



RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

‘Eschatology’ is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological ‘system’ scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular “Left Behind” system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FROM “THE DAYS OF VENGEANCE”  
BY DAVID CHILTON

## *The Sixth Trumpet*

NOTES ON REVELATION 9:13-21

- 13 And the sixth angel sounded, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God,
- 14 one saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet: Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.
- 15 And the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released, so that they might kill a third of mankind.
- 16 And the number of the armies of the horsemen was myriads; I heard the number of them.
- 17 And this is how I saw in the vision the horses and those who sat on them: They had breastplates of fire and of hyacinth and of brimstone; and the heads of the horses are like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths proceed fire and smoke and brimstone.
- 18 A third of mankind was killed by these three plagues, by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone, which proceeded out of their mouths.
- 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents and have heads; and with them they do harm.
- 20 And the rest of the men, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk;
- 21 and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their fornication nor of their thefts.

13 Again we are reminded that the desolations wrought by God in the earth are on behalf of His people (Ps. 46), in response to their official, covenantal worship: the command to



TITUS FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

## *The True Veil*

All man's thoughts regarding the true meaning of the veil have been set at rest by that brief parenthesis of the Apostle Paul—“*the veil, that is to say, His flesh*” (Heb 10:20). The Holy Spirit has interpreted the symbol for us, and saved us a world of speculation and uncertainty. We now know that the veil meant the body of “Jesus.” ***The Rent Veil* by Horatius Bonar**

the sixth angel is issued by a voice from the four horns of the golden altar (i.e., the incense altar) which is before God. The mention of this point is obviously intended to encourage God's people in worship and prayer, assuring them that God's actions in history proceed from his altar, where He has received their prayers. St. John states that the voice came from the four horns (hornlike projections at each corner of the altar), referring to an important aspect of the Old Testament liturgy: the purification offering. This offering referred to the pollution and defilement of a *place* through sin. If the place defiled by sin is not purified, death will result. In his excellent study of the Levitical system, Gordon Wenham tells us that "the purification offering dealt with the pollution caused by sin. If sin polluted the land, it defiled particularly the house where God dwelt. The seriousness of pollution depended on the seriousness of the sin, which in turn related to the status of the sinner. If a private citizen sinned, his action polluted the sanctuary only to a limited extent. Therefore the blood of the purification offering was only smeared on the horns of the altar of burnt sacrifice. If, however, the whole nation sinned or the holiest member of the nation, the high priest, sinned, this was more serious. The blood had to be taken inside the tabernacle and sprinkled on the veil and the altar of incense." The sins of the nation were atoned for by offering a sacrifice on the brazen altar, then taking the blood and smearing it on the horns of the golden altar of incense (Lev. 4:13-21). In this way the altar was purified, so that the incense could be offered with the assurance that God would hear their prayers. The first-century readers of Revelation would have recognized the significance of this: God's command to His angels, in response to the prayers of His people, is spoken from the horns of the golden altar. Their sins have been covered, and do not stand in the way of free access to God.

One further point should be observed. The prayers of the Church at the altar of incense are imprecatory prayers against the nation of Israel. The "Israel" that has rejected Christ is polluted and defiled (cf. Lev. 18:24-30), and its prayers will not be heard by God, for it has rejected the one atonement for sin. The unclean land of Israel will therefore be judged in terms of the curses of Leviticus 26, a chapter which repeatedly threatens a sevenfold judgment upon the nation if it

becomes polluted by sin (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28; we have seen that this is the source for the repeated sevenfold judgments in the Book of Revelation).

But the Church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel, the holy nation, the true people of God, who possess "confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19). Again, the first-century Church is assured by St. John that her prayers will be heard and answered by God. He will take vengeance upon her persecutors, for the earth is both blessed and judged by the liturgical actions and judicial decrees of the Church.

God's readiness to hear and willingness to grant His people's prayers are continually proclaimed throughout Scripture (Ps. 9:10; 10:17-18; 18:3; 34:15-17; 37:4-5; 50:14-15; 145:18-19). God has given us numerous examples of imprecatory prayers, showing repeatedly that one aspect of a godly man's attitude is hatred for God's enemies and fervent prayer for their downfall and destruction (Ps. 5:10; 10:15; 35:1-8, 22-26; 59:12-13; 68:1-4; 69:22-28; 83; 94; 109; 137:8-9; 139:19-24; 140:6-11). Why then do we not see the overthrow of the wicked in our own time? An important part of the answer is the unwillingness of the modern Church to pray Biblically; and God has assured us: *You do not have because you do not ask* (James 4:2). But the first-century Church, praying faithfully and fervently for the destruction of apostate Israel, had been heard at God's heavenly altar. His angels were commissioned to strike.

