

The Scene & Seals

As Chapter 4 opens, the entire focus of Revelation changes. Revelation 4:1 states: “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’”¹ This verse marks the beginning of the prophetic portion of John’s book. If the book of Revelation were to be divided into two separate books, this would be the dividing point. Earlier, in Revelation 1:19, John had been instructed to record the “things which are” and the things “which shall take place after these things.” And as instructed, he has recorded the “things that are” - the messages to his beloved congregations in Asia Minor. Now, the voice from heaven tells him that the second part of his assignment - to record the things that are yet future - is about to begin.

Into the Throne Room

The events that John next records are nearly overwhelming. Only a few of the Bible writers were given glimpses of what John saw. Paul mentions being shown heaven in vision, but even though he had a wonderful command of language, he didn’t even attempt to describe it. Zechariah may have seen it, although it isn’t clear. Isaiah caught a glimpse of it, as did Daniel. Only Ezekiel, however, gives an account as detailed as John’s. Ezekiel records his experience in the first three chapters of his book. The parallels between the two stories are so striking that we must consider them in unison, as one may help us to understand the other.

Story Element	Ezekiel	Revelation
Sea of Glass	“there was something like an expanse, like the awesome gleam of crystal” (1:22)	“there was something like a sea of glass, like crystal” (4:6)
Four Cherubim	“there were figures resembling four living beings” (1:5)	“and around the throne, four living creatures” (4:6)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotes are from *The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1996.

information to be dogmatic about who these elders are. But since John did not describe them in non-human terms (as “creatures,” “beasts,” angels, etc.) we are tempted to think of them as being entirely human - as being representatives of our race. This conjecture can be supported from scripture. Matthew relates that at the time of Jesus’ death “the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.” (Matt.27: 51-53) Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4:8, that when Jesus “ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives,” further leads us to believe Jesus took these risen saints to heaven with Him - as “first fruits” of the great harvest of humanity that will ultimately be saved. It is certainly possible that the elders that John saw are from among that ransomed group, chosen to serve as humanity’s representative witnesses to the unfolding drama of salvation.

The Book

The parallels between John’s story and Ezekiel’s do not end with describing a common setting. The action that takes place in that setting is also remarkably similar.

Story Element	Ezekiel	Revelation
God hands out a message	“Then I looked, and behold, a hand was extended to me; and lo, a scroll was in it.” (2:9)	“I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book” (5:1)
Written on both sides	“When He spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back” (2:10)	“a book written inside and on the back” (5:1)

At this point the stories seem to diverge. Ezekiel receives a call to serve as a prophet and gets the message he is to relate. John, on the other hand, finds his book is sealed, and thus begins the story of the 7 seals. The casual reader may feel the parallels end here, but we are not involved in a casual study, are we?

Let’s look at the rest of Ezekiel’s story.

He has been invited into God’s presence for a purpose. God has a job for him. He wants Ezekiel to be a messenger for Him, and has written on a scroll the message Ezekiel is to deliver. God Himself gives this scroll to Ezekiel, along with a rather unusual instruction - Ezekiel is to *eat it*. In today’s spy movies, a person may be instructed to read a message and then to eat it so that no one else can see it. The message to Ezekiel, however, is to be widely

disseminated - not kept secret. Ezekiel seems to understand that the command to eat the scroll means he is to understand and internalize it. It is not a happy or joyous message that God has given him, for it contains "lamentations, mourning and woe." As he eats the scroll he finds it to be sweet to the taste, but the experience leaves him "embittered in the rage of my spirit." (3:14)

Now let's consider John.

John was an ardent student of the Old Testament scriptures, as his frequent allusion to them confirms. He knew of Ezekiel's experience in God's throne room. And now, just like Ezekiel, John finds himself invited into God's throne room to receive a message. He has been told that he is going to learn about the events were still to transpire before Christ's return. Can you imagine his eagerness? As his vision progressed, and he saw where he was, I'm sure his mind took him back to Ezekiel's experience. As he saw the throne, the sea of glass, and the four living creatures he must have been watching it unfold as a familiar dream. I wouldn't be surprised if he was thinking, "this is the point of the story where God gives me the message." And then he turns to see the book that God extends to him - eager to finally understand the mystery of the events attending the return of Jesus - only to find that the book has been sealed with seven seals.

Have you ever had a dream in which the plot suddenly took an unexpected turn for the worse? That's how this must have seemed to John. That was *his* message, he was called here to get that message - it couldn't be sealed! He must have been relieved when he heard the call over the loud speaker for someone who had the authority to come forward and take off the seals. Relieved, that is, until no one showed up. The Bible simply records that John started to weep at this point.

We can understand this when we pause to consider just who John is - when we remember the frail old man whose every thought is consumed with the hope of Jesus' soon return, whose dearest wish is to be reunited with his Friend and Master. And now, when Jesus Himself has promised to pull back the curtains so that he can see what is to transpire - now this! The information - as in Daniel's book - remains locked up, beyond knowing. No wonder he weeps.

Now I want to step back from the story to point out a couple of things. It is the parallel story line of Ezekiel and Revelation that tells us that the book John saw in God's hand was *intended for John*. Just like Ezekiel was called into God's presence to be given a message, so was John. The voice that spoke to him in verse one of chapter four put him on notice that he was being called into God's presence to get information. He was going to be shown what must transpire before Jesus could return. This explains why John was so disappointed when he saw that the book was sealed. He desperately wanted to receive the information that had been promised.

Many have speculated as to the contents of the sealed book. Some believe it to be a complete record of the historical events that were to transpire before Jesus returns. Others believe it to be the Book of Life. The story convinces me that this book contained the

information that John most wanted to know, that spoke to his greatest yearning. He longed for one thing more than anything else - to understand the signs of his Lord's return.

What I'm really pointing out here is the importance of the continuing parallel with Ezekiel. If that parallel doesn't exist, then it's hard to understand why John would get upset over seeing a sealed book in God's hand. It's the parallel that tells us *that book was the message that John had been promised*. That's why he was so upset!

Now having nailed that point down, the question has to be asked, "What happened to the book?" Logic would dictate that if the book contains the message that John was called into heaven to receive, then he should eventually be given the book. The continuing parallel with Ezekiel would make one believe that after the seals are removed - after the book can be opened and read - that it would be given to John. You might even expect that he would be asked to eat it, and that he would find its taste sweet, but find the experience bitter. You might expect that the book contained a prophetic message, one that would be hard to bear, one containing "lamentations, mourning and woe."

Again, the parallels are astonishing:

Story Element	Ezekiel	Revelation
Open Information	"A hand was extended to me; and lo, a scroll was in it. When He spread it out before me, it was written on the front and back" (2:9-10)	"I saw another strong angel coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud; and the rainbow was upon his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire; and he had in his hand a little book which was open." (10:1-2)
Command to eat	"He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you.'" (3:3)	"I went to the angel, telling him to give me the little book. And he said to me, 'Take it and eat it.'" (10:9)
Sweet & Bitter	"Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth." (3:3) "and I went embittered in the rage of my spirit." (3:14)	"I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and in my mouth it was sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." (10:10)

Command to Prophecy	“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.’” (3:4)	“You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.” (10:11)
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That the little book of Revelation 10 is the same as the book that John saw in God’s hand may seem like a new idea to some. The argument could be advanced that different Greek words are used to describe these books. This is true. The book in Revelation 5 is a “Biblion,” whereas the book of Revelation 10 is a “Biblaridion.” Both these words are derivatives of the Greek word “Biblos;” the word from which our English word “Bible” comes. The only difference between “Biblion” and “Biblaridion” is that “Biblaridion” is a diminutive form of the word, and is thus translated “little book.” Should this prevent us from concluding that these books are one and the same? Not at all. We often use different adjectives in describing the same thing. We may tell one friend that we are taking a “vacation,” and tell another that we are taking a “little vacation.” Should they conclude that we are taking two vacations instead of one?

The conclusion that these books are one and the same is driven from the story itself. The parallels with Ezekiel are too close to ignore. The stories are nearly identical. In both cases the men are taken (in vision) into God’s throne room. We see the sea of glass, the four mighty attendants, and the throne with the rainbow. We see God extend a written message – one written on both sides. The recipient is told to eat the message and to go and prophesy. When he eats the message he finds it very sweet. But the experience is bitter. The only difference between the stories is that in John’s case the book is initially sealed, and so we see a series of intervening events that transpire as these seals are removed. Once the seals are removed and the book is opened, John is commanded to eat the book and to prophesy.

The Worthy Lamb

Chapter 5 of Revelation is unparalleled in all of scripture. As John opens the chapter his focus is initially on the book in God’s hand. But as the story progresses, we come to one of the most awe inspiring pictures of Jesus contained in the entire Bible. There is John, weeping and dispirited over the failure of anyone to come forward with the authority and right to open the seals. After all, God had placed these seals on the book, and no one with less authority would dare to touch them.

