

CHRONOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Robert L. Dean Jr.

THOSE WHO HOLD TO A FUTURIST INTERPRETATION of Revelation 4–22 have one of three views on the cycles of judgments in the tribulation. Some scholars, including Lindsey and Walvoord, believe that all three series of judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls) will occur in the second half of the tribulation.¹

Others hold that the seal judgments will occur in the first half of the tribulation and that the trumpet and bowl judgments will be in the second half.² A third view, held by several expositors,³ is that the seal and trumpet judgments will be in the first half and the bowl judgments in the second half.

This article assumes a telescopic interpretation of the three series of seven judgments each. That is, the seventh seal judgment

Robert L. Dean is Pastor, West Houston Bible Church, Houston, Texas.

¹ Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Anna, CA: VisionHouse, 1973), 104; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 123; and idem, "Revelation," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996), 947. See also Joseph Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966).

² Gary Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 127–47; Herman H. Hoyt, *Studies in Revelation* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1977), 51; John A. McLean, "The Structure of the Book of Revelation," *Michigan Theological Journal* 3 (spring 1992): 5–40; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press, 1969), 146, 166; and Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 541–43.

³ J. N. Darby, "Notes on The Revelation," in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (n.d.; reprint, Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, 1971), 2:264–65; E. W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 368–70; Nathaniel West, *The Thousand Year Reign of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 213, 229, 234; Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1900), 9; C. I. Scofield, *What Do the Prophets Say?* (Greenville, SC: Gospel Hour, 1918), 152; Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1983), 205; and Tim LaHaye, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 13.

includes and introduces the seven trumpet judgments, and the seventh trumpet judgment includes and introduces the seven bowl judgments.

Daniel 9 states that the Antichrist, “the prince who is to come” (v. 26), “will make a firm covenant with the many [Israel] for one week,” that is, for seven years.⁴ “But in the middle of the [seventieth] week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering” (v. 27). Stopping these Jewish sacrifices in the tribulation temple, the Antichrist will seat himself in the temple and will display himself as God (2 Thess. 2:4).

The seventieth week is divided into two equal halves of three and a half years each (or forty-two months or 1,260 days). These time designations are used several times in Daniel and Revelation (“1,260 days,” Rev. 11:3; 12:6), “a time, times, and half a time” (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14), a half week (Dan. 9:27), and forty-two months (Rev. 11:3; 13:5–7).

When the woman who represents Israel flees into the wilderness (12:6), she will be protected by God for 1,260 days. Since Jesus warned Israel to flee at the sign of the abomination of desolation (Matt. 24:15–16), it seems certain that this flight will occur at the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation.

WILL THE SEAL JUDGMENTS BE IN THE FIRST OR SECOND HALF OF THE TRIBULATION?

Those who favor the view that the seal judgments will occur in the first half of the tribulation note the parallels between the events described by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24) and the seal judgments.⁵ Jesus predicted that false christs (vv. 5, 11), wars (vv. 6–7), famines (v. 7), earthquakes, (v. 7), and persecution and martyrdom (vv. 9–10) will occur. These events parallel the first five seal judgments as noted by numerous commentators.⁶ Jesus said

⁴ John F. Walvoord believes “many” refers to unbelieving Jews (*Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 234). However, “many” probably refers to national Israel (Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001], 271–72).

⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 416; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), 1:64; Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or “The Day of the Lord,”* 255; and George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 129–30.

⁶ For example Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 107; Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 2005); Hoyt, *Studies in Revelation*, 52;

that these calamities are “not yet the end” (v. 6); they will be “the beginning of birth pangs” (v. 8). Labor-pain imagery was often used to convey the suffering related to the approach of the Day of the Lord. This is to be distinguished, however, from similar trends preceding Daniel’s seventieth week (cf. Isa. 13:8; 66:6–9; Mic. 5:3–4; 1 Thess. 5:3). Since Jesus was answering a specific question in Matthew 24:3 about the sign of His coming and the end of the age, it seems unlikely that He would refer to trends common through most of human history as specific signs of His coming.⁷ More likely, the wars, famines, and earthquakes He described as signs will be significantly intensified beyond what has been normal throughout history. How else could these be signs, if there were not something unique about them?

After describing these signs, Jesus spoke of the desecration of the holy place (24:15) and the subsequent flight of the Jews into the wilderness. Matthew 24 speaks of numerous judgments in the first half (vv. 4–14), the abomination of desolation in the middle (v. 15), and the flight of the remnant and other judgments in the second half (vv. 16–20). The fact that these judgments will occur in the second half of the tribulation suggests that the seal judgments, which precede them, will take place in the first half, not the second half.

WHEN WILL THE 144,000 BE SEALED?

