



# THE REVELATION OF JOHN

## Bible Study 19

Text: Rev. 6:9-17

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1 Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ ἀληθοῦς Ἰησοῦ ἡν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει, καὶ ἐσήμανεν ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου, 2 καὶ ἔταρτύρησεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ὅσα εἶδεν. 3 Μακάριος ὁ ποιῶν τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ, ἵνα ἔσται ἡ γὰρ ἡμέρα αὐτῶν ἡ γειραμένη.

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#### 2. What the text means.

## Seals Five and Six

### Greek NT

9 Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, εἶδον ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον. 10 καὶ ἔκραζαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες· ἕως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 11 καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἐκάστω στολή λευκή καὶ ἐρρέθη αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἕτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί.

12 Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν ἕκτην, καὶ σεισμός μέγας ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα 13 καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔπεσαν εἰς τὴν γῆν, ὡς συκὴ βάλλει τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη, 14 καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν. 15 Καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ μεγιστᾶνες καὶ οἱ χιλιάρχοι καὶ οἱ πλοῦσιοι καὶ

### Gute Nachricht Bibel

9 Dann brach das Lamm das fünfte Siegel auf. Da sah ich am Fuß des Altars die Seelen\* der Menschen, die man umgebracht hatte, weil sie an Gottes Wort festgehalten hatten – an all dem, wofür Jesus Christus als Zeuge einsteht. 10 Sie riefen mit lauter Stimme: »Herr, du bist heilig und hältst, was du versprichst! Wie lange soll es noch dauern, bis du die Bewohner der Erde vor Gericht rufst und Vergeltung an ihnen übst, weil sie unser Blut vergossen haben?« 11 Sie alle erhielten weiße Gewänder, und es wurde ihnen gesagt: »Gebt noch für kurze Zeit Ruhe, denn eure Zahl ist noch nicht voll. Von euren Brüdern und Schwestern, die Gott dienen genau wie ihr, müssen noch so viele getötet werden, wie Gott bestimmt hat.«

12 Ich sah, wie das Lamm das sechste Siegel aufbrach. Da gab es ein gewaltiges Erdbeben. Die Sonne wurde schwarz wie ein Trauerkleid und der ganze Mond wurde blutrot. 13 Wie unreife Feigen, die ein starker Wind vom Baum schüttelt, fielen die Sterne vom Himmel auf die Erde. 14 Der Himmel verschwand wie

### NRSV

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among

### NLT

9 And when the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their witness. 10 They called loudly to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us? When will you avenge our blood against these people?" 11 Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters -- their fellow servants of Jesus -- had been martyred.

12 I watched as the Lamb broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake. The sun became as dark as black cloth, and the moon became as red as blood. 13 Then the stars of the sky fell to the earth like green figs falling from trees shaken by mighty winds. 14 And the sky was rolled up like a scroll and taken away. And all of the mountains and all of the islands disappeared. 15 Then the kings of the earth,

οἱ ἰσχυροὶ καὶ πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἔκρυψαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ εἰς τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὄρεων 16 καὶ λέγουσιν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ταῖς πέτραις· πέσετε ἐφ' ἡμᾶς καὶ κρύψατε ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, 17 ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι;

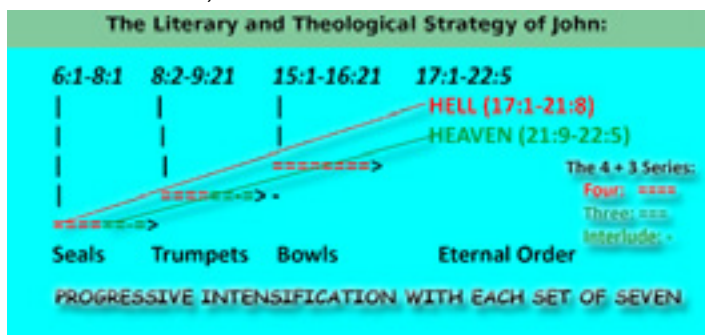
eine Buchrolle\*, die zusammengerollt wird. Weder Berg noch Insel blieben an ihren Plätzen. 15 Alle Menschen versteckten sich in Höhlen und zwischen den Felsen der Berge: die Könige und Herrscher, die Heerführer, die Reichen und Mächtigen und alle Sklaven und Freien. 16 Sie riefen den Bergen und Felsen zu: »Fallt auf uns und verbergt uns vor dem Blick dessen, der auf dem Thron sitzt, und vor dem Zorn des Lammes! 17 Der große Tag, an dem sie Gericht halten, ist gekommen. Wer kann da bestehen?«

the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

the rulers, the generals, the wealthy people, the people with great power, and every slave and every free person -- all hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 And they cried to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. 17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who will be able to survive?"

## INTRODUCTION

In this study we continue examining the seven seals introduced in 6:1. Seals numbers five and six are contained in the second half of chapter six, but the seventh seal surfaces in 8:1 after an 'interlude' in chapter seven. Between the sixth and seventh seals is an 'interlude' found in chapter seven. The shift in emphasis between the first four seals and the last three is rather dramatic, and is reflected in the 4 + 3 structural



understanding. This sets forth two foundation themes in the seals, bowls, and trumpets series: the wrath of God upon evil and evil people, and the protection of God's people by the Lord. In the scroll with the seals which contain the eternal will of God for His creation, the unfolding of the second set of seals will center on the timeless principle that God always takes care of His own people. This has been fundamental since the Garden of Eden and will remain the same throughout eternity. As we will see from this text in Revelation, this divine care does not exempt God's people from suffering nor from brutal persecution. But their eternal destiny is firmly secure, no matter what they experience in this world.

We have a lot to learn about God's care from this passage of scripture.

### 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

Again literary and historical aspects do play an important role in the interpretative process. We will carefully examine the relevant aspects.

#### Historical Aspects:

As a reminder, the external history centers on the writing and the hand copying of the passage from the late first century to the middle ages. The internal history, on the other hand, refers to both explicit and implicit history, i.e., time and place markers, inside the passage that have importance for understanding the meaning of the text.

**External History.** As established in the first study, the projected time and place for the writing of the entire document is the mid-90s of the first Christian century on the island of Patmos just off the western coast of the Roman province of Asia. The entire document, including this passage, was addressed to seven Christian communities of believers located in a circular pattern beginning with the city of Ephesus. We as modern readers are permitted to 'listen in' to what John was instructed by Christ to write down for these believers based upon his visionary observations in the apocalyptic vision that is foundational to the entire document.

From the time of the initial composition of this text until the invention of the printing press in the late 1400s, the copying of the document was done by hand. During the first three or four centuries this work was done by volunteers inside the Christian communities with little or no professional training in making document copies. But with the coming of Constantine to the Roman emperors in the early 300s, Christianity then moved from being a persecuted religion to becoming the official religion of the Roman empire. One of the impacts

of this was the shift from minimally trained volunteers to highly trained professional copyists in the distribution of the 27 documents of the New Testament. Growing numbers of Christian monks devoted their entire careers to just copying the sacred and other texts of the Christian religion. The line of demarcation for this shift is vividly noticed in the gradual move from papyri based manuscript copies to uncial parchment based copies of the New Testament. Although enormously more expensive, the tanned leather provided a much more durable basis for producing copies of the New Testament, which by this point in time especially were overwhelmingly kept secure in the church buildings and made available exclusively to the clergy for study and used by the individual churches in their public worship.

In examining the history of the hand copying of this passage we utilize the two most widely used print editions of the Greek New Testament. First, is *The Greek New Testament* in the fourth revised edition published by the United Bible Societies. As a part of this printed version of the Greek New Testament, a text apparatus is included that lists variations of wording in the passage deemed by the editors to be sufficiently significant in order to impact to some extent the translation of the passage.

In Rev. 6:9-17 only one variation was considered to merit inclusion in the text apparatus. In verse seventeen the phrase ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, *the great day of their wrath*, has a number of manuscripts that read ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ, *the great day of His wrath*.<sup>1</sup> This reflects the idea of God's wrath coming over against the original idea of God's wrath coming upon 'them,' i.e., the kings etc. mentioned in vv. 15-16 (contra Omanson below w. αὐτῶν understood as an objective genitive). The weight of evidence dominantly favors the third person plural pronoun adopted as the original text in the UBS 4th ed.<sup>2</sup>

**18 17** {A} αὐτῶν κ C 1611 1854 2053 2329 2344 it<sup>ar</sup>, e<sup>is</sup> vg syr<sup>ph</sup>, h Fulgentius // αὐτοῦ A 205 209 1006 1841 2351 Byz [P 046] cop<sup>sams, bo</sup> arm eth Andrew; Primasius Beatus

[Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (with Apparatus); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition (with Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000).]

<sup>2c</sup> Although the reading αὐτοῦ (his) is supported by a few uncials, almost all minuscules, and several ancient versions, it appears to be the easier reading, having been introduced to avoid the ambiguity of αὐτῶν and to carry on the reference to τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου (the wrath of the Lamb) of the preceding verse. The variant reading is followed by NJB: 'For the Great Day of his retribution has come, and who can face it?' The pronoun αὐτῶν refers to God, who is seated on the throne, and the Lamb. Translators may make this explicit by saying 'for the terrible day when God and the Lamb

But over the centuries of hand copying one would expect a larger number of variations in wording to be reflected in a comparison of the several thousand existing manuscript copies available in our day. The text apparatus of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* edited by Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland (27th rev. edition) includes references to all the variations that surface across the full range of manuscript copies of this passage. And indeed some 29 places surface where variations of wording occur.<sup>3</sup> will punish everyone has come'." [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 533.]



### **3Offenbarung 6,9**

\* τ. σφ. την π. κ\* 1611. 1854. 2344 pc syh (reversal of sequence of second and third words in τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα)

\* των ανθρωπων κ 1841. 2344 M<sup>A</sup> co (before τῶν ἐσφαγμένων is inserted τῶν ἀνθρώπων)

\* A 1854 it vgmss; Cyp Prim (διὰ is omitted)

\* του αρνιου 1611c. 2351 M<sup>K</sup> sy<sup>h\*</sup> (του αρνιου is inserted after μαρτυρίαν)

### **Offenbarung 6,10**

\* -ζον 1006. 1611. 1841. 1854. 2053. 2351 M<sup>A</sup> (ἔκραξαν is replaced with ἔκραζον)

\* απο M<sup>A</sup> (ἐκ is replaced with ἀπό)

### **Offenbarung 6,11**

\* 1 046. 1854. 2351 al (αὐτοῖς ἐκάστῳ sequence is reversed)

| 2 M<sup>K</sup>

\* ἵνα -σωνται κ C M (Alternative spellings of verb ἀναπαύσονται)

| -σασθε 1854. (2351: -σθαι)

| txt A P 046. 2053\*. 2329 al

\* 2 1 A 1006. 1841. 2344 pc sy<sup>h</sup> (resequencing of ἔτι χρόνον)

| τινα χ. 2329

| - 2351

\* M<sup>K</sup> (μικρόν is omitted)

\* οὗ M<sup>A</sup> (οὗ is inserted after ἕως)

| αν 2329

\* -ρωσωσιν κ M (alternative spellings for πληρωθῶσιν)

| -ρωσουσιν 1611. 2329 pc

| txt A C 2344 pc latt syph co

\* και 2351 M<sup>K</sup>; Cyp (καὶ inserted after αὐτῶν)

### **Offenbarung 6,12**

\* και οτε 2344 M<sup>A</sup> vg<sup>mss</sup>; Prim (καὶ inserted before ὅτε)

| και 2329

\* ιδου A pc vg<sup>cl</sup>; Prim (ἰδοὺ inserted before σεισμὸς)

\* κ 1854 M<sup>K</sup> (ἐγένετο μέλας sequence reversed)

\* 1611. 2329. 2344 M<sup>A</sup> ar\* sa; Prim (ὄλη is omitted)

### **Offenbarung 6,13**

\* θεου A (οὐρανοῦ is replaced with θεοῦ)

\* επι κ 1854. 2329. 2344 pc (εἰς is replaced with ἐπὶ)

\* 1 βαλλουσα κ 1611. 1854. 2053. (2329). 2351 al (alternative spellings of βάλλει)

| βαλουσα M<sup>K</sup>

| txt A C 046. 1006. 1841 M<sup>A</sup>

Careful examination of each of the variations will uncover either efforts to improve the style of the Greek or else careless copying habits. None of the variations alter the meaning of the text.

Consequently we can exegete the adopted reading of 6:9-17 with full confidence that it represents the original wording of the text.

**Internal History.** The apocalyptic visionary nature of the passage limits time and place markers alluding to a this world history. But what is referenced is the martyrdom of many believers in Christ. John's sweeping view of all of human history in his vision enables him to catch a glimpse of the many thousands of individuals who pay the ultimate price for their faith commitment to Christ. In the fifth seal, these are the center of attention as the justifying basis for the pouring out of wrath described in the first four seals. The sixth seal will continue this divine wrath theme with a glimpse into the ultimate culmination of divine punishment on those who have caused the death of the saints of God.

Foundational to these two seals, and especially to the fifth seal, is a view of cosmology assumed by John against the backdrop of various other views found in Judaism and in Greco-Roman religious and philosophical thinking. Some points of intersection among these are present but dramatic differences also surface in a careful analysis and comparison.

In the Hebrew thought of the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism a three tiered cosmology prevailed: the underworld labeled Sheol where the dead entered at their passing; the physical world where people lived while alive; and Heaven above the canopy of the sky where God dwells. From the view of the Hebrew Bible it was not possible for mortals to go into the heavenly presence of God at death.<sup>4</sup>

\* *M*<sup>A</sup> (reverse sequence of ἀνέμου μεγάλου)

**Offenbarung 6,14**

\* -νοϋϛ ϛ 1854 *M*<sup>K</sup> (alternative spelling of ἐλίσσόμενον)

\* βουνοϛ ϛ (νῆϛοϛ is replaced with βουνοϛ)

**Offenbarung 6,15**

\* *M*<sup>A</sup> (χιλίαρχοι καὶ οἱ πλούσιοι is transposed)

\* 1 al (καὶ οἱ ἰσχυροὶ is omitted)

\* παϛ ϛ<sup>l</sup> *M*<sup>A</sup> bo (ϛ\*: h.t.) (πᾶϛ is inserted before ἐλεύθεροϛ)

**Offenbarung 6,16**

\* -ψετε ϛ (alternative spellings of κρύψατε)

| καλυψατε 2329

\* τω -νω ϛ 2351 mK (τοῦ θρόνου is replaced with τῷ θρόνω)

**Offenbarung 6,17**

\* αὐτου A *M* sa<sup>ms</sup> bo; Prim (αὐτῶν is replaced with αὐτοῦ)

| txt ϛ C 1611. 1854. 2053. 2329. 2344 pc latt sy

[Eberhard Nestle et al., Universität Münster. Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 644.]

<sup>4</sup>It is theologically significant that here the dead are in some way present in heaven; from the perspective of the OT it is not possible for mortals to go to heaven after their death (Houtman, *Him-*

But during the Hellenistic era emerging during the intertestamental period, a new cosmology surfaces with the perspective that the righteous of God could enter into the presence of God. One should note that the new perspective emerged both in Judaism and in the developing Greco-Roman paganism.<sup>5</sup> Of course substantial difference between the Jewish and the Greco-Roman views were present. For the Jews the righteous were those with sufficient Torah obedience

*mel*, 3–5). Nevertheless, there are several passages in the Pauline letters, and perhaps two in the Fourth Gospel, that suggest that immediately following death believers are ushered into the heavenly presence of God (2 Cor 5:1, 8; Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 3:13 [however, here ἄγιοι may refer to angels rather than to ‘saints’ = deceased Christians]; 4:14; 5:9; cf. John 14:2–3; 17:24). The widespread ancient conception (found in both the OT and Homer) that the dead go to the underworld (Sheol or Hades) presupposes a three-tiered cosmology consisting of heaven, earth, and underworld (this is precisely the cosmology of Revelation; see *Excursus 4C: The Cosmology of Ancient Ascent Narratives*).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 403.]

<sup>5</sup>“The view that the postmortem destination of the righteous is heaven is largely based on the implications of the so-called new cosmology, which became prevalent in the Hellenistic period. The Hellenistic version of this cosmology imagined the earth as stationary at the lowest or innermost part of the cosmos and surrounded by seven planetary spheres enclosed by an eighth sphere consisting of the fixed stars; the gods were thought to dwell in the highest sphere. During the late Hellenistic period, Judaism, too, adopted an analogous geocentric view of the universe in which the earth was surmounted by three or seven heavens, with God enthroned in the highest heaven (A. Yarbro Collins, “The Seven Heavens in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses,” in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* [Leiden: Brill, 1996] 21–54). Paul’s cosmology consisted of at least three heavens, if not the full seven (2 Cor 12:2–3). In Asc. Isa. 9:7, ‘Isaiah’ reports that in the seventh heaven he ‘saw all the righteous ones from the time of Adam.’ Since according to this cosmology the throne of God is located in the seventh heaven, the conception here is very similar to that expressed in .Abot R. Nat. 12 and b. Šabb. 152b (quoted above). Similarly, in Sepher ha-Razim 7.1–3 (tr. Morgan, 81):

The seventh firmament, all of it is sevenfold light, and from its light all the (seven) heavens shine. Within it is the throne of glory, set on the four glorious Hayot. Also within it are the storehouses of lives, and the storehouse of souls.

