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The Mystery of the Seventh Seal

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The interpretation of the seventh seal has proven to be one of the more difficult problems in the interpretation of the book of Revelation. This is partly due to its brevity and lack of detail. It is partly due also to its location in Revelation 8:1, in close connection with the introduction to the seven trumpets. And it is due in part to a misinterpretation of the events taking place under the sixth seal, as well, and the intervening excursus in Revelation 7 that addresses the question asked rhetorically in 6:17: "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"[1] One other consideration we must observe is the differences in hermeneutical method applied to the interpretation of the book.

Due to these situations, there is a wide diversity of opinions regarding the interpretation of the seventh seal which this paper seeks to address. The purpose of this paper is to take into consideration each of these situations and point out the weaknesses in the various interpretations, using a careful study of the context to try to better understand what the seventh seal is about and how it ought to be understood in light of that context.

Various Interpretations of the Seventh Seal

Certain assumptions have resulted in a variety of interpretations. We begin with the hermeneutical method. Those who follow a preterist method look for fulfillments in events around the time of the author, near the end of the first century. The author, who calls himself John (1:4, 9; 22:8), is not a

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

prophet, according to most modern preterists, so he cannot discern the future. He writes instead either about events that have already occurred (history as "*ex eventu* prophecy") or about his speculations or anticipations about what he believes is likely to occur in the near future (false prophecy). Thus, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza believes that John's main concern "is not (salvation) history, but eschatology, that is, the breaking-in of God's kingdom and the destruction of the hostile godless powers,"[2] "the meaning of the present situation of the community and the date of God's judgment on those dwelling on earth."[3] Unfortunately, according to this hermeneutical method, John was looking for an event in his near future, which left him ultimately disappointed.[4]

In describing a typical preterist position on the seventh seal, Steve Gregg observes that in the silence in heaven, the loud voices of the martyrs crying out for vengeance are conspicuously missing. "Perhaps their cries have ceased because the requested vengeance upon their persecutors, the leaders of the Jews, had now commenced."[5] The modern preterist position typically does not accept at face value the author's claims to have seen and heard prophetic visions from Jesus Christ Himself or His angelic representative that pertained to the future of the people of God from John's day all the way to the return of Christ to set up His kingdom in the new creation (1:1-3, 9-11, 19; 4:1-2; 5:11-14; 6:1; 7:1-4; 8:2; 10:1-3, 11; 11:15-18; 12:10; 13:1, 11; 14:1-2, 14-16; 15:1; 16:1, 17; 17:1, 3, 7;18:1-5; 19:1-6, 9-11; 20:1-4; 21:1-7, 9-11; 22:6-8, 13, 16, 18-20). This hermeneutical method is defective, not taking the claims of the text seriously and is therefore unable to understand what the text is trying to tell us.

The futurist position, believing that everything from Revelation 4:1 onwards pertains only to the distant future and should be interpreted literally, indulges in mere speculation regarding how the prophecies found there will be fulfilled, since they still lie in the future and cannot be interpreted with certainty. Charles Ryrie writes,

> With the opening of this last seal the book is now fully opened, and one would expect a holocaust to let loose. Instead there is silence. . . . This is a

[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 46.

[3] Ibid., 47.

[4] "The author of Revelation is, indeed, aware of time, but he knows only a 'short time' before the eschaton." Ibid., 46.

[5] Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1997), 138.

> silence of expectancy, for this is the last seal. It is also a silence of foreboding that precedes the onslaught of judgments. It lasts for half an hour (which may be understood just as literally as the other time designations in the book).[6]

His view of the seals is a series of events that take place during the final seven years of tribulation that follow a rapture of the church and climax with the second coming of Christ, based on a futurist interpretation of the seventieth week of the prophecy of Daniel 9. The seals are followed by a series of seven trumpets, indicative of another series of tribulation events, which Ryrie refers to in the above quotation as "the onslaught of judgments."

The futurist approach to the book, reading it literally rather than symbolically and placing Rev 4-19 at the end of history, also stands in conflict with the claims of the text. John claims at the very beginning that the purpose of the book is to reveal things that "must soon take place" and that God "signified" (KJV, ASV, NKJV, CSB)[7] these things to him, meaning that they were presented not in literal language but in symbolic language that requires understanding the meaning of the symbols used. This means that Revelation is written in a kind of code, and the reader or hearer is challenged to discover the keys to the code, which are found primarily in the Old Testament Scriptures. Apart from such an intertextual approach, one will find it impossible to correctly understand the meaning of the text.

The idealist or spiritual method denies any historical application of the prophecies of Revelation, despite its prophetic claims pointing to real entities and other realities that will take place both in heaven and on earth.

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[6] Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1968), quoted in Gregg, 139. Cf. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1966), 150-51.

[7] The Greek is *esēmanen*, from *sēmainō*, I signify, indicate by signs (*sēma*), suggesting the use of symbolic language as a primary means of communication. See Jon Paulien, "The Seven Seals," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 227-28. Thus, e.g., 1:20-21 interprets some of the symbols that John sees in vision, as an aid to the reader in knowing the meaning of the signs or symbols John has described in the vision. Not all symbols are interpreted, leaving the reader to search for the keys to the code. The two-edged sword coming out of the mouth of the One like a son of man in 1:16 would make little literal sense, but it makes a lot of sense as a symbol in light of other biblical passages such as Heb 4:12, along with texts like Num 23:5, 16; Deut 8:3; Isa 45:23; Matt 4:4; John 1:1, 14; and Rev 19:13.

Why would God claim to reveal to John "things that must soon take place" (1:1; 4:1; cf. 22:6) if there were no historical realities being pointed to? Why would John be told, "Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666" (13:18), if there were no such significant entity being pointed to? Why would John be told, "This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while" (17:9-10), if there are no historical realities being indicated? The text is full of such examples. The idealist method simply does not take the claims of the text seriously.

William Hendriksen, for example, argues that "we should constantly bear in mind that the *purpose* of God and of the seer is to make wise unto salvation. The book has an ethical, a spiritual purpose. Now, if these symbols merely indicate and predict isolated, future events, someone's curiosity may be satisfied but it can hardly be said that people, in general, are *edified*. On the other hand, if we believe that the book reveals the principles of divine moral government which are constantly operating; . . . then—then *only*—are we edified and comforted."[8] In particular, regarding the seven seals and seven trumpets, he states, "The seals describe the persecution of the church by the world," and "even now *the seals of persecution are again and again followed by the trumpets of judgment.*" Further, "These trumpets of judgment, chapters 8-11, indicate *series* of happenings, that is, calamities that will occur again and again throughout this dispensation. . . . *They do not symbolize single and separate events, but they refer to woes that may be seen any day of the year in any part of the globe. Hence, the trumpets are synchronous with the seals*."[9]

A popular interpretational method today is known as eclecticism. It claims to use various methods based on clues found in the text, which sounds good, but really is not viable. Preterism, futurism, idealism, and historicism are not compatible methods. They are mutually exclusive and, as shown above, preterism, futurism, and idealism are in conflict with the claims of the text. So, to claim to be able to mix them together based on clues in the text is simply not reasonable. The text does speak of the past, the present, and the future, from John's perspective, and it also has spiritual

[8] W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, 8th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), 56-57 (emphasis original).