Revelation 7:1–8 refers to the sealing of 144,000 Jews, with 12,000 from each of Israel’s twelve tribes. When will this occur? Some say it will be between the sixth and seventh seal judgments, since chapter 7 follows chapter 6.⁸ This sequence seems suggested by the fact that four angels are holding back four winds “so that no wind should blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree” (7:1). The fact that the first three trumpet judgments refer to desolation on the earth, the sea, and trees (8:7–11) suggests a chronological sequence in chapters 6, 7, and 8. In this view this would mean that the sealing of the 144,000 will occur between the seventh seal

Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 270; and Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 416.

⁷ John F. Walvoord believes these signs are characteristic of the present age but “especially characteristic of the end of the age” (“Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age; Part III: Signs of the End of the Age,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 [July–September 1971]: 315).

⁸ McLean, “The Structure of the Book of Revelation,” 6; and Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 463.

judgment and the first trumpet judgment, that is, just before the middle of the tribulation and before the abomination of desolation.

Others, however, place the sealing of the 144,000 near the *beginning* of the seal judgments in the first half of the tribulation. Fruchtenbaum writes, “This passage describes the third of the five events happening throughout the first half of the Tribulation. This ministry of the 144,000 is something that occurs throughout the entire first half and not merely after the sixth seal judgment. In fact, it is going on during the Seal Judgments, and it is the means by which the fifth seal saints come to the Messiah. The passage begins with *After this*, which is not chronological, but merely the next vision John sees.”⁹

Fruchtenbaum explains that the words “After these things” in 7:9 suggest that after the 144,000 are sealed, a multitude of Gentile martyrs is identified. No doubt they will be saved directly or indirectly through the evangelistic ministry of the 144,000. Also the fifth seal refers to many martyrs (6:9–11). To have a vast number of martyrs during the first half of the tribulation as indicated by the fifth seal indicates that much evangelism will necessarily have taken place after the rapture of the church (and presumably by the 144,000).

Three lines of evidence support the view that the 144,000 will be sealed in the first half of the tribulation. First, in 14:4 the 144,000 are called “first fruits” (ἀπαρχή). If they are the first fruits of Jewish believers in the tribulation, then it is unlikely that their salvation and sealing would come *after* the sixth seal judgment. How can they be the first fruits of Jewish believers in the tribulation if three and a half years of Daniel’s seventieth week have already elapsed?

Second, the final verse in Revelation 6 asks, “Who is able to stand?” Thomas, who holds that chapter 7 chronologically follows the sixth seal, argues that chapter 7 answers the question posed in 6:17.¹⁰ However, how can the 144,000 be the answer to the question in 6:17 unless they had already been sealed before the sixth seal and thus survived the initial seal judgments?

Third, John’s style is first to give an overview of the judgments, listing them one through six, and then in the following interlude to focus on other details. This style indicates that the

⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah*, 219.

¹⁰ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–12: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 537.

events of chapter 7 will take place during, not after, the six seal judgments.

Though the arguments in favor of the sealing of the 144,000 after the sixth seal may seem strong, several questions are left unanswered. Therefore it seems preferable to place the sealing of the 144,000 near the beginning of Daniel's seventieth week.

MEASURING THE TEMPLE

In Revelation 11:1–2 John was told to measure the temple. The word for “temple” (*ναός*) is the holy place. This does not include the entire temple precinct.¹¹ Commentators disagree on the significance of the measuring of the temple. Walvoord says it signifies making an evaluation, a statement of divine ownership and of judgment on those worshipping there unworthily.¹² Garland suggests that the measuring “indicates a separation between a portion which God recognizes (the *Temple*, altar, and worshipers) versus a portion he rejects (the outer court).”¹³ Others suggest the significance is in protection. Whatever the meaning, clearly a distinction is made between the *ναός* and the outer courtyard along with Jerusalem. The outer courtyard and the city will be under Gentile dominion, while the *ναός* is not. Gentiles will control the city and outer court, but not the holy place.

John was told not to measure the outer courtyard of the temple (11:2). The outer courtyard and the city will be trampled (*πατέω*) by the Gentiles. This is the same word Jesus used in Luke 21:24 to describe Gentile control over Jerusalem from the conquest of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” Though some commentators say this means military occupation or domination, that has not always been the case in the city's history. The basic meaning of *πατέω* is simply “to walk or to tread,” a metaphor for control.¹⁴

During the first half of the tribulation, Gentiles will have par-

¹¹ R. Larry Overstreet, “The Temple of God in the Book of Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (October–December 2009): 453.

¹² Walvoord, “Revelation,” 955.

¹³ Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ*, 1:437.

¹⁴ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 786.

tial control of the temple and then complete control in the second half.