“The new cosmology was prevalent in Greco-Roman paganism, providing the basis for the belief that upon death, the soul, the true self, ascends to a heavenly region, to the realm of the gods. Seneca, a Roman Stoic reflecting a strong Platonic influence, states this belief (Ep. Mor. 102.22; LCL tr.):

When the day comes to separate the heavenly from the earthly blend, I shall leave the body here where I found it and shall of my own volition betake myself to the gods. I am not apart from them now, but am merely detained in a heavy and earthly prison. These delays of mortal existence are a prelude to the larger and better life.

This is very close to the Pauline view that ‘whether we wake or sleep, we might live with him’ (1 Thess 5:9).”

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 403–404.]

who were accepted by the God of Abraham. But for the Greeks and Romans the righteous were those having achieved sufficient virtue so that only their souls (ψυχαί) would return to the highest heaven where the gods and goddesses existed.

Generally similar was the evolving conceptualization of the multi-tiered region above the canopy of the sky. The Greeks and Romans identified at least a three tiered region beginning with the sky connected to the earth, the second layer was formed by the seven planets above the sky, and the third and highest tier was enclosed in the stars. This third tier was assumed to be the dwelling place of the gods and goddesses.

Intertestamental Judaism laid a foundation that was continued through the early Christian centuries among Jews that above the canopy were seven layers of Heaven with God being in the seventh and highest tier. Although seldom is any detail provided distinguishing some function for each layer, the general point, which is made clear, is that the higher one went, the closer to God he or she was. Some hint of a possibly similar view by Paul is referenced by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-3, but no details are mentioned in a three layered view of Heaven by the apostle.<sup>6</sup> This highest level he labels as τὸν παράδεισον, [Paradise](#), since it is the location of God's dwelling. What John asserts clearly here is that the Christian martyrs are in the full presence of God under the heavenly altar.<sup>7</sup> They have not gone to an underworld existence, but to be with God upon their death. The generalized views in both Judaism and the Greco-Roman religious/philosophical assertions provided a backdrop against which John could describe what happens to the saints of God who die prior to the second coming of Christ. And he gives particular emphasis to those who were executed because of their

<sup>6</sup>2 Cor. 12:1-4. 12.1 Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ, οὐ συμφέρον μὲν, ἐλεύσομαι δὲ εἰς ὀπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου. 2 οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων, εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ. 3 καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον, εἴτε ἐν σώματι εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, 4 ὅτι ἠρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι.

12.1 It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

<sup>7</sup>John seems to operate off the simple three tiered perspective as is reflected in his statement in 5:3, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ οὐδὲ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς οὐδὲ ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς ἀνοῖξαι τὸ βιβλίον οὔτε βλέπειν αὐτό, [And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.](#) Thus Heaven is a single layer rather than multi-layered as Paul suggests.

faith commitment to Christ.

### Literary Aspects:

As is always true the literary aspects of a scripture text must never be ignored in the interpretive process, since they provide an essential framework for understanding correctly a passage of scripture.

**Genre:** At the broad level of genre, this passage continues the apocalyptic vision introduced in chapter one. At a detailed level of literary pattern, no established genre form can be asserted. To be sure seals five and six are a part of the 4 + 3 pattern set forth in the first two series of sevens with the seals and the trumpets with these two being a part of the second segment of 3s. But by definition a genre can be claimed only when multiple expressions are found using a common core structure across numerous ancient writings. And this doesn't happen with these seven seals. To be sure, something similar to vv. 9-11 does surface in the Jewish apocalyptic writings of 1 Enoch 47:4<sup>8</sup> and 4 Ezra 4:35-37<sup>9</sup>. But these only form parallel texts with similar content and theme, not a literary form.

In Rev. 6:9-17, John structures the depiction distinctively with only borrowing ideas and some terminology out of the Hebrew prophetic materials. These two above examples of Jewish apocalyptic documents, to a lesser degree, are doing something similar but going a different direction than John goes.

**Literary Setting:** The literary context of vv. 9-17 is easy to determine. This passage contains seals five and six of the series of seven seals found in 6:1 - 8:1. This series of seven seals represents a continuation of the part two of John's apocalyptic vision begun in 4:1. It represents the natural culmination of 5:1-14 where the Lamb is granted authorization to open the heavenly scroll containing seven seals. Thus 6:1-8:1 is the first of three series of sevens with seven trumpets following in 8:2-11:19 and seven bowls of wrath in 16:1-

### <sup>8</sup>1 Enoch 47:4.

[And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy;](#)  
[Because the number of the righteous had been offered,](#)  
[And the prayer of the righteous had been heard,](#)  
[And the blood of the righteous been required before the Lord of Spirits.](#)

[Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2004), 216.]

<sup>9</sup>4 Ezra 4:35-37. 35 Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, 'How long are we to remain here? And when will the harvest of our reward come?' 36 And the archangel Jeremiel answered and said, 'When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance, 37 and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.'

[*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 2 Esd 4:35-37.]

21. Punctuating these three series of seven are 'inter-ludes' or interruptions to the series: 7:1-17; 10:1-14 and 12:1-15:8. These function primarily as amplifications on different themes found in the series of sevens.

With seals five and six being a part of the three's in the 4 + 3 structure, the core, common theme is the

protection of the people of God by the Heavenly Father.

**Literary Structure:** The block diagram below in English is based on an excessively literal translation of the Greek text in order to more clearly illustrate the internal structural relationship of the ideas inside the passage.

6.9           And  
              when he opened the fifth seal,  
**198        I saw the souls**  
              under the altar  
                          of those having been slaughtered  
  because of the Word of God  
  and  
  because of the witness  
  that they were having.

6.10           And  
**199        they cried out**  
              with a loud voice,  
              saying:  
                          "Until when,  
                          Master,  
                          holy and true,  
              will you not judge  
                          and  
              will you not avenge our blood  
                          from those dwelling  
  upon the earth?"

6.11           And  
**200        was given to them, to each one, a white robe**  
              and  
**201        they were told**  
                          that they should rest  
  yet  
  a short time  
  until the number was completed  
  /-----|  
  both of their fellow servants  
  and of their brothers  
  who are going to be killed  
  just as they.

6.12           And  
**201        I saw**  
              when He opened the sixth seal  
              and  
**203        a great earthquake happened**  
              and  
**204        the sun became black**  
                          as sackcloth  
              and  
**205        the full moon became**  
                          as blood

6.13           and  
 206       **the stars of heaven fell**  
                                   to the earth  
                                   as a fig tree casts off its unripe fruit  
   under the shaking of a gale-force wind,  
 6.14           and  
 207       **the sky was split apart**  
                   as a scroll rolling itself up  
                   and  
   from their place  
 208       **every mountain and island...was removed.**  
  
 6.15           And  
 209       **the kings of the earth**  
                   and  
                   **the great men**  
                   and  
                   **the tribunes**  
                   and  
                   **the rich**  
                   and  
                   **the powerful**  
                   and  
                   **every slave**  
                   and  
                   **freedman hid themselves**  
                           in the caves  
                           and  
                           in the rocks of the mountains  
 6.16           and  
 210       **they say to the mountains**  
                   and  
 211       ---- --- **to the rocks,**  
                                   Fall  
                                   upon us  
                                   and  
                                   hide us  
                                   from the face  
   of the One sitting  
   upon the throne  
                                   and  
                                   from the wrath  
   of the Lamb  
 6.17           because the great day of their wrath has come  
                                   and  
                                   who is able to stand?

**Analysis of Rhetorical Structure:**

At the basic level of division the markers for the fifth seal (#s 199-201) and the sixth seal (#s 202-211) clearly provide the core structure of the passage.

Within the fifth seal (#s 199-201), a twofold sub-division of thought is evident: # 198, John's seeing the martyrs, and #s 199-201, their interaction with God. This second division divides into two further subsections: #199, their crying out to God, and #s 200-201, His response to their plea.

Within the sixth seal (#s 202-211), a twofold sub-division is also evident: #s 202-208, John sees natural

disasters take place on earth, and #s 209-211, the human response on earth to these disasters.

**Exegesis of the Text:**

The organizing structure of the exegesis of the passage then needs to be built around this derived thought flow noted in the above diagram. The fifth and sixth seals provide the foundation division of the scripture text. Then the natural twofold subdivision inside each of the two seals provides further structural division of the ideas inside the passage.

## A. Seal Five, vv. 9-11

9 Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, εἶδον ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον. 10 καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες· ἕως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 11 καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἐκάστω στολή λευκή καὶ ἐρρέθη αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτενέσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

Inside the fifth seal two core points are made. First, John sees the martyrs in Heaven and describes their situation. Then second, he describes their plea to God and then God's response to their plea, which itself falls into an action and words spoken to them.<sup>10</sup>

This seal is in the 4 + 3 structural arrangement of the seven seals coming as the first one in the second grouping of three seals. The core theme of this second section is the protection by God of His people. Here the emphasis falls upon those who over time have paid the ultimate price for their witness to God by being put to death for it.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>"While the first four seals form a unit by the device of four successive cavaliers with mounts of different colors — each cavalier is summoned by one of the four cherubim, and each cavalier either brings or is commissioned to bring various destructive judgments upon the people of the earth (death by sword, famine, pestilence, and wild animals) — the fifth seal in vv 9–11 is set apart by its particular subject matter, the seer's vision of the souls of the martyrs under the heavenly altar. It seems somewhat out of place that the martyrs demand vengeance on the inhabitants of the earth when that appears to be precisely what has been dispensed by the four horsemen in vv 2–8. This section consists of three subunits: (1) The seer's attention is called to the souls of the martyrs under the altar (v 9). (2) The focus then turns to the martyrs, who appeal to God for vengeance on those who have killed them (v 10). (3) The divine response is twofold: (a) they are invested with a white robe (v 11a), and (b) they are told to rest until the *numerus martyrum*, "number of martyrs," is complete." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 390–391.]

<sup>11</sup>In ancient Greek the language of witness and martyrdom play off the same root word μάρτυς. Thus a μάρτυς is a witness who gives (μαρτυρέω) a witness (μαρτυρία). And such a μάρτυς

The parallels to both 1 Enoch 47:4 and 4 Ezra 4:35-37 in both form and content highlight a common theme of justice for the martyrdom of the righteous.<sup>12</sup> In ancient Judaism and early Christianity many individuals paid with their lives for their commitment to God. Execution often took on exceedingly brutal forms which others sometimes were forced to watch. This sense of injustice was burned deeply into the consciousness of the people of God in that world. But their belief in God included also a deeply held conviction that God was just and holy. This clearly implied that the justice of God would hold accountable all their persecutors and executioners. This fifth seal affirms this religious principle emphatically for early Christians. And remains something important for modern Christians to remember. It becomes particularly important to Christians in some parts of our world today who undergo brutal suffering and persecution for their faith commitment to Christ.<sup>13</sup>

**1. John sees the martyrs, v. 9.** 9 Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, εἶδον ὑποκάτω τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον. 9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaugh-

may die for his/her witness and become a *martyr*, which in Greek is also a μάρτυς.

<sup>12</sup>"The entire scene in vv 9–11 has close parallels in both form and content with 1 Enoch 47:4 and 4 Ezra 4:35–37. According to 1 Enoch 47:4 (tr. Black, 1 Enoch 49),

And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy;  
Because the number of righteous had been reached,  
And the prayer of the righteous had been heard,  
And the blood of the righteous ones had been avenged before the Lord of spirits.

"Despite some difficulties with the text (Knibb, *Enoch* 2:133, note on 47.4), the reference is probably to the predetermined number of the elect (Black, *1 Enoch*, 209–10). Here we find the juxtaposition of two motifs, the complete number of the righteous and the prayer for vengeance by righteous martyrs. Similarly, in 4 Ezra 4:35–37, we find a comparable sequence of motifs consisting of a brief question put by the righteous dead (beginning with the phrase 'How long ... ?' as in Rev 6:11; see Westermann, ZAW 66 [1954] 53) and the comforting answer by a supernatural being, which contains the motif of the *numerus iustorum*, i.e., the complete number of the righteous (RSV):

Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, "How long are we to remain here? And when will come the harvest of our reward?" And Jeremiel the archangel answered them and said, "When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled."

"This same passage is also quoted in an Amharic commentary on Revelation (R. W. Cowley, *Apocalypse*, 238)."

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 391.]

<sup>13</sup>For a gateway web site into what is happening in the modern world today, see "Persecution," Christianity Today at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/p/persecution/>.



tered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given;

A part of the formula pattern in the first four seals, particularly seals two through four, is continued in the fifth seal: Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, and when He opened the fifth seal.<sup>14</sup> The Lamb is specifically named as opening each of the seals in the first one, and then the assumed verb subject in the subsequent ones. The main clause verb follows this adverbial temporal dependent clause and here is εἶδον, I saw. The emphasis in these first five seals will be either on εἶδον, I saw, and/or ἤκουσα, I heard. Note:

**1st seal** (vv. 1-2), εἶδον ὅτε... καὶ ἤκουσα, I saw when...and I heard;

**2nd seal** (v. 3), ἤκουσα, I heard;

**3rd seal** (vv. 5-6), ἤκουσα... καὶ εἶδον...καὶ ἤκουσα, I heard...and I saw...and I heard;

**4th seal** (vv. 7-8), ἤκουσα... καὶ εἶδον, I heard...and I saw.;

**5th seal**, εἶδον, I saw.

Typically the stress on seeing and hearing follows what ever is emphasized in the content of the seal. If action, then εἶδον; if speaking then ἤκουσα; and if both, then ἤκουσα... καὶ εἶδον.

This time when the fifth seal was untied and the scroll unrolled down to the sixth seal, John did not see a horse and rider coming out of the scroll. Instead, what emerged from the scroll was a glimpse into a chamber located under the altar of sacrifice located before the throne of God in heaven. Not otherwise visible, this insight became possible through divine action in John's visionary experience.

For the first time we are introduced to an altar<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Note the pattern:

**First seal (v. 1):** Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὸ ἄρνιον μίαν ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ σφραγίδων,

**Second seal (v. 3):** Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν δευτέραν,

**Third seal (v. 5):** Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν τρίτην

**Fourth seal (v. 7):** Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν τετάρτην,

<sup>15</sup>“**Altar**, the translation of a Hebrew word denoting ‘place of sacrifice.’ Because it is formed from a verbal root that means ‘to slaughter’ or, more specifically, ‘to slaughter and cut up for the purpose of sacrifice,’ the term ‘altar’ obviously is derived from the ancient, prebiblical practice of animal sacrifice. However, by the time of its usage in connection with biblical ritual, its early association with animal slaughter had been extended. Altars mentioned in the Bible were used for oblations in general: for a variety of foodstuffs, including grain mixed with oil and/or salt and incense, wine, fruits, four-legged animals, birds; and for incense alone. In addition, the probability that the prebiblical sacrifices or ritual killings took place on the altar itself appears remote. While offerings of all types were deposited and burnt on the altar, the actual slaughtering of sacrificial animals took place at a specially designated spot adjacent to the altar itself.

“The word for altar (*mizbah*) is found approximately four hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, most English ver-

located in Heaven, which was the model for the high altar located in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem during both the first and second temple eras. Somewhat more details about this altar will emerge in subsequent references to it in Revelation:

a) It was a golden altar: 8:3; 9:13.

b) It was located in front of the throne of God (8:3) or God Himself (9:13)

c) It had fire burning in it (8:5)

d) It had a chamber below the top containing τὰς ψυχὰς of the martyred (6:9)

e) An angel could come out of it (14:18)

f) It could speak verbally (16:7)

As becomes obvious from these references this was not an ordinary altar of sacrifice. Being located in Heaven one would anticipate extraordinary items connected to it. In Hebrews 13:10 an allusion to this heavenly altar most likely surfaces, but it is the seven references in Revelation that form the core of our understanding of this altar.

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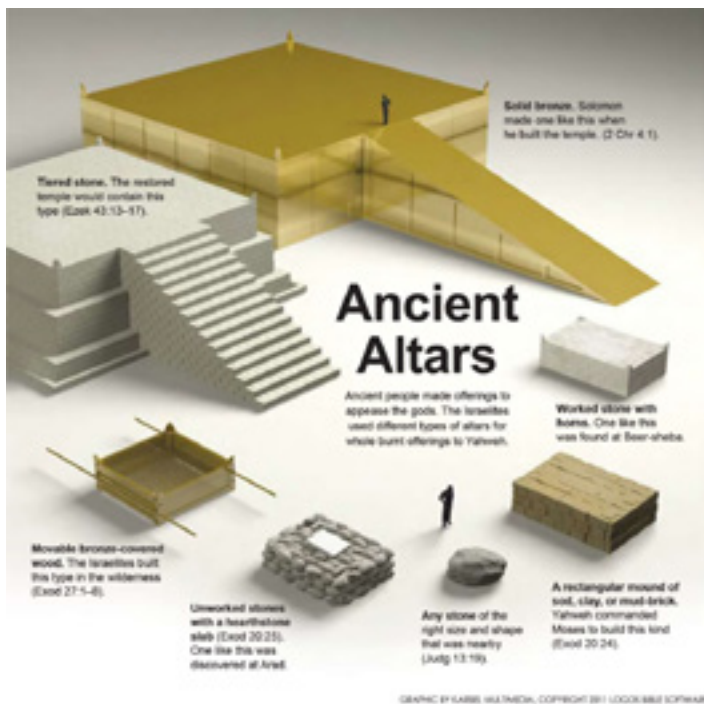
sions use ‘altar’ to render another Hebrew term (*hahrel*), which literally means ‘mountain of God’ and may refer to Syro-Mesopotamian altar constructions, since Ezekiel (43:15) probably uses it in reference to an altar built by King Ahaz in emulation of an altar he had seen in Damascus (2 Kings 11:10-16).

