

How Long?

The Judgment of God upon the “Earth”

Revelation 6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,

¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,

¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,

¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

(Revelation 6:9-17)

The Oldest Form of Death

What is the oldest way to die? Cancer? Heart Disease? Old age? The answer is **martyrdom**. Specifically, the very first human death took place because one man was worshiping Yahweh, his sacrifice was accepted, and his brother grew jealous and hateful and murdered him for it.¹ The ancient Jewish book *Lives of the Prophets*, probably written down during the First Century, recalls the deaths of 23 prophets of Israel. You might be surprised to learn that of these only six were martyred:

- **Isaiah**: sawn in two by Manasseh
- **Jeremiah**: stoned in Egypt

¹ Greek and Hebrew professor and missionary Michael Emadi recently sent me an idea he had about why Cain did this. “What do you think about the following regarding Genesis 4:7: Of the 164 times the noun **תְּבִיבָה** ‘opening’ is used in the MT (excluding Gen 4:7) 139 times it is in the construct state, the absolute noun specifically identifying the entrance to what. When it occurs in the absolute state, the context is very clear. In Gen 4:7 the Masoretes accented the text to identify the **תְּבִיבָה** as an absolute noun. However, if we repoint the text to put it in construct, then we would have ‘at the opening/gate of sin.’ But what does that mean? The feminine singular noun **תְּבִיבָה** while generally meaning ‘sin’ can, in the context of the sacrificial system, mean ‘sin-offering’ (For example, Ex 29:36, Lev 4:8, 20, 8:2). Interestingly, in Lev 9:1-7 both minchah (cf Gen 4:3-4) and **תְּבִיבָה** (Gen 4:7) as a sin-offering. Is it possible that we should understand Gen 4:7 as – ‘at the entrance of the sin-offering is a Rovets (a lurking demon)?’

This then coheres with the idea that part of the issue of God's not accepting Cain's sacrifice was that the order of sacrifices was animal first, then the fruit of the ground. If this is the case here, then Cain, in the arrogance of his heart, wanting to go first since he is the eldest, rushes ahead to offer his sacrifice when he should have waited for his brother's offering and then offer his.

This makes sense of the use of **בְּטוּבָה**. Walton argues that **tov** (“good”) is about order. Thus when God says, ‘If you do good...but if you do not do good.’ Perhaps we are to understand this in light of the sacrificial context of orderliness (i.e. which sacrifices come first).”

- [Ezekiel](#): murdered in Babylon
- [Micah](#): either thrown off a cliff or hanged by Jehoram
- [Amos](#): tortured by Amaziah and beaten with a club by his son
- [Zechariah](#): killed by Josah near the altar

Thank God that the majority died peacefully ([Hosea](#), [Joel](#), [Jonah](#), [Nahum](#), [Habakkuk](#), [Zephaniah](#), [Haggai](#), [Malachi](#), [Nathan](#), [Ahajah](#), [Joad](#), [Azariah](#), [Elisha](#), [Zechariah](#) sons of Jehoiada, [Elijah](#) was taken to heaven), though it must be remembered that the likes of [Daniel](#) (lion's den), [Obadiah](#) (suffered greatly) and probably all the others suffered much at the hands of wicked men for their stance of God and truth. Nevertheless, our Lord uses Abel and Zechariah as a merism (a figure of speech indicating totality or completeness²) for the suffering, persecution, martyrdom, and sacrifice of the saints in the OT.

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of

² It is an *alphabetical* merism in English only (A to Z). “Z” is not the least letter of the Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets. Nevertheless, it does work nicely for us. The reason Jesus chose Zechariah is not because he was the last historical martyr, but because in the canon he would have been familiar with, 2 Chronicles which contains his death ended the collection.

righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

(Matt 23:33-35)

But it isn't just the OT. We find the same thing only worse in **the NT!** **John the Baptist** had his head lopped off for the whimsical amusement of Herod's daughter. The worst of all, of course, is the martyrdom-murder of **Jesus of Nazareth** who, though he did no wrong, was crucified on a Roman cross as a sacrifice for our sins. From there, we read about **Stephen** the deacon who was stoned by a mob of Jews only a couple of years after the Lord himself at the hands of a wicked Pharisee named Saul.