[9] Ibid., 140 (emphasis original).

applications to make, both individually and corporately, but this is not the same as mixing preterism, historicism, futurism, and idealism. They do not mix.

The historicist method is the only one that takes seriously the claims of the text that John heard and saw revelations from God regarding things that would soon take place (1:1) and would continue to take place during the probationary period of history until the eschaton, at which time God would intervene in judgment with seven final plagues of wrath. Then Christ would return to set up His kingdom, which, after a thousand-year review of the heavenly records, would last forever in a new heaven and new earth in which sin, sorrow, pain, and death would be no more. During the probationary time period of history, people are called to decision, either to repent or to remain steadfastly faithful to the Lamb who has died to redeem them from sin. Salvation history is not only a past record of redemptive activities but a present reality and a future that is prophetically revealed, just as in the book of Daniel, which is a major prophetic background for John's Revelation. The same time prophecies found in Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 are found again in Revelation 11:2, 3; 12:6, 14; and 13:5. The same power found in Daniel 7 and 8 as the "little horn" is found again in Revelation 13:1-8 as the beast from the sea. The series of nations which function as oppressors of God's people in Daniel are found again in Revelation as the heads and horns through which the dragon achieves his objectives on earth (Rev 12:3; 13:1-2; 17:9-10, 12). Historical Babylon in Daniel functions as a type of spiritual Babylon in Revelation.

The major challenge of the historicist method is a lack of agreement on the nature and specifics of the fulfillments during the Christian era. This does not invalidate the historicist method, but it calls for caution in attempting to find a historical event corresponding to every detail of the prophecies of Revelation. This is neither necessary nor wise. Many of the prophecies of Revelation point to trends and developments rather than to specific events. There are, however, specific events pointed to in the prophecies of Revelation. Examples would be the signs of Christ's soon return found in 6:12-13 and the beginning and end of the time prophecy found in 11:1, 2; 12:6, 14; and 13:5. There are also many events that are real but not datable, such as the pouring out of the seven last plagues, the return of Christ, the thousand years, and the new creation. The historicist method does not require dating of most events, but it shows a very clear progression of salvation history, especially from the time of Christ to the return of Christ, so that there is no need for believers to be deceived regarding how God is working out His plan for human salvation, despite the devil's efforts

to combat and sidetrack it. It includes a theology of God and the Lamb, including their provision for human salvation and for justice to prevail. Jon Paulien states, "Historicism, rightly understood, is the best method because it allows each text to locate itself in time; it doesn't limit the meaning in an arbitrary way as the other approaches do."[10]

Aside from the occasional odd historicist attempt at such interpretation,[11] Seventh-day Adventist commentators are the only historicists today, although there were many great historicists in the past.[12] And their historicism is recapitulationist with reference to the visions that overlap time between John's day and the return of Christ. Yet historicists still have trouble agreeing on the interpretation of the seventh seal. There are several reasons for this, which will be addressed below. Recently, a new method has been proposed for interpreting Revelation. Sigve Tonstad criticizes the other methods as being insufficiently theological, failing to adequately reveal the true character of God. After reviewing each of these methods briefly, he writes, "These schools are all 'time bound' or 'time specific,' and they have in common bold lines running from the symbol to the historical reality to which a symbol is said to refer. . . . All the 'schools' are in danger of reading Revelation's symbols as coded language for specific events rather than respecting the integrity of the symbol as symbol."[13] He is troubled by the focus on events rather than on the God who reveals Himself through the events of salvation history. Many have developed false views of God as a harsh, even violent and vindictive, Autocrat. Revelation is supposed to correct these views. He writes,

> Revelation has a story that needs to be told and will not let up until the task is done. The story climaxes in the implosion of evil (20:1-10) and the earth made new (21:1-6; 22:1-4). . . . Revelation trains its sights on *values* more than *events*, and it is *God*-centered more than *time*-centered. . . . Revelation presents *revelation* as *exposé*, but *the Revealer is more important than his exposé* in suspenseful sequences of seals, trumpets, and bowls. In the sequence of the seven seals, the figure *in the middle*, the

[10] Jon Paulien, Seven Keys: Unlocking the Secrets of Revelation (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2009), 17, quoted in Gluder Quispe, The Apocalypse in Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation (Lima, Peru: Universidad Peruana Union, 2013), 223.

[11] See, e.g., Oral Edmond Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus: An Introduction, Analysis, and Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

[12] E.g., Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, [1987]; reprint, n.p.: C. C. Cook, 1900).

[13] Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 28, 29.

> "*Lamb standing as though it had been killed with violence*," is the ultimate revelation.[14]

Despite this preferred emphasis, Tonstad admits that history cannot be ruled out: "Revelation claims a temporal horizon that covers all of history, past, present, and future. . . . In temporal terms, the scope of Revelation runs from primordial time to the eschaton. This might be used as more than a token support for the historicist aspiration, but it does not certify a specific road map of events. . . . The mandate to reveal history must be taken seriously, but the claims to historical specificity must be modest."[15] In this regard, Tonstad is correct. The greatest weakness of the historicist method is its overconfidence in tying the prophecies of Revelation to specific events, resulting in a variety of competing proposals that cannot be established by the text. Nonetheless, historicism is called for by the text, as Tonstad acknowledges, and it does not stand in conflict with a theological focus on God and the Lamb, or the cosmic conflict in which they are engaged. This conflict is played out in a series of historical events which become markers in the progress of salvation history. A careful study of Revelation should include a focus on both the historical and the theological elements pointed to in the text of Revelation and its allusive backgrounds to other texts in Scripture.

In summary, preterism denies genuine prophecy and relegates everything to the Roman empire of John's day. This is not the same as prophetic insights regarding John's past, present, or future which God showed him in vision. Futurism reads the text literally and applies Revelation 4-19 to a seven-year tribulation immediately prior to the Second Coming. This is not compatible with preterism and is out of harmony with the claims of the text to be largely symbolic in nature and to begin with events that lie in John's near future. It is speculative, since it is entirely future-oriented, with no way to root the interpretation at least partly in objective historical events by which to evaluate the predictions concerning the future. Prophecy in Scripture is vindicated by being grounded in fulfillments of prior predictions (Deut 18:21-22). It must also be in harmony with prior revelation (Deut 13:1-5; Isa 8:20; 1 Cor 14:32). It cannot stand by itself with no basis for interpretation other than speculation. Futurism is not the same as prophecies pertaining to future historical events.