The Bible is full of word pictures that catch us off-guard, that startle us by saying what we don’t expect to hear. Sometimes we hear these phrases so often that they no longer carry the punch that they had when first heard. For example, I like Jeremiah 15:16, where it says, “Your words were found and I ate them.” It’s a strange picture, isn’t it? A man looking for words, as if they are physical objects. And upon finding them, he eats them! Of course, we

frequently hear people talk about “eating their words,” but Jeremiah’s usage still gets our attention.

I’ve long thought that verses 5 and 6 of Revelation 5 contain one of the best verbal twists to be found.

One of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.” And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.

Can you picture John as he turns to find this Lion? Imagine his surprise to see that the Lion is a Lamb! Then John further states that the Lamb was standing *as if slain!* How does a slain lamb stand? As a Hebrew, John had seen many slain lambs. But he had never seen one standing. Nor had he ever seen one with the power, authority, and regal majesty of a lion. What a beautiful picture of Jesus!

Once pictured, Jesus becomes the center of John’s narrative, as expanding circles of praise begin washing over the assembly. First the four creatures and the twenty four elders fall down before the Lamb and declare His worthiness to open the sealed book. They sing a new song of praise, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them *to be* a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

As the praise continues to swell, John hears the surrounding angelic host take up the strain as they too declare that, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” Then it seems to John that all of creation echoes back the heavenly song, and he hears the universal declaration, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, *be* blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” All of creation swells in a grand declaration of praise to the Lamb. **He is worthy.**

Sequence and Timing

What does Revelation 5 tell us about the timing of the events it speaks of? When do (or did) these events take place? I’ve read various authors who try to interpret textual clues to support various conclusions, but in fact, chapter 5 tells us nothing at all about the time in which these events occur. Some believe that Jesus was found “worthy” when he ascended to heaven, an event signified by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. I have no argument with them in this regard, but *is that what we are witnessing in Revelation 5?*

In fact, the question of timing cannot be resolved from Revelation 5. In order to postulate an answer, we must first assign meaning to the events that transpire when the seals

are taken off of the book. Since Revelation 5 is a declaration that Jesus is worthy to remove the seals and open the book, we know that it must happen before He takes those actions.

If, as some do, we accept that the first seal is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and rapid dispersal of the Gospel, then we would be forced to conclude that Revelation 5 transpired at the time of the Ascension. If, on the other hand, we find that the Seal events are a part of Earth's closing events, and that they are yet ahead of us, then we could surmise that the events John saw and recorded in Revelation 5 might yet be in our future.

We must first study the Seals, then we can better understand the timing of Revelation 5.

It will be noticed as we proceed through our study that there is a remarkable consistency to the format in which the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues are presented. In each case the first six events in the series will be shown to be events that take place on earth. The seventh event directs our attention to heaven where a pronouncement is made or an event unfolds in the heavenly sanctuary. In the case of the Seals and Trumpets, this heavenly event will be shown to be a change in Christ's high priestly ministry that opens the way for the following sequence to proceed.

Between the sixth and seventh event, each sequence contains an "interlude," a story that at first seems unrelated to the orderly progression of events that it interrupts. I have come to see these stories as an important element of the sequence in which they are told, and that they are essential to understanding the purpose of God for His people within that timeframe.

The Seals

Actually, this section should be called "Unsealing the Book", as the focus of the chapter is not the seals themselves, but the events that transpire as Jesus takes the seals off.

As we study the Seals, we must first look for the obvious. In keeping with the principle of Ockham's Razor², and with established Adventist interpretive practice, we need to look for the most obvious understanding that satisfies the meaning of the words. If this obvious meaning lines up with what Jesus revealed about coming events we must be willing to consider the possibility that we have uncovered the primary meaning of the passage. If it also matches what was revealed in vision to Ellen White, we have further reason to believe that we may be on the right track.

So let's take the Seals one at a time and see what they might be saying to us:

² Discussed on pages 43 and 44 of this guide.

The 1st Seal

“Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, ‘Come.’ I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.” (Rev 6:1-2 NASB)

With the removal of each of the first four seals, John hears one of the four living creatures call out, “Come” so forcefully that the crash of the sound snaps around him like thunder. While my Bible notes that one ancient manuscript adds the words “and see”, most simply say “Come.” I like that. Just a simple, one-word imperative statement: Come. When you really look at it, internal evidence indicates that John was not the person to whom that sentence was addressed. He merely heard it and recorded it.

What could be meant by this call to “come”? It’s not likely that the command was issued to John, for he was already in the place he was supposed to be in to view the forthcoming events. He didn’t need to “come” anywhere. His ability to see what was about to happen didn’t depend on his moving to another location or paying closer attention to them. So the cry to “Come” doesn’t seem to be directed at John. (Twice in his vision John was told to “Come here.” See Revelation 17:1 and 21:9. On both occasions the command to “Come here, I will show you...” was immediately followed by the statement, “And he carried me away in the spirit...” In these cases his “coming” to a different place was needed so that he could see something. John was clearly being addressed.)

Looking for other similar uses of the word in Revelation provides an interesting alternative answer. This same single-word imperative statement shows up at the end of Revelation in Chapter 22, verse 17. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

When the Spirit issues the invitation to “Come”, what is His intent? When the bride says to “Come”, what is implied? Those who hear this invitation and respond are told to also compel others to “Come”. To what? To come and take of the water of life. The entire Gospel is wrapped up in this invitation. Come to Jesus and take freely of the new life that only He can offer. Thus we see that all of Heaven is focused on the life-and-death drama of salvation, as they reinforce the invitation of Jesus, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Ezekiel makes it clear that the four creatures are full of the spirit. “And each went straight forward; wherever the spirit was about to go, they would go, without turning as they went.” (Eze. 1:12) Should we be surprised then, that the invitation John hears from them is exactly the same that the Spirit gives? Since they are filled with the Spirit, and are intimates of God and His Son, why should we not expect them to echo this gospel invitation?

With the opening of the first four seals, we hear the gospel invitation sounding from heaven with the power and authority of thunder.

The White Horse

“I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.” (Rev. 6:2)

So what does a literalist do with this statement? Well, on the face of it, I accept this as a true statement by John. He did indeed see - in vision - a white horse ride off across the earth. Does that mean that we should look for a giant white horse with a bow-toting, royal rider? No. What we are viewing here is a divine “political cartoon”, where real (and literal) events are portrayed in symbol. For the cartoon to work, the symbol has to be fairly simple, and the referenced event must be real.

So what image comes most readily from this white horse with its victorious rider? For years our church has taught we were seeing the early church - empowered by the Holy Spirit - as it spread the gospel throughout the civilized world. The symbol fits, doesn't it? White, for purity. The bow, representing the battle for souls. Victories, as men accept the power of salvation and continue the spread of the gospel. We cannot forget that under the Lordship of Christ, and with the impelling force of the Spirit, the nascent Church accomplished what had never before been done, as the light from heaven pushed back the darkness of Satan's kingdom.

But let me propose an alternative. Could we have correctly interpreted the White Horse, while making the wrong application? After all, John was told that he was to be shown what must take place “after these things.” Pentecost, and the early spread of the Church, was *behind* him. It was history, not prophecy.

The events of Pentecost were truly remarkable. Never in the history of the world had the power of God so directly touched the lives of men. And the effect was dramatic. The convicting power of the Holy Spirit drove men to confront the truths from which they had been hiding, and to accept - or reject - the claim of Jesus on their lives. Miracles were performed that rivaled any that Jesus did. Prophecy ran rampant. Lives were changed forever as commitments were made.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that what happened at Jerusalem was only a small portrait of what is to happen again on a worldwide basis. What happened locally will happen globally. The “early rain” must instruct us on what to expect when the “latter rain” is poured out, and not this time on a small group only, but on *all people everywhere!* Joel records that:

“It will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;
And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,

Your young men will see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.
I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth,
Blood, fire and columns of smoke.
The sun will be turned into darkness
And the moon into blood
Before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.
And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD
Will be delivered.” (Joel 2: 28-32) [Emphasis supplied]

As the “latter rain” experience will be worldwide in scope, I believe it to be a better match to the symbol of the White Horse than the “early rain.”

It was with great interest that I came upon the following statements from the pen of Ellen White. On page 33 of *Early Writings* she wrote, “At the commencement of the time of trouble, we were filled with the Holy Ghost as we went forth and proclaimed the Sabbath more fully.” She was apparently asked about this statement, because she later issued a clarifying statement that is recorded on page 85 of the same work. “‘The commencement of the time of trouble,’ here mentioned does not refer to the time when the plagues shall begin to be poured out, but to a short period just before they are poured out, while Christ is in the sanctuary... At that time...trouble will be coming on the earth, and the nations will be angry, yet held in check...” In this clarifying statement, Ellen White is saying that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that empowers the last-day church does not come at the commencement of the Great Time of Trouble, but at the start of a little time of trouble that will proceed the Great Time of Trouble. This is one of Ellen White’s first references to the Early Time of Trouble, and at its start the Holy Spirit will be poured out.