This Saul would later be miraculously converted by the effectual call of the risen Jesus on his way to **murder more Christians!** And he would suffer greatly as a Christian, which he knew from day one, as Jesus had told Ananias to convey this message to the man, "**I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my Name**" (Acts 9:15). He later recounts to the Corinthians that he was many times imprisoned, beaten, whipped five times with forty lashes less one, stoned, shipwrecked, in danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, in the city, in the

wilderness, at sea, from false brothers, sleepless, hungry, thirsty, without food, in cold... (2Co 11:-23-27).

Acts tells us about the **murder of James** ("The Great"), the brother of John. And church history (see *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, ch. 1) tells us about the murders of **all twelve of the Lord's Apostles**. Well, **eleven**. They tried to murder John by boiling him in oil, but he escaped without injury. OK, **twelve**, for Saul became Paul and was considered an Apostle unnaturally born, and they beheaded him.

The Twelve	
James "The Great": Stabbed/beheaded	Peter: Crucified upside-down
Matthew: Slain with a halberd	Jude: Crucified
James "The Less": thrown off temple/beaten	Bartholomew: Crucified
Matthias: Stoned	Thomas: Speared to death
Andrew: Crucified	Luke: Hanged
Mark: Dragged to pieces	Simon: Crucified
Others	
Stephen: Stoned	Barnabas: Tortured/stoned
Philip: Crucified	Paul: Beheaded

Of course, there have been many, many more since them. The most famous were probably in **the early church** (Polycarp, Ignatius, Justin, Valentine, Cyprian) or related to **the Reformation** (Jan Huss, William Tyndale, Thomas More, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer). The 20th century saw more murdered for Christ than all others combined, with a documented **26 million martyrs**.

between 1901-2000 compared to documented 14 million from 33 – 1900.³ It's clearly not everyone, only just a remnant of believers, yet still an awful lot of people have been put to death for their faith.

Context of the Fifth and Sixth Seals

Martyrdom is the context of the fifth and sixth seals of Revelation. Frankly, it is the context of the first four as well—those seals that we looked at last time in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is understood when we read the seals as a literary unit rather than in our common modern “linear” way of reading. As a literary unit, five does not come after four. Rather, five is the center of one through six.

- A. “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb” (Rev 5:13-14)
- B. The first four seals unsealed (6:1-8)
 - C. Fifth seal: souls who had been slain for the Word and the witness (6:9)
 - D. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (6:10)
 - C¹. Fellow servants who will be killed as they themselves had been (6:11)
 - B¹. The sixth seal unsealed (6:12-16a)
- A¹. “From the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (6:16b-17)⁴

³ Justin D. Long, “More Martyrs Now Than Then?” Clergy/Leaders’ Mail-list No. 465 (August 1997), <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/2904.htm>.

⁴ This is a modification of Christine Smith’s chiasm, <https://www.alittleperspective.com/revelation-6-2016/>.

Curiously, the fifth seal becomes climax as the 1st – 4th seals parallel the 6th seal. This is not self-evident, because we would think the first and seventh seals, the second and sixth, and the third and fifth seals would parallel, like we saw with the seven churches. But if we analyze the mini-structures found in seals one through four and seal six, we discover that the four parallel the one.

B Frame (vv. 1-8)	B1 Frame (vv. 12-16a)
A. White Horse comes conquering (1-2)	A. Eclipse of sun, moon and stars fall to the earth (12-13)
B. Red Horse comes taking peace from the earth (3-4)	B. Sky Removed like a scroll (14a)
B ¹ . Black Horse comes taking prosperity from the earth (5-6)	B ¹ . Mountains and islands moved , inhabitants hide (14b-15)
A ¹ . Pale Horse comes killing (7-8)	A ¹ . To the mountains and rocks: Fall on us (16a)

The white and pale horses kill and conquer nations which fall even as the sun, moon, stars, mountains, and rocks fall. The red and black horses take peace and prosperity while the sky, mountains, and islands are moved/removed or taken away.

I believe the reason for this has to do with the numbers. **Four** is the number of totality or completeness. Four horses ride to the four corners of the land/earth, sowing destruction. **Six** is the number of man. The sixth seal targets “the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals

and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free..." (Rev 6:15). Together, they symbolize the totality of the judgment of him "who sits on the throne and the lamb" which bookends our literary unit (Rev 5:13; 6:16).

In the middle is this great driving question. "How long?" (6:10). We saw last time that it parallels Joshua. But it is also the cry of the Psalmist. "My soul also is greatly trouble. But you, O LORD-how long?" (Ps 6:3). It is the cry of the prophet. "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?" (Hab 1:2). It is the cry of the Lord Jesus. "How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" (Matt 17:17). This last one puts a different spin on the question, for it is not the saints asking, but God himself. It is as he said through Moses his servant. "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" (Ex 10:3).