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[14] Ibid., 29 (emphasis original).
[15] Ibid., 28, 29.

Idealism, also known as spiritual interpretation, denies preterism, historicism, and futurism in that it insists that there is no historical application of the text but only a spiritual application to individual Christian lives or to the Christian community of faith. It is not possible to mix idealism with these other methods. They are incompatible. It is not identical with making a spiritual application of the text in addition to historical applications in the past, present, or future. Eclecticism is also an invalid method as it proposes to mix incompatible methods of interpretation.

Historicism, along with the compatible theological focus of the cosmic conflict motif, is the only valid interpretation of the prophecies that can find applications in the past, present, or future and still allow for spiritual applications as well. Only historicism in the context of the cosmic conflict can meet the tests required by the claims of the text. Therefore, this article will focus on historicist interpretations of the seventh seal. The challenge is to avoid applications that are speculative about prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled and to avoid dogmatism about historical fulfillments that appear to have already been fulfilled. There is a tendency to look for historical events where none may be actually pointed to, only general developments or trends in church history. The book is, after all, not a revelation of history but a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). Jesus, the Lamb of God "who was slain from the creation of the world" (13:8 NIV), is the most important theme in the book of Revelation. Without denying historicist interpretation, we must recognize that the Revelation is primarily about the cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan, and Christ is the victor in this conflict, and we can also be victors through Him (12:10-12).

Review of Specific Historicist Interpretations in the Literature

By far the most complicating factor for interpreting the seventh seal is its location in the text, separated from the first six seals by the excursus in Revelation 7 and placed at the head of chapter 8 immediately before the introduction to the seven trumpets. This has led a large number of interpreters to see a close connection between the seventh seal and the vision of the trumpets, with some assuming that the trumpets are actually an elucidation of the seventh seal,[16] while others believe that the seventh seal

[16] See, e.g., Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 336-38. He suggests that the relationship of 8:1 to 8:2-5 is not only very close but *kai eidon* in 8:2 "seems to be more of a transition to another aspect of the same vision rather than introducing an entirely new vision"

introduces the seven trumpets.[17] These views are held across most interpretational methods, but they are antithetical to recapitulationist historicism, which views the parallel series of the churches, the seals, and the trumpets as each covering essentially the same Christian era, as opposed to straightline historicism, which sees the visions as in a chronological sequence.[18]

Among historicist interpreters, there is little agreement either, which is a major reason most scholars have repudiated historicist interpretation.[19] Joseph A. Seiss, a well-known late-nineteenth-century historicist interpreter, records,

> It would be difficult to find another point upon which there have been so many different and discordant voices. Indeed, Hengstenberg gives it as the

(337). G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 151-52, however, points out that such an interpretation "is irreconcilable with the significance of the rest of the paragraph, and indeed with our understanding of the structure of the Revelation as a whole." He finds, instead, that the seventh seal "finds its true connection with verse 6, to which it forms an introduction" (152).

[17] A representative listing would include G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1999), 445-53; Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 530; J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 124-27; Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 136-40; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 178-79; Ted Noel, *A Primer on the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2010), 68-70; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 211-13.

[18] Only the series of the seven last plagues is limited to the eschatological period which takes place under the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet. Eschatology in Revelation is that final period of earth's history that follows the close of human probation, when the kingdoms of this world are brought to an end and the wrath of God is poured out on the world (11:15-18). Virtually all historicists today are recapitulationist, as this is in harmony with the text, in which each of the seal and trumpet series brings the reader to the eschaton in the seventh of the series, while the first six take place during historical (probationary) time.

[19] I believe that another reason is the reluctance to point to historical entities as being possible or probable fulfillments of some of the prophecies which relate to the Christian era that is already past. Modern political correctness requires that such pointed applications are not to be made by Christian interpreters. In fact, the futurist and preterist methods were developed by Jesuit scholars to direct attention away from the historicist interpretations of the Reformation which pointed to the papacy as the harlot of Revelation.

> general rule, that when expositors come to this silence they break out into all sorts of contradictory conjecture. Though the marks of historic continuity are as distinct as it is possible to make them, some take this silence as a full stop to the chain of apocalyptic predictions, and so treat what follows as a mere rehearsal, in another form, or what had preceded. Others regard it as a blank, leaving everything belonging to the seventh seal unrevealed, so that its action can only be known when we come to the immortal life. Some pronounce it a mere poetic invention to heighten the dramatic effect, but having no particular significance. Others treat it as a prophetic symbol of scenes and experiences in earthly history of man; some, as the suspension of divine wrath in the destruction of Jerusalem; some, as the freedom granted to the Church under the reign of Constantine; some as the interval of repose enjoyed by Christians between the persecutions by Dioclesian and Galerius in A.D. 311, and the beginning of the civil wars toward the end of the same year; some, as the disappearance of human strivings against God and his Christ; others, as a lull in earthly revolt and persecution, equivalent to a jubilee for the truth among men; others, as the millennium of peace and righteousness to be induced by the triumphs of evangelic effort and the progress of liberty; and yet others, as the everlasting rest of the saints.[20]

Seiss cites some other views as well, including "a mystic connection with Jewish rites," especially the incense oblation,[21] but these suffice to demonstrate the broad variety of views just among early historicists. After giving reasons why the incense offering is not a viable interpretation, Seiss concludes, "It is impossible, therefore, for this silence to be a part of the ceremony of the offering by the angel, or that it should mean any of the things to which reference has been made."[22] Seiss's own interpretation is that the seventh seal involves "the final consummation of the great mystery of God, before which all heaven, including God Himself is 'mute and breathless' in 'interest and awful expectancy' of the event about to unfold."[23] He takes the time period of half an hour as expressive of an "agonizing suspense" which seems interminable "in comparison with

[20] Seiss, 180-81 (citing E. W. Hengstenberg's *The Revelation of St. John: Expounded for Those Who Search the Scriptures* [Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1852]).
[21] Ibid., 181.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

moments of ordinary life."[24] Yet Seiss views the seventh seal as unfolding in the vision of the seven trumpets, as do many non-historicists.[25]

