

## Revelation 8:6-12 – The First Four Trumpets

### What the images of the Egyptian Plagues tell us about God’s purpose

Events are harder to interpret than words. I wonder if some of us interpret things that happen as signs either than God is happy with us or angry? God’s promises in the Gospel however are not ambiguous. Have you ever thought about why we sometimes attach more weight to events than to the Word of God? Do you know what a “plague” is? It’s not a synonym for disease. It comes from a word meaning “to strike” or “smite”.<sup>i</sup> In my personal Bible reading this week, I was in Exodus and struck with the similarity between the 10 plagues and these 7 trumpets. Many Bible scholars have commented on the obvious Exodus source to the images in the trumpet judgements.<sup>ii</sup> In Exodus, God was judging Egypt in order to free His people from slavery. It also struck me that Jesus is still setting His people free. Slavery robbed Israel of freedom, obviously, but also of hope. The Egyptians were hard masters to the people of Israel. They imposed a strict quota of how many bricks they had to produce. When Moses came along and Israel started to dream of freedom, the Egyptians also forced them to go and find their own supplies for bricks, without giving them any break on the production quota (Ex 5:4-22). Then God spoke to Moses: **[read Ex 6:5-9]**

Slavery crushed their spirits and robbed them of hope. So that they did not even believe God could save them. The next verse in Exodus is powerful: **"So the LORD said to Moses,** 'Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land.'" That word, "so" means that one of the reasons God punished Egypt with plagues until Pharaoh released the Israelites from slavery was because the oppression they endured made them doubt God could save them. God was about to reveal His power in great acts of judgement in order that His children would trust Him and His enemies would fear Him. Ex 7 says that God was going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let Israel go until all the plagues were finished, so that the people of Egypt would no longer doubt God's power.

- The hail and fire in verse 7 comes from the seventh plague in Exodus 9.
- The sea becoming blood in verse 8 is from the first plague in Ex 7, as is the undrinkable water in verse 11.
- The darkness in verse 12 comes from the ninth plague in Ex 10.

This is so obvious that it seems to me that anybody reading about these trumpet judgements in the fifth century, or in the 21st century, should see the similarity with the plagues of Egypt and draw the same conclusion that many of the Egyptians did 1500 years before John wrote Revelation: Ex 9:20 says that some Egyptians "feared the word of the LORD" and then got ready for the hailstorm Moses predicted, while others "did not pay attention to the word of the LORD" so that their livestock and servants died in the hailstorm. Over the next weeks I will be showing how all seven trumpet judgements have already come true, but should that mean they are irrelevant to us? Should we stop paying attention to Bible prophecy that's already happened? No, we should learn from what has happened to others, to pay attention to the Word of the LORD, to fear Him, and to believe Him when He promises He will save us. So what is the “Word of the LORD” that these judgements teach us to pay attention to? The Gospel. Matthew Henry points out,

“When the Gospel comes to a people and is coldly received and does not properly affect their hearts and lives, it is usually followed with dreadful judgments. God gives warning to people

about his judgments before he sends them. He sounds an alarm through his written Word, through ministers, through people's consciences, and through the signs of the times, so that if people are taken unawares, it is their own fault."<sup>iii</sup>

That's the point of the seven trumpet judgements of the Lamb: pay attention to the Gospel—in it, God promises to save everyone who believes in Jesus. But for everyone who disdains the Gospel, or treats it casually, these judgements are just a taste of the Day of Judgement still to come. That's why, after the first six seals were opened by the Lamb, there is an interlude in chapter 7 to show John all the people God was preparing to save. That's why that glimpse of the end of time (Rev 7:9-17) was taken from the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrating the way God led Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land—it shows how many people God will eventually save! That's why when the Lamb opened the seventh seal John saw a picture of the Day of Atonement, where Christ has already paid for our sins and every believer can now come in person to the throne of Grace—it shows how God saves His people through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ! Did you know in Jewish tradition, at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, looking back on how God brought Israel into the Promised Land, the priests would blow seven trumpets and the people would shout, "Hosanna!", looking forward to when God would save them in the future. These trumpets call people to pray to God for salvation—"Hosanna!"—and announce judgement. The trumpet judgements beginning in the fifth century were because people refused the Gospel. Don't make the same mistake.