“Virtually half of the OT usages appear in the Pentateuch, as might be expected, because of the concentration of priestly texts in the first section of the Hebrew Bible. Other biblical books with frequent mentions of the altar are 1 and 2 Kings, which include the description of the Solomonic Temple altar, 2 Chronicles, which has a decidedly priestly interest, and Ezekiel, a prophet whose visions are highly influenced by Temple imagery.

“In the NT the word for ‘altar’ (Gk. *thusiastērion*) is used in twenty-four places. In one instance, in reference to a pagan structure (Acts 17:23), another Greek word (*bōmos*, ‘high place’) is translated ‘altar.’ Older English versions render a third word (*thumiatērion*) ‘censer’ in one other place, Heb. 9:4, although the usage probably denotes the golden incense altar, as the RSV understands it. The NT references exhibit concentrations in Matthew (seven times), with only two mentions in Luke and none in Mark or John, and in Revelation (eight times), as might be expected because of the Temple visions of that book.

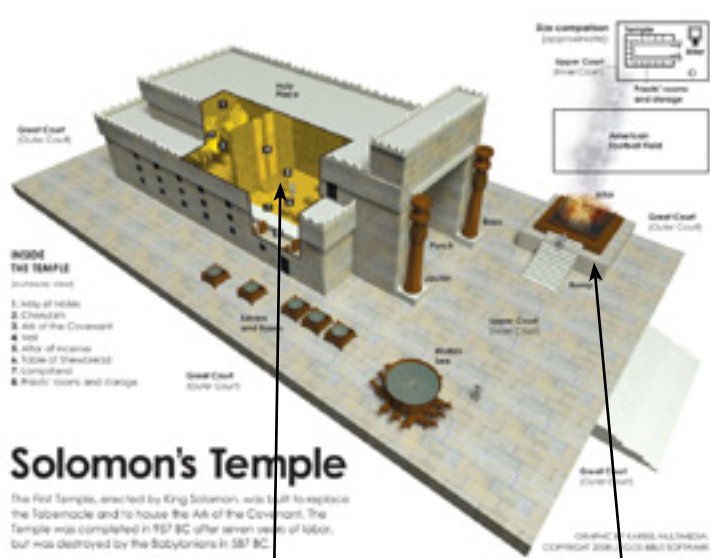
“The construction of sacrificial altars was not necessarily limited to the Jerusalem Temple or to any temple for that matter, at least not before the time of the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem in Josiah’s time (639-609 B.C.). By their very nature, involving as they did the processing of animal carcasses and the burning of various foodstuffs, altars (except for incense altars) were open-air structures. Therefore, altars could in fact exist and function independently of temple buildings. This fact is especially apparent in the reference to altars in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis (e.g., Gen. 13:18; 33:20). However, the converse is apparently not true, and temple buildings were always accompanied by altars in their courtyards. In addition, the somewhat enigmatic shrines known as ‘high places’ were perhaps a category of altar.”

[Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 22–23.]



## Ancient Altars

Ancient people made offerings to appease the gods. The Israelites used different types of altars for whole burnt offerings to Yehovah.



## Solomon's Temple

The First Temple, erected by King Solomon, was built to replace the Tabernacle and to house the Ark of the Covenant. The Temple was completed in 957 BC after seven years of labor, but was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

and served different purposes.<sup>17</sup> The great altar was located outside the inner courts of the temple in the Court of the Priests and functioned at the place of burnt offerings from both animals and various grains. The second altar was located in the inner court of the temple in front of veil covering the entrance into the Holy of Holies. It was an incense altar made of wood but overlaid with gold.

Given the roles of the altars in the Jerusalem temple as an 'earthly copy' of the heavenly temple, the reason for the heavenly altar seems fairly clear.<sup>18</sup> The

Logically the question arises as to why was there an altar in Heaven. To be sure a direct answer to this question is never given by John.

The Greek word for altar used in Revelation is θυσιαστήριον which is the dominate word for altar inside the NT.<sup>16</sup> In Solomon's temple two altars existed

<sup>16</sup>“The noun θυσιαστήριον, ‘altar,’ found eight times in Revelation (here; 8:3[2x]; 8:5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:8; 16:7), is derived from the verb θυσιάζω, ‘to sacrifice,’ and is linked to the compound suffix -τηριον (the agentive -τηρ with the addition of -ιο-, a morpheme with diminutive significance), which is added to verbal stems to provide names for establishments, instruments, and utensils (an extension of the agentive significance); in this case the noun indicates the place where the sacrifice is made, i.e., the altar. The term appears for the first time in the LXX where it occurs over four hundred times (primarily as a translation of the Hebrew מִזְבֵּחַ *mizbēah*, ‘altar’), where it is used of the altar of burnt offering (2 Kgs 16:10–15), of the incense altar (1 Chr 6:49), and of altars generally (Gen 8:20). Until the third century A.D. the term is limited to Jewish and Christian authors (Klauck, ZNW 71 [1980] 277). In the NT It is primarily used of the altar for burnt offerings in the Jerusalem temple (Matt 5:23–24; 23:28–20, 35; Luke 11:51; 1 Cor 9:13; 10:18; Heb 7:13; cf. 1 Clem. 41:2), four times for the altar of incense (Rev 8:3[2x], 5; 9:13), or for altars generally (Rom 11:3; Jas 2:21). In Revelation θυσιαστήριον is used four times of the altar of incense (8:3[2x], 5; 9:13), three times of the altar of burnt offerings (6:9; 11:1; 16:7), and twice by figurative extension with the meaning ‘sanctuary’ (11:1; 14:18; see Comment on 11:1). In the NT θυσιαστήριον refers to the heavenly altar only in Revelation (with the possible exception of Heb 13:10; see J. W. Thompson, “Outside the Camp: A Study of Heb 13:9–14,” CBQ 40 [1978] 58–59). In Herm. Man. 10.3.2–3, the term occurs twice of the heavenly altar, which is the goal of prayers, and the same conception is found in Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 4.18.6 (Harvey 4.31.5) and Gregory Nazianzus (*Or.* 42). In Herm. Sim. 8.2.5 the heavenly altar is again mentioned as the place for testing or judgment. The conception of an altar in the heavenly temple is apparently of Jewish origin. The view of some that the presence of an altar in the heavenly temple is modeled after the presence of an altar in

earthly churches is anachronistic. Minucius Felix (Octavius 32.1) observed *aras non habemus*, ‘we have no altars’ (see Origen, *Cont.* 8.17).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 405.]

<sup>17</sup>“There were two altars in Solomon's temple. One was 20 cubits square (about 25 feet) and 10 cubits high (about 12.5 feet). It was made of bronze and used for burnt offerings. It remained the center of temple worship until the temple was destroyed, although in the days of King Ahaz it was removed from its place to the northern side of the temple at the command of the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-pileser (2 Kgs 16:14). It was later restored to its proper place by Hezekiah (2 Chr 29:18). The second, the incense altar, stood in front of the veil. It was made of cedar and overlaid with gold (1 Kgs 6:20–22).” [Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 63.]

<sup>18</sup>“Since in Jewish thought the earthly temple was modeled after the heavenly temple, it is appropriate to ask to what the eight occurrences of the term ‘altar’ in Revelation refer (discussed in some detail in Charles, 1:226–230). The tabernacle (in part an idealization of the Solomonic temple; see Haran, *Temples*, 189–204), the Solomonic temple, and the Herodian temple had two distinct altars, the ‘outer’ altar or the ‘altar of burnt offering,’ located (along with the bronze laver) in the court before the entrance to the holy place, i.e., in the ‘Court of Priests’ (Jos. J. W. 5.225), and the ‘inner’ altar or the golden altar of incense, situated just in front of the *pāroket* or curtain separating the holy place or nave from the *dēbîr* or most holy place (Lev 4:18). The holy place also housed the menorah (or menorahs) and the table for the bread of the presence (Jos. J. W. 5.216).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Page 10

altar in the temple in Jerusalem functioned as the place where God meets sinners and grants them forgiveness, i.e., the altar of burnt offering.<sup>19</sup> The depiction in 6:9; 11:1; and 16:7 stresses this function. The physical action of offering sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple expressed concretely the spiritual action of God granting forgiveness in heaven. But the depiction of the altar in 8:3 (2x); 8:5; and 9:13 describe the altar of incense, which symbolized God's communication with His people through their prayers being offered up to Him. The unusual reference in 14:18 where an angel comes out of the altar reflects most likely a figurative extension of altar to specify the entire sanctuary or heavenly temple.

What John saw when the scroll was opened was τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων, *the souls of those having been slaughtered*.<sup>20</sup> That this is apocalyptic visionary language is undeniable. John was permitted to see the invisible part of individuals that only God can see.<sup>21</sup> These individuals are identified further as

Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 405–406.]

<sup>19</sup>Of course it must be remembered that the general depiction of Heaven itself is largely within the framework of the design of the earthly temple in Jerusalem, whether Solomon's temple or the later Herod's temple. So this depiction of the altar in Heaven is entirely consistent with this pattern in Revelation.

<sup>20</sup>Not to be overlooked here is the probable role of **Lev. 4:7**, καὶ ἐπιθήσει ὁ ἱερεὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ μόσχου ἐπὶ τὰ κέρατα τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τοῦ θυμιάματος τῆς συνθέσεως τοῦ ἐναντίον κυρίου, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ σκηνῇ τοῦ μαρτυρίου· καὶ πᾶν τὸ αἷμα τοῦ μόσχου ἐκχεεῖ παρὰ τὴν βᾶσιν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου τῶν ὀλοκαυτωμάτων, ὃ ἐστὶν παρὰ τὰς θύρας τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου. † *The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense that is in the tent of meeting before the Lord; and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering, which is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*

*underneath the altar:* The striking imagery is suggested by Lev 4:7, "The rest of the blood ... he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt-offering"; and, since "blood is the life" (Lev 17:11), the "souls" of martyrs are where their life-blood is found.

[Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 16, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 93.]

<sup>21</sup>"The term ψυχή here (and in 20:4) refers to 'an essence which differs from the body and is not dissolved by death' (Thayer, *Lexicon*, 677) or to the 'seat and center of life that transcends the earthly' (BAGD, 893); n.b. that the three meanings for ψυχή suggested by Louw-Nida, 2:266 ('inner self,' 'life,' 'person'), do not provide for such a possible conception (see Diogn. 6:1–9; Wis 3:1). The problem of how it is possible for John to see a (presumably) disembodied ψυχή immediately suggests itself, though this never appears to be a problem for visionaries in either Jewish or Hellenistic texts. For Tertullian, of course, the Stoic view of the corporeality of the soul was the answer (*De anima* 8). However, even in Plato *Phaedo* 81C–D (Tertullian argues against the Platonic views of the incorporeality of the soul in *De anima* 6) unpurified souls are conceived of not as immaterial substances but as phantoms or insubstantial *wraiths* (Gallop, Plato, 143–44). The location under the altar symbolizes the nearness of these martyrs to God; the same motif is apparently at work in early Jewish traditions,

τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον, *of those having been slaughtered both because of the Word of God and because of the witness which they were having*. Although the language here does not exclude the righteous martyrs of the OT, the focus is overwhelmingly on the believers in John's day who died for their commitment to Christ. This is consistent with the scattered subsequent references to martyrs in the remainder of Revelation.<sup>22</sup> Rev. 20:4a comes the closest to reproducing this depiction here.<sup>23</sup>

which conceive of souls under the throne of God (b. Šabb. 152b). It is interesting that the Greek term βωμός and the Latin term *ara*, both meaning 'altar,' were used in antiquity by pagans and Jews to mean 'tomb' (van der Horst, *Epitaphs*, 42–43). According to Tacitus *Hist.* 5.5 (LCL tr.), Jews 'believe that the souls [animos] of those who are killed in battle or by the executioner are immortal [aeternos putant]; hence comes their passion for begetting children and their scorn of death.' According to *Abot R. Nat.* 12 (see b. Šabb. 152b), 'Nor is the soul of Moses alone in safekeeping under the throne of glory; rather the souls of all the righteous are in safekeeping under the throne of glory' (tr. Goldin, *Fathers*, 65). There is an interesting tradition in the *Abot R. Nat.* 26: 'He who is buried in the land of Israel is as though he were buried under the altar; for the whole land of Israel is fit to be the site of the altar. And he who is buried under the altar is as though he were buried under the throne of glory' (tr. Goldin, *Fathers*, 111). The problem, of course, is that a body buried under the altar would render it unclean. Lieberman, however, provides an explanation for this problem by referring to the rabbinic view that the 'ashes of Isaac,' which formed the foundations of the inner altar, are identified with the 'ashes of the ram' sacrificed by Abraham (Lieberman, *Hellenism*, 161–63). Porphyry (*De abst.* 2.56.6) reports that the Doumatenoi of Arabia sacrificed a young boy whom they then buried beneath an altar; they thereafter treated the altar as a cult statue (Millar, *Near East*, 12–13)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 404–405.]

<sup>22</sup>"While it is obvious that 'those who had been slain for the word of God and because of the testimony which they bore' are martyrs, their specific identity is unclear. There are several variations of this phrase found throughout Revelation. The focal motifs are 'the word of God' and 'the testimony (of Jesus)' (1:2, 9; 20:4) or 'the word of God' and 'their testimony' (12:11). The closest parallel is 20:4, which speaks of those who had been beheaded διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, 'because of the testimony borne by Jesus and because of the word of God.' Feuillet (*NTR* 99 [1977] 189–207) argues that the motif of 'their testimony' rather than 'the testimony of Jesus' indicates that here their number includes all pre-Christian martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of moral and religious truth (see Matt 23:31–35; Heb 11:4; 12:24). It is more probable that Christian martyrs are particularly in view, including those who died in the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64. The phrase ἣν εἶχον, 'which they maintained,' refers not to the testimony they bore to Jesus Christ but rather to the testimony they had received and preserved (for εἶχον μαρτυρίαν, see 12:17; Beckwith, 526; Charles, 1:174)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 406.]

<sup>23</sup>**Rev. 20:4a.** Καὶ εἶδον θρόνους καὶ ἐκάθισαν ἐπ' αὐτοὺς καὶ κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς, καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ οἵτινες οὐ

Whether these ψυχὰς were corporeal or not remains unclear. But what is clear is that they are near God and completely in His care and safe-keeping. No evil force will ever touch them again!

**2. The martyrs interaction with God is not-ed, vv. 10-11.** 10 καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες· ἕως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 11 καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἑκάστω στολή λευκή καὶ ἔρρέθη αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί. 10 they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

The second part of this fifth seal centers on the interaction of these ψυχὰς with God. First, they cry out to him in a plea, and then He responds with both actions and words. Although in 20:4 καὶ ἔζησαν, and they came to life, here they are already alive and able to speak to God: καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες, and they cried out in a loud voice saying. This kind of shifting back and forth is not unusual in apocalyptic visions, since the symbolism of the image is the central point rather than some logical consistency of narrative detail. But failure to grasp this -- as the original Roman censors of this document most likely would have -- creates the impression of complete logical chaos in the narration of the story.

**a) Their plea to God, v. 10** 10 καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες· ἕως πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”

The plea of these martyred saints is introduced by καὶ ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλη λέγοντες, and they cried out in a loud voice saying. The combining of two verbs of speaking ἔκραξαν and λέγοντες stresses as a Hebraism a judicial tone of requesting justice from God.<sup>24</sup>

προσεκύνησαν τὸ θηρίον οὐδὲ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἔλαβον τὸ χάραγμα ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτῶν.

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God.

<sup>24</sup>“Their response is prayer that the reputation of God and his people be vindicated. The reputation of God’s justice is at stake because he will be considered unjust if he does not punish sin (note similar appeals for divine faithfulness in executing justice in 1 En. 9:3–10; 22:5).” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Com-

This plea is made φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, in a loud voice, signaling not so much raising the volume of speaking but the collective impact of this large host of martyrs speaking together in unison.<sup>25</sup> Thus their plea takes on an urgency beyond that of just a single individual making such a plea. As the American clique goes, “There is strength in numbers.”

He is referenced as ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, Master, holy and true. The term ὁ δεσπότης, Master, is used only here in Revelation and can refer either to God or Christ. It is a term referencing the possessing of authority and power.<sup>26</sup> Here the modifiers ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, the holy and true One, favors ὁ δεσπότης referring to God rather than to Christ.<sup>27</sup> Their

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mentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 392.]

<sup>25</sup>“Using the רומר קל *qal wāhōmer*, ‘lesser to greater,’ argument, It is argued in rabbinic Judaism that if God hears an individual cry to him, how much more will he hear when many cry (Mek. de-Rabbi Ishmael, Nezikin 18; Lauterbach, Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael 3:143)? In this instance the appeal for vengeance is uttered by many martyrs.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 406–407.]