Before proceeding to Adventist historicists, a recent non-Adventist historicist is worth mentioning. Oral Collins bravely attempts a historicist reading of the text when it is broadly unpopular. However, he follows Seiss and the others in interpreting the seventh seal as an introduction to the trumpets, making him a straight-line historicist at a time when virtually all historicists are recapitulationist historicists. He cites Isbon Beckwith as precedent for his conclusion that there is "a consecutive relationship between the seal prophecies and the two sequences, the trumpets and the bowls that follow."[26]

Among Adventist historicists, it would be appropriate to begin with Uriah Smith, one of the earliest Adventist scholars to write a commentary on Revelation. Smith argues that the seals and the trumpets "occur during the same time,"[27] making him a recapitulationist historicist. Unlike many Adventist interpreters after him, Smith insists, "The sixth seal does not bring us to the second advent of Christ, although it embraces events closely connected with that coming. . . . The personal appearing of Christ must therefore be allotted to the next seal," the seventh.[28] He explains further: "When *all* the heavenly harpers leave the courts above to come to this earth with their divine Lord as He descends to gather the fruit of His redeeming work, will there not be silence in heaven? The length of this period of silence, if we consider it prophetic time, would be about seven days."[29] It is worth noting that he does consider it prophetic time, a literal seven and a half days ("about seven days"), according to the day-for-a-year prophetic principle followed by most historicist interpreters.[30]

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[24] Ibid., 182.

[25] Ibid. Cf. footnote 13 above.

[26] Collins, 175 (citing Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction, with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* [(New York, NY: Macmillan), 1919; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967], 549).

[27] Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*, rev. and newly illustrated (Nashville, TN: Southern Publ. Assn., 1944), 474.

[28] Ibid., 473.

[29] Ibid.

[30] This is based on the obvious need for prophecies to cover extensive time periods in order to reach into the distant future, including the time of the end (Dan 7:25; 8:13-14, 17, 19, 26; 9:24-27; 12:7, 9, 11-12; Rev 11:2-3; 12:6,14; 13:5), as well as prophetic principles clearly stating such a correspondence (Num 14:34; Ezek 4:6). See W. H. Shea, "The Year-Day Principle—Part 1," in *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel and

Another early Adventist historicist commentator was Roy Allan Anderson. He takes a position similar to that of Smith: "When Jesus returns for His people, every angel in glory will accompany Him, Matthew 25:31. Those heavenly beings whose voices are heard in continual praise will descend with their Commander to bring back the ransomed of the Lord. No wonder heaven is silent, the dwelling place of God hushed because of their absence."[31] Many others have followed this notion, along with Smith's literal seven days. Both of these works were very influential early on, being used as textbooks in teaching Revelation in Adventist schools.[32] Other Adventist interpretations vary considerably and will be taken one at a time, in chronological sequence.

Mervyn Maxwell's position is very close to that of Smith and Anderson, only he avoids making the half hour into a prophetic time period, referring to it only as "a brief silence" for "a short time."[33] He explains the silence as taking place at the Second Coming: "God the Father accompanies His Son. All the holy angels come as well. See Matthew 25:31. This explains why, under the seventh seal, there is for a short time 'silence in heaven,' Revelation 8:1. No one is left up there to make a song."[34] He refers to this event as the "consummation."[35]

Jon Paulien, after describing a number of explanations that have been offered for the silence in heaven under the seventh seal, suggests that since the sixth seal "portrays events surrounding the Second Coming itself (6:15-17) and describes the presence of the redeemed before the throne (7:9-17), the seventh seal may be best understood as either a cryptic precursor of the millennium or the universal peace that results from the consummation at the end of the millennium (cf. Rev 20:9-15)."[36] He thus makes it a post-Second-Coming event, a fairly unique interpretation of the seventh seal.

The dissertation by Ekkehardt Müller, in which he attempted a microstructural analysis of Revelation 4-11, argues in favor of a number of

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Revelation Committee Series, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1982), 56-88.

[31] Roy Allan Anderson, *Unfolding the Revelation*, rev. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1974), 73.

[32] Among those taking this position is Erwin R. Gane, *Heaven's Open Door: The Seven Seals of Revelation and Christ Our Heavenly High Priest* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1989), 153-54.

[33] C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 2: *The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1985), 178, 191.

[34] Ibid., 191; cf. 159-60, 181.

[35] Ibid., 149, 176.

[36] Paulien, 238.

similarities between 8:1 and 4:1-2, creating a chiasm in the vision.[37] "These two passages," he says, "are a fitting frame for the vision of Rev 4-7."[38] The seventh seal represents the "conclusion" and "the consummation."[39] That is all he says about the event itself. On the half an hour, he describes it as "for a limited time."[40]

Roy Naden provides a fairly extensive explanation of the seventh seal, connecting it very closely with the introduction to the seven trumpets in verses 2-5. He sees them as a unit: "The first five verses of chapter 8 are set in the sanctuary and form a bridge between the seals and the trumpets, concluding one and introducing the other."[41] He views the sequence of symbols in these five verses as "probably drawn from the daily service ritual."[42] "The significance of the half hour," he says, "is enigmatic and probably indicates just the briefest space of time." However, he cites D. T. Niles and Douglas Ezell as indicating that a period of about half an hour elapsed between the offering of the sacrificial lamb and the offering of the incense in the Holy Place, while the people waited in silence for the priest to leave the sanctuary after offering the incense.[43] Naden describes all of this as "a prelude to judgment,"[44] which takes place under the seven trumpets. He has trouble drawing a distinction between the two visions.

According to Hans LaRondelle, the sixth seal "opens with the arrival of the day of reckoning, the day of justice and vindication,"[45] presumably the Second Coming, since it "begins with a cosmic quake that shakes both the earth and the heavens (Rev 6:12-14). It describes the global effect on the earth dwellers who have no shelter against the 'wrath of the Lamb' (Rev

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[37] Ekkehardt Müller, *Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 4-11*, University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 21 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994), 284-85.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 285-86.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Roy C. Naden, *The Lamb Among the Beasts: A Christological Commentary on the Revelation of John That Unlocks the Meaning of Its Many Numbers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996), 133.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 134 (citing D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible* [New York, NY: Harper & Bros., 1961], 63; and Douglas Ezell, *Revelations on Revelation: New Sounds from Old Symbols* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977], 48-49).

[44] Ibid., 134.

[45] Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible: The Biblical-Contextual Approach* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997), 141.

