodom and Egypt. This explanation can be interpreted in several ways, but we would like to consider the three most plausible and obvious interpretive scenarios.

The first option is that the great city, which was deliberately unnamed in the text, could be referring to Jerusalem because this is where the crucifixion occurred. This is a very straightforward reading. Usually, the plainest reading of the texts is most preferable. Yet, this passage also tells us that the city is “spiritually called Egypt and Sodom,” so it’s clear that a straightforward, non-symbolic interpretation may not work in this case—not to mention that Jerusalem is not *literally* Sodom or Egypt. We will return to Jerusalem shortly.

The second option is that the unnamed “great city” could be a reference to Rome—a viable option to which the internal context of Revelation points:

And he said to me, “The waters which you saw where the prostitute sits are peoples and multitudes, and nations and

languages... **The woman whom you saw is the ‘great city’** (ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη; *hei polis hei megalei*), which reigns over the kings of the earth.” (Rev 17: 15-18).

It’s not hard to deduce that the description of this “great city” is not tied to Jerusalem but to Rome. Yet Rome is not called by its real name in Revelation; it’s most often hidden behind the name “Babylon.” One of the angels in heaven proclaims,

Fallen, fallen is **Babylon the great**, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality. (Rev 14:8)

Furthermore, Revelation 18 conveys the words of grief by the kings, merchants, and sailors over Babylon, which is called the “great city,” in verses 10, 16, and 19. This reference to the “great city” is certainly not Jerusalem but Rome. We are jumping far ahead, but these verses are most helpful in making the right connections.

After these things, I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated from his glory. And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, **“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!** [...] And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of sexual immorality



and lived luxuriously with her, will weep and mourn over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, **‘Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.’** And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargo any more.... The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, saying, **‘Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls...’** And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and all who make their living by the sea, stood at a distance, and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, **‘What city is like the great city?’** And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, **‘Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich from her prosperity, for in one hour she has been laid waste!’** Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment

for you against her.” (Rev 18:1-2, 9-16, 17-20)

The city where the bodies of the witnesses lie on the street seems to be Rome. If the city mentioned in Revelation 11:8 is indeed Rome, then how can we explain the reference to the crucifixion of the Lord of the two witnesses, which we know for a fact occurred in the vicinity of Jerusalem rather than the vicinity of Rome?

Besides this being a possible reference to the apostasy of various Jewish groups in Jerusalem, the crucifixion language may be tied to murderous persecutions of the members of Christ’s body in Rome. Both history and tradition relate that thousands of early Christ-followers, including Jesus’ most famous disciple, Peter, met their violent deaths in Rome or at the hands of Romans.

If Rome was in view, then a rhetorical dynamic like the one depicted in Paul’s revelation of Jesus on the road to Damascus may be at play in Revelation. When Saul was persecuting Jewish followers of the Way, Jesus himself addressed him and said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). Though Paul set out to capture Damascus Christ-followers and bring them for the prosecution to Jerusalem, Jesus asked him why he was persecuting him personally. Thus, Jesus draws a correlation between himself and his followers. The link is that his followers collectively, in some true way, make up his body.

So, could it be that the crucifixion of their Lord refers to the “crucifixion of his body (his followers)” in Rome or by the authority of the Romans anywhere? Our answer is yes, that’s possible.

Another way to think of Rome as the city where Jesus was crucified is to consider that Romans crucified Jesus in the vicinity of Jerusalem but by the Roman authority. Though Pilate was certainly manipulated by some powerful Jews, in the end, it was Rome that was legally responsible for putting Jesus to death.

There may have been another very important reason to camouflage Rome under Babylon, Jerusalem, Sodom, and Egypt – so that only those “in the know” would grasp what the author really meant. As with Revelation, the letter of 1 Peter refers to Rome as “Babylon” (1 Pet 5:13).

Remember that John was writing from Patmos, where he was forced into exile. John had some freedoms on Patmos, but his correspondence with outsiders would still need to pass the Roman vetting as politically correct messaging delivered via Roman post service. In other words, the last thing any Roman official on the prison island would want is for the anti-Roman religious leaders (Jewish or otherwise) to continue their subversive activities through writing and further instigation. It is for this reason that John may have used all sorts of

techniques, Hebrew language hints, metaphors, and religious and cultural code-language that would be properly understood only by the movement insiders.

In which sense, then, can Rome be compared to Sodom and Egypt? This is not a complicated analogy to untangle. Naturally, in first-century Judaism, Sodom had become a cultural symbol that stood for sexual immorality (usually in conjunction with serving other gods). Egypt, on the other hand, was forever etched as the symbol of slavery and oppression. For early Christ-followers living under the oppression of the Roman government and among the flagrant immorality of Roman society, referring to Rome as Sodom and Egypt would make good sense.

Is it possible that this city, which is Sodom and Egypt, could be referring to Rome and Jerusalem simultaneously? Our answer, once again, is yes.

There is plenty of strong prophetic language against Israel and Jerusalem in the Bible. It is commonplace among the Hebrew prophets. For example, Isaiah details the Almighty's indignation against Jerusalem's religious establishment. The people addressed in the speech are Jerusalemite priestly elites. We read the following in Isaiah:

**Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!** “What are your many

sacrifices to Me?" says YHVH (יהוה).

...When you come to appear before Me, **who requires of you this trampling of My courtyards?** Do not go on bringing your worthless offerings; incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath, the proclamation of an assembly - I cannot endure wrongdoing and the festive assembly. (Isa 1:10-14)

Sodom was long gone, and yet these Israelites are called the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah. The apostles implicated both Jerusalemites and Romans simultaneously for Messiah's death, saying,

For truly in this city, there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and purpose predestined to occur. (Acts 4:27-28)

Though technically speaking, Jesus was crucified just outside of the walls of Jerusalem, Luke preserves Christ's prediction that he will be killed in Jerusalem:

I must go on my journey today and tomorrow and the next day; **for it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside Jerusalem.** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the

prophets and stones those who have  
been sent to her! (Lk 13:33-34)

So far, we have established that identifying the great city where the two witnesses were crucified as both Rome and Jerusalem is indeed quite possible. And with two options being either Jerusalem or Rome, a third interpretive option that we have already delved into, is the collective spiritual image, which combines both Jerusalem and Rome into one archetype of a “great city” (עיר גדולה; *ir gedolah*). This hybrid city embodies opposition to Israel’s God and his servants by any government structure. In this scenario, the image can include Jerusalem and Rome, along with all other powerful cities and governments yet to come.

Such a city could be something reminiscent of the builders of Babel (בָּבֶל) who said, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city (עיר; *ir*) and a tower whose top will reach into heaven” (Gen 11:4). The Hebrew word for “tower” (מִגְדָּל; *migdal*) most likely derives from the verb “great” (גָּדַל; *gadal*).<sup>23</sup> While the English names “Babel” and “Babylon” are a little different, in Hebrew, the Tower in Genesis 11 and the kingdom that destroys Jerusalem in 2 Kings 25:8 is the same: *Bavel* (בָּבֶל). It is not hard to see the “great city” as rebellious Babylon, Rome, Jerusalem, or any other city that at any point in history will rise against the LORD God of Israel.

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<sup>23</sup> cf. Gesenius’ Lexicon of Hebrew and Chaldee s.v. מִגְדָּל

All these explanations indicate the rich use of elusive symbols in Revelation. They do not always function as simple allegories (references to historical events and/or characters in some figurative way).

Let's now return to the fate of the two witnesses. The beast that makes war against the witnesses and succeeds in killing them inspires great admiration among the nations of the earth. This is so because the ongoing testimony of the two witnesses has tormented their conscience and disrupted their lives.

As is common in Middle Eastern cultures, the people passed on gifts to each other as a sign of celebration for the humiliation, silence, and death of the two witnesses (Rev 11:9-10). The witnesses are not buried—a postmortem fate that, in Jewish culture, would have been particularly heinous. In Jewish practice, returning a body to earth quickly is considered a pious act of human kindness. Because of this, Jews were known to bury the corpses even of non-Jews. For example, in the twelfth century, the Jewish sage Maimonides wrote, “We bury the dead of the gentiles, comfort their mourners, and visit their sick, as an expression of the ways of peace.” (Mishneh Torah 14:12)

In Revelation 11:9, the authorities refused to bury the witnesses, thereby extending the humiliation of the two witnesses further.

***And after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them, and they stood on their feet; and great fear fell upon those who were watching them. (Rev 11: 11)***

It is likely that the 3.5 days in which the witnesses were dead are somehow connected with the 3.5 years of the nation's trampling of Jerusalem that we discussed before (3.5 years = 42 months = 1,260 days). The period of the death and dishonor (3.5 days) of the two witnesses is basically the same period as the period that the people of God suffered persecution and oppression by the nations that trampled the courtyard in Jerusalem (Rev 11:1-2). But just as was the case with 1,260 days of oppression, the kind of persecution that the two witnesses experienced would be temporary. The two witnesses are resurrected, to the disappointment and fear of everyone. Moreover, as a clear sign of God's endorsement, they ascend to heaven in front of their enemies! The tables are turned. Justice is done. This is where the context of Daniel 7:22 (God's holy ones receiving the kingdom) creates a powerful parallel.

***And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up into heaven in the cloud, and their enemies watched them. And at that time 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. (Rev 11:12-13)***



As Revelation 11 draws to a close, the voices in heaven begin to spread the good and long-awaited news concerning the Kingdom of God cautiously but joyfully: evil has been defeated, the guilty have been punished, the righteous have been vindicated and exalted. Just as was the case with the ending of Daniel's vision, where the holy ones of the Most High are promised the kingdom forever, in Revelation, the verdict is clear and uncontested:

The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our LORD and of His Messiah (Χριστός; *christos*), and He will reign forever and ever. (Rev 11:15; cf. Dan 7:18)

In the compelling conclusion of Revelation 11, the triumphant echo of celestial voices heralds a new era, a magnificent testament to the indomitable power of righteousness over the forces of evil. The once worldly kingdom is now resplendently transformed into the eternal dominion of our Lord and His Messiah, a resonating fulfillment of the promise made in Daniel's vision. This luminous transition from worldly chaos to divine order signifies the ultimate victory of good over evil, the vindication of the righteous, and the unending reign of the divine. Hence, the message is unequivocal and resolute: The Kingdom of God has triumphed, just as prophesied, and His reign will be everlasting, a beacon of hope, justice, and unparalleled sovereignty for all eternity.