<sup>26</sup>“The term δεσπότης, ‘lord, master,’ used only here in Revelation, is a general designation for people in authority (slaveowners: 1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18; T. Job 7:9; householders: 2 Tim 2:20; T. Jos. 3:2), which is also used occasionally of Christ (2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4), but used seventeen times of God in the LXX (e.g., Gen 15:2, 8; Josh 5:14; Job 5:8; Prov 6:7; Isa 1:24; Jer 1:6; Jonah 4:3), and frequently in early Jewish literature (Adam and Eve 8:1; 19:2; T. Abr. [Rec. A] 1:4, 7; 4:5; 8:2–3; T. Job 38:1), as well as in early Christian literature (Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; Gk Ap. Ezra 2:23; 4:5; 5:1, 6, 16). That δεσπότης refers to Christ, not God, is argued unconvincingly by Heil, Bib. 74 [1993] 227 n. 22. The term δεσπότης, ‘master,’ is a regular Greek translation of two Latin terms for the Roman emperor, dominus and princeps (Philo Flacc. 4.23; see Mason, Greek Terms, 34). Dio Chrysostom Or. 45.1 (see Mussies, Dio, 248) states that though both Greeks and barbarians addressed Domitian as δεσπότης, ‘master,’ and θεός, ‘god,’ he was in reality an evil daimon (δαίμονα πονηρόν). This identification of a Roman emperor as an evil supernatural being comes close to John’s perception of the real powers at work behind the emperor and the Roman empire.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 407.]

<sup>27</sup>“The divine titles ‘holy and true’ are used in the asyndetic form ‘the holy, the true’ in 3:14 as titles of Christ (for the christological use of those titles, see Comment on 3:14). Neither the phrase ‘the holy, the true’ nor the phrase ‘holy and true’ is used elsewhere in early Jewish or early Christian literature of God or Christ. However, the title ‘the holy one’ (ὁ ἅγιος) is used frequently of God in the LXX, often in the expression ‘the Holy One of Israel,’ which occurs twenty-nine times in Isaiah alone (see 2 Kgs 19:22; Pss 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isa 1:4; 5:19, 24; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 41:14; Jer 2:3; 3:16; 50:29; 51:5). Less frequently, the title ‘true’ is applied to God, often in the sense that other gods are false (Exod 34:6; 2 Chr 15:3; Neh 9:6; Isa 65:19; Jer 10:10; John 7:13; 17:3; 1 John 5:20; 1 Clem. 43:14; Diogn. 8:9; Ant. 8.335, 337, 338).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 407.]

presence here underscores the plea as an appeal to God's character as holy and just.

The plea is stated as ἕως πότε...οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; *How long will you not judge and avenge our blood from those dwelling upon the earth?* Contrary to some contemporary commentators, this is a call for God to impose vengeance upon those who killed the martyrs. The second verb ἐκδικεῖς makes this undeniably true. But one should not confuse the English words 'avenge' and 'revenge.'<sup>28</sup> Though similar they are distinct from one another in meaning. The plea is for God to take action against their executioners in order to preserve His holiness and just character.<sup>29</sup> It has a very similar

338, 343, 402; 9.256; 10.263), or it is stated that he does not lie (Jer 42:5; Rom 3:3), as in the titles ἀληθινὸς καὶ δίκαιος, 'true and righteous' (Ant. 11.55)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 407.]

<sup>28</sup>**Avenge:** "to harm or punish someone who has harmed you or someone or something that you care about" ("Avenge," [Merriam-Webster online dictionary](#)).

**Revenge:** "to avenge (as oneself) usually by retaliating in kind or degree" ("Revenge," [Merriam-Webster online dictionary](#))

<sup>29</sup>Rev 6:10 reads like a dramatization of the rhetorical questions attributed to Jesus in Luke 18:7: 'Will not God vindicate [ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν] his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he long delay over them?' The phrase 'how long?' in the context of impatient prayer (i.e., the perception that too long a period has intervened between the commission of an outrage and its just recompense) occurs several times in the OT (Pss 6:3–4; 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:6; 1 Macc 6:22; 4 Ezra 4:35; cf. Luke 18:7; see Westermann, ZAW 66 [1954] 53). Rev 6:10 is essentially a prayer for vengeance, with precedents in the OT in the so-called imprecatory psalms (Pss 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 139), which are inappropriately labeled 'imprecatory' since wishes or prayers for retribution are found in various types of psalms, though no single psalm has a completely imprecatory character. Wishes or prayers for divine vengeance also occur with some frequency in other contexts in the OT (2 Sam 3:28–29; 2 Kgs 1:10, 12; 2 Chr 22:22; Neh 4:4–5; Jer 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21–23; 20:12; Amos 7:17). The verb ἐκδικεῖν, 'to avenge,' occurs only here and in 19:2, where the vengeance prayed for is clearly fulfilled. In the OT, the shedding of human blood is a crime that requires compensation, often the death of the murderer (Gen 9:5–6; Num 35:33; cf. the formula 'his blood is on his head' in Josh 2:19; 2 Sam 1:16; 1 Kgs 2:33, 37; Ezek 33:4; Matt 27:25). Once human blood has been shed, it is frequently said that such blood 'cries out,' i.e., to God who hears it, for vengeance (Gen 4:10; 2 Macc 8:3; 2 Esdr 15:8; Sib. Or. 3.313; cf. Ezek 3:18, 20; 35:6; see TDOT 3:249–50). Yahweh is depicted as the דָּרֵשׁ דָּמִים *dorēš dāmīm*, 'avenger of blood' (Pss 9:13; 72:14), i.e., the one who sees that justice is done to those who murder his people (Deut 32:43; 2 Kgs 9:7; Pss 9:12; 79:10). This brief episode in Rev 6:10 is based on a type scene in which, as it were, the clients of a patron petition him or her for justice or vindication. One instance of this type scene is found in 1 Macc 6:22, where subjects appeal to their king for satisfaction (n.b. the use of the two terms κρίσις, 'judgment,' and ἐκδικεῖν, 'to avenge'): "They went to the king and said, 'How long [ἕως πότε] will you fail to do justice and to avenge [οὐ ποιήσῃ κρίσιν καὶ

character to the plea in Luke 18:7 attributed to Jesus.<sup>30</sup> These martyrs do not demand bitter, personal revenge -- something in contradiction to Jesus (Lk. 23:34) or Stephen the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:60) -- but rather vengeance<sup>31</sup> from God that protects His name and character as holy and just. Note Rev. 16:7 and 19:2 especially for the realization of this plea.<sup>32</sup> Central to the

ἐκδικήσεις] our brethren?" In two nearly identical inscriptions containing Jewish prayers for vengeance inscribed on two tombstones from Delos and dating to the second or first century B.C. (Deissmann, Light, 413–24), we have a close parallel to Rev 6:9:

I call upon and pray the Most High God, the Lord of the spirits and of all flesh, against those who with guile murdered or poisoned the wretched, untimely lost Heraclea, shedding her innocent blood wickedly: that it may be so with them that murdered or poisoned her, and with their children; O Lord that seeth all things, and ye angels of God, Thou before whom every soul is afflicted this same day with supplication: that Thou mayst avenge [ἐγδικήσῃς] the innocent blood and require it again right speedily!

"The prayer for vengeance by the martyrs in Rev 6:10 also has a close parallel in 1 Enoch 47:4 and 4 Ezra 4:35–37, texts composed during the late first century A.D. A partial parallel is found in 1 Enoch 8:4–11:2 (a continuation of 7:1–6, since 8:1–3 is probably an interpolation; see Black, 1 Enoch 128): The destruction of humanity by the giants motivates the survivors to cry to heaven for help (8:4). The four archangels convey their prayer to God (9:1–11), specifically stating (9:10; tr. Knibb, Enoch):

And now behold the souls which have died cry out and complain unto the gate of heaven, and their lament has ascended, and they cannot go out in the face of the iniquity which is being committed on the earth.

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 407–408.]

<sup>30</sup>**Luke 18:6–8.** 6 Εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος· ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει· 7 ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐ μὴ ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν βοώντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς; 8 λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ποιήσει τὴν ἐκδίκησιν αὐτῶν ἐν τάχει. πλὴν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν ἄρα εὕρησει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;

6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

<sup>31</sup>**Vengeance:** "punishment inflicted in retaliation for an injury or offense" ("Vengeance," [Merriam-Webster online dictionary](#))

<sup>32</sup>**Rev. 16:7.** Καὶ ἤκουσα τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου λέγοντος· ναὶ κύριε ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ, ἀληθινὰ καὶ δίκαιαι αἱ κρίσεις σου.

And I heard the altar respond, "Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, *your judgments are true and just!*"

**Rev. 19:1–2.** 1 Μετὰ ταῦτα ἤκουσα ὡς φωνὴν μεγάλην ὄχλου πολλοῦ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ λεγόντων· ἀλληλουϊά· ἡ σωτηρία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν, 2 ὅτι ἀληθινὰ καὶ δίκαιαι αἱ κρίσεις αὐτοῦ· ὅτι ἔκρινεν τὴν πόρνην τὴν μεγάλην ἣτις ἐφθείρεν τὴν γῆν ἐν τῇ πορνείᾳ αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐξεδίκησεν τὸ αἷμα τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ ἐκ χειρὸς αὐτῆς.

1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, 2 *for his judgments are true and just*; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, *and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.*"

OT is that the shedding of blood demands a response from God upon the one who did such actions. Also note that the divine retribution is to be inflicted upon τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, *those dwelling upon the earth*. “Here divine retribution for the slaughter of God’s people is understood in terms of plagues upon the people of the world.”<sup>33</sup> The collective cultural orientation rather than an exclusively individualistic orientation comes to the forefront here. This prayer of the martyrs is better understood against the backdrop of ancient *defixiones tabellae*, rather than from a modern western perspective.<sup>34</sup> Curses in ancient paganism demanded

<sup>33</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 409.

Also note: “The phrase τῶν κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ‘the inhabitants of the earth,’ is used nine times in Revelation (3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10[2x]; 13:8, 14[2x]; 17:8), always of the enemies of Christianity; see Comment on 3:10.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 410.]

<sup>34</sup>“The martyrs’ prayer for vengeance on their enemies has many similarities to the so-called *defixiones tabellae*, i.e., curses preserved on lead and papyrus requesting the gods to do justice (Versnel, “Prayer,” 33). In fact, such ‘prayers of revenge’ constitute a particular literary type of ancient magical adjuration in Greco-Roman as well as early Christian magic; see Watson, *Arae*, 6–7, and Björck, *Fluch*. In ancient fiction, such prayers for revenge can be attributed to the dead, as was this prayer, which is placed in the mouth of the unjustly murdered Deiphobus (Vergil *Aeneid* 6.529–30; LCL tr.): ‘Ye gods, with like penalties requite the Greeks, if with pious lips I pray for vengeance.’ A Greek epitaph reads οἱ μὲν ἐμὲ κτείναντες ὁμοίως ἀντιτύχοισαν, Ζεῦ ξένιε, ‘May those who killed me meet a like fate, O Zeus, god of guests’ (W. Peek, *Griechische Versinschriften* [Berlin: Akademie, 1955] 1362), a curse that suggests that the Greek tradition of hospitality has been violated (a theme of many Greek myths, including several about the house of Atreus and the story about Procrustes in the Theseus cycle of legends).

The imprecatory prayers and prayers for vengeance in the OT are often discussed in terms of the apparent antithesis that exists between them and the NT commands to love rather than curse one’s enemies (Matt 5:39, 44; Luke 23:34; Rom 12:14; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 5:15); this theological problem is particularly striking when the curses of the NT are brought into the picture (Matt 21:18–21; 25:41; Acts 8:20; 13:10–11; Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 16:22; Rev 6:10; 22:18–19). There are several aspects of the problem that need consideration (see the discussion of Peels, *Vengeance*, 234–46): (1) The psalmists and others who utter prayers for vengeance are not cursing others but pray that God will act justly, though it is clear that the negative features of such prayers are derived from ancient curse traditions. (2) The curse played an important role in ancient social life and was used in a variety of contexts: to force obedience to treaties, to frighten off thieves and grave robbers, to guarantee honesty in transactions. (3) Curses were widely used as a legal device that posited justice against injustice, and a distinction was often made between legitimate and illegitimate curses (illegitimate curses were attributed to enemies; cf. Pss 10:7; 59:13; 62:5; 109:17, 28). (4) In the OT, curses were an integral part of the covenant relationship (derived from Near Eastern treaties, commonly sanctioned by curses) and were not simply unrestrained examples of human wickedness but originated from the conception of a holy and just God who curses those who do not turn from evil

that the god or goddess satisfy the personal desire for vengeance by the victim. But in both Judaism and early Christianity they focus on the vindication of God’s holy and just character, and not on the victim getting personal retribution. When God inflicts punishment on the enemies of His people, they find vindication of the justice of God that validates their faith commitment to Him.

**b) His response to their plea, v. 11**  
καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἑκάστῳ στολή λευκή καὶ ἔρρηθη αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτενέσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί. 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

The response to their plea takes on the form of an action and words of encouragement. God both heard and responded immediately to their plea. Even though the time between their execution on earth and their making this plea had been too long -- at least in their thinking -- as is reflected in the ἕως πότε (v. 10b) in their plea,<sup>35</sup> God did not delay in responding to their plea.<sup>36</sup>

(Maiberger, TTKi 97 [1988] 183–216). The commandments stipulated in the covenant between God and Israel required obedience rather than disobedience, which resulted in salvation, grace, and blessing on the one hand and destruction, judgment, and curse on the other. “The enemy is a covenant breaker and stands already, *ipso facto*, under the curse of God” (Peels, *Vengeance*, 240; cf. Maiberger, TTKi 97 [1988] 210). (5) In the OT, imprecatory prayers typically arise in situations in which the wicked appear to prosper while the righteous are victimized; in this apparent discrepancy between injustice and justice, the honor, majesty, and truth of God are in question, so that “the imprecatory prayer is a call for the breakthrough of God’s kingdom in liberation and vengeance” (Peels, *Vengeance*, 243). (6) Imprecatory prayers occur less frequently in the NT than in the OT and are associated not with the blessing-curse alternatives of covenant theology but with the proclamation of the gospel and the eschatological judgment.

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 409–410.]

<sup>35</sup>“The expression ‘how long?’ (ἕως πότε) is typically used throughout the Greek OT for questions concerning when God will finally punish persecutors and vindicate the oppressed (Pss. 6:4[3]; 12[13]:2; 73[74]:10; 78[79]:5; 79[80]:5[4]; 88[89]:47[46]; 89[90]:13; 93[94]:3; Dan. 8:13 Theod.; 12:6–13 Theod.)” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 392.]

<sup>36</sup>“The phrase ‘how long?’ in the context of impatient prayer (i.e., the perception that too long a period has intervened between the commission of an outrage and its just recompense) occurs several times in the OT (Pss 6:3–4; 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:6; 1 Macc 6:22; 4 Ezra 4:35; cf. Luke 18:7; see Westermann, *ZAW* 66 [1954] 53).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated,

First, *καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἑκάστῳ στολὴ λευκὴ*, and *was given to them -- to each one -- a white robe*. These were given a white robe, but its significance is not clear. The scattered references in Revelation (7:9, 13, 14; 22:14; cf. also *ἱμάτιον* rather than *στολή* in 3:5, 18) signal that such robes are typical heavenly garments and when given to believers signify their salvation.<sup>37</sup> Huge caution should be exercised in reading a temporal sequential significance into this action as a response to a plea to God. The significance is that the white robes affirm their place in Heaven in the very presence of God; the timing of the granting of the robes is insignificant. Remember that we are examining apocalyptic visionary reality, that has no interest in earth based timing for actions taking place in Heaven. Some interest for events happening on earth, but not in Heaven.

Second, God tells them to be patient since the full number of martyrs has not yet been reached on earth: *καὶ ἔρρέθη αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί*, and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of

1998), 407.]