6:15-17)."[46] "The *seventh* seal adds no further event, only 'silence in heaven' for about half an hour (Rev 8:1). This silence suggests that the justice of God has been fully executed, based on Israel's expectations (Isa 62:1; 65:6, 7; Ps 50:3-6)."[47] LaRondelle quotes 4 Ezra 7:30 to the effect that "the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginning; so that no one shall be left."[48] The seventh seal is, then, a result of Christ's return in judgment under the sixth seal: "The seventh seal seems to declare a 'silence in heaven' as the *end* of the 'loud voice' of the martyrs for divine justice."[49] LaRondelle's subsequent abbreviated commentary on end-time prophecies maintains the same position, though in fewer words.[50]

Jacques Doukhan is somewhat vague on the events to take place under the seventh seal. "Neither seen nor heard," he writes, "the incident is beyond description." "Human history finishes as it had begun—by a time of creation. The week of silence at the end echoes the week of silence of the beginning (Gen 1)."[51] This sounds like he is referring to the new creation. He is clear, however, that these events take place in heaven: "For the first time the events triggered by the seal occur exclusively in heaven."[52] So the silence becomes inexplicable in terms of what creation he may be referring to. He does clearly identify the time period as prophetic time equal to a literal week: "The silence lasts for a good half hour. In prophetic language, in which one day stands for one year, this amounts to a whole week."[53] So Doukhan brings prophetic time into the eschatological period and concludes that there is a one-week creative activity in heaven that echoes the original creation week. Presumably, this is after the Second Coming, since Doukhan sees the wrath of God taking place under the sixth seal and seems to imply that the Second Coming takes place at the end of the sixth seal, though he never actually states that: "God's wrath invades the earth in its totality. . .

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[46] Ibid., 137. He distinguishes this from any local earthquake which serves as a sign of the nearness of Christ's return, but rather it is a sign of His actual coming. Ibid., 137-39.

[47] Ibid., 141.

[48] Ibid. The quotation is taken from J. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments,* Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 537.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Idem, *Light for the Last Days: Jesus' End-Time Prophecies Made Plain in the Book of Revelation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1999), 91.

[51] Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 73.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

His wrath encompasses everything and everyone. The sixth seal closes with the vision of God 'who sits on the throne' (verse 16) and with the anguished question that concludes the oracle: 'Who can stand?'" (verse 17).[54]

Leslie Hardinge holds the position that the seventh seal has to do with the return of Christ with all His angels, and he connects it with facing the wrath of God under the sixth seal. He states, "This silence, when every harp is hushed, and the angels' choirs cease their singing, marks the destruction of the wicked."[55]

Alberto Treiyer, normally a supporter of the traditional, historicist interpretation, begins by stating that the seventh seal "is the seal of the Lord" and "reveals the divine engagement to keep His people in their struggle against sin."[56] "Briefly," he adds, "that final seal reveals the part [of God's judgments] that corresponds to God in the covenant made with His people."[57] Treiyer has a fairly extensive section on the content of the seventh seal plus another section on the silence in heaven. He writes, "Some have suggested that the silence in heaven is the seventh seal. But the silence in heaven does not reveal the content of the seventh seal."[58] The content of the seventh seal is deduced from the fact that Treiyer views the sealed scroll as "the original Book of the Law," which is now open and able to be compared with the lives of the sealed saints, showing that their records have been cleansed: "The solemn happening of having the original Book of the Law open in the heavenly court, produces a moment of suspense in heaven, during a short period of half an hour (Rev 8:1)."[59] "There, 'all mankind' must be silent before the judgment of the Lord. Even Satan is silenced at the moment when the 'filthy clothes' of the High Priest who represents the people of Israel, are to be changed with the final glorious and splendid apparel promised to the redeemed (Zech 3:3-7)."[60] This is a fairly unique interpretation of this seal.

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[54] Ibid., 68.

[55] Hardinge, *The Lamb, God's Greatest Gift: Meditations on the Book of Revelation* (Harrisburg, PA: American Cassette Ministries Book Division, 2005), 144. This is not their *final* destruction, but the destruction at the Second Coming.

[56] Alberto R. Treiyer, *The Seals and the Trumpets: Biblical and Historical Studies* (N.p.: By the author, 2005), 197.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 198.

[59] Ibid., 199. Treiyer never signals whether the half hour is to be taken literally or otherwise.

[60] Ibid., 200.

Ranko Stefanovic states from the outset that none of the different explanations offered on the meaning of the seventh seal has proved to be satisfactory.[61] Yet he goes on to argue for well-known positions taken by others, as described above. He cites the prophecies of Habakkuk 2:20, Zephaniah 1:7, and Zechariah 2:13 as shedding light on the possible meaning of the silence in Revelation 8:1. "The anticipation of God's imminent action dominates the scene and forms the basis for the prophetic appeal. The Lord prepares to leave his holy dwelling to visit the earth, and his arrival will drive the wicked into dreadful despair." His position is very similar to that of Paulien, with elements of Doukhan:

> The riders on the horses have finished their work, the sealing of God's faithful people is completed, the winds have ceased to blow (Rev 7:1-3), the great tribulation is over, and the second coming of Christ has taken place. The prayers of God's people (cf. Rev 6:9-11) are heard, and there is silence in heaven in the light of the final judgment to be executed on rebellious humanity of which the seven last plagues are just a foretaste (cf. Rev 15-16). Jewish people of John's day believed that there would be silence before the new creation which would correspond to the silence before the first creation.[62]

He states very clearly, "Revelation 6:16-17 indicates that the scene of the breaking of the seventh seal follows the Second Coming. This silence might refer to the millennium (which is a relatively short period of time as compared to eternity) or to the period after the millennium, when God will execute judgment and create a new world."[63] Regarding the half hour, Stefanovic states, "The meaning of the half hour is enigmatic. It evidently should be understood symbolically to refer to a very short period of time of unspecified length."[64] He refers to it as "a dramatic pause which makes the righteous judgments of God about to be executed upon the earth even more impressive."[65] In his later short commentary, he takes the same position: "The silence in heaven when the seventh seal is broken occurs because heaven is focused on the final judgment and the conclusion of the Great Controversy between good and evil. 'Half an hour' refers to a relatively

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[61] Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 253.

[62] Ibid., 253-54.

[63] Ibid., 254.

[64] Ibid., 253. He seems rather confused in view of his suggestion that it could be either the millennium or the period after the millennium, which is really into eternity already.

[65] Ibid., 254.

short time, and the day-year principle does not apply here."[66] So, like Paulien, he places the seventh seal definitely after the Second Coming.

Ken Mathews, Jr., has a lot to say about the seventh seal. After reviewing a variety of biblical passages that mention silence or its equivalence, he draws no clear conclusion, though he seems to favor the idea that it represents "no less than the emptying of the Holy City, as Jesus comes back to this earth to redeem His saints," based on a reading of Revelation 19:11-14, in which the armies or hosts of heaven follow Christ on white horses in that symbolic portrayal of the Second Coming. This appears to be confirmed by his summary of the seven seals, in which he sees the Second Coming as taking place under the sixth seal, while the seventh seal is described merely as "The judgment time has come."[67] He elaborates a little further on this in his summary interpretation of Revelation 8, where he says of verse 1 that "the Trinity and the universe mourned the destruction of the wicked."[68] Thus, he also follows Paulien in placing the seventh seal after the Second Coming, even at the end of the millennium.