## The Woman and the Dragon

Chapters 12-15 of Revelation contain seven different visions. Since visions is our focus, we will continue to explore these images. While the imagery may look odd to modern readers, first-century Christ followers (suffering under the brutal oppression of the Roman empire) would have understood their meanings. While these signs can be organized differently depending on who is doing the counting, here is one reasonable list:

- ⌘. The Conflict between the Woman and her Seed and the Serpent and his Seed (12:1-18)
- Ϣ. Persecution by the Beast from the Sea (13:1-10)
- λ. Persecution by the Beast from the Land (13:11-18)
7. The Lamb and his 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1-5)

- ה. Three Angels Proclaim Good News and Judgment (14:6-13)
- ו. The Son of Man Harvests the Earth (14:14-20)
- ז. The Victory over the Beast and the Victory Song (15:2-4)

Revelation 12 begins with the appearance of a great sign in heaven:

***A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was pregnant, and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. (Rev 12:1-2)***

The identity of the woman is not completely clear, but what is beyond doubt is that, in some way, the woman is the mother of Jesus. Later, we read that “she gave birth to a Son, a male, who is going to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.” (Rev 12:5) Psalm 2 describes God’s Anointed (מָשִׁיחַ; *mashiach*) and mentions the “rod of iron” (שֵׁבֶט בַּרְזֶל; *shevet barzel*) with which he will rule:

Why are the nations in an uproar and the people devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and **the rulers take counsel together against YHVH (יהוה) and against His Anointed**, saying, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” He who sits in the heavens

laughs, The Lord scoffs at them. Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury, saying, “But as for Me, **I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain.**” “I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, ‘**You are My Son, today I have begotten You.**’ ‘Ask of Me, and **I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,** And the *very* ends of the earth as Your possession. ‘You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.’ (Ps 2:1-9)

Knowing what John believes about Jesus’ messiahship, we can be quite certain that Revelation 12 depicts King Jesus as the child born of the heavenly woman. So, this leaves us with two main interpretive options. First, the woman is Mary, the literal earthly mother of Jesus. Second, the woman is Israel (God’s People), whose anointed son will rule the entire world. There is also a third option, and that is to suggest that the woman is a hybrid image of Mary and Israel.

By way of a disclaimer, Pinchas thinks that the woman in Revelation 12:1-2 is Israel, since in prophetic material, Israel is often depicted as the woman (Hos 1-3, Ezek 16 and 23). Eli leans towards the third option as the most likely interpretation. So, let’s begin first by considering Mary as the woman in Revelation 12:5. In Luke’s

birth narrative, we see what high honor was given to Mary.

“Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, “**Greetings, favored one! ADONAI is with you.**” But she was very perplexed at *this* statement and was pondering what kind of greeting this was. And the angel said to her, “**Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the LORD God will give Him the throne of His father David; and **He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end**” [...] Now at this time, Mary set out and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, “**Blessed are you**

**among women, and blessed is the  
fruit of your womb! (Lk 1:26-42)**

Deep respect and high regard for one's parents (especially one's mother!) is a prominent characteristic of Jewish tradition. Torah speaks of honoring one's father and mother (Ex 20:15) in the Ten Commandments or, as Jewish tradition calls them, the "Ten Words." The command to honor one's parents is the only one of the ten to which consequences are attached. In Luke's Gospel, a Jewish woman, Mary, has found great favor in God's sight. Could Mary be the one in Revelation's heavenly vision? Possibly.

Now, let's consider whether the woman depicted in Rev 12:5 can be understood not as a singular person but as the image of Israel, God's chosen people.

I will raise up for them **a prophet from among their countrymen like you**, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them everything that I command him. (Dt 18:18)

The idea of Messiah as a prophet from among his countrymen means he will come from within Israel. In other words, Israel, in some way, can be seen as the people group producing this future Messianic figure. In his letter to the Romans, Apostle Paul traces the messianic promises through Israel as well:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my countrymen, my kinsmen according to the flesh, **who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and daughters, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple service, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh,** who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 9:1-5)

There is an extremely important text in understanding what or who the mother of the Messiah can be or can symbolize. In Galatians, Paul writes, “But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.” (Gal 4:26). There, the heavenly Jerusalem is allegorically connected with God’s People, Israel.

Moreover, one of the Qumran scrolls offers a very relevant parallel to the visionary imagery of mother and child in Revelation. The 1QH scroll comprises a collection of hymns believed to have been written by the Teacher of Righteousness, the spiritual leader of the Qumran community (c. second of first century BCE).<sup>24</sup> In the seventh column of the scroll,

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<sup>24</sup> This scroll from the Dead Sea region is called *Hodayot* (hymns of thanksgiving). It expresses a profound sense of gratitude to God for

there is a remarkable poem about a mother giving birth to a son and the travail of her experience.

...For children come through the breakers of death, and the woman expectant with a boy is racked by her pangs, for through the breakers of death she gives birth to a male, and through the pangs of Sheol there emerges, from the crucible of the pregnant woman a wonderful counselor with his strength, and the boy is freed from the breakers. In the woman expectant with him rush all the contractions and the racking pain at their birth; terror (seizes) those expectant with them, and at his birth all the labor pains come suddenly, in the crucible of the pregnant woman. And she who is pregnant with a serpent is with a racking pang; and the breakers of the pit result in all deeds of terror.  
(Qumran Hodayot Scroll, 1QH 7:8-12)

Though ancient Semitic poetry can be vague, the mother here gives birth to a male child whom the writer calls “wonderful counselor with his strength,” a very specific term connected to the identity of Messiah (Is 9:6). Many interpreters of this poem see the identity of the mother as Israel, and the child is the Messiah born in a tumultuous and dangerous environment.

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His divine revelation and mercy, often in the face of formidable challenges and adversities.



Many documents found by the Dead Sea paint the picture of Qumran Jews living in imminent expectation of apocalyptic events and messianic redemption. The breakers indicate the sea, which is a code for danger, and Sheol indicates the risk of death and grave. Curiously, the serpent is present in this poem as well, most likely a reference to *Leviathan*, who, according to some, had seven heads and lived in the sea. We will explain some more about this creature in just a few pages. What is important for now is to see how similar the language of the Jews in Qumran is in describing their visions of future hope.

The above texts are all excellent examples that can justify the view that the people of Israel corporately could be understood as “the mother” of the Messiah Jesus, who will rule the nations with the rod of iron.

As we struggle to unravel the meaning of such symbolic language, sometimes, it is the big picture that is most helpful. Revelation Chapters 11-13 contain five references to various periods of time that may help us to determine the identity of the woman in this vision.

Leave out the courtyard, which is outside the temple, and do not measure it because it has been given to the nations, and they will **trample the holy city for forty-two months.** (Rev 11:2)

And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will **prophesy for 1,260 days**, clothed in sackcloth. (Rev 11:3)

Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be **nourished for 1,260 days**. (Rev 12:6)

But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was **nourished for a time, times, and half a time**, away from the presence of the serpent. (Rev 12:14)

A mouth was given to him, speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and **authority to act for forty-two months was given to him**. (Rev 13:5)

In the above texts, various numbers come up, but they all refer to one and the same period of time. This means that whether the woman is in view (Rev 12:6 and 14) or God's People (Rev 11:2, Rev 13:5), or two witnesses (Rev 11:3), all these images likely refer to one and the same object. Notice that three chapters include three periods of oppression or persecution: "1,260 days" (mentioned twice: 11:3; 12:6), "42 months" (also mentioned twice: 11:2;

13:5), and “a time, times and half a time” (mentioned once: 12:14).

First, if we count according to solar rendering, there are 30 days in a month. How many days are there in 42 months? The answer is 1,260 days. Second, 42 months is how many years? Since there are 12 months in a year, 42 months equal to  $3 \frac{1}{2}$  years, which is probably the equivalent of “a time (1 year), and times (2 years), and half a time (half a year)” (12:14).

The math is  $1 + 2 + \frac{1}{2} = 3 \frac{1}{2}$ . So far, everything lines up. These calculations, summaries, and references all bring us to the conclusion that all three periods of time are the same: 1260 days = 42 months =  $3 \frac{1}{2}$  years.

Given that all these periods seem to refer to one and the same period of time, is it not possible that we should view Rev 12 vision as a hybrid image of both Mary, mother of Jesus and Israel/Church, God’s faithful people?

Is it possible to say that there is a double meaning here? In the first broader way, the woman refers to Israel - Messiah’s own people, but in a narrower way, it can refer to Mary, a particular Israelite woman who bore Jesus. Let’s link this to it as the third interpretive option for understanding Revelation 12:1-2. In other words, the woman clothed in the sun could be a hybrid image of both Mary and Israel. This is possible.

However, if the woman is not merely Israel but is also Mary, then we must explain the following:

***Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God so that there she would be nourished for 1,260 days. (Rev 12:6)***

A possible way to understand this is the story found in the Gospel of Mathew. In this scenario, Herod seeking to destroy the newborn Jesus (and all Jewish boys, just to be sure) would be understood as the dragon who stood to devour the child (Rev 12:4). We read in Matthew:

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” And after being warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, *the magi* left for their own country by another way. Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the LORD appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him.” So Joseph got up and took the child and His mother while it

was still night, and left for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod... Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged and sent *men* and killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. (Matt 2:7-16)

One can suppose that 1,260 days can be somehow connected to the period that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were hiding in Egypt. The story in Matthew's account does not give us that exact time, so it is impossible to say if the 1,260 days refer to this story or not.

Also, the woman in Revelation is described as having a crown of 12 stars. It's clearly an important symbol and a clue. There are also three options here: Twelve stars can represent 12 patriarchs (tribes of Israel), or 12 Apostles of Israel, or some combination of the two. For example, a Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view can be best summarized as follows:

Q: Do the twelve stars in Rev 12:1 refer to the twelve apostles?