Besides the fact that the empowering of the church by the Holy Spirit matches the symbolic picture given in Revelation, and beside the fact that the timing coincides with what Ellen White saw in vision, there are other logical reasons that support this prophetic application.

1. The Holy Spirit is the one essential agent in the ripening of Earth’s crops. Both the Wheat and the Tares will ripen with exposure to His power.
2. The events that follow will be seen to flow sequentially from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We will see the effect of that action in the seals that follow. One seal will be seen to reference persecution of the church on a global scale. This persecution will not rise up without an infusion of “primitive Godliness” which only the Holy Spirit can give.
3. This construction places the responsibility for the commencing of “end-time” events squarely in the hands of God and Jesus. God is sovereign, and He alone decides when the final outpouring of the Holy Spirit will begin. But when it does, the world will never be the same again.

4. As discussed in next week's lesson, the time in which the seals are removed is the time in which the 144,000 are selected and sealed. This would be impossible without the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible assures us that God is more eager to give us the Holy Spirit than a father is to give good gifts to his children. Is it any wonder that the first act of Jesus, as end-time events begin, is to touch the lives of people everywhere with His Spirit? The power of that event will split human history, separating everything that happened before it from everything that happens after it.

And the timing is solely in Jesus' hands.

The 2nd Seal

"When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, 'Come.' And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him." (Rev. 6:3-4)

I wish that this seal were hard to understand, but regretfully it is far too easy. Every child older than preschool age can tell you what we call it when peace is taken from the earth and when men slay one another. We call it war.

Is war a literal event? Of course. Can we understand these words just as they are written? Yes. So let's presume for the time being that this is the primary meaning of these words, and let's see how well this - and the following seals - fit with the rest of Scripture.

The events of the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues are numbered – so we know they are consecutive, and occur in order. But notice that they are not just unrelated "event beads" on a "time string", but occur in a logical sequence, each flowing from the previous event. Even the sudden breaking out of war all over the world (event #2) can be seen as a "side effect" of the Holy Spirit being poured out (event #1).

To understand the linkage, one only needs to consider the current precarious position that the entire civilized world has been placed in by the suicidal actions of a handful of religious fanatics on 9/11. That these fanatics were Moslem is irrelevant. That they were driven by fundamentalist fanaticism is extremely relevant.

I very much believe that in the end-time everyone will be a religious fanatic; beginning with the first seal when everyone has to confront the reality that there is indeed a God. I believe that a large percentage of the population will get really serious about "doing the right thing," which will for many mean an earnest return to the faith of their upbringing. We will see a huge upsurge of fundamentalism.

Now think for a moment of all the “hot spots” around the world where deep-seated religious conflicts are barely contained, if contained at all. Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Israel, Pakistan. What will happen in these regions when fanaticism surges? Will “peace be taken from the earth?”

September 11, 2001 stands in silent testimony to the fact that fanatical, fundamentalist fervor kills.

The 3rd Seal

“When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘Come.’ I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine.’” (Rev. 6:5-6)

What is the common term we use to describe the situation when food prices soar? What causes food to become precious? Scarcity. Famine.

Does famine ever follow as a consequence of war? Of course it does. In the 1940’s the valuable tulip crops of Holland were nearly decimated as people dug up the bulbs to use them as a rather poor substitute for potatoes. My mother-in-law still remembers childhood deprivations in her Finnish village, as food supplies dwindled. In more modern times we can all remember the famines in Ethiopia caused by years of domestic warfare and intertribal unrest. In recent headlines we read of the need for millions of dollars in emergency relief in Afghanistan to stem the rising tide of hunger and despair caused by the war there.

I had one man tell me that what made food prices rise was inflation. But in the above verses, the food prices soar in terms of what can be bought with a “denarius” which was a day’s wages. It is true that in the 1840’s the finest men’s suit could be bought for \$20.00. That same suit today might cost \$2,000.00. However, in terms of daily wages, the price for the best suit has not risen at all, as wages have gone up the same amount as the suit. The Bible is here predicting a situation where a quart of wheat costs everything that a man might earn in a day, which in today’s world would be around \$100.00. That’s expensive wheat! And the only thing that can drive prices up like that is scarcity.

Should this passage be accepted literally? I believe so, for this is not the only place in the Bible where the price of food was predicted. You will no doubt remember the story in 2 Kings 7 about when Samaria was under an extended siege. As food supplies dwindled, prices soared. Eventually the city’s inhabitants resorted to cannibalism. At the height of this human tragedy Elisha made what seemed to all as a ridiculous prophecy. “Tomorrow about this time a measure of fine flour will be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria.” (2 Kings 7:1) Was this prediction fulfilled? Yes, in spite of its seeming impossibility. Verse 18 of the same chapter records, “It happened just as the man of God had

spoken to the king, saying, 'Two measures of barley for a shekel and a measure of fine flour for a shekel, will be sold tomorrow about this time at the gate of Samaria.'"

In Samaria's case, the prediction was the opposite of what is predicted in Revelation. Instead of the food prices dropping dramatically as they did in Elisha's day we are told that they will rise dramatically. Was the first one fulfilled literally? Yes, it was. Will the second? I believe it will.

The 4th Seal

"When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come.' I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth." (Rev. 6:7-8)

The one-word caption for this "cartoon" is supplied. Death.

Please notice the continued sequencing. Warfare has flared up in numerous places around the world, impacting normal food-supply activities such as farming, processing and distributing. Food has become scarce, at least regionally. And now as the situation worsens, John sees a fourth of the world so impacted by war and famine that disease and death are common. He sees populations so distressed that they even fall prey to predatory beasts. John does not say that a quarter of the earth's population will die at this time but that a quarter of the earth is severely impacted by these events - to the point where death is a common result.

Is this a pleasing picture? Not at all. Is it a picture in which we can see a logical progression? Certainly.

Before addressing the questions in the lesson, I want to point out one thing. So far, the seals have been additive. We certainly see this in the phrasing of the fourth seal where war and famine are mentioned as the cause of death. The war has been continuing; the famine has been prevailing. And death by the tens of thousands will be the result.

What about the rider on the White Horse? Is he still riding, still conquering? Yes. All of the subsequent events are taking place in the context of the gospel message going forth in an unprecedented manner. Remember that as the second, third and fourth seals are opened that the gospel invitation to "Come" is heard with dramatic emphasis.

Why is this important to keep in mind? Because of the nature of the fifth seal.

The 5th Seal

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.” (Rev. 6: 9-11)

Can we come up with a one-word summary to describe what John saw when the fifth seal was opened? Clearly we can. Persecution. Is it logical to think that persecution would once again break out against the church under the conditions described in the Seals? Yes.

What is it that has always driven persecution in the past? Social or cultural unrest on the one hand, and a dramatic witness for truth on the other. When these two ingredients combine, the result has always been suppression or persecution.

You’ll notice that when the first four seals were opened the focus was on things that happened in the present. When the fifth seal is opened, our attention is drawn to those who have died in the past. We see an accumulation of guilt waiting to be repaid. Why? I believe that Jesus wanted to draw our attention to Matthew 23.

Matthew 23 is the chapter that records the “woes” that Jesus pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees. The last of these is particularly relevant to the fifth seal:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Matt. 23: 29-36)

Jesus had “had it” with the hypocrisy of these men. How dare they build tombs and memorials for the very prophets that their fathers had murdered? Especially when He knew that in their hearts they harbored the same rebellion against God that motivated their ancestors. On this day He informed them that He was going to expose them. He would do this by sending

them “prophets and wise men and scribes.” When the religious leaders rose up to persecute these men they would prove that they **would have** killed the prophets in the earlier ages. There would be, Jesus said, two inescapable consequences to their actions. First, they would be held guilty for the righteous men killed in earlier ages. Second, they would fill up the cup of guilt for their nation.

How did Jesus send them prophets, wise men and scribes? Simple. At Pentecost He filled 120 people with the Holy Spirit. Within a short time that divine fire had spread to countless more. As the power of their witness grew, so did the hatred and opposition from those who had closed themselves off from the Spirit’s touch. Within 3-1/2 years the conflict grew to such a point that the religious leaders again resorted to cold-blooded murder to silence the voice of those who spoke the Spirit’s words.

Just as their fathers had.

Jesus was not just pronouncing “woes” that day. He was issuing the firmest warnings. Their own souls were at stake, as was the fate of the nation they led. Jesus warned them that He was going to send them men filled with the Holy Spirit, just as He had to their fathers. When they rose up against the conviction of the Spirit and treated these men as their fathers had treated the earlier messengers, then they too would be as guilty of the earlier deaths as their fathers. In fact, as the appeal of the Spirit was more direct, more powerful, and more undeniable at Pentecost, their guilt would no doubt be seen by God as greater than their fathers.

Jesus also warned them that this would be the final appeal to their nation, and that by resisting it and killing the messengers they would finally fill up the cup of guilt for their nation.