Although his work is not specifically a commentary on Revelation, James Hayward, Sr., in his compilation of materials on the last days, has a short section on the seventh seal. After noting, "There is no Spirit of Prophecy statement regarding the 'silence in heaven' about the space of half an hour,"[69] he also observes that some have conjectured that this equates to about seven days of prophetic time, but he sees some problems with that interpretation. He concludes incorrectly, "The general SDA view is that the 'half hour' is a short, unspecified period similar to the 'day' or 'hour' of Rev 18:8, 10, 17, 19, as the time of the seven last plagues."[70] Hayward adds,

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[66] Idem, *Plain Revelation* (Berrien Spring, MI: Andrews University Press, 2013), 90.

[67] Kenneth Mathews, Jr., *Revelation Reveals Jesus: An Explanation of the Greek Text and Application of the Symbolism Therein*, 2 vols. (Greeneville, TN: Second Coming Publishing, 2012), 1:367.

[68] Ibid., 463.

[69] James L. Hayward, Sr., comp., *The Time of the End: A Chronological Study for the Last Days from 1798 to the New Earth, Compiled from the Holy Scriptures and the Spirit of Prophecy*, rev. ed. (Harrisburg, PA: American Cassette Ministries, 2013), 425-26 (quoting White, *Early Writings*, 15-16). (The term "Spirit of Prophecy" is used by many Adventists to refer to the writings of Ellen G. White.)

[70] Actually, the general Seventh-day Adventist view is that the half an hour is prophetic time and represents about a literal week, or more accurately, seven and a half days. Besides those elsewhere represented in this review as holding that view, other Adventist commentators holding that view include Kenneth Cox, *Revelation—Pure and Simple* (Loma Linda, CA: Kenneth Cox Ministries, 2012), 116; Norman McNulty, *Commentary on the Book of Revelation: Practical Living in the Judgment Hour* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2022), 124; Loren M. K. Nelson, *Understanding the Mysteries of Daniel &*

"There will certainly be silence in the heavenly sanctuary after Christ's mediation ceases and the angels end their activity in behalf of man's salvation,"[71] an apparent reference to the close of human probation. He does, however, go on to cite Matthew 25:31 and an Ellen White quotation to the effect that heaven will be emptied of all the angels at the Second Coming of Christ, suggesting an alternative interpretation.[72]

The 2014 work by Austin Cooke identifies the seventh seal with the Second Coming. He lists a number of items included under the seventh seal: (1) "The deliverance of the church of Christ"; (2) "The second advent"; (3) "Enemies of the church slain"; (4) "Faithful taken to kingdom"; (5) "Silence = God's grief at the destruction of the millions of unsaved"; (6) "Half hour = 7½ literal days"; (7) "Christ and angels are absent from the Father."[73] He has other points, but they are either not relevant to the interpretation of the biblical text or they repeat one of the above points in one way or another.

Sigve Tonstad's 2019 commentary calls Revelation 8:1 "one of the strangest verses in the Bible!"[74] He states that "there is no consensus regarding the meaning of the silence," though the two major views have to do with judgment and prayer.[75] After summarizing some of the major views taken by scholars of different persuasions, Tonstad argues that these views are not correct, because they "seek the meaning of the silence in the *continuation* of Revelation's story," as opposed to "*completion* and *climax*."[76] "They veer from best practice by failing to give the OT the requisite billing."[77] He points to Isaiah 52:14-15 as the essential background to the silence, concluding that the members of the heavenly council "are at a loss for words" when they see the humiliation and exaltation of the Lamb and are astonished at Him. Thus, the seventh seal finds its content in this

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Revelation (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2016), 225; Robert J. Wieland, *Revelation of Things to Come*, 4th ed., rev. & updated (Grantham, Lincolnshire, England: Stanborough Press, 2014), 73. Jeff Scoggins, *A Simple Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Boonsboro, MD: Skapto Publishing, 2018), 164, offers it as one of two possible interpretations, the other being simply "a short period of unspecified length."

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid, (quoting White, *Early Writings*, 110).

[73] Austin Cooke, *An Enduring Vision: Revelation Revealed* (www.TEACH Services. com: TEACH Services, 2014), 223.

[74] Tonstad, 137. Tonstad would not class himself as a strictly historicist interpreter, though his theological "cosmic conflict" emphasis takes salvation history seriously while avoiding what he sees as the dangers of traditional historicism.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

Old Testament background. "It signals completion, not continuation. Heaven's half an hour of silence is a measure of the impact of 'the Lamb in the middle of the throne' (7:17; 5:6)."[78] This is another fairly unique interpretation.

This has not been a comprehensive list of all works or positions people have taken, but it is a representative cross-section of the positions taken in the historicist literature. One can readily see that there is a great diversity of opinion regarding the interpretation of this seal. They cannot all be correct. It is necessary, therefore, to have another look at the evidence of the biblical text, to see which positions may be supported by the text and which are not. We turn, then, to an exegesis of the biblical passage in its larger context in Revelation.

An Exegesis of Revelation 8:1 in Its Larger Context in Revelation

There are several factors in the larger context of the seventh seal (8:1) that are very important to understand before we get into the text itself. One is the question of methodology. If the interpreter is serious about the claims of the text, the only hermeneutical method that is legitimate is the recapitulationist historicist method,[79] as shown above. Textual evidence in support of this method is abundant. Each of the major series of visions reveals a progression that takes place over time during historical (probationary) time, with calls for either repentance or patient endurance on the part of the people being addressed. Only the seventh in the series of the seals and of the trumpets takes place exclusively in eschatological (post-probationary) time. With each of these two series, in particular, bringing the reader to the end only in the seventh of the series, there must be recapitulation, with the major focus being on making important salvific decisions before probationary time runs out. This requires that the seals and trumpets cannot be consecutive series but contemporaneous series, nor can the trumpets be the content of the seventh seal. The recapitulationist historicist method requires that the seals and the trumpets be separate

[78] Ibid., 138.

[79] See Kenneth A. Strand, "Foundational Principles of Interpretation," *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 4-34; idem, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor, 1979), 33-41, 44-49.

visions that recapitulate one another in some way, both ending with the return of Christ.