A: The Marian interpretation of Rev 12:1 indeed allows for the suggested interpretation. Mary is the archetypal

symbol of the Woman who is Israel (original) and the Church (developed). As the archetype of the Church, she is a sign that the Church is surrounded by God's power and protection (Clothed with the Sun). She is in continuity with the original people of God but also stands for the renewed people of God, the Church. Here is where the star symbol applies. The twelve stars above her head apply to both the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel (original people of God) and the twelve apostles (renewed people of God). It is legitimate to go a step further and read this image of Rev 12:1 as Queen of Heaven since Mary is (for example, according to the Litany of Loreto) Queen of both Patriarchs and Apostles. She is also in Rev 12:1, the image of the eschatological Church or heavenly Jerusalem. (*Answered by Father Johann Roten, S.M.*)

This argues for the third option, where the woman that gives birth to the Messiah is a hybrid image of Israel as God's Ancient people and Mary, Mother of King Jesus, as a physical Jewish mother. Therefore, the woman is either Israel or, in some way, personifies Israel. In short, the case could be made that Revelation describes here a hybrid image again (much like with the interplay between Rome and Jerusalem in Rev 11:8). Eli thinks that this time, the

hybrid image is that of Israel, God's people, and Mary, the earthy mother of Jesus. Israel gives birth to Jesus in a broad general sense, and Mary does so literally.

Pinchas maintains the necessity of corporate identity in understanding this vision and does not favor seeing the woman as an individual (although he is not opposed to the hybrid image understanding). Mary, as a solitary woman, can be easily removed from the interpretation of this vision, and all of the visionary imagery in this chapter would continue to work and line up with Israel without her as an individual character. But if we remove the connection of this heavenly woman to Israel as a people (or "Israel as Old Testament Church" in Catholic language), such interpretation will suddenly fall apart at the seams, as many other details will not apply to Mary as an individual. In Pinchas' view, the woman cannot be abstracted from her explicit Israelite identity as a mother of Israel's Messiah.

Now, we come to another exciting juncture in our study of visions. The circumstances of the child are further explained in Revelation, and terrifying danger greets the offspring of this woman.

***Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven crowns. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and hurled them to the earth. And the***

***dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child. (Rev 12:3-4)***

A mythical seven-headed red dragon appears in the skies. He is crowned and is very powerful (seven horns are symbols of the fullness of power). One-third of all the stars represent a host of angels that are swept down from heaven to earth in what appears to be an accidental move by the dragon. The author of the Book of Revelation, therefore, pictures an exceedingly powerful dragon but clumsy, desperate, and lacking self-control.

The bloodthirsty dragon positioned himself in such a way that it would be possible for him to destroy the male child that the woman was about to birth. He is standing ready to devour the child even prior to his birth, anticipating his murderous meal. If the connection between ready-to-devour-dragon and Herod's attempt at Jesus' murder is valid, then Revelation refers to not only the things that were and that will be but also the things that already took place. This in and of itself must force us to stop and think about what it is we are expecting to learn from the Book of Revelation.

Certainly, a strictly futuristic interpretation may not adequately explain the multitude of events that have already transpired yet are unveiled in Revelation. The depiction of a woman encased in the sun, among other signs, aligns with the recurring themes in Revelation. It reinforces the apt designation of



the book as the Revelation or, more accurately, Apocalypse, which translates to the unveiling of concealed truths. This encapsulates the essence of the book to near perfection. If this interpretation holds true, we must then acknowledge that the book of Revelation is not primarily intended to foretell future events in a detailed, sequential manner. Instead, it serves a different purpose. Through precise interpretation, the book offers something like a “call to arms” for Christ-followers, confronting the pressures and obstacles of a pagan society. It reassures them of their impending triumph, encouraging them to withstand all trials that may come their way during their testament to Christ.

In essence, this is the crux of Revelation. Anything beyond this can be considered as an enriching supplement, the proverbial icing on the cake. In a way, Revelation is like the Book of Job, describing the events that happen behind the curtain of heaven, about which Job is oblivious. Job suffers bitterly without any knowledge of the true reasons for his misfortunes, not realizing that this is an elaborate test that he is expected to pass—or that his suffering has so much more meaning in the grand scheme of things. The faithful suffer in both books.

However, the difference is that the tragic events in Job’s life are never explained to him. While seeking for answers from God, he meets the Almighty and is humbled by that powerful encounter. That’s it! He is never told the reason all these things happened in

his life. He continues to live unaware that Satan and God had a disagreement about people's ability to love God for just being God and not for the benefits and gifts they receive from him.

The Book of Job reveals a lot to the readers but not to Job himself. Revelation is different because it explains to the readers and hearers of the message the reasons for the suffering that they are enduring, assuring that they are temporary. Just as it was with Job, Revelation shows that any oppression or evil that the Adversary and his ilk can inflict upon believers is done strictly with the permission of God and for a purpose. Thus, the second sign-vision explains to the suffering Christ-followers the background of why they are going through these difficult times.

***And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they did not prevail, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Rev 12:7-9)***

One of the best explanations of the Dragon and Satan references in Revelation we heard was offered by our colleague and friend, Dr. Nicholas

Schaser from Israel Bible Center.<sup>25</sup> He explains that Satan is called a “serpent” (*ophis*; ὄφις) and might remind us of the creature who deceived Adam and Eve (see Gen 3:1-6, 13). However, while the Greek Septuagint also calls the serpent of the Garden an *ophis* (Gen 3:1, LXX), the writer of Revelation is not referring to the snake we meet in Genesis.

John is not recalling Genesis, but Isaiah. Revelation 12:9 describes Satan as a “dragon” (δράκων; *drakon*) three times. The one and only other verse in all of Scripture that describes a creature as both a “dragon” and a “serpent” in this way is Isaiah 27:1. There, the creature is the primordial sea monster known as *Leviathan* (לִיָּתָן). Just like Revelation, Isaiah’s passage describes an end-time battle against evil. In the Hebrew text of Isaiah 27:1, the dragon that God will destroy at the end of days is called “Leviathan”:

“In that day ADONAI (יהוה), with his heavy and great and strong sword, will punish Leviathan (לִיָּתָן; *livyatan*) the fleeing serpent (שָׂחָה; *nachash*), Leviathan the twisting serpent (לִיָּתָן עֲקָלָתוֹן; *livyatan nachash ‘aqalaton*), and he will slay the dragon (תַּנִּין; *tannin*) that is in the sea.” (Isa 27:1)

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25 See Nicholas J. Schaser, “Which Serpent is Satan?” *Israel Bible Weekly* (2021).

Therefore, this vision of the dragon in Revelation is not about the defeat of the Serpent from Eden but the post-Edenic defeat of Satan as Leviathan—the embodiment of evil itself. The connection between the two visions, the mother giving birth to a child and the battle between Michael and the Dragon, is critical. There are two ways to look at them.

The first way is to suppose that they describe two separate events, one which takes place on earth and the other in heaven. The second way is to consider that this is the same event described twice. It would be a tragedy to miss an intricate connection between these two visions. Their linkage reveals that while Jesus and his mother are threatened on earth by Herod, who is ready to devour the child, at the same time, Michael and his angels are waging war with Satan and his angels.

The reason Jesus and His mother survive is that Michael and his heavenly army are successful in throwing Satan and his angels down from heaven. Their courage and combat skills ensure the failure of the Dragon's (Satan's) plans on Earth to destroy the child. It is as if the author keeps "rewinding the tape" for the readers and hearers in such a way that contemporary and future events will make sense within their larger context.

In other words, when the birth of Jesus is brought up, the hearers of Revelation must understand that the threat to Jesus' life happened as a direct result of

a heavenly war where the Dragon was put to flight, humiliated, and thrown out of the heavenly realm.

***Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Messiah have come, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down... And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony... For this reason, rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them... because the devil has come down to you with great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time. (Rev 12:10-12)***

Whichever way we choose to understand the previous two visions (either with the events occurring at the same time or following one another), the overall meaning does not change. The Dragon is done, and he knows it. His out-of-control, desperate actions speak of his final defeat that already took place. Rome or any other power that rises up against God and His people will eventually come to full destruction. Now, says Revelation, it is just a matter of time. Let's continue looking deeper at the conflict with the dragon.

***And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time, times, and half a time, away from the presence of the serpent.***

***And the serpent hurled water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon had hurled out of his mouth. So the dragon was enraged with the woman and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev 12:13-17).***

Unfortunately, the message did not simply announce that Satan or Dragon was completely defeated. As with most wars, there is an aftermath to one side's defeat. As Satan was cast down to earth, he sought to destroy Jesus' life at the point of birth and ultimately at the time of the crucifixion. But as it became clear, all his evil plans failed. Rev 12:17 sums up the point of the whole story. The dragon could not win, so he set out for as much damage as he could muster and turned his attention to the woman's other children.

So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev 12:17)

As you can imagine there are different ways to interpret the verse above. In our book we decided to leave this text without a commentary, because we happened to sharply

disagree with one another on its interpretation.

Switching gears, there is a fascinating perspective that we should also consider in interpreting this particular vision and other similar imagery of Revelation, although its detailed study lies outside of the limitations of this book. We have not introduced this vector up to this point, but this passage seems like the most appropriate moment. Pinchas is especially intrigued by the material culture behind the text and by physical contexts that can explain the language, especially symbolic language. Earlier, we mentioned how deliberate “repetitions” (*hazarot*, חזרות) function in Revelation. They create an obvious pattern and structure. Now we should consider the physical context of the sky, the “constellations” (*mazalot*, מַזְלוֹת), and the imagery of the heavens frame the text. The sun, the moon, the woman, and the Dragon are all known images, star clusters visible in the night sky.

When we read about the stars falling from the sky, it sounds a lot like a meteor shower to modern readers, but to the ancients, it could be a sign of a heavenly battle. In this Revelation vision, we could have had a woman represented by the constellation called Virgo. The 12 stars are nearby in the sky. There are 9 stars in the modern rendering of the constellation of Leo. A lion is a symbol of the royal Judah, so the crown language is an easy connection. On Leo’s tail, one can see three more stars, which,

in some charts, are distinct from Leo, but may not have been so for the ancient people. If one looks at star constellations themselves, we can literally have 12 stars appear over Virgo's head in the night sky. And they are tied to the lion image.

The constellation of Draco, or Dragon, is another well-known cluster of lights in the night sky. There is also a Serpent constellation that has ten stars in it, which can easily represent the ten horns of the Dragon. There is also a Corona constellation, a crown made up of seven stars in the sky. When the woman in Revelation is given the wings of the eagle in the vision in order to escape, there is a bird in the night sky as well, the constellation of Corvus. Much of the imagery John talks about can be tied to physical and observable context.

We can't be dogmatic about this, but can it be that the story one sees in the stars has a direct correlation to actual events on Earth? Seeing it all come together is a cohesive and deeply spiritual message full of codes and rich with symbolic imagery. These constellations also move and, at certain times of the year, appear in different locations in the sky. They appear alive.