Now here’s how that applies to the fifth seal. As it is taken off, John sees those who have died in the cause of Christ asking when their deaths are going to be avenged. The answer is not given directly, but is implied. Their deaths will be charged to the present generation. How can that be? By the same mechanism that Jesus pointed out in Matthew 23. Under the first seal He has begun the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the Church goes forward with “primitive godliness” those who resist the convicting power that attends them grow bolder and bolder. Under the fifth seal persecution finally breaks out against the church around the world. When this happens, the present generation - the last generation - becomes guilty of the deaths of all those slain for their adherence to God’s will, from Abel to Zechariah - from A to Z.

The 6th Seal

“I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the

rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" (Rev. 6: 12-17)

For many Adventist, the first major hurdle for accepting the linear sequencing of the Seals, Trumpets, and Plagues will be the sixth seal, because we have always taught that the sixth seal culminates in the Second Coming of Jesus. We have used the language of the sixth seal for over a hundred years in describing the Second Coming.

I recall that Ellen White made a statement to the effect that we may have many things to unlearn³. I believe this is one of them. My studies have convinced me that the sixth seal has nothing to do with the Second Coming.

To see this point, one merely has to make a checklist of the events depicted under the sixth seal, and then compare them to a similar checklist of events known to occur at the Second Coming:

- A great earthquake moves all islands and mountains.
- The sky is darkened.
- Meteorites fall.
- Atmospheric disturbances churn the clouds.
- Prominent people, military men and common people hide in the ground for protection.
- They realize that God is angry, and that the day of God's wrath has come.

Now compare this with the list of elements present at the Second Coming:

- A Cloud appears from the east.
- The assembled wicked fight against the army of heaven.
- The graves of the righteous are opened.
- The righteous dead are raised to life.
- The living saints are taken up into the air.
- A worldwide earthquake destroys all mountains and islands.
- The wicked are killed.

³ "We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and Heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed." {CET 203.2}

Comparing these lists, we find that *not a single element* of the Second Advent is present in the first list. We have to conclude that they are describing two different events.

If I had to come up with a single word to describe the sixth seal, I'd pick the word "signs." There are signs in the heavens and on the earth, and people are frightened to the point that many go into underground shelters for protection. God gives the earth a "shot across the bow" to get their attention. And it works. People everywhere come to a dramatic conclusion - **not that Jesus is coming** - but **that the time of God's wrath has come**. As we get into that part of the study, I'll try to show that the Trumpets and the Plagues describe the Time of God's Wrath. If this is so, the sixth seal must precede the Trumpets and Plagues.

Lisbon?

I well remember the evangelistic series that I attended with my parents when I was ten years old. I recall the evangelist promising the crowd that he would identify our *exact position* in the flow of prophecy. This he did by showing that the sixth seal started being opened in 1751 with the Lisbon earthquake, followed years later by the Dark Day, and finally the Falling of the Stars in 1833. The very next event, explained the evangelist, was the Second Coming when, "The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places." Therefore he confidently concluded we were at the *period* (.) at the end of the sentence. That period at the end of the sentence marked our exact location in prophetic time.

As a youth, I was pretty amazed. That was over forty years ago, and most Adventist would still place us on that tiny dot.

In terms of an eschatological understanding of the Seven Seals, is it reasonable to expect the events of the sixth seal to take hundreds of years to occur? Certainly not, if the previous seals all are concise events. But even more importantly than anyone's opinion on the matter is the fact that the Lisbon earthquake did not fulfill the specifics of John's prophecy. Note that the first sentence of the prophecy declares that "there was a great earthquake," but does not say how great. That question is addressed in the subsequent sentence, "every mountain and island were moved out of their places."⁴ Did the Lisbon earthquake do this? Not even close.

⁴ A few years back there was a major earthquake that was centered on an island off the north coast of Japan. I recall reading several days later that GPS readings showed that the entire island had moved four feet due to the slippage of the earth's crust! We can only imagine the strength of the earthquake predicted under the Sixth Seal, which will move every island and mountain out of its place! The only event of greater magnitude mentioned in Scripture is the earthquake at the Second Coming, which **destroys** all the mountains and islands.

I very much appreciate the open-minded scholarship of Dr. Hans K. LaRondelle on this question. Both in his *Ministry Magazine* article and in Appendix A of his book, *Light for the Last Days*, he states his conclusion that the Lisbon earthquake, the Dark Day, and the Falling of the Stars in 1833 were not prophetically significant events, and that the sixth seal was not pointing to these events. He states, "There is no biblical reason to interpret this seal as a chronological sequence of cosmic upheavals that occur over a period of hundreds of years... In the sixth seal, verses 12-14 describe the cosmic calamities on earth and in the sky and verses 15-17 portray their effects on people around the world. This suggests that the cosmic signs in verses 12-14 form a close-knit, indivisible unit that is followed by a description of the impact of these signs on a single generation."⁵

I heartily concur with this opinion.

Putting the pieces together

Let's take a moment to recap the events that we have covered so far. I believe the events that take place with the unsealing of the book are specific end-time events. I believe these events comprise the Little Time of Trouble spoken of by Ellen White. When will these events occur? I have no way of knowing.

The disciples asked Jesus a similar question right before he ascended to heaven. "So when they had come together, they were asking Him, 'Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.'" (Acts 1:6-7) Often we focus on the part of the sentence that says, "It is not for you to know." But the rest of the sentence is also vitally important, because it tells us that the Father has fixed the timing of these events **by His own authority**. God is sovereign. Before the world was created, He knew its future history. He knew how long He would allow the drama of sin to play, and He knew when He would lower the curtain on the last act. I believe that moment is just before us.

In that moment, Jesus will take the book in His hands and - one by one - remove the seals. Accepting the most obvious meaning of the descriptive words used by John, I must conclude that at the opening of the Seals, the following events occur:

First, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit. He (the Holy Spirit) is the active agent that ripens both of earth's crops - both the wheat and the tares. This worldwide Pentecost touches every life to some degree, and empowers the Church in the same manner that was seen in the first century. The Gospel message advances into new arenas and gains ground on all fronts. This process does not come to a close until every person on the face of the earth has had a chance to hear, to understand, and to accept. "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come." (Matt 24:14)

⁵ Dr. Hans K. LaRondelle, *Light for the Last Days*, Nampa, ID, Pacific Press, 1999 (p. 163, 164)

This advance of the Kingdom takes place against a backdrop of successive events. Warfare - fueled by a surge of religious hatred and animosity - erupts in numerous locations around the world, like fires that cannot be extinguished. Famine follows on many fronts, and as these wars persist, disease and death are the inevitable result. God's people come under increasing criticism and repression; and with the opening of the fifth seal, this hatred breaks into active persecution.

When worldwide oppression develops into worldwide persecution, the earth (corporately) fills its cup of guilt. God sends a remarkable display of signs that convinces men everywhere that their world is about to be dramatically altered. The Wrath of God is about to be poured out.

End-time meaning or just an end-time construction?

Before going on to look at the "Interlude" story related in Revelation 7, let's ask a very important question. Are these words of John **intended** to have an end-time meaning, or are we just forcing that meaning on his words? It is often true in science that the researcher finds *just what he is looking for*. Is that what we are doing here?

In order to determine the answer to this question, we must find independent verification of our understanding. Does the Bible elsewhere picture these events - warfare, famine, earthquake, persecution, etc. - as *happening before* the Great Time of Trouble? Does this construction of these events line up with the words of Jesus? I believe it does.

Jesus' great sermon on end-time events is recorded in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. It's almost too familiar to need to repeat, but as I want to point out several things, I'll include them both here. First, let's look at Matthew:

(3) As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (4) And Jesus answered and said to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. (5) For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. (6) You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. (7) For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. (8) But all these things are *merely*⁶ the beginning of birth pangs."(Matt. 24:3-8)

Reading these verses we have come to the conclusion that what Jesus was saying was that the disciples should pay no particular attention to the events here outlined, because they were "background" events that would always be occurring up until the return of Jesus. But upon closer examination, that is not what Jesus was saying.

⁶ The word "merely" is italicized to show that it was not in the original text and was supplied by the translators.

In verse 6 He **does** say exactly that. Wars and rumors of wars - by themselves - would not constitute a sign of His return. They would always happen.

But starting in verse 7 Jesus begins to describe **a different set** of events. In verse 8 He refers to these events as the “beginnings of birth pangs.” Just what are those events? Go back to verse 7 and you will see them.

- ✓ Nation rising against nation
- ✓ Kingdom against kingdom
- ✓ Famine
- ✓ Earthquake

Jesus is not setting forth a particular order of events so much as He is listing the elements that will be present at a certain time - the time when earth goes into labor. Some may question the contention that verse 7 starts a new line of thought that is separate from verse 6. But this is strongly supported by Luke’s version of this story, recorded in Luke 21:

(7) They questioned Him, saying, “Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (8) And He said, “See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not go after them. (9) When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately.”

(10) Then He continued by saying to them, “Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, (11) and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.