### Hail and fire (v7)

The images of hail and fire are drawn from the seventh plague God sent on Egypt through Moses. The "fire" described in that passage is what we call lightning. And that original scene helps us understand this one. God took natural things and made them a weapon to free His people from captivity in Egypt. Don't miss that here in Revelation: while the images are about natural disasters, they are also images of divine warfare. Against a real human enemy. The seven trumpets in verse 6, a snapshot borrowed from the Battle of Jericho in Joshua 6, suggest that God is going to war against another "Jericho"—a city preventing God's people from entering the Promised Land. When Rome took a caricature of the Gospel and re-made Christianity into a mere religion of works, it kept, and still keeps, countless people from discovering God's promises. So there are elements here of both Jericho and Egypt. This looks like it's going to be an epic battle! But again keep in mind that the hail and fire and blood are symbols thrown on a stage, a symbolic "land" or "earth". They predict real earthly events, just like the six seals did, and we should expect these symbols to be fulfilled sometime not too long after the sixth seal (which brought us up to about the year 395AD, when Rome was ruled by the "Christian" king, Theodosius). When the Holy Spirit takes these images from the seventh Egyptian plague, we should understand that whatever they predict should never be understood as just random historical events, but as a "plague" sent by God. The fact that the plague is symbolized as "hail" recalls other passages like Isaiah 28:2, where a hailstorm is a symbol for armies coming from the north to wipe out Samaria. Finally, the description, "mixed with blood" suggests that the result of this plague is human bloodshed, not just ruined trees and grass.

At a time when many so-called Christians were embracing the Arian heresy, an Arian named Alaric, King of the Visigoths invaded Italy—from the North of course. His army laid waste to Italy three times in the first decade of the 400's, burning cities and destroying the countryside with what looked like an invading nation migrating behind him.<sup>iv</sup> About the same time, another barbarian named Radagaisus led Vandal armies to attack and raid and destroy parts of Italy. A hailstorm is an appropriate image for the trampled

country these invasions left behind. Alaric is even famous for saying that the people of Rome were like thick grass easier to mow down!<sup>v</sup> Rome had not been attacked by foreigners for 600 years. This was monumental. The beginning of the end of the Empire.

### A mountain on fire (vv8-9)

Mountains in Old Testament prophecy often refer to powerful Kingdoms, as God declares about Babylon in Jeremiah 51:25, [read]. We might picture a volcano, burning from the inside out. This invading kingdom falls on the sea, destroying creatures in connection with maritime battles, war on the high seas, so that verse 9 specifically mentions the destruction of a third of the fleet (probably meaning a big part but not all of the fleet, because the final destruction is still to come). And the sea turning to blood is another reminder that this invasion by sea is not a random accident of history, but a judgement from the hand of God, just like when He turned the Nile River into blood to punish Egypt.

Forty years after the Gothic invasions, the Vandals attacked in force from across the sea in North Africa, “burning the Roman Navy at sea”<sup>vi</sup> and sacking the city of Rome. H.G. Wells summarized the invasion of the Vandals like this: “The Vandals of the south of Spain, under their king Genseric, embarked *en masse* for North Africa (429), became masters of Carthage (439), secured mastery of the sea, raided, captured, and pillaged Rome (455)...”<sup>vii</sup> Again let me say that history matches the symbols beautifully, and in order.

### A falling star (vv10-11)

As we’ve seen in Revelation so far, “stars” are a symbol full of meaning in this vision. In Rev 1:20, Jesus interprets the seven stars in His right hand as the “angels” or “messengers” He sent to His churches—in chapter 2-3 we discover they were the pastors of those churches that received the seven letters from Jesus and were charged with reading them to their churches. But then in chapter 6, “stars” falling from the sky stand for pagan leaders in Rome falling from their positions of power where they governed the people of Rome in the names of their false gods. Like the fall of the King of Babylon, in Isaiah 14:4 and 12, is represented like this, as a blazing, fallen star.<sup>viii</sup> Now in chapter 8, the symbol is a single, great star falling in a fiery blaze, not falling from power, but falling with power upon Rome. An invading ruler conquering in the name of his god.

The symbols so far are the hail and fire, the burning mountain, and the falling star. They fall on land, sea, and rivers. Just like “the land” represent the actual land of the Empire, here the sea and rivers are about the actual geography of these events. A real sea with boats and real rivers flowing from their sources. These waters are contaminated (The Greek word *absinthe* translated as “wormwood” means the water became poisonous and bitter like the plant *artemisia absinthe*)<sup>ix</sup> and are found on land. Between 451-452AD, Attila the Hun and his Mongol army invaded Italy, ravaging and destroying cities as they followed the rivers from their springs in the Alps along the plains of northern Italy, leaving the waters polluted with death and disease. E.B. Elliott says many people died “that drank of the waters, through famine, disease, and pestilence.”<sup>x</sup> Refugees fleeing that destruction became the founders of the city of Venice.<sup>xi</sup> Among Attila’s followers he was revered as “a superhuman representative of Mars, the... god of war.”<sup>xii</sup> So we have a superhuman legend, rivers and springs, and diseased waters fulfilling the third trumpet.