Ancient people were not as scientifically oriented as twenty-first-century readers and perceived nature and the world around them, and even time, in a radically different way. No gravity and no laws of thermodynamics were yet articulated. To them, the world was governed and moved by the forces of



another realm, not the laws of physics. For Jews, one God managed it all, even the seven stars of Pleiades and Orion, as Amos 5:8 explains, were in his hand. According to Psalm 147:4, God is the one who numbers, names, and guides the stars.

Someone might be put off by this celestial connection to what John says, but we are not talking about astrology and reading fortunes in the stars here. God created the stars, and their movement is predictable, coinciding with times and seasons. It's a pattern through which we can recognize the presence of the creator (Ps 19:1). In the gospel of Matthew, the star leads the wise men to the infant Messiah (Matt 2:2).

But all this does not take away or change the message of Revelation. In the end, John is the shaper of what story one sees in the sky, he is the interpreter of these symbols. So, it does not change the meaning of what John says, but it could explain the imagery itself and the details that people have tried to see in these images. The stars may act as analogies, something that corresponds to earthly events, whether in the story of Israel as a people or in the life of the ultimate Israelite – Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

After the initial confrontation with the heavenly woman, Satan's rage will continue to be felt, but it will be the rage of a bleeding and dying dragon.

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<sup>26</sup> For in-depth treatment of this topic see Malina, B. J. and Pilch, J. J.' *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000).

## Daniel and Revelation

Revelation loosely quotes and alludes to a wide array of other biblical and extra-biblical books. When one considers the references, it becomes clear that Revelation cites all five Books of Moses and pretty much every other book of the Hebrew Bible in a staggering number of occurrences. However, there is one book that has a core message strikingly similar to Revelation. Not only is this book written in a similar literary style, but many of its ideas and concepts are presented almost “as is” in John’s Apocalypse. We are speaking, of course, about the Book of Daniel.

At this point, we would like to take a look at Daniel to see how its content overlaps with what we read in Revelation. This background will be beneficial for what we have already covered and what is yet to come, especially for understanding the descriptions of the beasts in Revelation 13.

Daniel begins after the first Babylonian attack against Jerusalem when the Temple was plundered and desecrated, and the Israelite elites were taken to Babylon. The story begins with four young, exiled Jewish men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (the Christian world knows three of them mostly by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego).

The first part of Daniel (chapters 1-6) is a series of narratives that speak about the trials of the four friends and 1) their faithfulness to Israel's God, 2) their hope that God's deliverance will surely come, and 3) the wisdom they display as they oppose the idol-worshipping society of their oppressors. The second part of the book (chapters 7-12) deals with the visions that Daniel sees regarding the future.

The language of Daniel is varied. It was written in both Hebrew, and in Aramaic, the primary language of the ancient Middle East and Babylon. Curiously, the first chapter is in Hebrew, chapters 2-7 are in Aramaic, and chapters 8-12 return to Hebrew. Naturally, scholarly debates rage about the implications of such linguistic divisions, but it is clear that chapters 2-7 form a cohesive unit. So even though the stories of the four young men are covered only in chapters 1-6, the fact that chapter 7 is written in Aramaic, just as chapters 2-6 are, means that the message of the first part of Daniel is deeply connected with the message of the second.

Just like John in Revelation, Daniel also received heavenly messages and interacted with angels. Revelation features the struggle against the oppressive pagan system (Rome), and Daniel's circumstances are similar in Babylon. Israelites were meant to persevere in Babylon against all odds and persecutions and wait for the day of divine salvation, a release from exile. The faithfulness of Daniel and other young Jewish men in the story is tested, and each test, whether it is food or furnace, or lion's den, is about resisting idolatry. In a similar way, the message of Revelation is a poignant rebuke of idolatry at every turn.

Because we believe the Book of Daniel is so closely tied to Revelation, it would be prudent to survey the main events and issues described in the former so that we can see the big picture of what Daniel is all about. It's not a long book, but this aside will be extremely fruitful in connecting some important themes.

### **A Brief Overview of Daniel**

Daniel 1 features the four Davidic descendants who are winsome, smart, handsome, fit, spiritual, and wise (that's why they were chosen for the Babylonian king's service preparatory program). As they enter their training, they politely refuse to violate the Israelite food laws, arguing their case wisely and convincingly, all the while trusting God. When they stand their ground and find themselves

in danger, they end up being elevated by the decision of the Babylonian King.

Chapter 2 begins with the King of Babylon's dream. Only Daniel (and his friends) can interpret it. In the dream, the King sees a gigantic statue made of four different sections, symbolizing four kingdoms following one after another (Babylon being the head). A huge rock, which later becomes a mountain, destroys the statue as it falls in dishonor. The overall message is that the arrival of the four kingdoms is inevitable but, eventually, the kingdom of Israel's God will defeat the forces of the four kingdoms to preserve and elevate Israel in perpetuity.

Chapter 3 features the well-known story of Daniel's three friends being thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship a false god. They withstand the pressure to bow down to the Babylonian idol—even at the threat of being burned alive—and Israel's God protects them against all odds. Witnessing this miracle, the King of Babylon is convinced that it is in his best interest to protect and bless Daniel's friends. Moreover, he makes a public acknowledgment of the veracity of their faith.

Daniel 4 tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King. He has a series of dreams and visions that only Daniel can interpret and suffers harsh consequences for refusing to worship Israel's God. Nebuchadnezzar loses his mind and becomes

as a beast of the field. Eventually, the king repents and comes to his senses.

Chapter 5 is a continuation of the previous story but features the son of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, who does not repent and is struck dead by God. He, too, is warned in dreams and visions, and like his father, he did not willingly humble himself by repenting of his pride and arrogance.

Chapter 6 tells the story of Daniel being thrown to hungry lions due to his refusal to accept the idol-worshipping practices of Babylon. This time, the king himself was supposed to be worshiped. Just as in Chapter 3, the king witnesses a miracle of divine protection, elevates Daniel, and makes a public pronouncement about the greatness of Israel's God.

Chapter 7 switches gears and focuses on Daniel's dreams. When Daniel is confused by his nighttime visions, Daniel gains great wisdom through angelic intervention. He sees four beasts—the same number as the sections of the massive statue destroyed by the rock. One beast resembles a lion, another a bear, and another a leopard. The fourth beast has many horns, with one horn raised up far above the others. This horn presumably represents an earthly king who opposes Israel's God in a special way and carries out consistent persecutions of God's people.

After taking stock of the beasts, Daniel sees someone who looks like a human being or, in the original Aramaic phrase, “son of man” (בַּר אֱנוֹשׁ; *bar*

*enash*). This “son of man” represents God’s suffering people as a collective whole. Israel’s God (the Ancient of Days) judges the final beast, delegates his authority, and glorifies the son of man, who comes up to his heavenly throne in a cloud of heaven (symbol of honor and divine authority).

The representation of God’s people as a son of man does not contradict the idea that Daniel 7 is describing the Messiah. Jesus, after all, is the faithful remnant of God’s people, Israel, so it makes sense that he applies the title of “son of man” to himself.

This seventh chapter brings a logical conclusion to all the stories in the six previous chapters: God’s suffering people must not lose hope in the face of persecution as they resist the temptation to succumb to the society around them. They suffer due to the rebellion against Israel’s God by the kings of powerful Gentile nations. Therefore, God’s people need to wait for God to defeat them. When this happens, God will exalt the reputation of his righteous people and publicly vindicate them.

Chapter 8 moves to another of Daniel’s visions. This time, the vision reveals the two final kings of Chapter 7 represented by two different animals: a ram and a goat. The ram symbolizes a joined empire of Medes and Persians, and the goat represents the Greeks. The goat has many horns, with one horn being raised above all the others—the same aesthetics of the final king in chapter 7. This king

will desecrate the Temple of YHVH (יהוה) after his attack against Jerusalem and fill it with despicable idols. His end, however, will be his own destruction at the hands of Israel's God.

Chapter 9 addresses Daniel's confusion regarding the timing of his visions' fulfillments. At this point, the text recalls the prophetic scroll of Jeremiah, which prophesied that the exile of which Daniel is a part would last only 70 years. Though only a few years were left according to Jeremiah's prophecy, Daniel saw no end in sight. In faith, he called upon the Most High to fulfill his promise of restoration, but God's angel came with a disturbing message: God has multiplied the original punishment of 70 years by seven. This change in the prophecy may sound surprising, but prophecies were not static predictions of the future. Messages of doom can be reversed by repentance, and lack of repentance can revoke the promises presented by the prophet (see Jer 18).

Chapter 10 details Daniel's deep distress about the realization of further exile. A heavenly agent that Daniel encounters at the riverbank explains that he was delayed by three weeks (counting from the time Daniel petitioned God). He tells Daniel that he had departed earlier but was unable to come because he was prevented by a struggle with another angel fighting on the side of Persia. Daniel almost loses consciousness at the sight of the heavenly visitor, but the angel affirms Daniel and strengthens him.



Chapter 11 describes the most detailed prophecy found in the Bible. Persia will wage war with Greece. Kings of the South and North will wage war with one another. Truces, peace deals, alliances, power intrigues, and betrayals are all part of the coming events. In the end, Jerusalem will be plundered, its Temple will be destroyed, and regular worship will cease. At this time, the so-called “abomination of desolation” will be set up. Many of the righteous leaders will suffer horribly because of their faithfulness. In the end, however, the evil rule will be nullified, and all wicked plans will come to nothing.

Finally, Chapter 12 relates Daniel’s encounter with an angel who tells Daniel that even though the exile is prolonged, there is good news. There is an exceptionally mighty angel called Michael (מִיכָאֵל) who now stands guard over the people of Israel. He will be part of the rescue during a coming time of great distress such as the world has never seen. It will culminate with the resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous from among the dead. The angel explains that the temporary trials that will befall Israel and the world will arrive in the distant future. In the meantime, Daniel must seal up the words of the prophecy he has heard.

The main point of Daniel can be summed up as follows: When nations and their governments turn away from God and glorify themselves, they become like violent wild beasts. In his own time, God will defeat these wicked beasts and establish

his glorious kingdom. Therefore, God's people ought to remain faithful to the covenant despite oppression and persecution because, ultimately, they are on the winning side. Now, let's consider some key texts from Daniel that relate to Revelation's message.