<sup>37</sup>“The timing of this investiture is puzzling, for garments are given to the souls of the martyrs (separated from their earthly bodies) only when they complain that they have not been avenged. This seems to presuppose an ‘intermediate state’ of indeterminate duration between death and the assumption of the heavenly mode of existence symbolized by the white robe (Roloff [ET] 89). Elsewhere in the NT the notion of an intermediate state has often been read into 2 Cor 5:1–5 (e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC [New York: Harper & Row, 1973] 154–55; R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 [Waco, TX: Word, 1986] 106), though this view is doubtful. The conception of such an intermediate state is reflected in 4 Ezra 7:100–101, where it is said that after the souls of the righteous have been separated from their bodies they will have seven days before ‘they shall be gathered in their habitations [congregabuntur in habitaculis suis],’ a view closely parallel to the Jewish notion that the souls of the righteous dead are protected near the heavenly presence of God, dwelling in the ‘treasury of souls’ (1 Enoch 39:4–5; 41:2; 61:12; 70:2–4; Urbach, *Sages*, 238–42), and close to the view of Philo, who conceived of heaven as the paternal *οἶκος* (Som. 1.256), the place to which souls return (Conf. 78; Quis Her. 274; Mos. 2.228). Some scholars understand the white robe as a reference to a heavenly body that the martyrs alone possess (Bousset [1906] 271; Charles, 1:176, 184–88; Lohmeyer, 64; cf. Caird, 86), but this is doubtful, particularly in view of the resurrection of the martyrs in 20:4. White robes, the characteristic garb of heavenly beings (see Comment on 3:5a), are also used as a polyvalent metaphor for salvation, immortality, victory, and purity (see *στολή* in Rev 7:9, 13, 14; 22:14; *ἱμάτιον* in 3:5, 18; Comment on 3:5a; Roloff [ET] 90; Mounce, 160). The passive verbs in this verse are passives of divine activity used as circumlocutions for the name of God (see Comment on 9:3), so these phrases could be translated ‘Then God gave each of them a white robe and told them to rest a while longer.’” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 410.]

their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

First the grammar here is unusual in that it is the exclusive use of indirect discourse inside Revelation.<sup>38</sup> This could be part of the reason for the absence of *καὶ ἤκουσα*, and *I heard*, from this seal even though individuals are speaking. This triggers the phrase *καὶ ἤκουσα* in the previous seals where it is found. Second, the passive voice *καὶ ἔρρέθη αὐτοῖς*. and *was spoken to them*, reflects the so-called ‘divine passive’ where God is clearly doing the speaking although He is not mentioned directly as doing so.<sup>39</sup> This is rather common in Revelation, e.g., 6:2b, 11a; 8:3b; 13:5–7, 10b.

Third, the divine plan requires more time on earth for additional believers to suffer martyrdom: *ἵνα ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρόν, ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι ὡς καὶ αὐτοί*, that they should rest yet a little time until the number was completed of both their fellow servants and their brethren who were going to be killed like they also were. Here the identification of the martyrs becomes clearer that they were Christians. The suffering of believers plays a role in the divine plan.<sup>40</sup> Those

<sup>38</sup>“The rhetoric of this verse is peculiar, for the divine response to the martyrs is in *oratio obliqua*, i.e., indirect discourse, which occurs only here in Revelation. Strikingly, *oratio obliqua* is also used in 1 Enoch 47:2, in a context closely parallel to Rev 6:9–11, where the holy ones in heaven pray to God giving thanks that he has forgotten neither the blood nor the prayers of the righteous.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 410.]

<sup>39</sup>The grammatical subject of the passive voice verb *ἔρρέθη* is the *ἵνα*-clause in a substantial subject function, rather than its normal adverbial purpose role. The construction of an ‘indirect command’ via this construction provides a certain tone of command to the instructions of God for the martyrs to wait, but without any sense of rebuking them for making their plea. .

<sup>40</sup>“The implication of the divine response to the petition from the martyrs indicates the necessity of suffering in the plan of God, for more Christians must yet die before the eschaton can be inaugurated. Christian suffering does not hinder the fulfillment of the eschaton but rather inevitably leads to its inauguration. It is also evident that the prayer of the martyrs cannot alter the predetermined plan of God (see Luke 18:6–8, which is quite different). The terms *ἀνάπαυσις* and *ἀναπαύειν* (and cognates, particularly *κατάπαυσις* and *καταπαύειν*) are used as metaphors for death in early Judaism (as are *κοίμησις*, ‘sleep,’ and *κοιμᾶσθαι*, ‘to sleep’; see Louw-Nida, § 23.104; van der Horst, *Epitaphs*, 115–18); a few references are found in TDNT 1:350. In early Judaism, the situation of the dead, particularly the righteous dead, is sometimes described as one of rest and repose; see Comment on Rev 14:13 (which is similar in form to an epitaph). Sometimes the metaphor of rest is used of burial (Prov 21:16, the ignorant man ‘will rest [MT ינוח] *yānah*; LXX *ἀναπαύσεται*] in the assembly of the dead’; Sir 30:17, ‘eternal rest [ἀνάπαυσις αἰῶνος]’ 38:23, ‘when the dead are at rest [ἐν ἀναπαύσει νεκροῦ]’ 47:23, ‘Solomon rested [ἀνεπαύσατο] with his fathers’; see also Wis 4:7). The rest or repose of the soul in heaven is sometimes mentioned (Jos. As. 8:11; 15:7, ‘a place of rest [τὸν

yet on earth who will suffer martyrdom (οἱ μέλλοντες ἀποκτείνεσθαι) are καὶ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτῶν, both their fellow servants and their brothers. At first glance this seems to specify two separate groups of believers, but the grammar can be understood to designate a single group who are defined both as σύνδουλοι and ἀδελφοί.<sup>41</sup>

The passive verb πληρωθῶσιν signals the completion of a number in adding up to get a total.<sup>42</sup> Thus

τόπον τῆς καταπαύσεως] in the heavens' 22:13; 1 Enoch 39:4–9; T. Abr. [Rec. B] 7:9; T. Isaac 2:13, 15), sometimes referred to as Paradise (4 Ezra 7:36 [locus requietionis], 38, 75, 91, 95; 8:52; Gk Ap. Ezra 1:12), or Eden (T. Dan. 5:12), or the lap of Abraham (Luke 16:22). The place of rest for the righteous dead is often left unspecified (4 Ezra 2:34; Par. Jer. 5:32). The phrase εἰρήνη καὶ ἀνάπαυσις occurs on a Jewish grave inscription (CIJ, 688; fourth century A.D.; see Delling, Lehre, 30–31). The notion of the *mānōah*, 'rest,' of the righteous dead also occurs in rabbinic literature (b. Šabb. 152b; see Str-B, 3:817). In Rev 6:11, the rest of the dead martyrs is clearly temporary, a notion presupposed in the question of 'Ezra' in 4 Ezra 7:75: 'after death, as soon as every one of us yields up his soul, shall we be kept in rest [A: in requie; L: in requiem] until those times come when you will renew the creation?' (the question is answered positively in 4 Ezra 7:88–99, which describes the seven orders of rest that the righteous will enjoy)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 411.

<sup>41</sup>"In the phrase 'their fellow servants and brothers,' that both plural nouns are articular and both are preceded by the conjunction καί, 'and,' suggests the possibility that two separate groups are in view (Zahn, 2:362; Ulfsgard, Feast, 56). However, the connecting καί may well be epexegetical so that the phrase should probably be construed as meaning 'their fellow servants, that is, their brothers,' thus describing a single group from two perspectives (Beckwith, 527; Charles, 1:177; Mounce, 160). The term σύνδουλοι, 'fellow servants,' is a title found three times in Revelation (6:11; 19:10; 22:9). Elsewhere, it occurs in the NT in Col 1:7; 4:7 and in the Apostolic Fathers (Ign. Eph. 2:1; Magn. 2; Phld. 4; Smyrn. 12:2; Rom. 4:3). In these contexts it is always a title of honor (H. Gültzow, *Christentum und Sklaverei in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* [Bonn: Habelt, 1969] 32). A parallel from the religious institutions of Asia Minor is found in the title συνιερόδουλος, 'sacred slave,' 'colleague,' in an inscription from Lydia; see G. Petzl, "Vier Inschriften aus Lydien," in *Studien zur Religion und Kultur Kleinasiens*, FS F. K. Dörner, ed. S. Sahin, E. Schwertheim, and J. Wagner (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 745.61, 746.50." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 411–412.]

<sup>42</sup>"This verse indicates that a *numerus praedestinatorum*, i.e., a 'predetermined number,' of martyrs must die before God will avenge them. πληροῦν can mean 'to make something total or complete, to complete the number of' (Louw–Nida, § 59.33), so the entire clause can be translated 'until the number of their fellow servants and brothers would be complete' (this verb is extremely problematic; see Note 6:11.h-h.). In the Mart. Pol. 14 (tr. Musurillo, Acts, 13), Polycarp gives thanks that he is able 'to have a share among the number [ἐν ἀριθμῷ] of the martyrs.' Since Polycarp died ca. A.D. 156 (the date is disputed; see Musurillo, Acts, xiii–xiv), this notion could have been drawn from Revelation, though it seems unlikely. A similar statement is made in the Ep. Lugd.

the Lord's action of final vengeance would be delayed on earth until the proper moment in the divine plan contained in the scroll. The temporal conjunction ἕως, until, only specifies a definite time but gives no indication of how long that will be. The implementation of that will be described in the sixth seal that follows.

## B. Seal Six, vv. 12-17

12 Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν ἕκτην,

13 (Eusebius Hist. eccl. 5.1.13; Musurillo, Acts, 64–65), 'every day the worthy were arrested to fill up the number of the martyrs [τὸν ἐκείνων ἀναπληροῦντες ἀριθμὸν].' This martyrdom occurred ca. A.D. 177, and the work was written shortly thereafter. Since it alludes to Revelation twice (Rev 14:4 in chap. 10, and Rev 22:11 in chap. 57), the conception of a predetermined number of martyrs may very well be drawn from Revelation.

"In early Judaism, the view that the numerus iustorum, 'number of the righteous,' has been predetermined by God is first expressed clearly in apocalypses nearly contemporary with Revelation (1 Enoch 37–71; 4 Ezra; 2 Apocalypse of Baruch; see Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 67–78). In 1 Enoch 47:4 It is said that the hearts of the holy ones rejoiced that the number of the righteous had been reached, that their prayer had been heard, and that their blood had been required before the Lord of Spirits. 4 Ezra 4:36 contains the phrase 'when the number of those like yourselves is completed,' referring to a predetermined number of the elect, though martyrdom is not in view. A similar view is reflected in 2 Apoc. Bar. 23:5 (tr. Klijn in Charlesworth, OTP 1:629), 'No creature will live again unless the number that has been appointed is completed' (see 30:2; 75:6). The notion also occurs in early Christianity. Paul claims that Israel will be unresponsive to the gospel until 'the full number of the Gentiles come in' (Rom 11:25). The author of 1 Clement uses the phrases ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν, 'the number of the elect' (2:4; 59:2), and ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν σωζομένων, 'the number of the saved' (58:2), in such a way as to suggest that it is already a well-known concept (van Unnik, RHPR 42 [1962] 237–46). Similarly, Justin says that Christ will not return in judgment 'until the number is completed of those whom he foreknows [συντελεσθῆ ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν προεγνωσμένων]' (1 Apol. 45.1). Apost. Const. 15.3 (perhaps dependent on 1 Clement) speaks of 'the fullness of the number of the saved.'

"While Rev 6:11 speaks of the number of martyrs that must be completed, in the Pistis Sophia the phrase 'the number of perfect souls is completed [affōk ebol n i parithmos nnepsuchooue nntelios]' (or its equivalent) occurs frequently (1.23, 26, 27, 45, 50; 2.86, 96, 98; 3.125[4x]) and obviously refers to Gnostics. The phrase is apparently a *terminus technicus*, which the author incorporated within the framework of his Gnostic eschatology (van Unnik, "Pistis Sophia," 473). The 'completion of the number of perfect souls' will occur at the 'end of the aeon' (Coptic: *tsunteleia mpaion* = συντέλεια τοῦ αἰῶνος; 2.86), at the decisive point in the eschatological drama (van Unnik, "Pistis Sophia," 473). According to Pistis Sophia 1.50 (tr. MacDermot, 89–90), 'Now at this time truly I say to you, when the perfect number is completed and the All is raised up, I will sit in the Treasury of the Light and you yourselves will sit on twelve light-powers, until we have set up again all the ranks of the twelve saviours at the place of the inheritance of each of them.'"

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 412–413.]



καὶ σεισμὸς μέγας ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα 13 καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔπεσαν εἰς τὴν γῆν, ὡς συκὴ βάλλει τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη, 14 καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν. 15 Καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ μεγιστᾶνες καὶ οἱ χιλιάρχοι καὶ οἱ πλούσιοι καὶ οἱ ἰσχυροὶ καὶ πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἔκρυψαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ εἰς τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὀρέων 16 καὶ λέγουσιν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ταῖς πέτραις· πέσετε ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς καὶ κρύψατε ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, 17 ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι;

12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Again the internal organizational structure falls into actions and words as did the content of the fifth seal. But the actions and words are very different. In the fifth seal both are directed to the martyrs in Heaven, but in the sixth seal both target events on the earth, although directed from Heaven. Again one should not forget that these are apocalyptic visionary depictions and not necessarily logical in nature. For example, the natural disasters portray the mountains as πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν, every mountain and island has been shaken from its place (v. 14) as though already accomplished. But the pleas of humans is for the mountains and rocks yet to collapse down upon them (v. 16), since they have not yet been shaken and have continued to exist. Perhaps the seal signals only partial calamity, rather than total. The reference to ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, the great day of their wrath, in v. 17 points this direction. But one must exercise extreme caution when reading temporal sequence into an apocalyptic vision.

**1. John sees natural disasters on the earth, vv. 12-14.** 12 Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἦνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν ἕκτην, καὶ σεισμὸς μέγας ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα 13 καὶ

οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔπεσαν εἰς τὴν γῆν, ὡς συκὴ βάλλει τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη, 14 καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν. 12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Here the introductory formula returns to the first seal pattern with Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἦνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν ἕκτην, And I saw when He opened the sixth seal.<sup>43</sup> The content of the first part of the sixth seal centers on events happened that are to be seen. Thus εἶδον is more appropriate. But the commonality of pattern serves as a boundary marker to the first six seals by enclosing them as a unit expression of idea.

What did John see when the scroll was unrolled down to the seventh seal? Verses 12b - 14 describe a series of cosmological disasters happened on the earth. Note the parallelism between the first upheaval, σεισμὸς μέγας ἐγένετο, a great earthquake, and the last upheaval, πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν, every mountain and island was shaken from their places. These two synonymous lines express the upheaval in non-figurative language, while those four lines between them use the figurative expression of a simile, which is signaled by the comparative particle ὡς, just like. Collectively they provide a context of despair for inhabitants on the earth to fear the coming day of great wrath.<sup>44</sup>

**a) καὶ σεισμὸς μέγας ἐγένετο, and a great shaking happened.** Probably in this context σεισμὸς refers to an earthquake. The noun σεισμὸς in the singular is modified by μέγας also in Mt. 28:2 (σεισμὸς ἐγένετο μέγας) and in the plural at Lk. 21:11 (σεισμοὶ μεγάλοι). In the three ‘little apocalypses’ of the synoptic gospels, earthquakes play a role in the end time events: Mt.

<sup>43</sup>6.1. Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἦνοιξεν τὸ ἀρνίον μίαν ἐκ τῶν ἐπτὰ σφραγίδων, And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals. This is in contrast to the patterns in seals two through five: two through four: Καὶ ὅτε ἦνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα ..., ἤκουσα, And when He opened the ?? seal, I heard; and number five: ὅτε ἦνοιξεν τὴν πέμπτην σφραγίδα, εἶδον, And when He opened the fifth seal, I saw.

<sup>44</sup>“The description of the upheavals of the cosmos in vv 12–14 is a pastiche of traditional motifs arranged in a quasi-poetic manner (as the arrangement of the translation above in stichoi suggests). The first and last lines describe without the use of figurative language the great earthquake and the shaking of every mountain and island, while each of the four lines they frame makes use of a simile. All the inhabitants of the earth react to these cosmic disturbances with terror and try in vain to hide themselves from these events.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 391.]



24:7, καὶ ἔσονται λιμοὶ καὶ σεισμοὶ κατὰ τόπους, *there will be famines and earthquakes in various places*; Mk. 13:8, ἔσονται σεισμοὶ κατὰ τόπους, *there will be earthquakes in various places*; Lk. 21:11, σεισμοὶ τε μεγάλοι, *and there will be great earthquakes*. Earthquakes are commonly seen in the Bible as connected to a major coming or presence of God in judgment upon people.<sup>45</sup>

In the background of this is Haggai 2:6-7, 21-22, where the prophet was told to deliver this message to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah.<sup>46</sup> This was during

<sup>45</sup>“The term σεισμός, ‘shaking,’ probably refers to an earthquake, but in the context it could refer to a ‘shaking’ of ‘the heavens and earth’ (Hag 2:6–7, 21–22), which caused the disruption of the heavenly bodies. In biblical tradition, earthquakes are often expected to occur in the end time as one effect of the presence or coming of God (Joel 2:10; 3:16[MT 4:16]; Isa 24:18–23; 29:6; Mic 1:4; Nah 1:5; see Comment on the theophany form in Rev 20:11); see Bauckham, “Earthquake,” 199–209. Earthquakes are often perceived as prodigies (Plutarch *Cicero* 14; *Appian Bell. civ.* 1.83; Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 2.28.1–3; Wülker, *Prodigienwesens*, 18).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 413.]