(12) “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake.”

Here we see Luke making a break between the “wars and disturbances” that do not mark the end of time and verse 10 which starts the new sequence.

Note the other elements that Luke records:

- ✓ Nation rising against nation
- ✓ Kingdom against kingdom
- ✓ Earthquakes
- ✓ Plagues⁷

⁷ Note that the word for plague used here is not the same as the seven last plagues. The word Luke uses, “**loimos**”, refers to a “pest” or “pestilence”. The word in Revelation is “**plege**”, for “a blow”,

- ✓ Famine
- ✓ Terrors and great signs from heaven
- ✓ Persecution against the Church

Are these lists starting to look like the events that John said would happen when the seals were removed? Again, Jesus is not giving exact sequences, but is listing elements to look for that, when taken together, mark the beginning of the events leading to His coming. You'll notice that Luke says that persecution would break out "before all these things."⁸ Jesus is saying that even though He was *mentioning* the persecution at the end of the list, it wouldn't *occur* at the end of the list.

Going back to Matthew, we also find that persecution against the Church is part of this group of elements. This time we will look at verses 7-14:

(7) "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. (8) But all these things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs.

(9) "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. (10) At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. (11) Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. (12) Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. (13) But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. (14) This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Putting Matthew and Luke together, we can conclude that the time period in which the earth goes into final labor pains will be characterized by the following events being present:

- ✓ Nation rising against nation
- ✓ Kingdom against kingdom
- ✓ Earthquakes
- ✓ Plagues (Pestilence, Pests)
- ✓ Famine
- ✓ Persecution against the Church
- ✓ Terrors and great signs from heaven

These are ***the very elements*** depicted in the Seals.

"wound", or "flogging". The word used by Luke implies deadly disease, dovetailing with John's description of the fourth seal.

⁸ The construction of this sentence would allow for two meanings; A) "Before any of these things happen." or B) "Before all of these things have happened." I favor "B" as it doesn't force the persecution to the front of the list.

Are these “end-time” events? Notice what Matthew says will happen in connection with this persecution (or tribulation) of the church. He says in verses 13 and 14 that:

- ✓ He who endures to *the end* will be saved.
- ✓ The gospel will *go to all the world*, and then
- ✓ *The end* would come.

All of these are end-time identifiers. Clearly Jesus’ words give an end-of-time significance to these elements.

I’d like to advance a few more reasons that I believe the Seals and the first part of Matthew 24 are describing the same events, and why they should be considered as end-time events.

1. I’ve never been pregnant. I’ve never carried a baby to term. I’ve never endured labor (a pain my wife says men couldn’t handle). I cannot claim to be an authority in the field, even though I’ve observed the process with my own children. However, even a novice - with the help of his wife - can offer the following observations about labor:

- It’s inevitable. Once the baby has been created, labor and delivery *are* going to happen - sooner or later.
- The exact time of the delivery may be guessed at before it happens, but when labor pains start everyone knows that it won’t be long now.
- Even though long anticipated, it often catches people by surprise.
- Though labor is the most traumatic part of the entire pregnancy, it’s also the shortest part.
- It hurts. It hurts more than can be imagined or described beforehand.
- After it’s all done and the delivery is accomplished, we see that it was worth the pain.

Jesus likened the process at the end of our age to a woman in labor, which - when you read the above - is a very good comparison. Upon reading Matthew 24 some have concluded that all this “labor pain” drama that Jesus predicted covered the whole time period from the inception of the church to its deliverance. That construction is like saying that as soon as a woman gets pregnant - as soon as the baby is conceived - she begins her labor pains. Could you imagine living through *nine months* of such agony?

No, the picture is quite different. The Church was conceived nearly two thousand years ago. That’s a long pregnancy. But before the delivery (deliverance?) there will be a brief, agonizing period of labor – a time period worse in reality than our advance conceptions of it. A time long anticipated, but that will still take people by surprise. A time in which we will finally know for certain that, “It won’t be long now.”

2. Bear in mind that the answer Jesus gave must be understood in the context of the question that He was answering. That seems obvious, doesn’t it? What was the question He was answering? The disciples had asked Him, “What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” They were asking for signs that they could look for that would tell them that Jesus’ coming was imminent. His answer must be understood in that context. He was not giving them a road map of the next two thousand years. He was answering their question, “What should we look for to know that You will soon return?”

That the signs Jesus gave match the elements John saw when the seals were opened should be sufficient to convince us that the Seal events are eschatological. But there is further proof.

3. As Matthew 24 continues, Jesus says that following the onset of persecution they would be given a sign for leaving Jerusalem, and fleeing to the mountains. Why? Because of the next event to happen.

“For **then** there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”(Matt. 24:21-22) [Emphasis supplied]

Following the “wars and rumors of wars,” the “famine,” the “earthquake,” the “persecution” (or tribulation) of the church - following the events depicted as John sees the Seals opened - **then** there will be a “great tribulation.” This is a clearly defined sequence.

That Jesus was using the destruction of Jerusalem as a little illustration of the larger destruction at the end of the age is clear, and He demonstrates that by applying descriptive elements to the Great Tribulation that clearly were not fulfilled at the time of Jerusalem’s destruction. So Jesus was not primarily addressing the destruction of Jerusalem. He was speaking to us.

4. Adding these sequential elements of the Great Tribulation to the earlier list, we now have:

- ✓ Nation rising against nation
- ✓ Kingdom against kingdom
- ✓ Earthquakes
- ✓ Plagues (Pestilence, Pests)
- ✓ Famine
- ✓ Persecution against the Church
- ✓ Terrors and great signs from heaven
- ✓ Warning to leave the cities
- ✓ The Great Tribulation

In a nutshell, that is Revelation’s picture. The events that John saw with the opening of the Seals will be followed by a warning to get out of the cities. Why? Because then there will be a Great Tribulation; so great that if it were not cut short, no one would survive it. The events of the Great Tribulation will be discussed as we get into the Trumpets and Plagues.

5. Perhaps most importantly, the events that Jesus delineated in Matthew 24 match those that **He later gave** in greater detail to John in Revelation. Both these prophecies are His. Shouldn’t they be in agreement?
6. And finally, this understanding of Matthew 24 - that it matches the end-time events that John described under the Seals, Trumpets and Plagues - answers a question that has plagued Christians since the day of Jesus. He concluded His address by saying, “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its

leaves, you know that summer is near; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, **this generation will not pass** away until all these things take place.” (Matt. 24: 32-34) [Emphasis supplied] Jesus’ disciples were sure He meant them. I can imagine that it was a shock when the last person who had known Jesus personally finally died. Many others have applied these texts to themselves, including Adventists.

Just recently I was listening to a sermon that was recorded on an old cassette tape. The non-Adventist minister was making the argument that the restoration of the nation of Israel in 1948 was the “budding of the fig.” And since the Bible spoke of a generation as being 40 years, then the Lord would come before 1988! It was at this point that I realized just how old that tape was!

Jesus said, “When you see all these things...” What things was He talking about in Matthew 24? The Seals, the Trumpets, and the Plagues. Jesus was saying that these events, detailed in the book of Revelation, would not be events that spanned the ages, but would be experienced by a single generation. Those who see them start will see them end.

The Interlude

After the sixth seal, the narrative of the Seven Seals is interrupted. Before it is resumed again in Revelation 8, we are treated to what some Bible expositors refer to as an “interlude.” In everyday language, an interlude is like a time-out. It’s a break in a play to give people time for getting refreshments. After the break, the action continues where it left off. What takes place in the break can be totally unrelated to the play.

If that’s what an interlude is, Revelation 7 is no interlude.

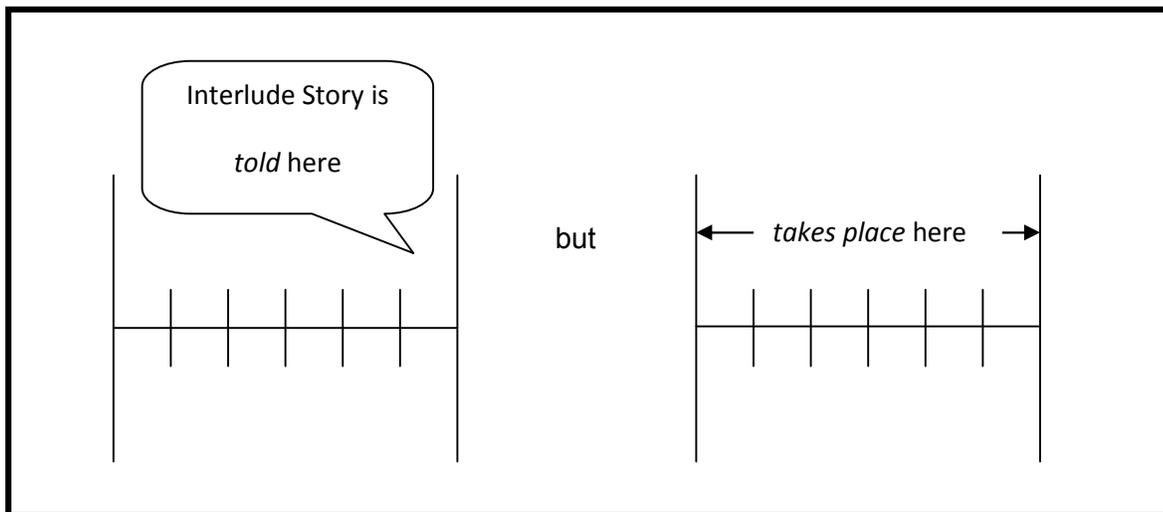
We will find this same pattern repeated in the story of the Seven Trumpets. The first six are told as an unbroken unit - then there is a seemingly unrelated story dropped in - and then the action continues with the seventh trumpet. The pattern is so clear that we must conclude it is no accident, and that the stories are placed there deliberately.