Secondly, the structure of the book reveals that the seals and trumpets are separate visions and each has its own introduction.[80] According to several scholars, the structure of Revelation is either a chiasm or at least an inverted parallelism.[81] If this is correct, it reveals that each vision has its parallel in the other half of the book—except for the central vision in the chiasm, which would be the vision of the cosmic conflict in chapters 12-14.[82] Whether or not a chiasm exists depends on one's assessment of the content of the book, but there do appear to be at least some elements of parallelism in the structure of the book. Kenneth Strand finds a kind of inverse parallelism in which the visions in the center of the book follow an "Exodus from Egypt/Fall of Babylon" motif.[83] In this structure, the historical visions are separated from the eschatological visions, with the historical visions running through chapter 14 and the eschatological visions beginning in chapter 15. Careful analysis, however, reveals that things are not as simple as they may seem in trying to force a structure on the book.[84] Ultimately, the content must drive the structure, which should be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Many proposed structures have been prescriptive and have sometimes proposed a restructuring of the book in order to make it fit the proposed structure. This does not contribute to understanding the message of Revelation.

There are strong parallels between the content and structure of the seals and the trumpets, although they are not in a chiastic relationship with each other. Each septet is comprised of the first four being parallel to one another

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[80] See, e.g., Kenneth A. Strand, "The Eight Basic Visions in the Book of Revelation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (*AUSS*) 25 (1987): 107-21; idem, "Literary Structure—a Key to Interpreting the Revelation," *Ministry*, March 1977, 17-20; idem, "The 'Victorious-Introduction' Scenes in the Visions of the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 25 (1987): 267-88.

[81] Mathews, 1:37; Maxwell, 148, 224; Müller, 24; Naden, 21; Stefanovic, *Plain Revelation*, 5; Strand, "Chiastic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (*AUSS*) 16 (1978): 401-4.

[82] Examples would include Mathews, 1:37; Naden, 21; Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 37; idem, *Plain Revelation*, 5. Strand, "Eight Basic Visions," 107-11; idem, *Interpreting Revelation*, 47-52, claims to find a chiasm in the larger structure of the book, but in reality what he finds is an inverse parallelism, as he admits on page 47 of the latter, since there are eight visions with no central vision, making it not a true chiasm.

[83] Strand, "Eight Basic Visions," 107-11; idem, *Interpreting Revelation*, 47-52.

[84] Edwin Reynolds, "Ten Keys for Interpreting the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 11, nos. 1-2 (2000): 264-66.

in important ways, while the last three are different and more comprehensive. Both visions begin with an introduction that takes place in the sanctuary or temple in heaven (Rev 4-5; 8:3-5). Both involve intercession with incense for the prayers of the saints (5:8; 8:3-4). Both involve partial judgments with implicit expectations for repentance (6:4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 17; 8:9, 11, 12; 9:5, 15, 20-21). In both, there are excurses under the sixth element and prior to the seventh which offer additional information about the details of the time of the end but are still essentially historical,[85] while the seventh of each is eschatological. The main difference is that the seals are connected with the covenant scroll being prepared for opening and reading and seem to describe the covenant blessings and curses that come on God's covenant people when they are faithful or unfaithful, respectively,[86] whereas the trumpets are warnings sounded to the world at large, which ultimately fails to heed the warnings and repent (9:20-21).[87]

The sixth and seventh seals appear to be essentially historically and eschatologically parallel visions with the sixth and seventh trumpets. Both the sixth seal and sixth trumpet bring us to the eschaton, the end of human probationary history, and both the seventh seal and seventh trumpet take us from the close of probation through the seven last plagues to the return of Christ (11:15–19). Comparing 11:19 with 15:5 seems to suggest the same event, the close of Christ's high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. And comparing "your wrath came" in 11:18 with "with them [the seven last plagues] the wrath of God is finished" in 15:1 and "the great day of their wrath has come" in 6:17 (pointing forward to the events under the seventh seal, after the close of probation in 7:1-8), as well as "He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" in 19:15 (which must necessarily chronologically precede "with them the wrath of God is finished" in 15:1), also seems to suggest the same event. The seven last plagues fall under the seventh trumpet, so it would seem natural to assume that they would fall under the seventh seal as well.

While many interpreters believe that the sixth seal represents the return of Christ, it no more represents the return of Christ than the sixth bowl plague represents Armageddon, or "the battle on the great day of God

[85] The exception is Rev 7:9-17, which is a proleptic view of the great multitude of sealed saints standing before the throne and before the Lamb, providing the answer to the question in 6:17, "Who is able to stand?" (NASB).

[86] Neall, 248-49; Paulien, "Seven Seals," 222-23.

[87] Mueller, 293-95, identifies a large number of parallels and differences between the two visions.

Almighty" (Rev 16:16 NIV). The sixth plague is only a gathering, a preparation for that final battle, which actually takes place under the seventh plague. So also the sixth seal is not the return of Christ but a series of events in preparation for the return of Christ. In fear of the wrath to come, people are already represented as fleeing and trying to hide themselves wherever they can rather than face their judgment.[88] They are portrayed as crying out to the rocks and mountains, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (6:16-17). This is biblical metaphor, taken from the Old Testament (Isa 2:10-12, 19, 21; Hos 10:8; cf. Ps 139:7-8; Luke 23:30; Rev 20:11), representing the humbling of those who are proud against God in the face of coming judgment. While some see the flight response of these wicked people as evidence that they are facing the return of Christ, this is not necessarily so, as suggested by Matthew 3:7 and Luke 3:7, where John the Baptist asked the Jewish leaders who came to see him, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Clearly, they were not facing the Second Coming, yet they are portrayed as fleeing from the coming wrath about two thousand years earlier.

What is the great day of God's wrath in Revelation, from which the wicked are seeking to escape at the end of the sixth seal? The answer is found in Revelation 15:1: "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete." Revelation 16:1 says, "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth.'" When does this series of events take place? It takes place under the seventh trumpet, according to 11:18: "The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, / And the time of the dead that they should be judged, / And that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, / And those who fear Your name, small and great, / And should destroy those who destroy the earth." It takes place between the close of probation (at the end of the sixth trumpet, according to

[88] Smith, 473, states, "The sixth seal does not bring us to the second advent of Christ, although it embraces events closely connected with that coming. It introduces the fearful commotions of the elements, described as the heavens rolling together as a scroll, the breaking up of the surface of the earth, and the confession by the wicked that the great day of God's wrath is come. They are doubtless in momentary expectation of seeing the King appear in glory. But the seal stops just short of the event. The personal appearing of Christ must therefore be allotted to the next seal."

10:7)[89] and the second coming of Christ, which takes place in Revelation 19 after the fall of Babylon and the nations under the seventh plague.