<sup>46</sup>**Haggai 2:2-7.** 2 Εἰπὸν δὴ πρὸς Ζοροβαβελ τὸν τοῦ Σαλαθιηλ ἐκ φυλῆς Ἰουδα καὶ πρὸς Ἰησοῦν τὸν τοῦ Ἰωσεδεκ τὸν ἱερέα τὸν μέγαν καὶ πρὸς πάντας τοὺς καταλοίπους τοῦ λαοῦ λέγων ἥ 3 Τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν ὃς εἶδεν τὸν οἶκον τοῦτον ἐν τῇ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ τῇ ἐμπροσθεν; καὶ πῶς ὑμεῖς βλέπετε αὐτὸν νῦν; καθὼς οὐχ ὑπάρχοντα ἐνώπιον ὑμῶν. ἥ 4 καὶ νῦν κατίσχυε, Ζοροβαβελ, λέγει κύριος, καὶ κατίσχυε, Ἰησοῦ ὁ τοῦ Ἰωσεδεκ ὁ ἱερεὺς ὁ μέγας, καὶ κατισχυέτω πᾶς ὁ λαὸς τῆς γῆς, λέγει κύριος, καὶ ποιεῖτε· διότι μεθ’ ὑμῶν ἐγὼ εἰμι, λέγει κύριος παντοκράτωρ, ἥ 5 καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐρέστηκεν ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν· θαρσεῖτε. ἥ 6 **διότι τάδε λέγει κύριος παντοκράτωρ Ἔτι ἅπαξ ἐγὼ σείσω τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὴν ξηρὰν.** ἥ 7 **καὶ συσσειώσω πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, καὶ ἤξει τὰ ἐκλεκτὰ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν, καὶ πλήσω τὸν οἶκον τοῦτον δόξης, λέγει κύριος παντοκράτωρ.** ἥ

2 Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, 3 Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? 4 Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. **6 For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; 7 and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts.**

**Haggai 2:20-22.** 20 Καὶ ἐγένετο λόγος κυρίου ἐκ δευτέρου

the time of the exile (vv. 2:10, 18) and this shaking was the promise of divine intervention to bring the exiles back home to Judah in the Restoration. From an ancient perspective, the destructive power of a large earthquake clearly surpasses any form of human power and so quite naturally would be linked to the divine. Their destructiveness would naturally suggest divine anger and punishment.

**b) καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος, and the sun became black as sackcloth.** This image of natural disaster is clearly an allusion to Joel 2:31 (MT; LXX 3:4).<sup>47</sup> The message of Joel is a promise of great upheaval connected to God’s coming to restore His exiled people to their homeland.<sup>48</sup> This stands as a

πρὸς Ἀγγαῖον τὸν προφήτην τετράδι καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ μηνὸς λέγων ἥ 21 Εἰπὸν πρὸς Ζοροβαβελ τὸν τοῦ Σαλαθιηλ ἐκ φυλῆς Ἰουδα λέγων **Ἐγὼ σείω τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν** καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὴν ξηρὰν ἥ 22 καὶ καταστρέψω θρόνους βασιλέων καὶ ὀλεθρεύσω δυνάμιν βασιλέων τῶν ἐθνῶν καὶ καταστρέψω ἄρματα καὶ ἀναβάτας, καὶ καταβήσονται ἵπποι καὶ ἀναβάται αὐτῶν ἕκαστος ἐν ῥομφαίᾳ πρὸς τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ. ἥ

20 The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month: 21 Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, **I am about to shake the heavens and the earth,** 22 and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall fall, every one by the sword of a comrade.

<sup>47</sup>**Joel 2:30-32 MT / 3:3-5 LXX.** 3 καὶ δώσω τέρατα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, αἷμα καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀτμίδια καπνοῦ. ἥ 4 ὁ ἥλιος μεταστραφήσεται εἰς σκότος καὶ ἡ σελήνη εἰς αἷμα πρὶν ἔλθειν ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ. ἥ 5 καὶ ἔσται πᾶς, ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου, σωθήσεται· ὅτι ἐν τῷ ὄρει Σιών καὶ ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἔσται ἀνασωζόμενος, καθότι εἶπεν κύριος, καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενοι, οὓς κύριος προσκέκληται. ἥ

30 I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 31 **The sun shall be turned to darkness,** and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. 32 Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

<sup>48</sup>“3,4 A chiasmic structure (I: sky: earth//earth portents: sky portents: Yahweh) serves to create the impression that when Yahweh comes, everything will break loose at once. These ‘signs’ (תּוֹפְתִים; cf. Exod 4:21; 7:3, 9; Deut 4:34; 34:11; Isa 8:18) are not just indicators but fully supernatural portents associated with the intervention of Yahweh to or on behalf of his people (e.g. blood: Exod 7:17–21; fire and smoke: Exod 19:18; darkness: Exod 10:21; Deut 4:11).

“The synonymous parallelism of the initial couplet of v 4 (sun ... darkness, moon ... blood) does not focus on the sun and moon separately, as if there were to be daytime and nighttime signs in the sky, but merely pairs moon with sun, the sign being darkness during the daytime (cf. 1:2; Josh 10:12–14).

“All of this dramatic and cataclysmic action heralds Yahweh’s coming to deliver the righteous and dispense with the wicked, the intended activity of the sovereign’s day of conquest.

“5 The prose conclusion to the oracle provides a simple, direct

critical part of an oracle of deliverance to God's suffering people in exile in Babylon. The targeted realization comes with Ezra and Nehemiah leading groups back to Jerusalem from Babylon. This began a recovery process for covenant Israel after decades of exile in Babylon and the destruction of their homeland from the judgment of God upon their wickedness.

Also of interest is Peter's use of this same passage in Joel on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:20) and his interpretation of it being fulfilled that day with the phenomenon of speaking/hearing the Gospel message in various languages. The coming of the Holy Spirit on that occasion was viewed as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy of the restoration of God's people.

**c) και ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα, and the full moon became as blood.** This image is also closely linked to Joel as well, and the dual reference to the sun and the moon are relatively common in such passages in the Old Testament. John's adding of the adjective ὅλη to the noun ἡ σελήνη, creating 'full moon,' may suggest some awareness of the [Assumption of Moses](#) 18-19 that exclusively has a somewhat similar image.<sup>49</sup> But this is far from clear and no direct linkage can be established between the two with certainty. A common source for both seems more likely.<sup>50</sup> Thus the natural

answer to the invasion. Its message is that there is coming a time when salvation will be readily available to the people of Jerusalem, but only if they return faithfully to Yahweh. Its focus is eschatological, yet as a prediction of what will someday happen to Israel, viewed as a continuum, it would have constituted a great encouragement to the believers among Joel's audience."

[Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 261.]

<sup>49</sup>"To Joel 2:31 (see quotation above) and Ass. Mos. x. 5, '(luna) tota convertet se in sanguinem,' we have a very remarkable parallel in our text. The passage in Ass. Mos. appears to be directly dependent on the text of Joel save that it adds *tota*. Now our text, while it gives a free rendering of the Hebrew behind both passages (יהפך לדם), embodies the addition of ὅλη in the Ass. Mos. This might be a coincidence, but it seems to be more. Our author may not improbably have had the text of this book before him in some form; for the Ass. Mos. x. 4-5 contains references to earthquakes, the eclipse of the sun, the ensanguining of the moon, and the disorder of the stars: 'Et tremebit terra ... sol non dabit lumen ... et (luna) tota convertet se in sanguinem et orbis stellarum conturbabitur.' In any case he is not dependent on the LXX. For the expectation in Babylonian literature that the sun and moon would be darkened, see Zimmern, K.A.T.3 393." [R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1920), 180.]

<sup>50</sup>"The addition of ὅλη as a modifier of σελήνη in such lists of portents is found only in T. Mos. 10:5, *Sol non dabit lumen et in tenebris convertent se cornua lunae et confringentur, et [luna] tota convertit se in sanguine*, 'The sun will not give its light, and the horns of the moon will turn into darkness, and [the moon] will entirely be turned into blood' (tr. J. Tromp, *Assumption of Moses*, 18-19). Charles (1:180) thought that the presence of *tota* in T. Mos.

phenomena of a full [solar eclipse](#) and [lunar eclipse](#) provided the natural backdrop to these images of the sun and moon.

But the religious significance for these images of the sun and the moon signals divine judgment coming. This meaning is widely affirmed both in OT prophetic oracles regarding the impending Day of the Lord and also in Jewish apocalyptic literature, as well as Christian writings especially from the second century forward.<sup>51</sup>

10:5 and ὅλη in Rev 6:12 suggested that the author of Revelation had some form of the Testament of Moses before him when he wrote, though direct literary dependence is not the only possible explanation. The darkening of the sun and moon is a motif that occurs elsewhere (Isa 13:10), while the haircloth or sackcloth motif was perhaps derived from Isa 50:3, 'I clothe the heavens with blackness and I make sackcloth their covering' (on "sackcloth," see Comment on 11:3).

"From a Roman perspective, such a phenomenon would be considered *auspicia oblativa*, i.e., 'unsought signs' (see Vergil Georg. 1.438-65). The darkenings and eclipses of the sun and the moon are frequently mentioned as prodigies (Apollonius Rhod. 4.1286; Cicero Rep. 1.16.25; Vergil Georg. 1.463-68; Dionysius Hal. Ant. Rom. 1.77.2; Ovid Metam. 15.785; Philo Mos. 1.123; Plutarch Pelopidas 31; Cassius Dio 47.40.2; Aulus Gellius Noctes Atticae 2.28.4-7; Diogenes Laertius 4.64; Lactantius Div. Inst. 7.169; Luterbacher, *Prodigienglaube*, 11-12; Wülker, *Prodigiengesens*, 7-8; F. B. Krauss, *Interpretation*, 70-71; see also F. Boll, "Finsternisse," RE [1909] 6:2329ff.). In Greco-Roman dream interpretation, a sun 'dim or suffused with blood, or hideous to behold, It is inauspicious and evil for all men' (Artemidorus Oneirocritica 2.36; tr. White, *Interpretation*, 115)." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 413.]

<sup>51</sup>"The motif of the darkening or destruction of the sun when God judges the world occurs frequently (Isa 13:10b; 24:23; Amos 8:9; Joel 2:31[MT 3:4]; Zeph 1:15 (the Day of the Lord is a day of darkness and gloom); T. Mos. 10:5; Mark 13:24-25 = Matt 24:29; Luke 21:25; Acts 2:20; 2 Pet 3:10 [the coming of the Day of the Lord will be accompanied by the destruction of the heavens and the earth]; Barn. 15:5). The three stichs in vv 12b, 12c, and 13 all have a similar pattern: a declarative statement of what occurred in the aorist, followed by a simile introduced with ὡς, 'as, like.' The motif of darkness on the Day of Yahweh found in the prophets (Amos 8:9) is developed into the motif of the darkening or destruction of the sun, moon, and stars on the day of judgment (Isa 13:9-10; Ezek 32:7-8; Joel 2:10; 3:15[MT 4:15]; T. Levi 4:1; Sib. Or. 5.477-82; 7.125; 4 Ezra 7:39; Oracle of Hystaspes frag. 14; Lactantius Div. Inst. 7.16.8 [Bidez-Cumont, *Mages* 2:368-69]; Barn. 15:5). Barn. 15:5 is interesting because the sequence of motifs it contains is as follows: (1) the coming of the Son, (2) the destruction of the time of the wicked one, (3) the judgment of the godless, and (4) the changing of the sun, moon, and stars. In view of this widespread association, It is obvious that the author of Revelation intends the readers to think that the Day of the Lord is ushered in with the sixth trumpet. An example is found in Sib. Or. 5.346-51 (tr. J. Collins in Charlesworth, *OTP* 1:401):

The imperishable flames of the sun itself will no longer be nor will the shining light of the moon be anymore in the last time [ὑστατίῳ καιρῷ], when God assumes command.

d) *καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔπεσαν εἰς τὴν γῆν, ὡς συκῆ βάλλει τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη, and the stars of heaven fell on to the earth, just as the fig tree casts off its unripened figs when shaken by a strong wind.* Here Isaiah 34:4 stands behind this image.<sup>52</sup> Falling stars, or meteors, also signaled impending divine judgment in the literature of the ancient world, and especially in the OT prophets and Jewish apocalyptic tradition.<sup>53</sup> Addition-

Everything will be blackened, there will be darkness throughout the earth,

and blind men, evil wild beasts, and woe.

That day [ἡμᾶρ ἐκεῖνο] will last a long time ...

“A similar prediction is found in Ps.-Philo Bib. Ant. 19.13 (tr. Harrington in Charlesworth, OTP 2:328):

And when the time draws near to visit the world, I will command the years and order the times and they will be shortened, and the stars will hasten and the light of the sun will hurry to fall and the light of the moon will not remain; for I will hurry to raise up you who are sleeping in order that all who can live may dwell in the place of sanctification I showed you.

“The consequences attendant upon the coming of God are described in T. Mos. 10:5–6 (tr. Priest in Charlesworth, OTP 2:932):

The sun will not give light.

And in darkness the horns of the moon will flee.

Yea, they will be broken in pieces.

It will be turned wholly into blood.

Yea, even the circles of the stars will be thrown into disarray.

“Finally, from the Oracle of Hystaspes frag. 14 (Lactantius Div. Inst. 7.16.8; see Bidez-Cumont, Mages 2:368–69):

Then, too, strange prodigies [prodigia] in the sky will confound the minds of men with the greatest terror: the tails of comets, the eclipses of the sun, the color of the moon, and the fallings of stars.

“A similar description is contained in Lactantius Epitome 71 (tr. Blakeney, Epitome, 121):

To these plagues will be added also miraculous signs [prodigia] from heaven, that everything may combine to increase human alarm. Comets will frequently be seen. The sun will be darkened with perpetual gloom; the moon will be dyed in blood, nor will it renew its lost light; all the stars will fall, nor will the seasons observe their proper course, for winter and summer will be confounded.

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 413–415.]

<sup>52</sup>**Isaiah 34:4.** καὶ ἐλιγῆσεται ὁ οὐρανὸς ὡς βιβλίον, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἄστρα πεσεῖται ὡς φύλλα ἐξ ἀμπέλου καὶ ὡς πίπτει φύλλα ἀπὸ συκῆς.†

All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.

<sup>53</sup>“This is an allusion to Isa 34:4, where the leaves rather than the fruit of the fig tree are described: ‘All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree’ (n.b. that the author has inverted the allusion to Isa 34:4 by first alluding to v 4b [in Rev 6:13a] and then to v 4a [alluded to in Rev 6:14a]). Isa 34:4 is also alluded to in the Synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13:25 = Matt 24:29 = Luke 21:26). However, the combination of the two motifs, the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars, occurs in Rev 6:12–13 and in a few other places (Mark 13:24–25; T. Mos. 10:5–6; Lactantius Epitome 71). Falling stars are mentioned several times in Revelation (8:10; 9:1; 12:4). Fall-

ally they are mentioned several times in Revelation: 6:13; 8:10; 9:1; 12:4. Their falling to the earth does not necessarily imply the destruction of the sky. Rather, in most references they signal impending doom from the pouring out of divine wrath upon the earth, e.g., Ezek. 32:7; Mk. 13:25 // Mt. 24:29/ Sib. Or. 8.190, 341. The image can also signal the fall of Satan and/or his angels, e.g., 1 Enoch 86:1; 88:1–3; 90:24; Jude 13; Testament of Solomon 20:16; Apocalypse of Elijah 4:11; cf. Lk. 10:18.

That these are apocalyptic expressions with symbolic meaning rather than literal historical depictions is clear since ἀστὴρ, *star*, in the ancient world was understood primarily as referring to the planets observed in the sky as bright lights shining at night. The smallest of these is several times larger than planet earth and were just one to hit the earth the earth would be instantly destroyed.

e) *καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον, and the sky was violently split apart like a scroll being rolled up into a cylindrical shape.* This fifth stich, or line, is derived also from Isaiah 34:4, καὶ ἐλιγῆσεται ὁ οὐρανὸς ὡς βιβλίον, *the skies will roll up like a scroll*. The point is that the sky will disappear from view, just the contents of a scroll disappear when it is rolled up. Additionally this image appears in several Jewish apocalyptic sources.<sup>54</sup> Although the exact impli-

ing stars, or meteors, do not necessarily involve the destruction of the heavens but may be considered a prodigy or an omen needing interpretation (4 Ezra 5:5; Jos. J. W. 6.289; Manilius Astron. 1.814–875), or they may be an anticipation of the judgment of God (Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:10[MT 3:4]; 3:15[MT 4:15]; Mark 13:25 = Matt 24:29; Sib. Or. 8.190, 341). The fallen-star motif is frequently used as a metaphor for the fall of Satan and/or his angels (1 Enoch 86:1; 88:1–3; 90:24; Jude 13; T. Sol. 20:16; Apoc. El. 4:11; cf. Luke 10:18). In ancient dream interpretation, seeing stars falling down to the earth meant that many people would die (Artemidorus Oneirocritica 2.37; cf. 5.23). In the apocalyptic scenario of the Hermetic tractate Asclepius 3.25, Trismegistus says ‘heaven will not support the stars in their orbits, nor will the stars pursue their constant course in heaven’ (tr. W. Scott, Hermetica 1:345). Such cosmic disturbances are a commonplace in apocalyptic literature; see Nock-Festugière, Corp. Herm. 2:381 n. 218. Meteors are also considered prodigies (Cassius Dio 40.47.2; Wülker, Prodigienwesen, 11). In some versions of the Gigantomachy (the battle between the Olympians and the giants depicted on the Great Altar of Zeus from Pergamon and the Temple of Apollo at Delphi [Euripides Ion 206–18]), the stars were shaken from their places by the tumultuous battle (Manilius Astron. 1.427).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 415.]