It is in Revelation 6 that these two perspectives, one of God being patient with man and one of the saints crying out to God, come together. And we must not separate them. In this regard, I like the pastoral way that Joel Beeke outlines this section of Scripture. He titles it: The Persecuted Church. And then, like the good pastor that he is, he forms a three-point outline. *The Outrage of Persecution* (6:9), *The Outcry of the Persecuted* (10-11), *The Outcome of Persecution* (12-

17).⁵ The persecuted cry from the outrageous persecution creates the question, “How long.” The outcome of the sixth seal forms the answer. And since the riders are parallel, they also answer. When you see these things happening, you know that God is answering. Let’s turn our attention now to looking at this second half of Revelation 6.

Seal #5: The Martyred Souls in Heaven

The Lamb of God has been opening the seals of the closed scroll. One by one, the wax comes loose, and the seal falls off. It’s like the unfolding of a movie. The first seal: a white horse—*conquest*. The second seal: a red horse—*war*. The third seal: a black horse—*famine*. The fourth seal: a pale horse—*death*.



Viktor Vasnetsov, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1887)
State Museum of History of Religion, St. Petersburg, *Wikimedia Commons*

⁵ Joel R. Beeke, *Revelation*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Jon D. Payne, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 227-31.

Their barbaric destruction must now be combined with the fuller context, for this is all part of a single scroll. All centers upon the fifth seal. “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and or the witness they had borne” (Rev 5:9).

This is a strange juxtaposition.

The conqueror has come, with bow in hand.

The warrior with his sword has taken peace from the land.

The peoples of the earth must scrounge for bread.

A pale rider comes to ferry the dead.

Who are the objects of the terrors of the horsemen? The kings, great ones, generals, rich, slave, free. These are put another way. “A fourth of the earth” (8). We will see in later cycles how this fourth becomes a third (8:8-12), which then becomes the whole (16:3). This is part of how Revelation intensifies the judgment as you read it.⁶ But the

⁶ It also does it through wordiness. “Flashes of lightning and sound and peals of thunder” (4:5) becomes “peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5) which becomes “flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm” (11:19), which becomes “flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake ... and huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each” (16:18-21). Bauckham, cited in Gentry, 159. **Going deeper.** Gentry identifies the “kings of the earth” as the “rulers of the land,” that is, the land of Israel. As such, the others listed would also be from the nation of Israel. He devotes a large excursus to it (pgs. 247-60). Again, my view is that they at least would include the nation of Israel, if the date of the book is early, and they would have been the initial fulfillment. But I see it as an either/or fallacy that Revelation’s prophecies

juxtaposition is that the riders are *not* after the saints of God. Yet, rather than mentioning all the dead corpses of the damned, as it will in later chapters, it talks about *the saints* who have been slain. **This is unexpected.** Why do that?

One answer is that unlike the way I grew up where everything beginning in Revelation 6 onward is a message to those in our own future who must live through The Great Tribulation, a term we will see in 7:14, this book is **written to the Seven Churches**. And so, just here, the Lord Jesus is telling his churches, churches that we have seen are full of imagery of suffering, persecution, and warfare, that he still remembers them. In fact, everything being done is for them! They are the ones that will read the book, not the nations. They nations won't repent because of its content. This is given to comfort the saints. The judgment here is for their sake.

A complementary reason is **to contextualize the judgments** coming in this chapter. Those he sees have “**been slain.**” They were **murdered**. They were slain “**for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.**” In other words, they are **martyrs**. So many of John’s friends had died this way. What meaning it would have had for him! Given that

must *only* be about fulfilling the judgment of Israel (as much as it is *only* about prophecy in our own future) and not moving outward, like the missionaries themselves, to the nations whom God also judges (see for example Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-31; and Amos 1-2).

John is writing this, I do not think “word” here refers to the Scripture, but to the Son of God. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14).

Curiously, in John’s Gospel, it is Jesus and his Father who give witness. “If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me ... The testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (John 5:31-36; cf. 8:13-18). In Revelation, it is his disciples. John begins the book as the only one of the Twelve to have escaped the death of a martyr with, “He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the Word of God” (Rev 1:1-2).