Most Adventist scholars would say that they never taught that the interlude stories are unrelated, and that these stories add immensely to the overall picture of Revelation. Furthermore, they would say that the placement of the story of the 144,000 is in answer to the question that is posed by the people in Revelation 6:17, “for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

However, the main thrust of the verse 6:17 is that the inhabitants of earth have come to the realization that **the wrath** of God is about to descend, and that *they* lack the preparation to stand. The question, “Who is able to stand?” is rhetorical. That the 144,000 will be able to stand in the day of God’s wrath is true. But I believe the placement of this story is for a greater reason than answering a rhetorical question.

Parallel Story Lines

I'd like to propose that even though these "interlude" stories are dropped in between the sixth and seventh seal and trumpet, that they actually happen over the entire period of the timeframe under discussion. It's as if a storyteller breaks into a story to say, "Meanwhile, back at the farm..." and then goes back to show us another set of parallel events that weren't apparent from the original perspective.



In the case of the Seals, we start to see the purpose that these traumatic events play in God's cause. While the world is experiencing warfare, famine, earthquake, etc., and the Church is undergoing persecution, God is using those events as a crucible in which the 144,000 are refined. The Seal events are the backdrop against which we see God at work in - and through - His people.

How integrally tied together these stories are! While the book is being unsealed, the 144,000 are being sealed.

This view answers so many questions. Where do the 144,000 come from? What are the events that drive this set of people into so close a dependence on God that He can seal them? Saints are not born on the easy chair. Trouble and strife have always been the agents to bring us more completely into God's orbit. And here we see a group - the 144,000 - that through the tumultuous events depicted in the Seals are brought into total submission to God's will.

Do you see why the Holy Spirit *must* be poured out at the onset of the Little Time of Trouble? It is only as these individuals submit to the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives that they can be brought to the place where they are irrevocably safe to seal.

Holding Back the Winds

“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.’” (Rev. 7:1-3)

With the opening of chapter 7, we are allowed a rare peek behind the curtain. Our attention has been focused on the events taking place on earth; and we have seen an escalation of the problems that have plagued humankind for millennia. But now, like Elisha’s servant, our eyes are opened to see the angels of God working on our behalf. These particular angels are seen holding back the winds that would otherwise harm the earth. Is this symbolic, or literal?

Like the divine cartoons that we saw with the opening of the seals, the scene that John describes here has descriptive elements that are figurative while conveying a literal meaning. In this case the “winds” represent harmful forces that are real, the effect of which would be to damage the earth, the sea and the trees. Notice that this is mentioned three times in the above verses:

“...I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree.”

“...he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea.”

“Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.”

If I tell my teenage children that they can’t go to the mall with their friends until they get the lawn mowed, what should I expect to happen the moment that they get the lawn mowed? They’re going to the mall, aren’t they? In the above verses, we see angels restraining forces that are said to be capable of damaging the earth, sea and trees. In fact, the angels themselves have been given permission to release these forces, but not just yet. They are to wait until the “bond-servants of our God” are sealed. It is not co-incidental that after the bond-servants are sealed, and the Trumpets begin to sound, that Revelation depicts tremendous damage to the earth, seas, and trees. [More about this as we delve into the Trumpets.]

Who are the Bond-Servants?

One of the most popular puzzles of Revelation is the identity of the 144,000 bond-servants. We all know of religious groups who, even today, claim that in order to be one of the 144,000 you must belong to their denomination. Most Evangelicals believe that the 144,000 are literal Jews who are converted after the rapture of the Church.

Many Seventh-day Adventists believe that there will be literally 144,000 people awaiting translation at the return of Jesus. This belief is derived less from scripture than from the writings of Ellen White. Early in her ministry she identified those awaiting translation as, "The living saints, 144,000 in number..."⁹ She made this association again near the end of her career, when in 1911 she wrote, "These [the 144,000], having been translated from the earth..."¹⁰ She was not always rigid in this identification, however. In 1901 she wrote, "It is not His will that they shall get into controversy over questions which will not help them spiritually, such as, Who is to compose the hundred and forty-four thousand? This those who are the elect of God will in a short time know without question."¹¹

If we are soon to know, how will we find out? Will we need to wait until they show up and announce themselves? Not necessarily. The understanding of spiritual truths is in God's control. No matter how much we may wish to understand something, if it is not yet God's will to have that point understood, we will not get our wish. Daniel wished to understand the prophecies revealed to him, but was not allowed to. Part of the function of prophecy is to *conceal* meaning until such time as God wishes it to be understood. Conversely, even though something may have been obscure for centuries, when God decides that it's time for us to know something, He reveals it *through His word*. The very words that were unclear are then seen to be full of meaning.

[This is an exciting axiom for those of us involved in this study. For if God makes truth clear in a *timely* manner - that is, if He makes things clear only when the truth becomes relevant - then if our study advances new perspectives we have great reason to hope that the time for the fulfilling of these prophecies is upon us.]

If the time for understanding this issue is upon us, it is to scripture that we must look if we are to learn the role and identity of the 144,000. Fortunately, quite a number of texts in both the Old and New Testament actually define the office of God's "servant."

1 Kings 14:18 All Israel buried him and mourned for him, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through His **servant** Ahijah the **prophet**.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, Washington, D.C., The Review and Herald Publishing Co., p.15

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, Washington, D.C., The Review and Herald Publishing Co., p. 649

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Washington, D.C., The Review and Herald Publishing Co., Volume 1, p. 174

1 Kings 18:36 At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the **prophet** came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your **servant** and I have done all these things at Your word.

2 Kings 9:7 'You shall strike the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge the blood of My **servants** the **prophets**, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD, at the hand of Jezebel.

2 Kings 14:25 He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His **servant** Jonah the son of Amittai, the **prophet**, who was of Gath-hepher.

2 Kings 17:13 Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My **servants** the **prophets**."

2 Kings 17:23 until the LORD removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His **servants** the **prophets**. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day.

2 Kings 21:10 Now the LORD spoke through His **servants** the **prophets**, saying,

2 Kings 24:2 The LORD sent against him bands of Chaldeans, bands of Arameans, bands of Moabites, and bands of Ammonites. So He sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD which He had spoken through His **servants** the **prophets**.

Ezra 9:11 which You have commanded by Your **servants** the **prophets**, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.

Jer. 7:25 Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My **servants** the **prophets**, daily rising early and sending them.

Jer. 25:4 And the LORD has sent to you all His **servants** the **prophets** again and again, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear,

Jer. 26:5 to listen to the words of My **servants** the **prophets**, whom I have been sending to you again and again, but you have not listened;

Jer. 29:19 because they have not listened to My words,' declares the LORD, 'which I sent to them again and again by My **servants** the **prophets**; but you did not listen,' declares the LORD.

Jer. 35:15 Also I have sent to you all My **servants** the **prophets**, sending them again and again, saying: 'Turn now every man from his evil way and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to worship them. Then you will dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your forefathers; but you have not inclined your ear or listened to Me.

Jer. 44:4 'Yet I sent you all My **servants** the **prophets**, again and again, saying, "Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate."

Eze. 38:17 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Are you the one of whom I spoke in former days through My **servants** the **prophets** of Israel, who prophesied in those days for many years that I would bring you against them?"

Dan. 9:6 Moreover, we have not listened to Your **servants** the **prophets**, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers and all the people of the land.

Dan. 9:10 nor have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in His teachings which He set before us through His **servants** the **prophets**.

Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord GOD does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His **servants** the **prophets**.

Zech. 1:6 But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My **servants** the **prophets**, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'

Rev. 10:7 but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His **servants** the **prophets**.

Rev. 22:9 But he said to me, "Do not do that. I am a fellow **servant** of yours and of your brethren the **prophets** and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God."

