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The Trumpets In Their Contexts

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Introduction

The fundamental problem the futuristic interpreters have with the book of Revelation is their *assumption* that John describes the end-time events with photographic accuracy and absolute literalness. The Apocalypse, however, portrays what God has “*signified*” through an angel to John (Rev 1:1, NKJV). To take John’s images of future events in absolute literalness is, therefore, to misunderstand at the outset the basic intent of the prophecy. Such a procedure can only lead to speculation.

John presents the future in a complex imagery and symbolism. A key to understanding John’s literary style is His pattern of anticipation and amplification. For instance, Christ’s promises to the conquerors in chapters 2-3 are fulfilled in chapters 21-22. The announcement of Babylon’s fall in chapter 14 is explained later in chapters 16-19. The persecuting beast in chapter 11:7 is described more fully in chapters 13 and 17. John thus uses the technique of interlocking his anticipatory visions in the first half of the book with the end-oriented narrative in the second half. The Apocalypse is a cohesive body, an organic whole that displays a beautiful architectural design.

A major challenge is how to understand the apparent reiterations in the book. The end of this age is described several times (1:7; 6:12-17; 11:15-19; 14:14-20; 19:11-21; 20:11-15). These recurrent visions of the end are part of the design of the author. They forbid the assumption that John describes the

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church age in a straight-line progression. He, rather, presents different perspectives on the end. John describes the seven seals (6-7), the seven trumpets (8-11), and the seven bowls (16-17) as parallel cycles which complement each other and increasingly center on the final events.

The book of Revelation as a whole progresses from promise to fulfillment. This movement resembles the upward movement of a spiral staircase. The series of seals, trumpets and bowls all build on each other. Together they express more adequately the complexity of the church age than any one of the cycles alone. Each cycle reveals its own emphasis on apostasy, judgment, and deliverance. This intensifying pattern reinforces the message of hope for the beleaguered church of Christ. It also counteracts a fatalistic acceptance of all hostilities.

The persecuted church must remember that the glorified Christ is portrayed as an all-powerful Lamb with “seven horns” (5:6). A “horn” in the OT symbolizes political and military power (Deut 33:17; Dan 7:24). The unrealistic imagery of a lamb with seven horns assures God’s people that the apparently defeated Lamb of God now has omnipotent power to judge and to deliver. He has this ability because He *has* triumphed over Satan in heaven and on earth through His testimony and death (5:5, 9). He now reassures His true followers they also “will reign on the earth” (5:10).

John presents the story of apostasy, persecution and deliverance first in the seven seals and the seven trumpets (6-9). Just as Jesus went *twice* through the church age in Matthew 24 [a] vss. 4-14; b] vss. 15-31], so we observe how the risen Christ repeats the basic themes of Matthew 24 in the seals and the trumpets. While the seals inform the reader about the sufferings of the church, the trumpets deal with God’s preliminary judgments on the enemies of His faithful people.

The Introductory Vision of the Trumpets

In Revelation 8:2-6 John presents an introductory vision to show the origin and purpose of the seven trumpets. The scene begins and ends with the announcement that there are seven angels standing before God, each of whom receive a trumpet (8:2, 6). This literary device, an inclusion-introduction, marks the introductory vision as a self-contained unit. It describes the intercessory ministry of Christ and its cessation. The heavenly throne scene in chapter 8 functions in a similar manner as the introductory vision to the seven seals in chapter 5. Just as the twenty-four elders hold “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (5:8)*, so John sees an angel with a golden censer stand at the altar. “He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne” (8:3).

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Pleas of the martyred saints “under the altar” are mentioned in the seals (6:9-10). They cry out for divine vengeance because of the injustice done to them. They are asking God to be “true” to His covenant. The vision of Revelation 8:3-4 thus *parallels the time period of the seals in Revelation 6*. The vision refers to the ongoing intercessory ministry of Christ in heaven, because it recalls the daily offering of incense in Israel’s sanctuary service (Exod 30:1, 7-8).

The theme of the introductory vision to the trumpets carries the assurance that Christ hears the prayer requests of His oppressed people, as is stated in Hebrews 4:14-16. Although the prayers of all the saints rise directly to God, they need the essential “incense” from God’s own altar. This incense represents the divine propitiation for our sins. John writes of Christ: “He is the atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos*, propitiation] for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10). Ellen White offers this practical application: “Morning and evening the heavenly universe behold every household that prays, and the angel with the incense, representing the blood of the atonement, finds access to God.”¹

The introductory vision ends with a scene describing the cessation of the angel’s ministry of incense, followed by his casting fire from the altar onto the earth, accompanied by thunderclaps, lightnings, and an earthquake:

Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake (Rev 8:5).