**14-16** The sixth angel is commissioned to release the four angels who had been bound at the great river Euphrates; they then bring against Israel an army consisting of myriads of myriads.

The Euphrates River formed the boundary between Israel and the fearsome, pagan forces which God used as a scourge against His rebellious people. "It was the northern frontier of Palestine [cf. Gen. 15:18; Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:4], across which Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian invaders had come to impose their pagan sovereignty on the people of God. All the scriptural warnings about a foe from the north, therefore, find their echo in John's bloodcurdling vision" (cf. Jer. 6:1, 22; 10:22; 13:20; 25:9, 26; 46:20, 24; 47:2; Ezek. 26:7; 38:6, 15; 39:2). It should be remembered too that the north (the original location of Eden) was the area of God's throne (Isa. 14:13); and both the Glory-Cloud and God's agents of vengeance are seen coming from the

*north*, i.e., from the Euphrates (cf. Ezek. 1:4; Isa. 14:31; Jer. 1:14-15). Thus, this great army from the north is *God's army*, and under His control and direction, although it is plainly demonic and pagan in character (on the binding of fallen angels, cf. 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). God is completely sovereign, and uses both demons and the heathen to accomplish His holy purposes (1 Kings 22:20-22; Job 1:12-21; of course, He then punishes the heathen for their wicked motives and goals which led them to fulfill His decree: cf. Isa. 10:5-14). The angels bound at the Euphrates had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, their role in history utterly predestined and certain.

St. John hears the number of the horsemen: myriads of myriads. We noted in the Introduction to this volume some of the more fanciful interpretations of this expression (see pp. 11-13). If we keep our imaginations harnessed to Scripture, however, we will observe that it is taken from Psalm 68:17, which reads: "The chariots of God are *double myriads, thousands of thousands*." Mounce correctly observes that "attempts to reduce this expression to arithmetic miss the point. A 'double myriad of myriads' is an indefinite number of incalculable immensity." The term simply means *many thousands*, and indicates a vast host that is to be thought of in connection with the Lord's angelic army of thousands upon thousands of chariots.

**17-19** Avoiding the dazzling technological speculations advanced by some commentators, we will note simply that while the *number* of the army is meant to remind us of God's army, the *characteristics* of the horses – the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which proceeded out of their mouths – remind us of the Dragon, the fire-breathing Leviathan (Job 41:18-21). "The picture is meant to be inconceivable, horrifying, and even revolting. For these creatures are not of the earth. Fire and sulphur belong to hell (19:20; 21:8), just as the smoke is characteristic of the pit (9:2). Only monsters from beneath belch out such things." Thus, to sum up the idea: An innumerable army is advancing upon Jerusalem from the Euphrates, the origin of Israel's traditional enemies; it is a fierce, hostile, demonic force sent by God in answer to His people's prayers for vengeance. In short, this army is the fulfillment of all the warnings in the law and the prophets of an avenging horde sent to punish the Covenant-breakers.

The horrors described in Deuteronomy 28 were to be visited upon this evil generation (see especially verses 49-68). Moses had declared: *You shall be driven mad by the sight of what you see* (Deut. 28:34).

As it actually worked out in history, the Jewish rebellion in reaction to the "locust plague" of Gessius Florus during the summer of 66 provoked Cestius' invasion of Palestine in the fall; with large numbers of mounted troops from the regions near the Euphrates (although the main point of St. John's reference is the symbolic significance of the river in Biblical history and prophecy). After ravaging the countryside, his forces arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in the month of Tishri – the month that begins with the Day of Trumpets. The army surrounded the city: "For five days the Romans pressed their attacks on all sides but made no progress; on the sixth, Cestius led a large force of picked men with the archers to an assault on the north side of the Temple. The Jews from the roof of the portico resisted the attack and repeatedly drove back those who reached the wall, but at length, overwhelmed by the hail of missiles, gave way.

The front rank of the Romans then planted their bucklers against the wall and on those the second row rested theirs and so on, till they formed a protective covering known as 'the tortoise,' from which the missiles glanced off harmlessly, while the soldiers undermined the wall and prepared to set fire to the gate of the Temple Mount.

"Utter panic now seized the insurgents, and many now began to run from the city, believing that it would fall any minute. The people thereupon took heart again, and the more the wretches gave ground, the nearer did the former advance to open the gates and welcome Cestius as a benefactor." Then, at the very moment when complete victory was within his grasp, Cestius suddenly and inexplicably withdrew his forces. Encouraged, the Jews pursued the retreating soldiers and attacked them, inflicting heavy casualties. Gaalya Cornfeld comments that "Cestius' failure transformed the revolt against Rome into a real war. A success so unexpected and sensational had naturally strengthened the hands of the war-party. The majority of the opponents to the revolt found themselves in a minority and tended to ally themselves with the win-

ning Zealots, even though they did not believe that victory was possible. Nevertheless, although they did not proclaim themselves openly, they thought it more advisable to give the appearance of approval for fear of losing control over the people as a whole. Thus, the high-priestly circles and moderates, although notorious in their allegiance to the side of peace, decided to assume the direction of the war which was now considered inevitable. . . . The respite gained by the Jews after Cestius' retreat to Syria was exploited to organize a national defense force."