Isn't it odd that when we think of prophets, we often think of them as having an elevated position - a higher calling? And yet in God's eyes **they are His servants** - those whom He can trust to give a message faithfully. And it is also true that as a person becomes more and more like the Master, that he becomes more of a servant. For the Bible points out that He "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men." (Phil. 2:7)

I don't mean to imply that all of God's servants are prophets. When the Bible speaks of God's servants it often uses the term in a general sense to apply to all those who do God's will. But it clearly has a more specific use in regard to the prophets. In fact, 2 Kings 9:7, cited above, uses the word both ways. "You shall strike the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge the blood of My **servants** the **prophets**, and the blood of **all the servants** of the LORD, at the hand of Jezebel."

Are their indications as to which usage - general or specific - applies to the 144,000? Yes. Twice in Revelation the specific use of the word "servants" is used. The servants are identified as prophets in Revelation 10:7 and 22:9.

Two indirect story elements also support the view that the 144,000 servants are prophets - that the specific form of the word is being used.

First, is the selection process itself. God Himself is choosing and sealing this group of individuals in order that they may be His bond-servants. The very identification of the 144,000 as a unique group that is being set apart to serve Him argues for the specific form of the word.

Second, one of the texts noted above is Amos 3:7. In this verse we are told that, "Surely the Lord GOD does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets." If the greatest, most traumatic, and most momentous events in the entire history of the world are about to happen, isn't it incumbent upon God to tell people? Amos tells us that it would be unlike God to do otherwise.

With the climax of earth's history about to break, God sends His messengers, 144,000 servants, who are given a special end-time message, and are empowered by the Holy Spirit, as were the apostles at Pentecost.

So how are we to know which parts of this story to take literally, and which to accept as figurative? Again, we apply Ockham's Razor. Is it reasonable to accept the following story elements as literal?

1. Servants as being prophets
2. 144,000 in actual number
3. 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel

As to the first, God has always used prophets to give specific and timely messages to guide His people through climactic events. Doing so again would be consistent with His character, especially as the events ahead of us will affect not just a regional church, but every man, woman and child on the earth. The prevalence of prophets in the early church following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost shows that prophecy is a common occurrence in a Spirit filled church. Should we expect less?

As to the second, is it reasonable? If we assume that the words mean just what they say, does it make sense? Would 144,000 prophets be able to get the word out to the 6 billion inhabitants of Earth? If spread out evenly across the earth's population groups, there would be one prophet for every 42,000 people. Auburn, Washington would have 1. Seattle would have 24, with another 24 in the surrounding communities. There would be 6,600 in the United States, whereas China would have 24,000 of them. Would that be sufficient? I think so. Therefore, on the face of it, I'd have to accept that the number of servants just might be literal.

But what about the reference to the 12 tribes? Can it be literal, or is it symbolic?

Speculation regarding the 12 Tribes

If I'm going to speculate about something, I want to be straightforward with you about the fact that it's speculation. And this plainly qualifies! In other words, I could be right about these surmising or I could be totally off base. Nothing in my study of God's Word gives me a clear, unambiguous answer to this issue, so we are left with reason and speculation. But we do have a clear starting point.

Most of the tribes listed no longer exist. There is some evidence that the 10 Northern tribes did not immediately cease to exist at the time they were taken captive by Assyria, but they did cease to exist in any real blocks that could be traced. Certainly before the time of Jesus these tribes had disappeared insofar as tribal identity was concerned.

A simple search of the internet will bring up thousands of references to these missing tribes. And while speculation regarding their fate ranges from the sublime to the silly, the simple fact is that the 10 northern tribes are gone – and have been for over 2,000 years. No DNA tests exist that pinpoint their lineage in the modern era.

I have to look for another reasonable explanation for this verbal metaphor. Throughout the New Testament we see the church identified **as Israel**. Not the Israel of genetics, but the Israel of faith – not an earthly kingdom, but the kingdom of those who have accepted Christ as their King. Since John has already applied *Israel-specific* language to the Christian Church (Rev 1:6), we can know that the 144,000 will be chosen from among the followers of Jesus – they will be spiritually mature members of the Christian Church.

But again – what symbolic meaning can be derived from his reference to the 12 tribes? One possible suggestion that I have heard over the years centers on the 12 different personality types seen in the 12 sons of Jacob. It has been suggested that we can see twelve different unique temperaments portrayed in the blessings of Jacob in Genesis 49 – and that all of us can be grouped under one of these temperaments.

Certainly this is possible – but I'm not persuaded.

One other thought has occurred to me that (since we are only speculating) may be worth mentioning. Is it possible to see the Christian Church today as made up of different families or tribes? If so – might it be God's intent to make sure that each of those families/tribes are represented in the 144,000 servants?

With that question in mind, I ran the phrase "Tribes within Christianity" through Google, and came up with an interesting result. It seems that Christianity does indeed have "tribes". While there are over 1,000 separate denominations within Christianity, scholars divide these into 4 to 8 "meta-groups" (such as Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, etc.) which can further be broken down into "families" of like denominations. One such grouping¹² is shown below:

¹² Posted at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_deno.htm

Adventist Family	Adventist groups , Jehovah's Witnesses , and British Israelism
Baptist Family	Southern Baptists, American Baptists, etc.
Christian Science-Metaphysical Family	Christian Science , New Thought
Communal Family	The Jesus People, Twin Oaks, etc.
Eastern Orthodox Family	Various Orthodox churches -- Russian, Greek, Serbian, etc.
European Free-Church Family	Amish , Brethren, Mennonites, Quakers , Shakers, etc.
Holiness Family	Christian and Missionary Alliance, Church of the Nazarene, etc.
Independent Fundamentalist Family	Plymouth Brethren, Fundamentalists, etc.
Latter-day Saints Family a.k.a. LDS Restorationists	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints , The community of Christ
Lutheran Family	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Lutheran church - Missouri Synod, etc.
Messianic Judaism	Jews For Jesus, and other similar groups
Pentecostal Family	Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleveland, TN)
Pietist-Methodist Family	Scandinavian Pietism, United Methodist Church, other Methodists
Reformed-Presbyterian Family	Reformed, various Presbyterian churches, Congregational, United Church of Christ
Western Liturgical Family	Anglican Communion; Roman Catholicism , including the Latin Church and the Eastern Rite Churches: (Armenian ⁵ Catholic Church, Chaldean C.C., Coptic C.C., Maronite C.C., Melkite C.C., Syrian C.C.); Old Catholicism; and the Ukrainian Catholic Church

This raises an interesting question. Since God undoubtedly has true believers within all of these Christian “tribes”, and since He is intent on getting His end-time messages to all people, is it possible that he may select His 144,000 end-time servants from across the broad spectrum of Christianity – the better to penetrate all of these “tribes”? Of course the Jehovah’s Witnesses will tell you that all of the 144,000 are from their denomination; and most Adventists (whether we teach it formally or not) are certain that the 144,000 will be Seventh-day Adventists. But how much resistance will Christianity instinctively have to any message that comes only from Jehovah’s Witnesses – or Adventists? Wouldn’t it be more in keeping with what we know of God’s character to select His servants from every nation in the world, from all races, from both old and young, from all social levels, all Christian churches, and both sexes? We know that His final messages will be for **everyone**, and by selecting a diverse group of servants – a broad cross-section that reflects the face of humanity – he will avoid the resistance that naturally rises in the human heart when someone from outside “our group” tries to teach us something.

The Great Multitude

The 144,000 are not the only group of people introduced in chapter 7, for after John sees and describes the 144,000 servants, his attention is drawn to another group of people described as “a great multitude.” John does not immediately understand who these people are or where they have come from, for when the angel asks John if he knows who they are, he replies, “My lord, you know.” The angel then informs John that these people are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation, having made their robes clean in the blood of the Lamb.

That this group is not the 144,000 is clear. The following chart shows some of the differences between these two groups:

First Group	Second Group
144,000 in number	A great multitude that no man can number
Chosen and sealed during the unsealing of the book	Comes out of the great tribulation
Said to be Jews	Said to come from every nation

Throughout the rest of the book of Revelation, the people of God will be referred to as either “servants” (prophets) or “saints.” These are the two groups of people that have been introduced in chapter 7. The “servants” are the 144,000 end-time prophets, and the “saints” are the vast number of people who will be saved as a result of the faithful witness of the 144,000. These two sets of people are seen in the following two verses:

“And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your **bond-servants the prophets** and the **saints** and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.” (Rev 11:18)

“...for they poured out the blood of **saints** and **prophets**, and You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it.” (Rev 16:6)

Up to this point...

Let's take a moment to recap. In vision John is allowed to see the events that will precede the return of Jesus. As Jesus removes the seals from the book, John sees a series of events transpire on Earth. These events - warfare, famine, persecution, etc. - are the stage setting against which an even more important event is taking place; the selecting and sealing of 144,000 last-day messengers through whom God will give the final warning to the inhabitants of Earth. This same set of events had earlier been described by Jesus as "the beginning of birth pangs."

It is interesting to note that these events are, by and large, events that have been common to mankind for the past 6,000 years. What is different is that these events are preceded by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and happen within the context of the rapid advancement of the Gospel.