In his final act the angel uses the censer no longer for intercession but for judgment: fire without incense. This indicates that the prayers of the saints (in 6:9-11) will be answered by judgments on earth, followed by the appearance of the Judge of all the earth in conjunction with a cosmic earthquake. A striking prototype is found in Ezekiel, who describes a vision of the curse of Yahweh on an impenitent Jerusalem:

The LORD said to the man clothed in linen, “Go in among the wheels beneath the cherubim. *Fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city*” (Ezek 10:2).

The historical context of Ezekiel’s vision may be summarized briefly. Just before the fateful year of 586 B.C., Israel’s God was leaving Jerusalem’s temple with a mighty sound (Ezek 10:4, 5, 18; 11:23). The casting of burning coals symbolized the execution of God’s judgment on

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Jerusalem by means of war and exile (11:8-10). This judgment was the manifestation of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26, which included the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and the scattering of Israel through wars (Lev 26:31-34). The covenant curse implied that God would wage war against His apostate people: "I myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over" (Lev 26:24). Nevertheless, God's covenant would provide mercy for those that repented and confessed their sins (Lev 26:40-45; Ezek 11:16-21).

In Ezekiel's historical setting, the casting of burning coals from God's throne on earth did not symbolize the final judgment but a punitive judgment on Israel, intended to lead her to repentance (see Ezek 11:18-20). John's introductory vision to the seven trumpets in Rev 8:2-6 should be understood against this background of Ezekiel. John's vision covers *both* probationary time and the wrath of God. The series of the trumpets announces not merely the final wrath of God (this comes only under the seventh trumpet), but also a sequence of *restricted judgments*, which harm only one third of the earth (11 times, Rev 8-9). These partial judgments of the first six trumpets are *preliminary warning judgments*. They warn the world concerning the *last* plagues to come and the *unmixed* wrath of God to be poured out at the conclusion of the day of atonement, when no one can enter the temple in heaven (15:1, 5-8).

The first six trumpets are sent from the golden altar of incense before God (9:13). This suggests that probationary time still continues during these six trumpets. The symbolic act of hurling fire from the altar onto the earth indicates the initiation of God's judgments in response to the prayer requests of the saints. The sequence of the six trumpets (chaps. 8-9), culminating in the seventh trumpet (involving the seven last plagues, chaps. 15-16), teaches that the angel's symbolic acts at the altar will have a twofold fulfillment:

1. Calamities of a limited extension during the church age.
2. The last plagues, without mercy, on the worldwide enemies of Christ and His people.

Relationship of the Seals and Trumpets

A challenging question is, When do the trumpets begin in relation to the preceding series of the seals? Are the trumpets completely parallel, and thus simultaneous; or sequential; or only partially parallel? There is no unanimous opinion among Bible scholars on this point. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* reports that the

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favored Adventist interpretation sees “these trumpets retrace, to a large extent, the period of Christian history already covered by the seven churches (chs. 2; 3) and the seven seals (chs. 6; 8:1), and that they emphasize outstanding political and military events during this period.”²

The “sequential” view is also mentioned, according to which the seven trumpet-judgments are poured out on the earth *after* the close of probation. But this view is found unsubstantiated in the biblical context by the Adventist “Daniel and Revelation Committee.” The Committee points out that the events of the end-time gospel proclamation in Revelation 10 and 11:1-14 belong to the sixth trumpet. The conclusion is therefore drawn: “The trumpet events occur in historical, probationary time . . . If the seventh trumpet is tied to the closing up of the gospel work, the gospel dispensation, then the preceding six trumpets must of necessity sound during probationary time.”³

The post-probation view of the trumpets is based on the assumption that the trumpets begin only after the introductory vision of 8:2-6 has expired. This view supposes that the sanctuary scene and the trumpets are portrayed in a chronological sequence. But this assumption is not justified in view of the fact that the *other* introductory sanctuary visions did not expire before each series began: the one preceding the seven churches (chap. 1); the one preceding the seven seals (chap. 5), and the one preceding the seven bowls (chap. 15). *All introductory visions remain active throughout each series.*

Each letter to the seven churches refers back to Christ in John’s inaugural vision of chapter 1; each seal-breaking is the result of Christ’s work in the introductory vision of chapter 5; all seven bowls are poured out while no one can enter the temple (15:8). Consequently, it is a more adequate assumption to view the throne-vision of 8:2-6 as *the abiding active source* for the seven trumpets. Jon Paulien concludes: “It is more likely that John intended the reader to see the intercession at the golden altar as being available right up to the instant the seventh trumpet blows, leading to the finishing of the ‘mystery of God’ (Rev 10:7), that is, the closing up of the gospel (Rom 16:25-27; Eph 3:2-7; 6:19).”⁴

The fact that the *fifth* trumpet refers to “the seal of God” on the foreheads of God’s people (9:4) and seems to coincide with the end-time and sealing of God’s servants in Revelation 7 is a significant feature and indicates the sealing work of chapter 7 and the fifth trumpet are closely connected. Both events can be viewed as historical counterparts which occur in probationary time. Also the *sixth* trumpet has been