Many think that "the great day of their wrath" refers to the return of Christ, as shown above, but textual evidence suggests that it is actually a reference to pouring out the plagues of God's wrath on the earth (Rev 15:1; 16:1; cf. 11:18-19) following the close of human probation. This may be observed by comparison with Revelation 7:1-17, the passage that immediately follows the question in 6:17. It has been called an excursus on the sixth seal, but the goal of the excursus is to answer the question posed at the end of the sixth seal, "Who is able to stand?" (in the day of God's wrath).[90] The final sealing of the people of God in 7:3-4 designates the close of human probation at the end of the sixth seal. These people are first represented symbolically as the twelve tribes of Israel, which John hears about as being sealed (7:4), then they are subsequently represented literally by the great multitude of the redeemed which John sees standing before the throne of God clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, while praising God for the salvation which He has provided for them.[91] The seven last plagues must precede the return of Christ, for no wicked person is left alive after Christ's return (19:21). The declaration of the time for the outpouring of the plagues of God's wrath under the sixth seal reveals that the silence in heaven under the seventh seal is a representation of that judgment.

A very significant factor for interpretation is intertextual and intratextual parallels and allusions. We have those factors in the language of the seventh seal. The silence in heaven is also implied in Revelation 15:8, where "the sanctuary [*naos*] was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven

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[89] The mystery of God, "as He declared to His servants the prophets," which is finished under the sixth trumpet, is the gospel proclaimed to the world (the nations/Gentiles), according to Rom 16:25-26; Eph 3:3-11; and Col 1:26-28 (cf. Matt 24:14).

[90] Beale, 405; Cooke, 218; Duvall, 112; Johnson, 128; LaRondelle, *End-Time Prophecies*, 144; Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 110; Mathews, 1:369; Michaels, 110; Mounce, 164; Beatrice S. Neall, "Sealed Saints and the Tribulation," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, vol. 6, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 259-60; Osborne, 301; Stefanovic, *Plain Revelation*, 89, 91; Treiyer, 184-85.

[91] Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1990; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 94-95; cf. Neall, 275-76; Stefanovic, *Plain Revelation*, 94-100.

plagues of the seven angels were finished." The "sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened" (v. 5; cf. 11:19), and the seven angels left the sanctuary in verse 6. Jesus had completed His intercessory ministry (Heb 9:11-12, 15, 23-28; Rev 8:3-5; 11:19) and pre-advent judgment (Dan 7:9-14, 21-22, 26-27; cf. Rev 11:1-2) there and had declared human probation closed and His return imminent (Rev 22:11-12). He had gone to His Father to receive His dominion and glory and kingdom (Dan 7:14) in preparation for His return, but the plagues of God's wrath remained to be poured out on those who had despised His proffered salvation. The contrast with the scene in which Jesus' heavenly ministry was inaugurated in Revelation 4-5 could hardly be more dramatic. The work in the heavenly sanctuary (Rev 8:3-4) was complete except for the pouring out of God's wrath on the earth (v. 5).

In the face of such wrath, silence is the only appropriate response. Romans 1:18-20 tells us that when the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, those who have suppressed the truth that God has revealed about Himself will be left "without excuse." A number of Old Testament texts call for silence in the face of judgment from God (Ps 76:7-9; Isa 47:5; Jer 7:34; 16:9; Lam 3:8; Amos 8:3; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:13).[92] In light of this Old Testament background as well as the silence in the heavenly sanctuary in Rev 15:8, combined with the announcement that the day of God's wrath has come (6:17), there should be little doubt that the silence in heaven in the seventh seal is an allusion to the judgment of the seven last plagues that lead up to the return of Christ (Rev 19:15; cf. 14:19-20).

As for the half an hour, it is a mistake to treat it as a time prophecy, as many Adventist scholars have done. The seventh seal is after the close of probation, as we have seen. It is an eschatological event. Time prophecy ceased under the sixth trumpet (Rev 10:6), during the historical period, while the seventh trumpet introduced the eschatological period, when "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever" (11:15). The shift from the historical to the eschatological between the sixth and seventh seals is roughly parallel to that in the trumpets. There can be no time prophecies after historical time ends with the close of probation. The Greek word for "hour" (*hōra*) does not normally connote a period of sixty minutes. It is

[92] Beale, 453; Hughes, 101-2; Johnson, 136; LaRondelle, *End-Time Prophecies*, 141; Mounce, 179; Osborne, 337; Smalley, 212; Stefanovic, *Plain Revelation*, 89-90; Treiyer, 199-200.

used most often to indicate either a particular point in time, as in Matt 24:36, 44, 50; 26:45; Mark 6:35; 15:33; Luke 2:38; 12:12; 22:14; John 2:4; 4:21; 12:23; 16:25, and so forth, or a short period of time, as in 1 John 2:18; Rev 17:12; and 18:10, 17, 19. The former does not suit the context, but the latter does. Given these understandings, it should be clear that "half an hour" merely represents symbolically a very brief period of time during which this silence takes place while the seven last plagues are being poured out. To assume a literal period of seven and a half days based on prophetic time calculations is to miss the point. The plagues of God's wrath are short-lived. The return of Christ will quickly interrupt these devastating plagues and bring in eternal peace.

Conclusion

In light of the biblical evidence presented above, the sixth seal covers events leading up to the close of human probation and the outpouring of God's wrath (Rev 6:17). The sealing of God's people shown in the subsequent excursus in 7:1-8, which still pertains to the sixth seal, providing the answer to the question in 6:17, is a representation of the close of probation. God's faithful people who are still alive at the end of time are sealed along with the redeemed of all ages, qualifying them to stand as part of the great multitude before the throne of God and of the Lamb, as shown in 7:9, clothed in white robes, with palm branches of victory in their hands, praising God and the Lamb for Their salvation.

The seventh seal is a brief period of time following the close of probation during which the seven last plagues are poured out, and there is silence in the heavenly sanctuary—not only inactivity due to the departure of Christ (Rev 11:19; 15:5) and the angels (15:6, 8) but also a sense of respect for God exercising judgment from His throne (Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:13) and a lack of voiced objections (Rom 1:18-20). God alone is there on His throne, shrouded in smoke from His glory and power as He commands the seven angels to go and pour out the bowls of God's wrath on the earth (15:8-16:1). The plagues occupy a very brief period of time, represented by the "half an hour" of the seventh seal. The bowl plagues culminate with the seventh and final plague, which includes the judgment on Babylon, the collapse of the cities of the nations, the breaking up of the earth's crust, and the return of Christ (16:19-20; 18:8; 19:1-2, 11-21). The seventh seal need not remain a mystery if we closely examine the biblical text with a valid hermeneutic, faithfully comparing Scripture with Scripture.

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