This [the outer court] was not to be included in the survey, because it was given to the nations. There is here a notable exactness, showing the precise point of time in view so far. The point of time is while the outer court is overrun by Gentiles, but the sanctuary and the altar are as yet unprofaned. But older prophecies make clear that, before the end of things, (1) the abomination that maketh desolate (presumably an image of the Beast) is to “stand in a holy place” (Mt. 24:15) . . . ; (2) that the Beast himself will proceed much further than this in aggression against God, for he will make all sacrifice to God to cease, so that thus the altar also will be profaned; and (3) that he will thrust himself forward into the sanctuary itself, which was in the inner court, and sit there proclaiming himself as the only object of worship (2 Thess. 2:3,4); and (4) finally, he will cast down the sanctuary itself (Dan. 8:9–14).¹⁵

Revelation 11:3 states that two witnesses “will prophesy for 1,260 days.” Since Gentiles will have taken control of Jerusalem and the temple in the second half of the tribulation, it seems that the two witnesses will conduct their ministry in the first forty-two months of the tribulation.

This accords with the crushing intensity of anti-Semitism in the latter half of Daniel’s seventieth week, the time when Jews are warned to flee to the mountains (Matt. 24:15–21).

Some commentators say the two witnesses, mentioned in 11:3–12, will minister in the second half of the tribulation.¹⁶

Others recognize problems in placing the two witnesses in the second half. First, Jesus commanded those who witness the abomination of desolation in the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week to flee immediately to the mountains (Matt. 24:15–21). Whitcomb asks, Would the two Jewish witnesses remain in Jerusalem during the latter half of the Antichrist’s reign of terror since the Lord commanded them to flee to the mountains?¹⁷ Second, if the 1,260 days will occur in the second half of the tribulation, then the entire world will be engaged in the three-and-a-half day celebration of the death of the two witnesses *after* the return of Christ, which seems

¹⁵ G. H. Lang, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, Selected Studies*, 2nd ed. (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 2006), 183.

¹⁶ For example McLean, “The Structure of the Book of Revelation,” 25–26; Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 89; and Walvoord, “Revelation,” 955–56.

¹⁷ John Whitcomb, “The Two Witnesses: First or Second Half of the Tribulation?” (lecture, annual Pre-Trib Research Center conference, Dallas, Texas, December 2007).

unlikely. Third, the Scriptures present the two beasts' reign of terror as being unopposed. "How can he (the first beast) bring fire from heaven upon their enemies (Rev. 13:13) when the two witnesses are bringing fire from heaven upon theirs (Rev. 11:5)?"¹⁸ Thus it seems preferable to view the two witnesses as ministering in the first half of the tribulation. As Garland asks, "If Christ returns with the resurrected saints to the earth at the end of the seventieth week [of Daniel], why do these two resurrected witnesses ascend to heaven?"¹⁹ Ryrie and Smith also place the two witnesses in the first half of the tribulation.²⁰

THE SECOND WOE (REV. 11:14)

After the two witnesses are executed (11:7), their bodies will be laid out for public display for three and a half days (v. 9). Then God will restore life to them and call them to heaven (v. 12). Within a short time another great earthquake will occur in Jerusalem, in which seven thousand people will be killed (v. 13). Then, as John noted, the second woe will have passed (v. 14). Does this statement about the second woe have chronological significance, or does it indicate a resumption of the forward movement of the narrative that ended in 9:21?

Thomas argues for the latter. "Because of this announcement, some would include the interlude as part of the second woe, thereby extending the second woe beyond the end of the sixth trumpet in 9:21."²¹ He thus dismisses any chronological implications. However, 11:14 may have chronological significance just as 8:1 follows the events of chapter 7. The pause in the narrative after 9:21 with the insertion of the events of 10:1–11:13 can have only one of two possibilities chronologically. Either the events of 10:1–11:13 will take place during the same time frame as chapters 8 and

¹⁸ Ibid. The only other option would make the term "1,260 days" describe a free-floating three-and-a-half-year period that will begin at some time in the middle of the first half and end sometime during the second half. Such a use has neither precedent nor support in the Scripture.

¹⁹ Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ*, 1:448.

²⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 72; and J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961), 171–72.

²¹ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary*, 99, 101. See also Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 141; and A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 6:384.

9, or the events in 10:1–11:13 will follow chapter 9. If the previous analysis of the time for the two witnesses is correct, then the events of 11:1–13 must be in the first half and are either contemporaneous with the first six trumpet judgments or they precede the trumpet judgments. If they precede the trumpet judgments, then the more likely location for the events of 10:1–11:13 would be before chapter 9. Just as 11:14 must chronologically precede the sounding of the seventh trumpet (v. 15), so also it follows the events of 11:1–13.

This chronological marker for the second woe is extremely important, for it firmly places the death of the two witnesses in the same time period as the trumpet judgments and in close proximity to the end of that series.