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recognized as a strong parallel with the sealing of chapter 7, portraying the demonic counterparts of the 144,000 in a stupendous number of destroying troops (9:13-18).⁵

It is important to observe that God's command for the sealing time, "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of God" (7:3), is *still* effective during the fifth trumpet (9:4), in spite of the fact the earlier trumpets had brought partial harm to the earth, the sea, and the trees ("a third" part, being affected, 8:7-9). The revelation that the *sixth* trumpet-judgment is coming from the angel at the "horns of the golden altar that is before God" (9:13) indicates the first six trumpets cover the whole probationary time of the church age. What each trumpet portrays, with reference to actual human history, must be determined by careful application of each trumpet to the religious and political history of the Christian church from the Roman Empire until the present. The trumpets should not be considered by themselves, in isolation from the larger context of Revelation, if we want to avoid speculative conclusions.

Post-probation View of the Last Plagues

The content of the seventh trumpet is unfolded in the seven bowls of God's final judgment (chaps. 15-16). This is implied in the explicit numbering of the last three trumpets as the three "woes" on the earth dwellers (8:13).

The fifth and sixth trumpets are characterized as the first and the second "woe" (9:12; 11:14), with the announcement that "the third woe is coming soon" (11:14). However, the seventh trumpet does not include any woe, except the declaration, "The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants . . . and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:18). Some interpreters have concluded the seventh trumpet, therefore, lacks the third woe altogether. But others rightly point to John's further revelation that the seven plagues will be the "last woe," because with them "*God's wrath is completed*" (15:1).

Isbon T. Beckwith comments: "The recognition of the bowl-plagues as the third woe has important bearing on the question of the composition of the Apocalypse."⁶ The series of the trumpets is interwoven inextricably with the seven last plagues through John's device of the three woes. As a result, the major portion of Revelation, chapters 8-19, constitutes a unit that unfolds a successive order of God's judgments.

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The critical point in this chronological sequence is the beginning of the seven last plagues, described as the “unmixed” “wrath of God” (Rev 15:1; 14:10, RSV). The phrase “unmixed [*akratos*, undiluted] indicates that the wrath of God will be manifested “in full strength” in the seven last plagues (Rev 14:10; NKJV, NASB). This means that justice is no longer united with grace in “the cup of His wrath.” John stresses the warning that the rejecter of God’s final message will be “tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb” (14:10). This reminds us of God’s judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gen 19:24, 25) and confirms the concept that the plagues come *after* human probation has ended. The statement, “And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever” (14:11), reminds us of God’s destruction of Edom, as a “retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause” (Isa 34:8-10). These OT judgments are apparently alluded to as types of the final outpouring of God’s wrath in the last plagues.

A particular indication of the salvation-historical turning point with the last plagues is the disclosure that *no one can enter* the heavenly temple during that time:

And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed (15:8).

This text teaches that when God’s time has come, the plagues can no longer be delayed by intercessory prayers. The “smoke from the glory of God” reminds us of the Shekinah cloud which was manifested in Israel’s temple as the visible presence of God (see 2 Chron 5:13, 14; 7:1, 2; Ezek 10:2-4). When Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne, while “the temple was filled with smoke” (Isa 6:1, 4), he received messages of doom for an apostate Israel (Isa 6:9-13). Similarly, as soon as John sees the presentation of the “golden bowls filled with the wrath of God,” the temple fills with smoke (15:7-8). The meaning is evident: “The time for intercession is past. God in his unapproachable majesty and power has declared that the end has come. No longer does he stand knocking: he enters to act in sovereign judgment.”⁷

If the seven last plagues constitute the woes of the seventh trumpet, this implies that the previous six trumpets symbolize God’s preliminary judgments which take place *during* the church age. If the bowl-judgments mark the beginning of post-probationary time, then the trumpet-judgments fall within probationary time and cover the church age. This interlocking of the trumpets and the bowls presents a

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telescopic view that John has condensed in his introductory throne vision of (8:2-5).

Notes

This paper is based on pp. 161-168 of Dr. LaRondelle's excellent book *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible* (Sarasota: First Impressions, 1997); to purchase a copy call 941-355-0037 or send \$20.00 to Dr. LaRondelle at 3915 Balsam Court, Sarasota, FL 34243-5234.

* Biblical citations are from the *New International Version* unless otherwise indicated.

¹ "Ellen G. White Comments," *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. Francis D. Nichol, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), 7:971.

² *Ibid.*, 7:788.

³ "Issues in Revelation: DARCOM Report," *Symposium on Revelation*, Book 1, Frank B. Holbrook, ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), p. 181.

⁴ Jon Paulien, "Seals and Trumpets: Some Current Discussion," *Symposium on Revelation*, Book 1, p. 195.

⁵ See, Paulien, *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁶ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), p. 671.

⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation in New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 290.