<sup>54</sup>“The same allusion occurs several times in the Sibylline Oracles, e.g., 3.82–83 (tr. Collins in Charlesworth, OTP 1:364), ‘when God who dwells in the sky rolls up the heaven as a scroll is rolled [οὐρανὸν εἰλίξει, καθ’ ἅπερ βιβλίον εἰλεῖται].’ Similarly, in Sib. Or. 8.233, 413, the phrases ‘He will roll up the heavens [οὐρανὸν εἰλίξει]’ and ‘I will roll up the heavens [οὐρανὸν εἰλίξω]’ occur. Other allusions to this metaphor from Isa 34:4 are found in Heb

cation of this is not clear, it may very be comparable to 'all the lights were turned off.' The blue canopy high up in the air called ὁ οὐρανός is no longer visible, neither in daytime or at night. Absolute darkness was a fearful idea in the ancient world.

f) *καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.* The series of six stiches in vv. 12-14 returns in this final one to the same point contained in the first one. Thus parameters on the series are established linking all of them into a unit expression. The point of this way of describing an earthquake is to stress that the most stable items located on planet earth -- mountains and islands -- are not immune to the mighty power of God in judgment.<sup>55</sup> This image connected to the presence of God was common in OT religious heritage. Also the image is repeated again in Rev. 20:11.<sup>56</sup>

Although clearly the various images and occasionally combinations of some of them allude to temporal judgments of God imposed either on ancient Israel or perhaps alluding to judgments on believers and non-believers in the apostolic era (cf. the warnings given to most of the seven churches in chapters two and three), the collective impact of all seven images happening about the same time clearly points to eschatological end times. Even those non-Jewish believers in the seven churches at the end of the first century would have sensed that something really bad and massive was going to happen toward the end of time, since most all of these images had the significance of signaling divine anger from the gods and goddess in their pagan

1:12, where the rolling up of the heavens and the earth is compared to the rolling up of a garment, in Gos. Thom. 111 (see Stroker, Extracanonical, 112–13), in Tertullian Ad Hermog. 34, and in Apocalypse of Peter (Macarius Magnes Apocrit. 4.7). Similarly, in Pistis Sophia 1.10 (ed. Schmidt-Till, p. 4, lines 15–16; ed. Schmidt-MacDermot, p. 6), the disciples speculate, 'Perhaps the world will be rolled up'." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 415.]

<sup>55</sup>"The metaphor of the most stable features of the world, such as mountains, islands, and coastlands, 'shaken' and 'moved' occurs in contexts of a divine theophany or divine judgment (Judg 5:5; Pss 18:7[LXX 17:7]; 46:2–3; Isa 5:25; 54:10; 64:1; Jer 4:24; Ezek 26:18; 38:20; Mic 1:4; Nah 1:5; Hab 1:6; Zech 14:4). In sapiential contexts, the movement of mountains is often regarded as impossible (Ps. 125:1–2; Matt 17:20; 1 Cor 13:2; cf. Job 14:18, which recognizes the reality of erosion). This motif also occurs in Rev 20:11 in a theophanic context." [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 416.]

<sup>56</sup>**Rev. 20:11.** Καὶ εἶδον θρόνον μέγαν λευκὸν καὶ τὸν καθήμενον ἐπ' αὐτόν, οὗ ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου ἐφυγεν ἡ γῆ καὶ ὁ οὐρανός καὶ τόπος οὐχ εὐρέθη αὐτοῖς.

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them.

background.<sup>57</sup> The massively widespread belief in su-

<sup>57</sup>"The term *prodigium*, 'prodigy' (the plural form is *prodigia*), often called a *portentum*, is a term in ancient Roman religion for an unnatural or extraordinary occurrence or phenomenon understood as a sign warning of divine anger (Wülker, *Prodigienwesens*, 1). In early Roman tradition the occurrence of a prodigy was thought to reveal the *ira deum*, 'anger of a god,' and ostensibly indicated the disruption of the *pax deorum*, 'peace with the gods.' Therefore, It required rites of expiation to repair the breach between the Roman people and their gods (Kleine Pauly 4:1151–53). Greeks used such terms as τέρας, σημεῖον, οἰωνός (the latter etymologically limited to birds), and φάσμα for *prodigium* (Appian Bell. civ. 4.1.4; Plutarch Sept. sap. conv. 149C; Bloch, *Les prodiges*, 15). Cicero defines many of the terms used for prodigies in *De div.* 1.42.93 (LCL tr.):

Because they "make manifest" [ostendunt], "portend" [portendunt], "intimate" [monstrant], "predict" [praedicunt], they are called "manifestions," "portents," "intimations," and "prodigies" [prodigia].

"These terms are essentially synonymous (Servius Comm. in Aen. 3.366; see F. B. Krauss, *Interpretation*, 31–34), though Johannes Lydus (*De ostentis praef.*) argued that σημεῖα occurred in the heavens, while τέρατα occurred upon earth.

"The prodigia had first to be observed, then acknowledged and accepted by the Roman senate (e.g., Livy 43.13.6), then explicated (through the science of *divinatio*), and finally expiated (often by following the *disciplina Etrusca*). The procedure for expiating prodigia was called *procuratio prodigiorum*, 'prodigy management,' and involved the purification of the city of Rome through such means as sacrifices, banquets for the gods (*lectisternia*), games, and the introduction of new cults and special prayers. Phenomena considered to be prodigies included eclipses of the sun and moon (Plutarch Alex. 31), the raining of blood and stones, unusual hail, lightning, thunderclaps in a clear sky (Cassius Dio 37.25.2), comets, meteors, earthquakes, and the behavior of birds, the sight and sound of armies in the sky, the sound of clashing arms and horses (Appian Bell. civ. 4.1.4), and the sweating, weeping, or moving of statues (Appian Bell. civ. 4.1.4). Livy (died A.D. 12 or 17) observed that people no longer believed in signs of the future and consequently no longer reported prodigies to the senate (43.13.1–2). Plutarch, who certainly believed in divination through portents, used prodigy lists from his sources in composing the *Parallel Lives* but was often very selective in the particular prodigies that he included in his narrative, and he also tended to subordinate them to the dramatic requirements of the narrative (Sulla 7; Marcellus 28; cf. Livy 27.11; see Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled*, 184–213). Tacitus commented briefly on the role of prodigies in the history of the Roman people during the period following A.D. 69, in *Hist.* 1.3.3 (LCL tr.):

Besides the manifold misfortunes that befell mankind, there were prodigies in the sky and on the earth, warnings given by thunderbolts, and prophecies of the future, both joyful and gloomy, uncertain and clear. For never was it more fully proved by awful disasters of the Roman people or by indubitable signs that the gods care not for our safety, but for our punishment.

"Roman annalists and historians often included lists of prodigies that were sighted each year or in association with critical events in the history of Rome. Some, like Livy and Tacitus, thought them superstitious but recorded them anyway (F. B. Krauss, *Interpretation*, 29). Prodigies and prodigy lists occur with such frequency in Roman histories and biographies that they should be regarded as

a literary form that plays a specific function in the larger literary genres within which they are embedded (references to prodigy lists in classical literature are found in K. Berger, ANRW II, 23/2:1443 n. 55). In times of great social and political stress and anxiety, the number of such prodigies sighted and reported increased enormously (Günther, *Klio* 42 [1964] 209–97). Lucan compiled a list of prodigies that reportedly occurred when Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C. (1.522–83). Vergil assembled a list of prodigies that were sighted in 44 B.C., the year of Caesar's death (Georg. 1.466–97); many are similar to those reported by Josephus (J. W. 4.289–300). Livy complained that in his day prodigia were lacking in official records and in histories (43.13.1), yet Julius Obsequens compiled *Prodigiorum liber*, a collection of prodigies, probably from *Livy Annals* 137. Livy gives lists of prodigies for the years 194 B.C. (34.45.6–8), 193 B.C. (35.9.2–5), 192 B.C. (35.21.2–6), 191 B.C. (36.37), 190 B.C. (37.3.1–6), etc. Many prodigies were reported during the conflict between Otho and Vitellius in A.D. 68, concerning which Tacitus observed (Hist. 1.86; LCL tr.), 'many other things had happened which in barbarous ages used to be noticed even during peace, but which now are only heard of in seasons of terror' (see Plutarch Otho 4.5; Suetonius Vesp. 5.7; on the problem of placing the overflowing of the Tiber during the reign of Otho, see Chilver, Tacitus, 154). Tacitus, who narrated the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero, reports very few prodigies during the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius. During the reign of Nero, however, in *Annals* 11–16, the number of such prodigies increased noticeably (Liebeschuetz, *Roman Religion*, 155–66), though the reasons for this are disputed (Syme, *Tacitus* 1:312; R. H. Martin, *Tacitus*, 257 n. 29). The first list occurs in A.D. 51 (*Annals* 12.43), a second in A.D. 54 (12.64), a third in A.D. 59 (*Annals* 14.12), and a fourth at the close of A.D. 64 (15.47). Biographers often inserted lists of prodigies that anticipated the births and deaths of great public figures such as Julius Caesar (Suetonius Jul. 81.1–3), Augustus (birth: Suetonius Aug. 94.1–4; death: Cassius Dio 56.29.2–6; 56.45.2), Caligula (Suetonius Cal. 57.1–4), Vespasian (Suetonius Vesp. 23.4), and Otho (Tacitus Hist. 2.50). Prodigies were also part of imperial propaganda signifying divine approval for a new ruler, e.g., Vespasian (Tacitus Hist. 2.78; Suetonius Vesp. 5; Cassius Dio 66.1; see Chilver, Tacitus, 237).

"While the sighting, interpretation, and expiation of prodigies were prominent features of ancient Etruscan and Roman religion, phenomena analogous to prodigies were not unknown in ancient Judaism, though there was no formal attempt made to expiate them (this according to Tacitus *Hist.* 5.13). Early Jewish literature reflects the formal adaptation of some of the more common Roman prodigies into literary contexts. These include the sight of a sword or swords in the sky (Sib. Or. 3.798; Jos. J. W. 6.288; Lactantius Div. Inst. 7.19 [Oracle of Hystaspes]) and armies clashing in the sky (Sib. Or. 3.805; 2 Macc 5:2; Jos. J. W. 6.288; Tacitus Hist. 5.13; Pliny Hist. nat. 2.58.148).

"Prodigies, then, tend to be presented as lists of unnatural events that require a diagnosis and a cure. Philo suggests that the sun and moon were created not only to give light but also to serve as σημεῖα μελλόντων, 'signs of future events' (Op. 58–58; Spec. Leg. 1.92). Occasionally, apocalyptic literature presents lists of unnatural occurrences in connection with such events as the eschatological day of judgment (2 Apoc. Bar. 27:1–13; 4 Ezra 4:52–5:13; 6:20–24; see K. Berger, ANRW II, 23/2:1455–59), though often single signs are mentioned (Sib. Or. 2.35; 3.334, 457; 4.61; 10.55). 4 Ezra 5:4–13, for example, contains a list of signs that combines the features of cosmic upheaval with the unnatural phenomena

pernatural meaning to unnatural phenomenon occurring in the natural world in first century Greco-Roman religions provided a substantial background for John's initial readers at the end of the first century. One particular event in 79 AD, barely a decade before the writing of this text, drilled a fresh vivid image into the minds of these readers. A huge eruption of Vesuvius on the Italian peninsula completely destroyed both Pompeii and Herculaneum. Nearly every image here in John took place in connection to this eruption.<sup>58</sup> The tendency of some circles of Hellenistic Judaism to incorporate some of this into their religious thinking added further background especially for the Jewish Christians in the

characteristic of prodigy lists. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described, in the manner of Roman historians of his day (he was, after all, addressing a primarily Roman audience), a number of unusual signs that he understood as divine warnings of the imminent destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, including a comet that lasted a year, a light that shown around the altar at midnight, a cow intended for sacrifice that gave birth to a lamb, a very heavy gate of the temple court that opened of its own accord, an appearance of chariots and armed soldiers in the sky, and a voice that was heard to say 'We are departing from here' (J. W. 6.289–300). Tacitus also described many of these events, which he considered 'prodigies' (*prodigia*), and observed that the Jews were opposed to averting these warnings by sacrifices or vows, understanding them to be positive rather than negative signs (Hist. 5.13).

Christian authors like Lactantius could also describe the signs of the end using the language of prodigies (Epitome 71; tr. Blakene, Epitome):

To these plagues will be added also miraculous signs from heaven [*prodigia de coelo*], that everything may combine to increase human alarm [*hominibus ad timorem*]. Comets will frequently be seen. The sun will be darkened with perpetual gloom; the moon will be dyed in blood, nor will it renew its lost light; all the stars will fall, nor will the seasons observe their proper course, for winter and summer will be confounded [cf. 1 Enoch 80:2–8]. Year and month and day will be shortened. That this is the old age of the world, and its declension, has been foretold by Trismegistus.

"While the plagues of Exodus were afflicted on the Egyptians by God through Moses, the plagues of Revelation are like prodigies in that they do not occur through human agency but are seen as signs of divine anger."

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 416–418.]

<sup>58</sup>"As a representative case of natural calamity John takes the earthquake, the most terrific catastrophe of nature which is known to man. Asia Minor had been visited many times by earthquakes, and was unusually liable to these natural convulsions. Sardis and Philadelphia and adjacent cities had been destroyed by an earthquake A. D. 17. Just shortly before the writing of Revelation, that is, A. D. 79, Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed by an eruption of Vesuvius, and in that catastrophe there was represented nearly every phenomenon described in this passage. It is not possible for us to imagine how that cataclysm of nature affected the mind of the ancient Mediterranean world. Its influence upon the mind of John is traceable at several points in the Apocalypse." [H. E. Dana, *The Epistles and Apocalypse of John: A Brief Commentary* (Kansas: Central Seminary Press, 1947), 121–122.]

churches of Asia which was a major center of Diaspora Judaism.

The collecting of this series of six such images, commonly found in Greco-Roman list of prodigies, but interpreted religiously by John basically out of his Jewish religious heritage in prophetic visions and Jewish apocalyptic visionary language, must have created a hugely fearful response in the minds of those first readers of this text. What was coming at the end was indeed frightening!

**2. The human response to these disasters is noted, vv. 15-17.** 15 Καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ μεγιστᾶνες καὶ οἱ χιλιάρχοι καὶ οἱ πλούσιοι καὶ οἱ ἰσχυροὶ καὶ πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἔκρυψαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ εἰς τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὄρεων 16 καὶ λέγουσιν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ταῖς πέτραις· πέσετε ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς καὶ κρύψατε ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, 17 ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι; 15 Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

But John is not finished with his depiction by just listing a series of extraordinary natural phenomena. In the second part of the sixth seal he describes human reaction to such kinds of events. The connection between vv. 12-14 and vv. 15-17 is not as close as the NRSV translation ‘then’ would imply. The Greek connector is only Καὶ as a simple link of an additional unit of material that may or may not have a connection to the first unit. It is not οὖν or one of the other less common inferential conjunctions that would imply the second unit action occurs as a consequence or implication of the first unit in a one - two sequence. The uniform use of Aorist tense verbs in both units -- ἐγένετο (2x), ἔπεσαν, ἀπεχωρίσθη, ἐκινήθησαν [1st unit]; ἔκρυψαν, λέγουσιν (present tense linked by καὶ to aorist ἔκρυψαν) -- push all but the last verb into completed action and thus obscure any sense of sequencing of the event occurrences. Although the reading of an English translation of the two units in such one - two sequence would seem to imply that the actions of the humans form a response to the specific calamities described in the first unit, the lack of any overt connectors calls such into question. Very likely the human actions are responses to the kinds of things depicted in the first unit of vv. 12-14, more than a reaction to the specific disaster portrayed collectively in this initial unit.

The identity of the humans in v. 15 is a seven fold

grouping of individuals from kings down to slaves.<sup>59</sup> This includes all of humanity. In Rev. 19:18 a similar grouping is found:<sup>60</sup>

**Rev 6:15**

The *kings* of the earth  
and *the important people*  
and *the generals*

and *the wealthy*  
and *the powerful*  
and *every slave*  
and *free person*

**Rev 19:18**

The carrion of *kings*

and the carrion of *generals*  
and the carrion of *horses*  
and *their riders*

and the carrion of *the powerful*  
and the carrion of *all*  
*free* and *slave*

Only minor differences (cf. above blue color designations) surface between the two lists. Also in the LXX of Isaiah 34:12 the first three groups in Rev. 6:15 are listed: the ... kings ... and the rulers ... and the great ones (οἱ ... βασιλεῖς ... καὶ οἱ ἄρκοντες ... καὶ οἱ μεγιστᾶνες).<sup>61</sup> Compare also Psalm 2:2 for another similar list. What emerges from this comparison is that these people listed uniformly represent people who are the enemies of God’s people and are due for divine wrath because of the harm and injury they have inflicted on believers.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup>“The number of classes in our text is seven — a favourite number with our author. It includes every one from the emperor down to the slave. For similar enumerations see Jub. xxiii. 19; 2 Bar. lxx. 3, 4, 6, though these are mentioned in connection with what is given in our text under the second Seal.” [R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1920), 181.]

<sup>60</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 419.

<sup>61</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 399.