But now, there are other witnesses. They are like the only other one we have seen. He is the only witness mentioned by name in the book: “Antipas my faithful witness” (2:13). Building on Antipas, John sees a host of slain martyrs “under the altar.” This refers to the heavenly altar, another piece of the furniture of the heavenly temple. This

is the furniture of **sacrifice**. It is saying that these dead saints were put to death as human sacrifices, “under the altar” where sacrificial blood was poured (**Ex 29:12**; etc.). This is just like **Abel**, the first martyr. Jesus told us of the “**righteous blood**” of Abel and Hebrews adds that it was “**sprinkled**” as a type of Jesus’ sacrifice to come (**Heb 12:24**). God sees these deaths of his saints very unlike we do. They are not pointless. They are a **pleasing aroma** to him. Not because he is masochistic, but because these saints were willing to follow their Lord unto death. Their lives and deaths were thank-offerings to him. “**Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints**” (**Ps 116:15**).

It uses a **strange term** for them. He sees, not their bodies, but their “**souls**” (*psuche*). Unless we are speaking of **ghosts**, we usually do not think of souls as visible, and even then, most still don’t. But this is a way of talking about **saints in heaven** who have not received their resurrected bodies, yet obviously **are alive**. And it should give us encouragement that there is some kind of non-sleep localization of Christians after they die.

We know that they are alive because they simultaneously “**cry out with a loud voice**” (**vs. 10**). The dead don’t do that. But what do they cry? Our center verse,

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true...” First, they acknowledge a three-fold glory of God. He is Sovereign. That is, God is over all things, the Most High. He is in total control of everything that happens to his creation. Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father’s will. His meticulous providence and sovereign unthwartable will is combined with his holiness. He cannot look upon sin. He is perfectly good in all that he is and does. There is no evil in him. Then, his truth. God is not false, he does not love what is false, he hates it. He is the source of truth. The word only has meaning with respect to him.

This makes their cry all the more palpable, for they know to whom they address their prayer. “How long?” “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (10b). God, you are sovereign. We know you can. God, you are holy, we know you hate evil. God, you are true. We know you despise those who are false, who commit treachery against you and your church. So how long? How long must we wait to be avenged?

Notice, they are dead and so they are not going to avenge themselves. Notice also that they were perfectly willing to let God pay back while they were alive, for they

understood that vengeance is his (Dt 32:35; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30). Nevertheless, they are not satisfied in heaven until God carries out justice for what their persecutors have done.

As the center of the chapter, you must not miss the theodicy here. Theodicy is the problem of evil. It is when humans cry out for justice, even though none seems to be near. The old problem posed by the atheist is that if God is all-good, he would not allow evil and if he were all-powerful he would subdue it immediately. Since evil exists and God doesn't do anything about it, there must be no God. This is not theodicy as the Bible spells it out. The saints of God have nothing to do with such foolish God-complexes that pretend to know better than him. This is a cry of faith, not hopelessness or doubt.

They understand that it is through suffering that God sanctifies and conforms his saints into the image of Christ. They understand that it is through suffering that the gospel spreads and people are saved. Suffering makes us stronger, better, more like Christ. The ways of this kingdom are backwards: the first are last, the poor are rich, the meek inherit the earth. In the source I read that talked about the 20th century having nearly double the murder of Christians

than all other centuries combined he finishes his piece by saying, “We in the West are constantly crying, ‘Stop the martyrdom!’ I find it interesting to note that those enduring persecution do not share our prayer. Rather, they cry, ‘Purify us, Lord, and make us strong. Help us to spread your Gospel.’ If we shared THEIR prayer, perhaps then the martyrdom would truly stop – because the nations would be changed from the inside out, an eternal change that would last without end.”

Nevertheless, it is easy to romanticize martyrdom. Church history has done some of that. Some of it can helpfully prepare the saints. But at the heart of it there is still the question of when. How long? The atheist is simply not right. God both has and will deal with evil. He *has* dealt with it in Christ. That’s why he alone is worthy to open the scroll. And the only viable solution to this great problem of mankind is to be found in the Suffering Servant who willingly went to crucifixion at the hands of wicked men, so that we might have forgiveness of our sin. Look anywhere else, and you will forever remain unsatisfied. God did not spare himself from this great problem of the ages. He entered directly into it and endured it without sin.