In the view that the trumpet judgments and the two witnesses will occur in the second half of Daniel's seventieth week, the events of the six trumpet judgments must necessarily span almost the entire second half. For in that case the seventh trumpet could not sound until after the ascension of the two witnesses (11:15 following 11:12), and this must be at the end of their ministry of 1,260 days. Also this would leave no time for the seven peals of thunder (10:3–4). The 1,260 days after the midpoint of the tribulation would extend to the Battle of Armageddon and the return of Christ. Then to place the thunders and bowl judgments after those events simply does not work.

THE OVERALL TIME SEQUENCE OF REVELATION 6–19

Revelation 6–19 seems to follow a general sequence of events. The narrative begins with the Lamb opening the seven seals of the scroll (6:1), which will be opened in sequence from one through six. The seventh seal will then be opened, revealing seven trumpets, which in turn will be sounded sequentially. The sounding of the seventh trumpet will reveal seven bowl judgments (9:13; 16:1). And the final bowl judgment will include the destruction of Babylon. The events that move the narrative forward in time are the seals (chap. 6), the trumpets (chaps. 8–9), and the bowl judgments (chaps. 14–16).²² How then do the interlude events described between these chapters relate chronologically to the chapters preceding them? Will the events of chapter 7 (the sealing of the 144,000,

²² Chapter 14 is included here because it seems that it is a summary of the bowl judgments (chapter 15 describes the prelude to the bowls and chapter 16 describes the bowl judgments themselves).

and the cries of the martyrs in heaven) occur during the time of the six seal judgments or after them? Will the events of chapters 10–13 occur after the six trumpet judgments or in conjunction with them? Will the destruction of Babylon (chaps. 17–18) occur after the seventh bowl judgment or during the period described in chapter 16?

As noted earlier, though there seem to be convincing reasons to view the events of chapter 7 as subsequent to the sixth seal judgment, this view is not without its problems. The destruction of Babylon in chapters 17–18 gives details first summarized under the seventh bowl judgment in 16:19–20. This follows the Semitic literary pattern of first giving a summary or overview of an event (as in the seven days of creation in Gen. 1), followed by a detailed look at one aspect of the summary (as in the description of the creation of man on the sixth day of creation in Gen. 2).

In this view Revelation 6 gives the chronological progression of the seal judgments, and chapter 7 depicts God's work of redemption within the same period of time. (This is consistent with the fact that the 144,000 are called the first fruits, 14:4.) Chapters 8 and 9 then describe the six trumpet judgments that will end at the middle of the tribulation. Chapters 10–13 record three other events that will have been taking place during the first half of the tribulation. In this view the great earthquake in Jerusalem (11:13) will immediately follow the establishing of the abomination of desolation, with the result that a large number of Jews will flee into the wilderness. Chapter 12 then gives background information on the spiritual war between Satan and God, with its focus on Israel. The narrative leads to the midpoint of the tribulation when the dragon (Satan) will begin to pursue the woman (Israel) into the wilderness. Nothing described in chapters 11 or 12 advances beyond events near the beginning of the second half when Israel will flee.

Chapter 13 then describes the two beasts, their rise during the first half of the tribulation, and their power base and opposition to the saints during the second half of the tribulation (for forty-two months, v. 5). The description of the second beast takes the reader to the point of the abomination of desolation and the economic tactic used to oppose those who do not take the number of the beast.

Each of these interlude chapters brings the reader forward to a time that is roughly equivalent to the beginning of the second half of the tribulation. This second half will include the consolidation of the first beast's power, including his miraculous recovery from a fatal head wound (13:3), his execution of the two witnesses (11:7), the ejection of Satan and his demons from heaven (12:9), his pursuit of the woman into the wilderness (v. 13), and his war against the saints (v. 17).

If these events in chapters 10–13 will occur between the sixth and seventh seal judgments (and thus before the trumpet judgments), why are they mentioned *after* the trumpet judgments of chapters 8 and 9 and not earlier? The fact that the events in chapters 10–13, which will occur in the second half of the tribulation, are mentioned *after* the trumpet judgments are noted suggests that the latter will occur before the midpoint of the tribulation.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to ascertain whether the trumpet judgments will occur in the first half of Daniel's seventieth week or in the second half. It has been argued that the key issue is in Revelation 11, which reveals difficulty in having both the two witnesses and the trumpet judgments in the second half. Since the second woe (11:14) will end with the ascension of the two witnesses (v. 12), and since the two witnesses will have served for 1,260 days (v. 3), it seems that it is not possible for this to take place in the second half of the Tribulation. Therefore the view with the least problems places the two witnesses and the trumpet judgments in the first half of the tribulation, Daniel's seventieth week.