<sup>62</sup>“As in Isaiah 34, so here these groups of people undergo divine judgment because they are an essential part of the corrupt world system, which must be destroyed. In both cases the precise reason for punishment is persecution of God’s people (cf. Isa. 33:1–34:13; 35:1–4; Rev. 6:9–12). That they are also judged because of idolatry is evident from the fact they ‘hide themselves in the caves and the rocks of the mountains ... from the presence of the one sitting on the throne and from the wrath’ (vv 15b, 16b), which is based on a typological understanding of God’s judgment of Israelite idolaters in Isa. 2:10, 18–21: ‘You enter into the rocks and hide yourselves in the earth from the presence of the terror of the LORD.... But the idols will completely vanish. And they will go into caves of the rocks and into holes of the ground before the terror of the LORD.... In that day they will cast away to the moles and bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, in order to go into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs before the terror of the LORD ... when he arises to make the earth tremble’ (a similar description from Jer. 4:29 may be included in this typological inference; cf. Jer. 4:23–28; 5:7).” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Page 23

The listing is not intended to cover the totality of humanity.

Most of the groupings are relatively easy to understand but not all of them. 1) οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς refers to the rulers of the various nations in the world. 2) οἱ μεγιστᾶνες is less clear. The plural noun etymologically means ‘the great men.’<sup>63</sup> Logically it would extend to more than just Parthian noblemen in a more generalized specification. 3) οἱ χιλιάρχοι literally refers in Greek to the Roman military tribunes, leader of a thousand soldiers, and called *tribuni* in Latin. Whether a specific reference to the Roman military or a more generalized designation of military generals universally is of little consequence. 4) οἱ πλούσιοι refers to the wealthy of that world which amounted to less than 5% of the population but controlled over 95% of the wealth in that time. 5) οἱ ἰσχυροὶ specifies ‘the powerful’ and socially would be closely linked to the preceding four categories. 6) and 7) πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος specifies every slave and freedman. These would designate the two lower classes on the social ladder of the ancient world, although percentage wise the largest groups composing well over 80 to 90 percent of the population.

Their action, ἔκρυψαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ εἰς τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὄρεων, they hid themselves in the caves and the rocks of the mountains, carries particular significance in light of numerous Old and New Testament references.<sup>64</sup> In addition to seeking to hide themselves from the judgment of God, very probably it carries the additional stigma of being idol worshipers who additionally are coming under divine judgment for their idolatry.<sup>65</sup> But foundational is the theme of divine judgment.

<sup>63</sup>“The μεγιστᾶνες are probably here to be identified with the Parthian princes (cf. Mommsen, v. 343 sq.). So Holtzmann and Bousset. The word is used six times in Theodotion’s translation of Daniel as a rendering of מַגִּישֵׁי, who were an order of great nobles and court officials under Belshazzar and Darius. Swete takes them to be civil officials, i.e. the persecuting proconsuls.” [R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1920), 181–182.]

<sup>64</sup>“This is an allusion to Isa 2:19–21 (cf. Isa 2:10; Ezek 7:16; Sib. Or. 3.607). During times of invasion or siege, residents of cities and towns would often flee to the mountainous regions to hide from their enemies (Judg 6:2; 1 Sam 13:16; 14:11; Job 30:6; Ezek 33:27; Jer 13:14; 16:16; 49:30; Ant. 6.99, 116; 12.272–75, 421; 14.429; J. W. 1.307; 6.370). This is precisely the advice given to those living in Jerusalem during the time of eschatological stress (Mark 13:14; Matt 24:16; Luke 21:21). In the OT, the major reason for fleeing from the presence of God is to avoid judgment (Gen 19:17; Ps. 67:1; Hos 5:3; Zech 14:5).” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 419–420.]

<sup>65</sup>“That they are also judged because of idolatry is evident from the fact they ‘hide themselves in the caves and the rocks of the mountains ... from the presence of the one sitting on the throne

ment, especially the one coming at the end of time.’<sup>66</sup>

and from the wrath’ (vv 15b, 16b), which is based on a typological understanding of God’s judgment of Israelite idolaters in Isa. 2:10, 18–21: ‘You enter into the rocks and hide yourselves in the earth from the presence of the terror of the LORD.... But the idols will completely vanish. And they will go into caves of the rocks and into holes of the ground before the terror of the LORD.... In that day they will cast away to the moles and bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, in order to go into the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs before the terror of the LORD ... when he arises to make the earth tremble’ (a similar description from Jer. 4:29 may be included in this typological inference; cf. Jer. 4:23–28; 5:7).” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 399–400.]

<sup>66</sup>“What is the significance of the OT allusions in vv 15–16 that refer to judgment on idolaters in their respective contexts? Rev. 6:15–17 shows that the cosmos is dissolved (6:12–14), whether literally or figuratively, in order to emphasize not only judgment but also that the apparently secure home of the “earth-dwellers” (6:10) will be destroyed. Just as the cosmic metaphors of vv 12–14 are figurative of the fall of human kingdoms and not the literal dissolution of the world in the OT and NT, so likewise the earthquake imagery signifies the judgment of nations (Israel) in both testaments (Hos. 10:1–3, 8; Luke 21:11; 23:30; cf. Heb. 12:27). That is the emphasis here also.

“The idolaters have committed themselves wholly to something in this creation, whether to political, economic, or social idolatries. In contrast to Christians, who are pilgrims on the earth and whose citizenship is in heaven, the ungodly earth-dwellers “are at home in the present world order, men of earthbound vision, trusting in earthly security and unable to look beyond the things that are seen and temporal.”<sup>88</sup> It is for this reason that the remainder of the Apocalypse uses “ones who dwell on the earth” exclusively of idol worshipers (so 8:13 [cf. 9:20]; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6–9; 17:2, 8; the emphasis in 11:10 is on unbelievers who persecute the saints). The unbelievers’ idol-refuge, the earth, must be removed because it has been made impermanent by the pollution of their sin, but the eternal home of believers with their God will remain (cf. Heb. 12:26–28; cf. Rom. 1:18–25 with 8:20–22; Asc. Isa. 4:18 pictures the judgment of the same heavenly and earthly elements as in Rev. 6:12–15a because they have been tainted with the influence of Beliar). And if the earth is also to be destroyed literally, this is to demonstrate that the idolatrous earthly securities of the earth-dwellers will be destroyed (cf. Test. Mos. 10:3–6 with 10:7, which makes the same connection). Humanity has become perverted and has worshiped the creation (cf. Rom. 1:21–25; Rev. 9:20).

“Therefore, creation itself (sun, moon, stars, trees, animals, etc.) has become an idol that must be removed. The Bible repeatedly refers to the heavenly bodies as representing false deities worshiped by Israel and the nations (e.g., Deut. 4:19; 17:1–4; 2 Kgs. 23:4–5; Jer. 8:2; Ezek. 8:16; Amos 5:25–27; Acts 7:41–43). If the most permanent and stable parts of creation will be shaken to their roots (e.g., mountains and islands), so will those living on the earth. Their earthly securities will be ripped away so that they will appear spiritually naked before God’s judgment seat on the last day. They will try unsuccessfully to hide their destitute condition from the divine gaze (vv 15–16) and to escape from the coming wrath (v 17). They will even rather die from the falling rocks and



mountains than face God's judgment (v 16).

"The earth-dwellers have not trusted in the Lamb who was slain for the sin of the world (cf. 1:5; 5:9). Therefore, they will have to suffer his destructive wrath and will not be able to withstand it. The gentle Lamb who was slain on the cross is now in an exalted position over the whole cosmos (1:5; 3:21; 5:5–6) to pour out his wrath. He is not only loving to his people but also a just judge of his enemies. The OT allusions used throughout vv 12–17 heighten the Lamb's position, since they all picture judgment coming from God. Now the judgment is seen as coming not only from God on the throne but also from the Lamb, who must also be viewed as functioning in a divine judicial capacity. This is especially expressed in the Isa. 2:10 allusion (likewise Isa. 2:19, 21) in v 16 (cf. "from the terror of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty" with Rev. 6:16, where "the one sitting on the throne" corresponds to "the LORD" in Isaiah and "the Lamb" stands in place of "the splendor of his majesty").<sup>89</sup> Likewise, the allusion to Joel 2:11 is another particular example underscoring the Lamb's deity: "for the day of the LORD is great" becomes in Rev. 6:17 "for the great day of their [God and the Lamb's] wrath came."

"In 1:5–6 two results of Christ's resurrection are that he becomes both 'ruler of the kings of the earth,' many of whom he judges (6:15; 16:12; 17:12–18; 19:18–19), and a loving redeemer of his people. 'The kings of the earth' who undergo the last judgment in 6:15 are to be identified with the same group being finally judged in 19:18–21 and not with those who are redeemed in 21:24 (a comparison of 21:8, 27 with 21:24 [see the comments there] also shows that the latter verse does not imply an ultimate universal salvation).

"Six parts of the cosmos are described as destroyed in vv 12–14: (1) earth, (2) sun, (3) moon, (4) stars, (5) heaven, and (6) "every mountain and island"; furthermore, vv 15–17 speak of six classes of humanity to be judged: (1) kings, (2) great ones, (3) rulers of thousands, (4) the rich, (5) the powerful, and (6) "every slave and free person." This parallel points further to an intended identification of the idolaters with the earth as their ultimate idol. There are six and not seven members in both lists: the sixth element in each is composed of two parts put together as a literary and conceptual unity by the introductory *πᾶς* ("every"). This parallelism could also support the suggestion made above that the judgment of the cosmos in vv 12–14 is figurative for the judgment of sinners in vv 15–17. The parallel sixfold pattern may emphasize the imperfection of both inanimate and human creation and, hence, the necessity that both be judged (cf. 13:16).<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, if a parallelism of seven parts of creation and seven classes of humanity were intended in vv 12–17, then the exhaustive, unqualified nature of divine judgment would be the emphasis.

"The cosmic order of nature and of the luminaries (the course of the sun, moon, and stars) was seen as essential to the ongoing welfare of the world's existence (e.g., 1 En. 2:1; 41:5–7). This order is interrupted and dissolved when humans go against the spiritual order of God's moral laws, which are to regulate the course of their lives. (e.g., Test. Naph. 3:1–5; 1 En. 80:2–8; 4 Ezra 5:1–7; cf. Sib. Or. 5.504–11 with 5.512–30). Hence, God judges the heavens by destroying its orderly movements in order to indicate that humanity has violated his moral order and is being judged (likewise, in the OT the fruitfulness or barrenness of the land was a spiritual barometer of Israel's faith). In the light of these Jewish texts, one can see how Jer. 31:35–36 and 33:20–21, 25–26 imply the same thing (see further on Rev. 8:12)."

[G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: a Commentary on the*

In their futile effort to hide themselves from the judgment of God they call upon the natural elements, which have also been objects of worship, to protect them from this judgment: καὶ λέγουσιν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ταῖς πέτραις· πέσετε ἐφ' ἡμᾶς καὶ κρύψατε ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ καθημένου ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, *calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.* With the background understanding of idolatry in the picture in connection to the caves and the rocks of the mountains, it is easy to grasp why they would appeal to caves and rocks to protect them. They were appealing to the spiritual powers assumed to be connected to these caves and rocks, and not just to the physical aspects of caves and large boulders be good hiding places.

The apocalyptic visionary nature of this text urges great caution in concluding from the statements about God in v. 16 that these pagans recognized the true God at this point in their lives. Most likely out of their superstitious religious heritage, they were fearful that divine wrath from some spiritual source was coming down on them with extremely destructive impact. John identifies for his readers that this source was none other than the God of the Christians whom these earth-dwellers had persecuted and even executed.

The basis for their fear is stated in verse 17: ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι; *for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?* One unusual phrase requires explanation: ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, *their wrath.* In v. 16, τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, the wrath of the Lamb, has been mentioned and thus one would expect, in v. 17, ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ, *His wrath,* instead of ὀργῆς αὐτῶν.<sup>67</sup> In fact

Greek Text, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 402–404.]

<sup>67</sup>What is unusual here is the attribution of wrath to Christ, rather than to God, which is the case elsewhere in Revelation: 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15. But eschatological judgment is a role given to the Son of Man in apocalyptic Judaism:

The role of the Messiah in Judaism sometimes includes the execution of eschatological judgment as the agent of God (Pss. Sol. 17:21–25, 35 [cf. Rev 19:15, 21]; 4 Ezra 13:8–11, 37–38; 12:32–33), particularly in the Similitudes of Enoch, where he is called "the Chosen One," "the Messiah," and "the Son of man" (1 Enoch 46:4–6; 49:4; 52:9; 55:4). This judicial role is clearly depicted in 1 Enoch 69:27 (trs. Knibb, Enoch 2:164):

And he sat on the throne of his glory  
and the whole judgment was given to the Son of man.  
And he will cause the sinners to pass away  
and be destroyed from the face of the earth.

In early Christianity, Christ is frequently assigned the role of eschatological judge (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Rom 2:16; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 2:9; 2 Tim 4:1; Barn. 15:5).

[David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, *Word Biblical Page 25*

several copyists (A M sa<sup>ms</sup> bo; Prim) altered αὐτῶν to αὐτοῦ, convinced that the smoother reading was original. But ὀργῆς αὐτῶν has much stronger support as the original wording of the text, and within the framework of ancient Greek grammar is easy to understand. The pronoun αὐτῶν should be taken as an objective genitive case expression with the derived meaning of ‘the wrath upon them.’

The phrase ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς, the great day of wrath, shows up in Jude 6 as a reference to final judgment.<sup>68</sup> And this is its meaning here in Rev. 6:17. A similar expression is found in 16:14, τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς μεγάλης τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ παντοκράτορος, the great day of God the Almighty.<sup>69</sup> The day of final judgment has arrived and the fear is καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι; and who is able to stand? The anticipated answer is no one! At least, no one from among the enemies of God and His people.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

Several implications for Christians today emerge from the fifth and sixth seals of 6:12-17. Two primary ones are as follows:

1) God’s promise to take care of His people is certain, even though the way He does this does not exempt believers from suffering and even martyrdom. Only in a pleasure oriented western culture would divine protection be understood to imply exemption from

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Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 420–421.]

<sup>68</sup>**Jude 6.** ἀγγέλους τε τοὺς μὴ τηρήσαντας τὴν ἑαυτῶν ἀρχὴν ἀλλ’ ἀπολιπόντας τὸ ἴδιον οἰκητήριον εἰς κρίσιν μεγάλης ἡμέρας δεσμοῖς αἰδίοις ὑπὸ ζόφον τετήρηκεν,

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day.

<sup>69</sup>“In *Barn.* 15:5, after interpreting the six creative days as a period of 6,000 years, the seventh day of rest is interpreted to mean ‘when his Son comes he will destroy the time of the wicked one, and will judge the godless, and will change the sun and the moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day.’ This is a time of judgment presided over by the Son (as in Rev 6:17), and it also refers to changes in the heavenly bodies, reflected in Rev 6:12–13. Both the author of Barnabas and the author of Revelation are dependent here upon an earlier Christian tradition. This phrase therefore corresponds to such phrases as ‘the day of the Lord [= Jesus]’ (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10); ‘the day of [our] Lord Jesus’ (1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6), or ‘the day of Christ’ (Phil 1:10; 2:16). In Rev 6:14, this eschatological event is referred to as ἡ ἡμέρα, ‘the day,’ in the phrase ‘the great Day of God’ (see 2 Pet 3:12). Similar ambivalence regarding the role of God or Christ in the last judgment is found in Paul, who can speak of ‘the judgment seat of God’ in Rom 14:10 but ‘the judgment seat of Christ’ in 2 Cor 5:10 (see Kreitzer, *Eschatology*, 112–28). Occasionally, the phrase ‘day of judgment’ occurs in the NT (2 Pet 3:7; 1 John 4:17), while ‘the day of God’ occurs only in 2 Pet 3:12.” [David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, vol. 52B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 421.]

suffering pain and misfortune. The rest of the modern Christian world sees God’s protection more in line with apostolic Christianity. Pain and suffering do not belong to God’s list of exempted issues for His people. In fact, they possess the potential for enormous good. As Paul phrased it in Phil. 3:10, τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ [τὴν] κοινωσίαν [τῶν] παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, in order to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, in being made to conform to His death.

The message of the fifth seal is that God cares, and coming under persecution as a believer in no way jeopardizes our relationship with God. To the contrary, suffering martyrdom as a Christian brings us into the very presence of God in heaven. The Jewish persecutors of believers in several of the seven churches in Asia claimed that killing Christians doomed these heretics to eternal damnation (cf. chaps 2 & 3). But John’s message was that such slaughter actually brought them into the very presence of God in Heaven, in the greatest validation of their faith commitment possible.

2) A major avenue of God’s protective care of His people is through holding accountable the enemies of God’s people for their evil, injurious behavior toward God’s people. God indeed is a holy and righteous God. Idolatrous rejection of Him coupled with persecuting His people produces not only overwhelming temporal judgments upon them as signaled by these extraordinary natural phenomena, but also pointed to the final time when such phenomena would stack up into a calamitous explosion bringing about their destruction and the destruction of the sinful world they had created.

We can rejoice in that and take comfort from that, not because of any personal revenge gained through divine judgment, but because such divine judgments validate God’s holiness and righteousness. This then certifies our faith commitment to Him, even in the midst of intense suffering, as being totally correct and proper. By committing our lives to the Lamb, we have made the right choice, even though we may pay a severe price for our commitment. Over the unending decades of eternity we will rejoice over and over that we made this commitment. It has brought us into the eternal bliss of the very presence of God.