## **The Reign of Beasts and Horns**

Daniel Chapter 7 opens with a vision of four beasts. The first one resembles a lion, the second a bear, the third a leopard with wings, and the fourth is difficult to identify with any animal. This final beast is the most dreadful, with large, iron teeth and ten horns (see Dan 7:4-8). Another horn rises on the head of this unknown beast, and it has eyes and a mouth that boasts.

In Aramaic and Hebrew, the "horn" (קֶרֶן; *keren*) represents power and strength. In Leviticus, horns adorn the corners of God's altar; in Joshua, the blasting of horns brings down the walls of Jericho. In Ps 132:17, God causes the horn of David, his anointed to come forth. The psalmist also says that God has lifted up a horn for His people, praise for all His godly ones. (Ps 148:14) Psalms declares that God will cut off all the horns of the wicked, but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up. (Ps 75:10) According to Ps 18:2, God is the shield and horn of David's salvation.

In Daniel, we read we encounter a heavenly scene. "I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the

Ancient of Days took His seat... The court convened, and the books were opened.” (Dan 7:9-10) The prophet keeps looking because of the boastful words of the beast with the little horn. The terrible, unknown beast is killed and burned.

Just as Revelation uses code language when it refers to Rome as “Babylon,” ancient rabbinic commentaries refer to Rome as “Edom.” According to *Midrash Tanhuma on Tzav* 14:1 and *Midrash Tehillim* 11:6, the Dan 7 beast, which is burned by fire, is none other than Rome (what the rabbis call “Edom”; אֶדוֹם). In Daniel, the dominion of the other beasts is taken away, but despite their mortal wounds, their lives were somehow extended (Dan 7:11-12). Then Daniel describes a vision known to many Christ-followers, saying,

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, honor, and a kingdom, so that all the peoples, nations, and languages might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13-14)

Daniel requested help from someone (presumably an angelic being) whom he approached to interpret

what he saw (vv. 15-16), and he received an answer:

These great beasts, which are four *in number*, are four kings *who* will arise from the earth. But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and take possession of the kingdom forever, for all ages to come. (Dan 7:17-18)

Rarely do we have interpretations that follow visions. Notice that while the vision shows the son of man approaching the Ancient of Days, the heavenly interpretation clearly states that it is God's people that will gain possession of the kingdom forever. This gives us the original perspective contained within this ancient Jewish text itself, a passage that Jesus later applies to himself before the high priest:

But He (Jesus) kept silent and did not offer any answer. Again, the high priest was questioning Him, and said to Him, "Are You the Anointed (*χριστός, Christos, משיח, Mashiach*), the Son of the Blessed *One*?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses?" (Mk 14:61-63)

We will explore this connection a little later. But suffice it to say that Jesus in the Gospels understands himself to be the embodiment of the people of Israel. He does so by quoting Daniel.

In the story, Daniel asks about the meaning of the fourth beast, his ten horns, and the one horn that is higher than others (Dan 7:19-20). While waiting for the answer, Daniel sees that the horn was waging war with the “holy ones” (קִדִּישִׁין; *kadishin*) or “saints” and prevailing against them. This occurs until the Ancient of Days comes and passes judgment in favor of the holy ones who take possession of the kingdom (Dan 7:21-22). The angelic being speaking with Daniel ultimately answers,

The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth which will be different from all the *other* kingdoms, and will devour the whole earth and trample it down and crush it. As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings will arise; and another will arise after them, and he will be different from the previous ones and will humble three kings. (Dan 7:23-24)

Some have speculated that the fourth beast is associated with Alexander the Great and, more importantly, the empire he built. After Alexander, through various intrigues, fighting, and divisions of

power, the control over Israel came to Antiochus IV (c. 215 – 164 BCE). As far as boasting and blasphemy go, his coins stated that he was “deity manifest,” and he was known as Ἀντίοχος ὁ Ἐπιφανής (*Antiochus ho Epiphanes*) “Antiochus god manifest”—though, secretly, he was mocked as Ἀντίοχος ὁ Ἐπιμανής (*Antiochus ho Epimanes*) “Antiochus, the madman.”

Antiochus reigned over the Seleucid Empire (a portion of Alexander’s domain) from 175 BCE until his death in 164 BCE. Notable events during Antiochus's reign include his near conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt, and his persecution of the Jews of Judea and Samaria, which brought on the successful Jewish rebellion of the Maccabees, who rededicate the Jerusalem Temple (hence the story of Hanukkah). Could it be that Antiochus IV is that boasting horn in Daniel? Here is how one second-century CE Roman historian described him:

Antiochus, who was staying in Athens, became king after the death of his brother. He afterward considered waging war against the Romans, but he is said to have been deterred by the death of Perseus. Antiochus had a few good traits mixed in with many bad ones. He had an unpredictable nature and was extremely frivolous. He used to join in revels at banquets and danced naked to the music; he bathed in public and went to the baths anointed with

myrrh or drenched with perfumes.  
(Granius Licinianus, *History of Rome*,  
Book 28, 4-5, 2)

The Seleucids, like the Ptolemies before them, had a suzerain relationship with Judea. They initially respected Jewish culture and protected Jewish institutions because Alexander himself established this order. This policy was drastically reversed by Antiochus IV after he forced his hand on his Judean subjects by appointing a High Priest based on the bribes he received. This corruption caused a civil war and a popular uprising against Antiochus attempted to crush. Antiochus issued decrees forbidding many traditional Jewish practices and began a campaign of persecution against devout Jews. A Greek writer, Diodorus who famously authored *Bibliotheca Historica* and wrote of Antiochus:

(Antiochus)...sacrificed a great swine at the image of Moses, and at the altar of God that stood in the outward court, and sprinkled them with the blood of the sacrifice. He commanded likewise that the books, by which they were taught to hate all other nations, should be sprinkled with the broth made of the swine's flesh. And he put out the lamp (called by them immortal) which burns continually in the temple. Lastly, he forced the high priest and the other Jews to eat swine's flesh. (Diodorus 34:1/4)

Antiochus IV's commitment to root out Jewish religious observance would become well-known in history. The policy of Hellenization, from which Israelites were previously exempt, demanded that the conquered populations adopt the Greek language, customs, and worship. Over a couple of generations, this would erase the cultural distinctiveness of Israel and make them like all other nations of the Mediterranean. The unique ancestral customs and worship of the Jews were deemed to be the problem and source of their resistance to "foreign" rule. With his actions, Antiochus meant to fully humble Judeans by instilling into them an attitude of submission and service.

The vision of the four beasts: Lion, Bear, Leopard, and some unknown beast (Dan 7) easily corresponds to the image (תִּלְעָם; *tzlelm*) that Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (Dan 2). The four powers are often understood as Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. If Rome is the last kingdom, then the ten toes (and ten horns) plus the one remarkable horn all must be explained, and there is no cogent explanation of this in ancient Roman history. Thus, prophecy enthusiasts imagined this to be some sort of future and revived the Roman empire yet to come. And the speculations that follow become quite elaborate.

However, such a kingdom lineup forgets another power: the Medes. Because the Medes and the



Persians are treated together in the Bible, there is a temptation to see them as the same. But these were different people who controlled some parts of what Babylon was formerly. This happened in succession after the mighty Assyrians and many other smaller regional powers, such as Scythians, Persians, Parthians, and Elamites, had chipped away at Babylon. Remarkably, when Belshazzar feasted with vessels from the Temple, Daniel interpreted the mysterious writing as a message that Babylon would fall to Medes and Persians (Dan 5:27). Medes dominated from 700 to 550s BCE, but Persians took over after 550 and through 330 BCE, after which came the age of the Greeks. We know very little about Medes, and they left us no written records, so they are easily ignored.

If the four powers are Babylonians, Medes, Persians, and Greeks (not Romans), the interpretation of visions in Daniel changes significantly. If the fourth kingdom is Greece, then the two legs stand for Ptolemies and Seleucids, with ten toes (and ten horns) being individual Hellenistic rulers of those two rival kingdoms. The horn who blasphemes, then, is Antiochus IV. We continue to read:

And he will speak against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be handed over to him for a time, times, and half a time. (Dan 7:25)

The authority of yet another evil ruler over God's people was given to him from above. Permission was given to this "horn," presumably Antiochus Epiphanes, only for the duration of "time, times and half a time," which likely means 3.5 years. The way numbers work in ancient Jewish literature is unusual, and thus, the exact amount of time each period stands for is impossible to determine with certainty. But what is clear is that time is limited, and the span represents only temporary permission to dominate.

But the court will convene for judgment, and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated, and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the empires will serve and obey Him. (Dan 7:26-27)

When a king rules, he and others around him see him as the ultimate judge. When the Scriptures mention the court being convened to judge the horn (Antiochus IV), this puts things into perspective. The result of the case is already known—Antiochus' demise.

The result of the court's heavenly judgment is clear: the roles will now be reversed. God's People will become members of the new kingdom where the Sovereign (Suzerain) is the Most High God who will exercise dominion over all the nations of the earth forever. This kingdom will be so large and powerful that even other sovereign nations will become subservient to God's reign.

God's people who suffer must not lose hope in the face of persecution as they resist the temptation to succumb to the adulterous society around them. The reason behind their suffering is explained in the context of rebellion against Israel's God by the kings of these powerful earthly nations. Therefore, God's people need to patiently wait for God to defeat them. When this happens, God's people's anti-government stance will be publicly vindicated, and their reputation cleared. They will be given all the glory and honor they rightfully deserve.

In Revelation, Babylon, where Daniel lived, is a code term that surfaces a number of times (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:1, 5; 18:1, 2,9, 10, 21), so the tie between these two books is not even veiled. The parallels between Dan 7 and Rev 13 are most pronounced, but consider the broader picture. The ten horns of the beast are mentioned in Daniel 7:8 and in Revelation 12:3, 13:1; 17:3, 8. The vision of the leopard, bear, and lion is explained in Daniel 7:4-6 and resurfaces in Revelation 13:2. The beast who speaks blasphemies is described in Daniel 7:8, 11, and in Revelation 13:5 as well. The worship of

the golden idol is demanded in Daniel 3:5-7 and Revelation 13:15. Naturally, anyone unfamiliar with Daniel's writings would not understand the connections between all these prophetic elements and the events of John's day according to Revelation.