### Darkness in the heavens (v12)

As we learned under the sixth seal in chapter 6, the symbols of “sun, moon, and stars” refer to the highest governmental authorities—the imagery comes from ancient astrology and the belief that kings

represented astrological gods. For example, in Eze 32:7-8, God declares that He will destroy Pharaoh king of Egypt using these same pictures—not about the end of the world, but about the end of that kingdom, fulfilled when Persia conquered Egypt: [read Eze 32:7-8]. So here, these symbols depict the final fall of the ancient king and government of Rome as the culmination of the first four trumpets. And it's here that we get an insight into the repetition of the words, "the third" of the land, sea, rivers, and light. About the year 400, the empire had three parts.<sup>xiii</sup> When Rome finally fell to the barbarians, the Western Empire, one of the three subdivisions of the whole,<sup>xiv</sup> fell with it. One third had already fallen to the barbarians, the eastern part lasted much longer under Constantinople.<sup>xv</sup>

In 476, Odoacer king of the Heruli invaded Rome itself, deposed the last of the Caesars, made himself the first King of Italy, and ended the old Roman Empire. The Senate was finally abolished 100 years later.<sup>xvi</sup> All four trumpet judgements contributed to the collapse and overthrow of Rome and the Western third of the Empire: Alaric the Visigoth, Genseric the Vandal, Attila the Hun, and Odoacer the Heruli. Jericho fell to seven trumpets (Josh 6), the city of Rome fell under the first four trumpets—yet the people still did not turn to Jesus. Many denied His divinity, most ignored His Gospel.

Exodus 6:9 says that when the people of Israel were slaves, they were not able to believe God would or could save them, "because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery". But then God shows up in real life, in history, and performs great acts of judgement by His own hand, as were predicted in the first four trumpets and fulfilled in the barbarian invasions and overthrow of Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Seeing these prophecies fulfilled, believers and unbelievers are challenged to now "pay attention to the Word of the LORD", and like those wiser Egyptians, to take refuge. The Good News that Jesus is a Saviour to sinners who believe, this is the refuge you and I need. The covenant Jesus makes with sinners, to save us by His grace alone, this, my dear friends, is the hope that breaks the chains of our slavery. Do not receive this Gospel coldly, don't treat lightly this sovereign and holy Lord. Embrace His promises, fall on His mercy, receive His grace, believe in Jesus now while you can.

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<sup>i</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Plague", "History and Etymology" [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plague>]. Accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> "This section of Revelation seems to present the future deliverance of the people of God at the end of history as the final fulfillment of the exodus pattern. The Lord heard the people's "cry for rescue" in Exodus 2:23–25 and delivered his people through the plague judgments at the exodus (Exodus 3–14). Similarly, the prayers of all the saints are presented before the Lord in Revelation 8:3 (cf. 6:9–11), and the Lord will deliver his people from their bondage to corruption through the trumpet (chs. 8–9) and bowl (ch. 16) judgments—which John describes in ways that recall the plagues on Egypt." (Gospel Transformation Notes - Revelation 8) Also c.f. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Revelation 8:6; NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible Notes, Revelation 8:6-9:21, etc.

<sup>iii</sup> Crossway Classic Commentary – Revelation 8:7

<sup>iv</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* 1911, "Alaric"

[[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Alaric](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Alaric)], Accessed October 6, 2018; Wikipedia, "Alaric I" [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaric\\_I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaric_I)]. Accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, "Alaric" *Brittanica*.

<sup>vi</sup> Oral Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus* (Wipf and Stock, 2007), p191.

<sup>vii</sup> H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City, 1920), 482. Quoted in Collins, p191.

<sup>viii</sup> The translation "Lucifer" comes from the mistaken Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew means "shining one" and ancient reference to Venus, and a pagan symbolism for the King of Babylon as Isa 14:4 makes clear in context. Also see the study notes in the NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible, and the ESV Study Bible on Isa 14:12.

<sup>ix</sup> See Louw-Nida Lexicon, #79.43;

<sup>x</sup> E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, Vol. 1. (5<sup>th</sup> Ed., 1862), p382.

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<sup>xi</sup> "Attila", *Wikipedia* [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attila#Invasion\\_of\\_Italy\\_and\\_death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attila#Invasion_of_Italy_and_death)]. Accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>xii</sup> Collins, 191.

<sup>xiii</sup> As of 400AD, the Eastern Empire, Illyricum, and the Western Empire

[[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Alaric](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Alaric)]. Accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>xiv</sup> C.f. Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol.1 (Prince Press, 2001), p107; and *Wikipedia* for the map of the Western Empire showing also the Eastern Empire, and the other third that had by 476 fallen to the barbarians in Spain and central France [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romulus\\_Augustus#/media/File:628px-Western\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Roman\\_Empires\\_476AD\(3\).PNG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romulus_Augustus#/media/File:628px-Western_and_Eastern_Roman_Empires_476AD(3).PNG)] Accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>xv</sup> See Elliott's argument in *Horae Apocalypticæ*, Vol. 1., 356-365.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Collins, 192.