**20-21** Yet the rest of the men, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent . . . so as not to worship demons and the idols. The Jews had so completely given themselves over to apostasy that neither God's goodness nor His wrath could turn them from their error. Instead, as Josephus reports, even up to the very end – after the famine, the mass murders, the cannibalism, the crucifixion of their fellow Jews at the rate of 500 per day – the Jews went on heeding the insane ravings of false prophets who assured them of deliverance and victory: "Thus were the miserable people beguiled by these charlatans and false messengers of God, while they disregarded and disbelieved the unmistakable portents that foreshadowed the coming desolation; but, as though thunderstruck, blind, senseless, paid no heed to the clear warnings of God."

What "clear warnings" had God given them? Apart from the apostolic preaching, which was all they really needed (cf. Luke 16:27-31), God had sent miraculous signs and wonders to testify of the coming judgment; Jesus had warned that, preceding the Fall of Jerusalem, "there will be terrors and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11). This was especially true during the festival seasons of the year 66, as Josephus reports: "While the people were assembling for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the eighth of the month Xanthicus [Nisan], at the ninth hour of the night [3:00 A.M.] so bright a light shone round the altar and Temple that it looked like broad daylight; and this lasted for half an hour. The inexperienced regarded it as a good omen, but it was immediately interpreted by the sacred scribes in conformity with subsequent events."

During the same feast another shocking event took place: "The east gate of the inner sanctuary was a very massive gate

made of brass and so heavy that it could scarcely be moved every evening by twenty men; it was fastened by iron-bound bars and secured by bolts that were sunk very deep into a threshold that was fashioned from a single stone block; yet this gate was seen to open of its own accord at the sixth hour of the night [midnight]. The Temple guards ran and reported the news to the captain and he came up and by strenuous efforts managed to close it. To the uninitiated this also appeared to be the best of omens as they had assumed that God had opened to them the gate of happiness. But wiser people realized that the security of the Temple was breaking down of its own accord and that the opening of the gates was a present to the enemy; and they interpreted this in their own minds as a portent of the coming desolation." (A similar event, incidentally, happened in A.D. 30, when Christ was crucified and the Temple's outer veil — 24 feet wide and over 80 feet high! — ripped from top to bottom [Matt. 27:50-54; Mark 15:37-39; Luke 23:44-47]: The Talmud records that in A.D. 30 the gates of the Temple opened by themselves, apparently due to the collapse of the overhead lintel, a stone weighing about 30 tons.)

Those who were unable to attend the regular Feast of Passover were required to celebrate it a month later (Num. 9:9-113). Josephus reports a third great wonder that happened at the end of this Second Passover in 66: "A supernatural apparition was seen, too amazing to be believed. What I am now to relate would, I imagine, be dismissed as imaginary, had this not been vouched for by eyewitnesses, then followed by subsequent disasters that deserved to be thus signalized. Before sunset chariots were seen in the air over the whole country, and armed battalions speeding through the clouds and encircling the cities."

A fourth sign occurred inside the Temple on the next great feast day, and was witnessed by the twenty-four priests who were on duty: "At the feast called Pentecost, when the priests had entered the inner courts of the Temple by night to perform their usual ministrations, they declared that they were aware, first, of a violent commotion and din, then of a voice as of a host crying, 'We are departing hence!'"

There was a fifth sign in the heavens that year: "A star that looked like a sword stood over the city and a comet that con-

tinued for a whole year.” It was obvious, as Josephus says, that Jerusalem was “no longer the dwelling place of God.” Appealing four years later to the Jewish revolutionaries to surrender, he declared: “I believe that the Deity has fled from the holy places and stands now on the side of those with whom you are at war. Why, when an honorable man will fly from a wanton home and abhor its inmates, do you think that God still remains with this household in its iniquity — God who sees each hidden thing and hears what is wrapped in silence?” Yet Israel did not repent of her wickedness. Blind to her own evils and to the increasing judgments coming upon her, she remained steadfast in her apostasy, continuing to reject the Lord and cleaving instead to her false gods.

Did the Jews really worship demons and idols? We have already noted (see on 2:9 and 3:9) the Satanic character of Judaism, which is not Old Testament religion, but is rather a false cult claiming Biblical authorization (just as Mormonism, the Unification Church, and other cults claim to be Biblical). As Herbert Schlossberg points out, “Idolatry in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator.”