## The Dragon and Beasts

In Revelation 13, the beasts take center stage. Eli thinks that due to the historical Christian influence on Western thought, this chapter of Revelation is very likely responsible for the number thirteen becoming an “unlucky number” in popular culture. The negative view of the number thirteen may stem from the assumption that the so-called “mark of the beast” and the number “666” in this chapter (Rev 13:17-18) are references to Satan. Setting aside the superstitions around the number 13, let us make sure that we understand the true meaning of this text.

*And he (the dragon) stood on the sand of the sea.  
(Rev 13:1a)<sup>27</sup>*

A unique beast, a dragon, stood on the sand of the seashore. In ancient Israelite culture, the “sea” and

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<sup>27</sup> In some manuscripts, this short comment about the Dragon, who was seen in the sky and now stands on the seashore, is attached to the end of chapter 12.

the “deep” are associated with vast unknown darkness and often carry negative connotations. In Isaiah 27:1, the Septuagint translates the Hebrew *Leviathan* (לִיָּתָן) as “dragon” (δράκων; *drakon*) of the deep, also calling the creature a “serpent” (ὄφις; *ophis*) in Greek, and a “twisted” or “coiled serpent” (נָחָשׁ עֲקָלָתוֹן; *nachash aqalaton*) in Hebrew. In Western culture, the word “dragon” is its own unique term for a monster featured in legends and tales, but it is borrowed from the Greek language. In Hebrew, the term points to the serpent-like creature *Leviathan* (לִיָּתָן) that, according to the book of 1 Enoch, God forced into the depths of the sea.

And on that day were two monsters  
parted, a female monster named  
Leviathan to dwell in the abysses of the  
ocean over the fountains of the waters.  
But the male is named Behemoth, who  
occupied with his breast a waste  
wilderness named Duidain... And I  
asked the other angel that he should  
show me the might of those monsters,  
how they were parted on one day and  
cast, the one into the abysses of the sea,  
and the other unto the dry land of the  
wilderness. (1 Enoch 60:7-9)

For our purposes, the most critical imagery in this passage of 1 Enoch (which also appears often in the Bible) is the “sand of the sea”—a phrase that also features in Rev 13:1. This terminology comes

directly from the Torah (first in Genesis) in a promise made to Abraham.

I will indeed bless you greatly, and I will greatly multiply **your seed** as the stars of the heavens and **as the sand, which is on the seashore**; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. (Gen 22:17; cf. 32:12)

We see here that Abraham’s “seed” or “offspring” (זֶרַח; *zerah*)—a description of the people of God who would emerge from Abraham—are compared to the “sand on the seashore” (חול על־שפת הים; *chol al sfat hayam*). If the sand is not merely a surface, but a symbol of Abraham’s descendants in Rev 13:1, then the dragon positioned on top of that sand would imply that Satan treads upon—or, perhaps, even has dominion over—God’s people.

*Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten crowns, and on his heads were blasphemous names... And the dragon gave him his power and his throne, and great authority. (Rev 13:1b-2)*

The fearsome beast arises from the watery, dark home of the dragon (Rev 12:3), and the dragon rules with the beast as his agent. The dragon stands by the sea (θάλασσα; *thalassa* [the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew יָם; *yam*]). In the passage above, the beast associated with the dragon comes out of the

sea. John will echo this water imagery when he sees a drunken harlot who ‘sits on many waters’ riding a beast (Rev 17:1). All these references point to the watery “deep” of Israel’s Scriptures (תַּהוֹמִים; *tahom*) being a place of evil and peril.<sup>28</sup>

God’s people are suffering under the persecution and dominance of the Roman empire, and Satan (the dragon standing on the seashore) seeks to use Rome to trample God’s people under his feet. But, according to Genesis 22:17, Abraham’s seed will eventually possess the “gate of their enemies” – also an ancient cultural image of dominion and victory. However, this time of Abrahamic victory has not yet come; right now, the enemies of God’s people appear to have the upper hand.

Revelation was penned to give hope to suffering and persecuted people, to help them persevere and remain faithful and firm in their bold witness against the idolatry of the Roman Empire. During such times of trial, it is tempting to cry out, “O God, do you know what is happening?” Do you care? The answer to these questions is, of course, “Yes.” God does know and does care. For believers, this assurance is essential.

In this vision, the serpent-like dragon welcomes a “beast” (θηρίον; *therion*), a term which indicates a “wild animal” or even simply an “animal.” This beast of the sea is full of strength and seems to be

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<sup>28</sup> Beale and Campbell, 267-268.



unbeatable. It has ten horns, seven heads, and ten crowns (Rev 13:1). Just as the Name of God will be placed on the foreheads of the believers (Rev 22:4), blasphemous names are inscribed on the seven foreheads of this powerful beast (Rev 13:1b).

The inscription of blasphemous names is important. John's depiction mocks the impious inclination of pagan rulers to assume divine titles and even to accept worship. When it comes to imperial Rome, we know that Emperor Augustus accepted divine honors in his lifetime. Nero's coins hailed him as the "Savior of the World." Emperor Domitian, for example, was addressed as "Our Lord and God" (*dominus et deus noster*). In pagan thinking, the line between powerful humans and gods is a blurry one. Hence the contrast: the Israelite worldview calls for making clear distinctions, but the beast epitomizes confusion, disorder, and chaos.<sup>29</sup>

In ancient Israel, one key duty of priests was to guide people in distinguishing the holy from the common. Israel was to be a "kingdom of priests" living by higher standards than the rest of the world (Ex 19:6). The Israelites were allowed to eat clean animals but ordered to avoid unclean ones. They were not to plant multiple types of crops together. Men were not to wear women's clothing and vice versa. The commandment not to mix wool and linen in clothing also highlights these kinds of distinctions. God separated the land from the sea, night from day, Israel from the nations—the list of

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<sup>29</sup> Mounce, 245-246.

distinctions goes on and on. Israel's God is a God of order. Conflating what should be separated creates disorder and works against God. According to Revelation, the beast himself is a mixture of multiple animals: "a leopard... a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion" (Rev 13:2).

The dragon, whom God permitted to wreak havoc for a time, gave the beast of the sea his great power and authority. As we saw above, Revelation has a special connection with the prophetic book of Daniel. Creative interaction between these two books occurs on many levels, and quite a bit of visionary imagery overlaps. In Daniel 7:3-8 the lion, bear, leopard, and terrifying beast represent four successive kingdoms. In Revelation 13, these multiple images are applied to the single beast of the sea (13:2). The blending of the four of Daniel's beasts into one suggests increased power and a prolonged reign of the monster in Revelation.<sup>30</sup>

***[I saw] one of his heads as if it had been fatally wounded [or slain] and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed [and followed] after the beast. (Rev 13:3)***

John sees one of the seven heads of the beast being fatally wounded, and yet, to his amazement and discouragement, it simply heals itself! This results in "the whole earth"—which, in biblical parlance, signifies a great number of people—being led astray by the seemingly indestructible beast. Revelation

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<sup>30</sup> Beale and Campbell, 268.

calls the wound “fatal” because, according to a literal rendering of the Greek, the beast appeared “as slain to death” (ὡς ἐσφαγμένην εἰς θάνατον; *hos esfagmenein eis thanaton*; Rev 13:3). This is an idiomatic way of speaking that echoes the Lamb in Revelation 5:6 who was similarly “standing as slain” (ἑστηκὸς ὡς ἐσφαγμένον; *hestekos hos esfagmenon*).

Both the beast and the Lamb were wounded, and this brush with death contributed to their appearance. There is deliberate mirroring between the beast and the Lamb in Revelation. Who wounded the beast? The strike seems to have come from God since the “wound” (πληγή; *pleigei*) is the same as the Greek word for “plague”—and as any good Bible reader knows, God has a history of sending “plagues” on his enemies.

The head injury to the beast was caused by the Messiah himself.<sup>31</sup> The image of the seed (עֲרֵב; *zerah*) of Eve Genesis and the seed of the serpent (נָחָשׁ; *nachash*) may be the contexts for this circumstance:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will bruise your head, and you will bruise their heel. (Gen 3:15)

Revelation 13:3 also echoes the poetic text of Isaiah 27, which connects the protection of God’s people

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<sup>31</sup> Beale and Campbell, 269-270.

(the vineyard of beauty) to the defeat of Leviathan (לִיַּתָּן), an ancient “monster” (תַּנִּינִי; *tanin*) who lives in the sea and “serpent” (נָחָשׁ; *nachash*) in Hebrew and “dragon” (δράκων; *drakon*) in Greek:

On that day, the LORD will punish Leviathan, the fleeing serpent with His fierce and great and mighty sword, even Leviathan the twisted serpent, and He will kill the dragon who [lives] in the sea. On that day, they will refer to [or answer her] “A vineyard of beauty.” I, the LORD, am its keeper; I water it every moment. So that no one will damage it, I guard it night and day. (Isa 27:1-3)

The result of the beast’s show of self-healing power appears in the following verse of Revelation:

***And they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?’ (Rev 13:4)***

Revelation presents several parallels between the Lamb and this beast:

- α. Both are slain and then raised to new life (cf. 5:6; 13:3)
- β. Both have followers with their names written on their foreheads (cf. 13:16; 14:1)
- γ. Both have horns (cf. 5:6; 13:1).

7. Both have authority over every “tribe, tongue, people, and nation” (compare 5:9; 7:9 with 13:7; 17:12, 15).
7. Both receive worldwide worship (cf. 5:8-14; 13:4, 8)
1. Both have a final coming or manifestation, though one is to destruction and the other to eternal victory (see 17:7-18)

As we mentioned in our previous commentary on Revelation, some see the beast of Rev 13 as a representation of Emperor Nero.<sup>32</sup> It is not an exact correspondence, but Nero could represent any evil power of past, present, and future that opposes Israel’s God. For Jews, Nero was a perfect summation of everything that is wicked and was, therefore, a prime example of the persecutors throughout Israel’s painful history. We will go into further details about Nero as the beast later in this chapter.

In Revelation 6, the persecuted believers and martyrs wondered how much longer the LORD would allow such evil to prevail. The answer they received was an acknowledgment of their pain and an assurance that evil was currently being allowed to reign, but not for much longer:

When [the Lamb] broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been killed because of the word of God, and because of the

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. “Hebrew Insights from Revelation,” for more detail.

testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O ADONAI (יהוה), holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who live on the earth?’ And a white robe was given to each of them; and they were told that they were to rest for a little while longer, until [the number of] their fellow servants and their brothers [and sisters] who were to be killed even as they [had been], was completed also. (Rev 6:9-11)

We have seen in earlier chapters how the lives of the martyrs were awaiting justice; the author of the Apocalypse expects that divine vengeance will arrive eventually. With this hope in mind, let us now return to Revelation 13.