Rising opposition - breaking at last into persecution and martyrdom of some of God's people - will meet this Gospel advance. As the nations of earth support this repression, they will inherit the responsibility for all such acts ever committed, and will fill up their cup of guilt. God will signal the people of Earth that they have "crossed the line", and that the time has come for His wrath to be poured out.

Before that can happen, however, a dramatic change must occur in the heavenly ministry of Jesus, our High Priest. To witness this change ***our attention is now directed to Heaven.***

The 7th Seal

"When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them." (Rev. 8:1-6)

With the opening of the seventh seal our attention - which has been focused on events transpiring on earth - is drawn to heaven. Just as the weekly cycle defined six days for man and the seventh for God, so in the stories of the Seals, Trumpets, and Plagues the first six in each series are earth-centered events, but the seventh draws our attention to heaven. And so, as the seventh seal is opened our vision is no longer filled with scenes of earth and its troubled condition. Instead, we see heaven - but a heaven that is uncharacteristically quiet. So often heaven is pictured as a place of praise, worship and joy. But with the opening of the seventh

seal it is silent. Why? What is happening in heaven to cause this silence? It is silent because the attention of every being in heaven is focused on an event that is about to transpire in heaven's sanctuary - an event that will affect each person on earth.

The sixth seal has taken us to the point where people come to the realization that the time of God's wrath has come. Then, when the seventh seal is opened, we see the angels who are about to blow the seven trumpets line up and receive their instruments. They don't blow them yet - they can't. But they are ready to do so, and as soon as the censer is thrown down, they raise the instruments to their lips. This is an undeniable sequence. The event that transpires in the heavenly sanctuary at the opening of the seventh seal clears the way for the blowing of the trumpets. The censer must be cast down before God's wrath can be poured out.

The Censer

Who is this mighty angel? What is He doing in the sanctuary? What is the importance of the censer in the sanctuary service? Why does the casting down of the censer allow the trumpets to sound? The answer to these questions lies in the earthly model that Jesus gave to the Jewish nation.

In the simplest of terms, the earthly sanctuary service was a parable. It was a play - a theatrical production - that daily demonstrated the great themes of the plan of salvation. At the heart of this play were the sacrificial offerings. While there were many different specific sacrificial offerings, they could largely be broken into two categories; individual and corporate. The individual offerings - the sin offerings, the thank offerings, the first fruits, etc - were sacrifices and offerings that a person might give relative to his own relationship with God. The corporate offerings were independent of anything personal.

Each morning and evening the High Priest sacrificed a lamb on behalf of the entire nation. He then took some of the blood of this lamb into the sanctuary where he sprinkled it on the altar of incense. As a part of this service he would also trim the lamps on the menorah and offer incense before the altar of incense. In Exodus, this daily service was called a perpetual (or continual) service. Even though it only happened twice a day, God said that he would consider it to be ongoing.

We see in the daily service the two great works of Jesus in the plan of salvation:

1. The offering of the lamb clearly represents His substitutionary death for our sins.
2. The offering of incense by the High Priest represents the work of Jesus as our heavenly High Priest, as He intercedes before the Father, pleading His death on our behalf.

We must also understand that while the sacrificial death of Jesus took place at a specific time 2,000 years ago, the intercession of Jesus on man's behalf has been ongoing from the moment that sin first entered our world. As soon as the first sin occurred Jesus stepped in

between man and God. I imagine that many scriptural arguments could be raised to support this view, but the two noted next should suffice.

First, Revelation 17:8 indicates that there are those whose names have “been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.” This is only possible if Christ’s ministry on our behalf extends *from the foundation of the world*.

Second, Adam and Eve were told that the punishment for sin would fall on them on the day that they sinned. “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’” (Gen. 2:16,17) The fact that they didn’t die the very day they ate of the fruit was not because God changed his mind like a parent that threatens, but doesn’t follow through. Nor can we say that the text was fulfilled in that Adam and Eve *began* to die on that day. No, the prophecy was clear. They would **die** on the very day that they ate of the fruit. And yet, they didn’t. Only one explanation fits this situation.

But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him. (Isa. 53:5,6)

That Adam and Eve did not immediately die shows that this transference of guilt for our sins did not take place at the cross, but took place at the time of the sin. This is a result of Jesus pleading his blood on our behalf. From the time of the fall we have been shielded from the just effects of our transgressions. This protection that is provided by Jesus’ intercession on behalf of mankind is universal and invisible. Ellen White refers to this as an atmosphere of grace that surrounds the earth that is as real as the air that we breathe.¹³

We see the intercession for the corporate family of earth in the intercession of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary. That intercession has effectively shielded us from the just wrath of God against sin and sinners. A graphic illustration of this truth is seen in the story of the rebellion of the camp of Israel along with Korah, Dathan and Abiram. This story, recorded in Numbers 16, shines a spotlight on Revelation 8.

The Protective Censer

You’ll no doubt recall that when Korah, Dathan and Abiram challenged the leadership of Aaron and Moses that 250 leaders of the congregation supported them. The Bible says they

¹³ Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, Washington, D.C., The Review and Herald Publishing Co., p.68

were “men of renown.” This was a crisis of leadership, and God acted decisively to put it down. Before the next day was over the 250 leaders were dead, and Korah, Dathan and Abiram - and their families - were swallowed up by the earth. The manner in which these men died should have left no question as to the fact that God had acted. That’s what makes the next morning’s events so unbelievable. The Bible says:

But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’S people.” It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared. Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” Then they fell on their faces. Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for **wrath has gone forth from the LORD**, the plague has begun!” Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. He took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked. But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah. Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked. (Num.16: 41-50) [Emphasis supplied]

Note these story elements:

- The people were in clear rebellion against God.
- God was justifiably angry.
- When God’s wrath broke out only the intercession of the High Priest could stop it.
- With his censer in hand, Aaron stood between the living and the dead.

How remarkable! Notice that the people of the camp had not experienced wholesale repentance, nor were they begging for mercy. No, the opposite is true. While they were enemies they were reconciled to God. (See Romans 5:10) “Atonement” and “Intercession” were done for the people; they were not deserved. They were simply provided. **The “censer” ministry of the High Priest protected rebellious people from the wrath of God.**

Now let’s revisit the questions that I asked earlier. Who is the mighty angel in John’s vision? What is He doing in the sanctuary? What is the importance of the censer in the sanctuary service? Why does the casting down of the censer allow the trumpets to sound?

Since only the High Priest was allowed to perform the “daily” service, the angel that John saw must be our High Priest, Jesus. As the rest of the heavenly hosts look on, we see Jesus perform the *very last* rite of atonement for the earth *as a whole*. No wonder Heaven was silent! Since sin entered this earth Jesus has continually offered his blood on behalf of a guilty earth. That protection is now coming to an end. We see Jesus adding “much” incense “to the prayers of all the saints.”

Are the saints on earth going to be praying at this time? Remember that the church on earth is undergoing persecution, and that the people of God are seeing the signs of Jesus’ return as the Seals have been opened. Of course they will be praying. They will be praying for endurance. They will be praying for strength. They will be praying for power to reach others for Him. They will be praying for deliverance.

To answer the prayers of the saints for deliverance - to close up earth’s history - Jesus must cease His intervention on man’s behalf. He must step out of the way. The censer must be cast down.¹⁴

No longer will Jesus stand between a guiltless God and a guilty earth. God’s wrath is about to be poured out. The Trumpets that could not sound while Jesus was still performing this “daily” service will now be allowed to blow.

A Final Word

Ockham’s Razor suggests that if the story makes sense **as written** that we must seriously consider that angle. In fact, if the story makes sense as written, we should prefer that approach to other more complicated ones.

The beauty of the story of the Seals is that understood at face value it gives us precious information that is relevant to the experience that we may soon be seeing. This information is in perfect agreement with Jesus’ great prophetic outline in Matthew and Luke. It is in perfect agreement with the future events that Ellen White saw in vision.

If such agreement didn’t exist - if the story couldn’t be accepted at face value - then perhaps there would be justification for relegating this section of Revelation to history. But given the perfect fit between John’s vision and Jesus’ words - given the harmonious voice with which they speak to us of events yet to come - we must consider this position seriously.

¹⁴ The end of this phase of Jesus ministry does not signal the Close of Probation. This is an “administrative” move that allows God’s wrath to fall on earth while the way is still open for people to repent and turn to Christ in faith. As long as Jesus is in the sanctuary people will be allowed to confess and forsake their sins. The individual sacrifices for sin are still ongoing. Only the corporate service comes to an end at this time.

At the sounding of the seventh trumpet we will see another change in Christ’s heavenly ministry - the Close of Probation. Following that, we will see God’s wrath poured out **without** mercy.

This eschatological view allows the Seals meaning **just as written**. It finds that the elements are internally coherent and follow each other in a logical progression. Apart from this view, there is no scriptural support for the Early Time of Trouble - a time Ellen White clearly saw. This view not only reveals the Early Time of Trouble, but also shows how this ordeal will be used by God to select and seal the 144,000 servants that He will rely upon to take His final messages to a dying world.