By rejecting Jesus Christ, the Jews had inescapably involved themselves in idolatry; they had departed from the faith of Abraham and served gods of their own making. Moreover, as we shall see, the Jewish idolatry was not some vague, undefined, apostate “theism.” Forsaking Christ, the Jews actually became worshipers of Caesar.

Josephus bears eloquent testimony to this, writing repeatedly of God’s wrath against the apostasy of the Jewish nation as the cause of their woes: “These men, therefore, trampled upon all the laws of man, and laughed at the laws of God; and as for the oracles of the prophets, they ridiculed them as the tricks of jugglers; yet did these prophets foretell many things concerning the rewards of virtue, and punishments of vice, which when these zealots violated, they occasioned the fulfilling of those very prophecies belonging to their own country.” “Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, from the beginning of the world.”

“I suppose that had the Romans made any longer delay in coming against these villains, the city would either have been

swallowed up by the ground opening upon them, or been overflowed by water, or else been destroyed by such thunder as the country of Sodom perished by, for it had brought forth a generation of men much more atheistical than were those that suffered such punishments; for by their madness it was that all the people came to be destroyed.”

“When the city was encircled and they could no longer gather herbs, some persons were driven to such terrible distress that they searched the common sewers and old dunghills of cattle, and ate the dung they found there; and what they once could not even look at they now used for food. When the Romans barely heard this, their compassion was aroused; yet the rebels, who saw it also, did not repent, but allowed the same distress to come upon themselves; for they were blinded by that fate which was already coming upon the city, and upon themselves also.”

Israel’s idols are said to be of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, a standard Biblical accounting of the materials used in the construction of false gods (cf. Ps. 115:4; 135 :15; Isa. 37:19). The Bible consistently ridicules men’s idols as the works of their hands, mere stocks and stones which can neither see nor hear nor walk. This is an echo of the Psalmist’s mockery of heathen idols:

They have mouths, but they cannot speak;  
They have eyes, but they cannot see;  
They have ears, but they cannot hear;  
They have noses, but they cannot smell;  
They have hands, but they cannot feel;  
They have feet, but they cannot walk;  
They cannot make a noise with their throat,

Then comes the punchline:

Those who make them will become like them, Everyone who trusts in them. (Ps. 115:5-8; cf. 135:16-18)

Schlossberg comments: “When a civilization turns idolatrous, its people are profoundly changed by that experience. In a kind of reverse sanctification, the idolater is transformed into the likeness of the object of his worship. Israel ‘went after worthlessness, and became worthless’ (Jer. 2:5).” As the prophet Hosea thundered, Israel’s idolaters “became as detestable as that which they loved” (Hos. 9:10).

St. John’s description of Israel’s idolatry is in line with the usual prophetic stance; but his accusation is an even more direct reference to Daniel’s condemnation of *Babylon*, specifically

regarding its *worship of false gods with the holy utensils from the Temple*. Daniel said to king Belshazzar: “You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His House before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified” (Dan. 5:23).

St. John’s implication is clear: Israel has become a Babylon, committing sacrilege by worshiping false gods with the Temple treasures; like Babylon, she has been “weighed in the balance and found wanting”; like Babylon, she will be conquered and her kingdom will be possessed by the heathen (cf. Dan. 5:25-31). Finally, St. John summarizes Israel’s crimes, all stemming from her idolatry (cf. Rom. 1:18-32): This led to her murders of Christ and the saints (Acts 2:23, 36; 3:14-15; 4:26; 7:51-52, 58-60); her sorceries (Acts 8:9, 11; 13:6-11; 19:13-15; cf. Rev. 18:23; 21:8; 22:15); her fornication, a word St. John uses twelve times with reference to Israel’s apostasy (2:14; 2:20; 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2 [twice]; 17:4; 18:3 [twice]; 18:9; 19:2); and her thefts, a crime often associated in the Bible with apostasy and the resultant oppression and persecution of the righteous (cf. Isa. 61:8; Jer. 7:9-10; Ezek. 22:29; Hos. 4:1-2; Mark 11:17; Rom. 2:21; James 5:1-6).

Throughout the Last Days, until the coming of the Romans, the trumpets had blown, warning Israel to repent. But the alarm was not heeded, and the Jews became hardened in their impenitence. The retreat of Cestius was of course taken to mean that Christ’s prophecies of Jerusalem’s destruction were false: The armies from the Euphrates had come and surrounded Jerusalem (cf. Luke 21:20), but the threatened “desolation” had not come to pass. Instead, the Romans had fled, dragging their tails between their legs. Increasingly confident of divine blessing, the Jews recklessly plunged ahead into greater acts of rebellion, unaware that even greater forces beyond the Euphrates were being readied for battle. This time, there would be no retreat. Judea would be turned into a desert, the Israelites would be slaughtered and enslaved, and the Temple would be razed to the ground, without a stone left upon another.