***A mouth was given to him speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him. And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, [that is,] those who dwell in heaven. (Rev 13:5-6)***

The multiple crowns (or “diadems”) the beast wears symbolize his claim to earthly power and authority. The Messiah himself wears multiple crowns in Revelation 19:12, 16. The blasphemous names written on the beast’s heads represent its claim to divine kingship. Revelation presents the beast this

way in order to provide a negative counterfeit to the Messiah's positive characteristics (compare Rev 13:1 with 17:3 and 13:7-13 with 1:5; 17:14; 19:12-16).<sup>33</sup> A mouth, the ability to speak, and any authority that the beast has was "given to him." In other words, the beast is only able to act if enabled to do so. He is under the control of God and cannot act independently.

***It was also given to him to make war with the holy ones [saints] and to overcome them, and authority was given to him over every tribe, people, language, and nation. (Rev 13:7)***

The influence of the beast will be broad, encompassing all people groups and languages. The beast of the sea will win many battles, but the Lamb and his army, comprised of the "holy ones" (τῶν ἁγίων; *ton hagion*) of the Most High God, will eventually win the war. The time for this comeback has not yet come.

***All who live on the earth will worship him, [every one] whose name has not been written since the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slaughtered. (Rev 13:8)***

We are told that there will be worldwide worship of the beast, but true believers (now a minority in the narrative world of Revelation) must not be moved from the one God. The cause of such worship is that the names of these worshippers were never written

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<sup>33</sup> Beale and Campbell, 268.

in the heavenly Book of Life (βίβλος τῆς ζωῆς; *biblos teis zoeis*). Yet even though the entire world worships the beast, YHVH and his appointed King of Israel (Jesus) have everything under control.

The notion of a divine Book of Life predates Revelation. One of the most famous instances of this heavenly scroll appears in 1 Enoch:

You who have observed (the law) shall wait patiently in all the days until (the time of) those who work evil is completed, and the power of the wicked ones is ended. As for you, wait patiently until sin passes away, **for the names of (the sinners) shall be blotted out from the Book of Life and the books of the Holy One**; their seeds shall be destroyed forever, and their spirits shall perish and die; they shall cry and lament in a place that is an invisible wilderness and burn in the fire—for ground, there exists also as on earth. (1 Enoch 108:2-3)

The recording of names in the “Book of Life” ( סֵפֶר חַיִּים, *sefer chayim*) is an ancient Jewish concept inspired by biblical texts (Isa 65:6; Ps 56:8; 139:16; Dan 7:10). Even today, every year, as the Day of Atonement approaches, Jews around the world wish for one another, “May your name be written in the Book of Life!” The record, however, is not static. Names can be inscribed or removed from the book,



and it is the duty of humans to remain faithful to God throughout their lifetimes.

*If anyone has an ear, let him hear. If anyone [is destined] for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone who is to die by the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faithfulness [faith] of the holy ones [saints]. (Rev 13:9-10)*

This section concludes with a summary statement along the lines of “Whatever will be, will be.” Some things must come about exactly as they were foreseen, a paraphrase of Jer 15:2 and 43:11.<sup>34</sup> The holy ones of the Most High must persevere regardless of circumstances. In the end, their ability to maintain a faith that is manifest in Christ will reflect their identities as true children of God.

In 4 Maccabees (a Jewish text roughly contemporaneous with Revelation), we read the story of a mother and seven brothers, and Eleazar, the priest tormented by wicked king Antiochus to turn them to pagan worship, yet they overcame him through their “endurance” (ὕπομονή; *hupomonei*):

All people, even their torturers, marveled at their courage and endurance, and they became the cause of the downfall of tyranny over their nation. **By their endurance, they**

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<sup>34</sup> Beale and Campbell, 277.

**conquered the tyrant**, and thus, their native land was purified through them. (4 Macc 1:11)

Back in Revelation, John switches gears and describes another creature: the beast of the earth.

***Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke like a dragon. (Rev 13:11)***

This beast of the earth is different from the beast of the sea, and its descriptions are less ominous. Yet, in the end, he proves to be deviously deceptive and sinister insofar as “he looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon!” This second beast is just as evil and just as dangerous as the first beast. Its less frightening appearance is a trick. The motif of beasts counterfeiting messianic characteristics continues. In a bid to deceive Jesus-followers, the forces of evil will try to adopt the outward appearance of Christ as the Lamb.

***He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who live on it worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of the sky to the earth in the presence of people. And he deceives those who live on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who live on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the***

**wound of the sword and has come to life. (Rev 13:12-14)**

Later in Revelation, this beast of the earth (the second beast) is called the “false prophet” (Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). In Israel, prophets’ primary purpose was to return their people to sincere worship of the one true God. This beast does the opposite. He forces the worship of the first beast and, by extension, the satanic dragon. During his lifetime, Jesus himself warned about the coming false prophets (Matt 7:15; 24:5), who are wolves in sheep’s clothing, or in this case, a dragon in lamb’s appearance (Rev 14:11, 12).<sup>35</sup>

The second beast performs great signs and facilitates the worship of the first beast. Rev 13:14 calls the wound of the sea-beast a “wound of the sword” or “knife” (τὴν πληγὴν τῆς μαχαίρης; *ten plegen tes machaires*), which implies that this beast was stabbed. Since we know that Nero opted to commit suicide by stabbing himself rather than undergo public execution, the imagery of a stabbed beast supports the likelihood that it represents Nero.

(Nero) drove a dagger into his throat, aided by Epaphroditus, his private secretary. He was all but dead when a centurion rushed in, and as he placed a cloak to the wound, pretending that he had come to aid him, Nero merely gasped: "Too late!" and "This is

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<sup>35</sup> Beale and Campbell, 279.

fidelity!" With these words, he was gone... he (Nero) had forced from his companions a promise... that he be buried unmutilated... He was buried... His ashes were deposited by his nurses... in the family tomb of the Domitii on the summit of the Hill of Gardens... (Suetonius, *The Lives of Twelve Caesars*, Life of Nero, 49-50)

Initially, the beast appeared as slain and then was healed. Now, the beast will appear to be alive.

***And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause all who do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. (Rev 13:15)***

The second beast does something extraordinary: it gives the manufactured “image” (εἰκών; *eikon*) of the first beast the breath of life and the ability to speak. According to Genesis 2:7, God animates the first human by imparting the divine breath of life. Here, the people make the image of the first beast, and the second beast gives it life.

The image itself should remind us of the king’s vision of the great “image” (תְּזֵלֶם; *tzelem*) in Daniel 2:13 and the golden “statue” (תְּזֵלֶם; *tzelem*) that he erected in Daniel 3:1. This image was also to be worshiped upon pain of death. Daniel contains the blueprint for Revelation’s same story, but in the Apocalypse, the image speaks.

Now we come to probably the most iconic text in the entirety of Revelation, one which is widely known in popular culture.

***And he causes all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, and the free and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, and [he decrees] that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, [either] the name of the beast or the number of his name. (Rev 13:16-17)***

The beast of the earth, acting on the authority of the beast of the sea, has established the near-universal worship of the first beast. This worshipful loyalty is indicated outwardly by a mark on the right hand and forehead. The overwhelming majority of the population accept this beastly sign since no one can partake in local or regional economies without it. The mark is either the name of the beast or a number representing its name.

This notion of a “mark” is reminiscent of Jewish prayer boxes called *Tefillin* in Hebrew or “phylacteries” in the Greek of Matt 23:5. Since Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 state that God’s commands should be bound to the hand and “between the eyes,” many observant Jews say daily prayers with small boxes containing Scripture affixed with leather straps upon their left hands and foreheads. As a visual symbol, *Tefillin* signifies complete allegiance to the LORD in thought and

deed. Even with Revelation's obvious parallels to this prayerful practice, parody is at play. The beastly mark is placed on the *right* hand; the *opposite* hand from the one used for tying *Tefillin* (at least in later Rabbinic tradition).

But what does receiving the mark of the beast mean? Taking the above description into consideration, accepting the mark of the beast is an act of surrender to the pagan society that is opposed to the God of Israel. The mark is a tangible expression of an ongoing commitment to principles that are anti-God in thought, word, and deed; thereby promoting a posture that is the exact opposite of the Jewish Tefillin custom.

***Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man, and his number is six hundred and sixty-six. (Rev 13:18)***

The name of the beast is shrouded in a numerical code that reflects an ancient Jewish interpretive method. Gematria assigns the numerical values of Hebrew letters to words, phrases, and sentences. Then, by adding those values together, it seeks to determine the “deeper” or “concealed” meaning of the text.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes, the interpretive results of this method can be far-fetched, but at other times, a clearer conclusion can emerge. A form of this

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<sup>36</sup> We explain this method and the 666 encoding in our earlier book, *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*, in additional detail.

interpretive tradition can be traced back to the first-century Gospel of Matthew.

The numerical value of the Hebrew characters forming the name of the most famous king of Israel – David (דָּוִד) – is 14. Here’s how it works:

$$ד (4) + ו (6) + ד (4) = 14$$

Matthew’s Gospel separates its opening genealogy into three groups of 14 names to tie Jesus to David numerically. In this way, the evangelist underscores Jesus’ identity as the messianic “son of David” (Matt 1:1):

Thus, there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.  
(Matt 1:17)

In Matthew’s genealogy, the key interpretive number is fourteen, but readers of Revelation are confronted with the number 666. Although the imagery of Revelation’s beast is almost certainly not limited to the text’s first-century context alone, a compelling conclusion emerges when we combine Gematria with ancient history. Caesar Nero was a bloodthirsty persecutor of early Christ-followers. When his name and title are transliterated into Hebrew (נֵרוֹן קֶסָר; *Neron Kesar*), the moniker has the numeric value of 666.

If the original identification of the beast as Emperor Nero is correct, then this would explain why several of the early manuscripts of Revelation (for example, Papyrus 115) has the number as 616 instead of 666. The alternative number probably arose from the spelling of Nero's name in Latin (*Nero*) rather than the Hebrew version (*Nerōn*) spelled in Greek letters. In its Latin pronunciation, the Hebrew *nun* (נ), the last letter, has a numerical value of 50; without it, the emperor's title comes to 616.

The depiction of the name of the beast as 616 likely represents a scribal adaptation of 666 (perhaps for clarification for differing audiences). The overwhelming majority of Revelation manuscripts have 666 as the number of the beast, and this number most likely represents the original version of the text (modeled after its Hebrew pronunciation with the "n" at the end).

In conclusion, the number of the beast, 666, is a profound symbol steeped in historical context and the ancient interpretive tradition of Gematria. Although its original reference may have been the infamous Emperor Nero, the beast of Revelation has evolved into a symbolic representation of all those who have persecuted, and may still persecute, God's people throughout history. This number, embedded in the fabric of Revelation, serves as a stark reminder of the struggle between good and evil, a constant theme throughout the pages of history. It is a testament to the timeless relevance of biblical text,



its symbols transcending centuries and resonating with generations past, present, and possibly future.

## **Reaping Wrath**

Chapter 14 marks a breakthrough for God's people in the story of Revelation. Until now (especially in chapters 11-13), God's people were persecuted and oppressed. Evil, though temporary, seemed to have free reign. From an outsider's perspective, God's people had hoped for help in vain. But Revelation 14 marks the beginning of the end for the kingdom of darkness.

***Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000 who had His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. (Rev 14:1-2)***

In Hebrew, *Tzion* (תִּיּוֹן), Mount Zion, means the “mount of God's marking” or the “mount marked by God.” God's word through Isaiah placed Mount Zion at the epicenter of God's redemption:

Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of YHVH will be established as the chief of the mountains... And many peoples will come and say, “Come, let's go up

to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; so that He may teach us about His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.” For the Torah [instruction] will go out from Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isa 2:1-3)

The 144,000-soldier army of God’s people had every single soldier marked with the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father on their foreheads. We have discussed these marks already, but now their status aligns with a geographical location. The Lord God was with them. Why were they standing on Mount Zion? They were preparing themselves for battle as they heard the sounds that John compares to thunder and harps.

***And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one was able to learn the song except the 144,000 who had been purchased from the earth. These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are celibate. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from mankind as first fruits to God and to the Lamb. And no lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (Rev 14:3-5)***

Songs have played a crucial role in the history of armies throughout the ages. They still serve as a powerful tool for boosting morale and even creating

a rhythm for marching in formation. They instill a sense of unity and provide soldiers with a source of inspiration and motivation. Amid the chaos and hardships of war, songs have acted as a reminder of the camaraderie between soldiers and have provided a much-needed escape from the harsh realities of battle. Whether it be marching songs, patriotic anthems, or ballads of love and longing, the importance of songs for armies cannot be underestimated. So, while we can only guess all these details, we have some general understanding of the songs of warriors. They can uplift spirits, forge strong bonds, and ultimately contribute to the success of military campaigns.

In addition, many times, in the Scriptures, Israel priests lead Israel's army with songs of praise. For example, in Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat of Judah finds his kingdom threatened by a vast enemy force. In response, he seeks God's guidance and leads the people in prayer. As they march into battle, Jehoshaphat appoints priests at the front of the army, singing praises to God. Their songs express trust in God's deliverance. As they begin to sing, the LORD sets ambushes against the enemy, resulting in their defeat. This unique battle strategy underscores the power of faith, praising God even in the face of adversity and the belief that victory comes from the LORD.

We have already offered some insightful commentary on this passage. Suffice it to note here that the army's ability to sing the new song that no

one else can sing undergirds their special status. There is no question that their leading characteristic is their full and unquestionable devotion to their King. Their whole being has been dedicated to His service.

***And I saw another angel flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth and to every nation, tribe, language, and people; and he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, and sea and springs of waters.” (Rev 14:6-7)***

In Revelation, angelic proclamations play a significant role in uncovering divine messages and unveiling the unfolding events of the end times. These proclamations are characterized by their awe-inspiring nature, often accompanied by heavenly visions and supernatural phenomena. The angels in Revelation serve as messengers of God, delivering urgent warnings, pronouncing judgments, and declaring the ultimate victory of God over evil. Their words are marked with celestial authority that conveys the divine purpose and plan for humanity's future.

This first angel announces the eternal gospel – the good news to everyone living on the earth. The final call is to worship YHVH, and not his counterfeits like the dragon and beast. All nations are given one last chance to begin fearing God and worshipping the

Almighty alone. Why is this gospel called eternal? Because this message has been proclaimed to humanity across the ages by many of the righteous. The call to acknowledge the one true God is not new. Humanity has been facing this choice for a long time. As the first heavenly being flew and announced his message, John saw another angel following the first, saying,

***Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality. (Rev 14:8)***

Wars are fought in valleys, fields, hills, swamps, and forests, and every other terrain of contested territory, but victories are declared only when the governments are toppled in the capital cities. The second angel announced in a loud voice the hope of many generations of God's people – the “sacking” of Babylon. The capital of the evil empire has fallen. Its government, and therefore, its ability to do evil and violence on an industrial level, is no more. Which Babylon has fallen? John and his audience are most likely thinking of their own Babylon, Rome.

Overall, this proclamation in Revelation serves as a theological warning against embracing immoral and wicked governments, a sociological reminder of the influence of dominant powers over societies, and a geopolitical commentary on the rise and fall of powerful entities in the world. It calls for individuals and nations to remain steadfast in their

commitment to righteousness and resist the allure of corrupt systems. One big takeaway here: there is no victory for God's people without the destruction of God's enemies, be they human or otherwise.

***Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. (Rev 14:9-11)***

The third angel follows the second in his warning to the people who are currently worshiping the beast and his image. Just as pagan worshipers shared in the beast's glory, they will now share in his shame. Fire and brimstone are certainly forecasting immense pain. But the emphasis here is on the ample, yet ignored, opportunities to repent. This proclamation, however, is not merely for those who side with the beast, but for the people of God who can take courage that their Christocentric suffering will not be in vain. A voice from heaven commands John:

***Write: “Blessed are the dead who die in the LORD from now on!’ Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.” (Rev 14:13)***

Throughout Revelation, there is a consistent message of the promise of spiritual protection for God’s people. However, physical protection is not always guaranteed. The book portrays a world amid intense spiritual warfare, in which war is inevitable. In this battle, God’s people are called to be courageous warriors who are fully committed to their commander and the cause he represents. They are willing to offer the ultimate sacrifice, even their own lives, without hesitation.

***Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, with a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.” Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. (Rev 14:14-16)***

The scene of flying angels transitions into a vision of someone sitting on a cloud who looks like a son of man, a human, crowned with a golden crown. He is getting his sickle ready for the harvest. We are not told who this son of man is. The crown is a symbol of royal authority. A “sickle” (*drepanon*;

δρέπανον) is a curved tool used for harvesting. The image of the harvest underlines that the time has come to its fullness.<sup>37</sup>

In another apocalyptic Jewish text, 4 Ezra, harvest is connected to anticipation and divine timing. The harvest is also tied to rewards and recompense. In this passage, those who are dead are patiently waiting in *Hades* (Sheol) and will be released from that place to receive what is owed to them. The harvest is here; evil has run its course. The time for judgment has come:

For the evil about which you ask me has been sown, but the harvest of it has not yet come. If therefore that which has been sown is not reaped, and if the place where the evil has been sown does not pass away, the field where the good has been sown will not come.... Then I answered and said, “How long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil?” He answered me and said, “You do not hasten faster than the Most High, for your haste is for yourself, but the Highest hastens on behalf of many. Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, ‘How long are we to remain here? And when will come

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<sup>37</sup> Harvesting means gathering but in ancient Hebrew, the term harvest (קָטִיזַר, *katizir*) is likely related to the root that means to “awaken” or to “become active” (קָץ).



the harvest of our reward?’ And Yeremiel the archangel answered them and said, ‘When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.’” (4 Ezra 4:28-37)

4 Ezra envisions the time when the earth’s harvest is being reaped because the time for ingathering has come. The harvest should not be gathered before its time. Thus, harvesting is a sure sign that no further delay can take place. Missing the exact time of the harvest means a forfeited crop. And such forfeiture does not happen with God.

*And another angel came out of the temple, which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. Then another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar; and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, “Put in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.” So, the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered [the clusters] from the vine of the earth and threw [them] into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trampled outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses’ bridles, for a distance of 1,600 stadia. (Rev 14:17-20)*

The angels come in and out of the heavenly temple, with at least one of them tasked with the responsibilities of fire and altar. This can mean only one thing – these angels are heavenly priests taking part in the heavenly priestly services. It appears that the son of man is harvesting with his sharp sickle, and multiple angels are prompting him on what needs to be done next.

The wine press is another harvest and yet another symbol of judgment. John calls it the “wine press of God’s wrath” because that is what it represents. The winepress yields ‘not grape juice’ but blood. The description of the level that blood reaches being 5-6 feet (or 1 ½ to 2 meters) deep for 200 miles (or 300 kilometers) denotes extreme, and likely hyperbolic, bloodshed. The massive scale of the judgment is clear.

The apocalyptic narrative of 4 Ezra uses the harvest as a symbol of divine judgment and recompense, signifying an inevitable reckoning where the righteous and wicked receive their due. This allegory emphasizes that divine justice, like a harvest, cannot be hastened but will arrive at the right time. The depiction of angels reaping earth's vine from the heavenly temple underscores the severity of this judgment, further intensified by "God's wrath" and descriptions of bloodshed.

This text serves as a reminder of moral responsibility, individual consequences, and the importance of righteous conduct, stressing that

divine justice is inevitable. This symbol of the harvest, prevalent in many religious texts, here it reinforces the concept of divine justice. This theme of justice and the restoration that follows it will be explored in the following chapters (in our next book).

## In Closing

As we come to the end of this study, we conclude it with a sense of awe, having explored many ideas that we did not consider prior. This does not mean that we have arrived at a complete level of understanding on all of these matters. But this does mean that we took important steps in the right direction. Obviously, this work is introductory in nature and invites both of us (the authors) and you (the readers) to examine all the things we talked about in greater depth.

Moreover, you can see that this book covered chapters 6-14, having built on the previous book *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*, covering Revelation 1-5. We stopped at Revelation 14. This means that you should expect one last volume in these series, covering Revelation 15-22. We have called it *Hebrew Kingdom in Revelation*. We look forward to reconnecting with you once that volume is released.

## REQUEST

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