But why does God wait? Vs. 11 provides a glimpse. “Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little long, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” “Resting” in the heavenly realm prior to the resurrection is a fascinating idea. It does not mean soul sleep. Here, it means being dressed in a white robe. This is the robe of purity—justification, the forgiveness of sin. It is the robe of the victor, the color of the first horse of conquest. It is the color of the stones Jesus promises the churches who conquer. It is the color of the Levitical singers who surrounded the temple of David (2Chr 5:12). If they are at rest, it means they are at peace. These “ghosts” do not haunt and torment for they are in the presence of God. They are under the altar, working in the heavens as those who conquered on earth and are now at peace.

But the answer the verse gives about the why God waits has to do with the future number of their fellow servants being complete. There I number and God has ordained it. This is a way of talking about election, though here it is more specific than election is normally discussed. When we speak of election, we speak of those whom the Father has given to the Son that no one will snatch out of his hand (cf.

John 6:37; 10:26-29; 17:12; etc.). This doctrine was precious to John. He spoke about it often. There is a “complete” number that had not and still has not been realized. They must hear his voice and come to the Shepherd as his sheep too. And God will not bring the final judgment until they do.⁷

But this cry serves one other purpose. It becomes **the legal means** by which God will act. These saints are dead, and they are dead because they were murdered. This is why the election of the saints has the narrow focus of the rest who were to be killed. Their cry is “**a legal plea in which God is asked to conduct a legal process leading to a verdict that will vindicate his martyred saints.**”⁸ This is exactly like Abel whose “**blood cries out**” to God from the ground (**Gen 4:10**).

It is interesting in this regard to note **the oral tradition of the Jews** surrounding **Cain’s death** as it was eventually recorded in Jubilees. It reflects justice, an eye for an eye. “**And at the beginning of the third jubilee, Cain killed Abel because the sacrifice of Abel was accepted, but the offering of**

⁷ **Gentry** (p. 605) notes the idea association of this to the Abel-Zechariah verse just before the Olivet Discourse (**Matt 23:35**). He uses this as a further argument that the full number here contain itself to Jerusalem, since that is Jesus’ context in this verse. However, Abel was not in Jerusalem, nor the Promised Land. Yes, there will be a judgment upon Israel, for judgment begins in the house of God. But that judgment must extend to the four corners of the earth.

⁸ **Joel Nobel Musvosvi**, “The Concept of Vengeance in the Book of Revelation in its Old Testament and Near Eastern Context.” Ph.D. Dissertation: Andrews University (March 1986), 232, 278-79.

Cain was not accepted. And he killed him in the field, and his blood cried out from the earth to heaven, making accusation because he killed him” (Jub 4:2-3). But, “At the end of [the nineteenth] jubilee Cain was killed one year after [Adam]. And his house fell upon him, and he died in the midst of his house. And he was killed by its stones because he killed Abel with a stone, and with a stone he was killed by righteous judgment. Therefore it is ordained in the heavenly tablets: “With the weapons with which a man kills his fellow he shall be killed just as he wounded him, thus shall they do to him” (Jub 4:31-32).⁹ Whether or not this is true, the point is very relevant. Cain did not die for hundreds of years after he murdered his brother (how long, O Lord?), but eventually, according to heavenly justice, he met his appropriate end. How long was not forever. This transitions us nicely to the sixth seal.

Seal #6: Cosmic Catastrophe

Without hesitation, the Lamb opens the sixth seal. This will, in its own way, answer “how long.” Not with date

⁹ What are these heavenly tablets? One scholar puts them into five categories: 1) The Tablets of the Law; 2) Heavenly Register of Good and Evil; 3) The Book of Destiny; 4) The Calendar and Feasts; 5) New Halakot (i.e. the totality of written and oral traditions of the laws and ordinances over time). This particular scholar puts our passage into the last category, though it also overlaps with the first. See Florentino García Martínez, “The Heavenly Tablets in the Book of Jubilees,” Between Philology and Theology, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 162, ed. Hindy Najman and Eibert Tigchelaar (Boston: Brill, 2013): 49-69.

setting, but with great cosmic activities. First, there is a great **earthquake**. Simultaneously, the **sun** became black as sackcloth, the full **moon** became like blood, and the **stars** of the sky fell to the earth as the **fig tree** sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The **sky** vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every **mountain** and **island** (note the seven objects) was removed from its place (**Rev 6:12-14**).

Dispensationalists read this passage **physically**. One says, “It will not do to say that these things prefigure and symbolize the overthrow of the Powers of the Earth by great social and political convulsions. These are nothing more or less than great **physical convulsions** that shall shake the earth, and that have been foretold by the Prophets and by Christ Himself.”¹⁰ The MacArthur Study Bible gets specific.

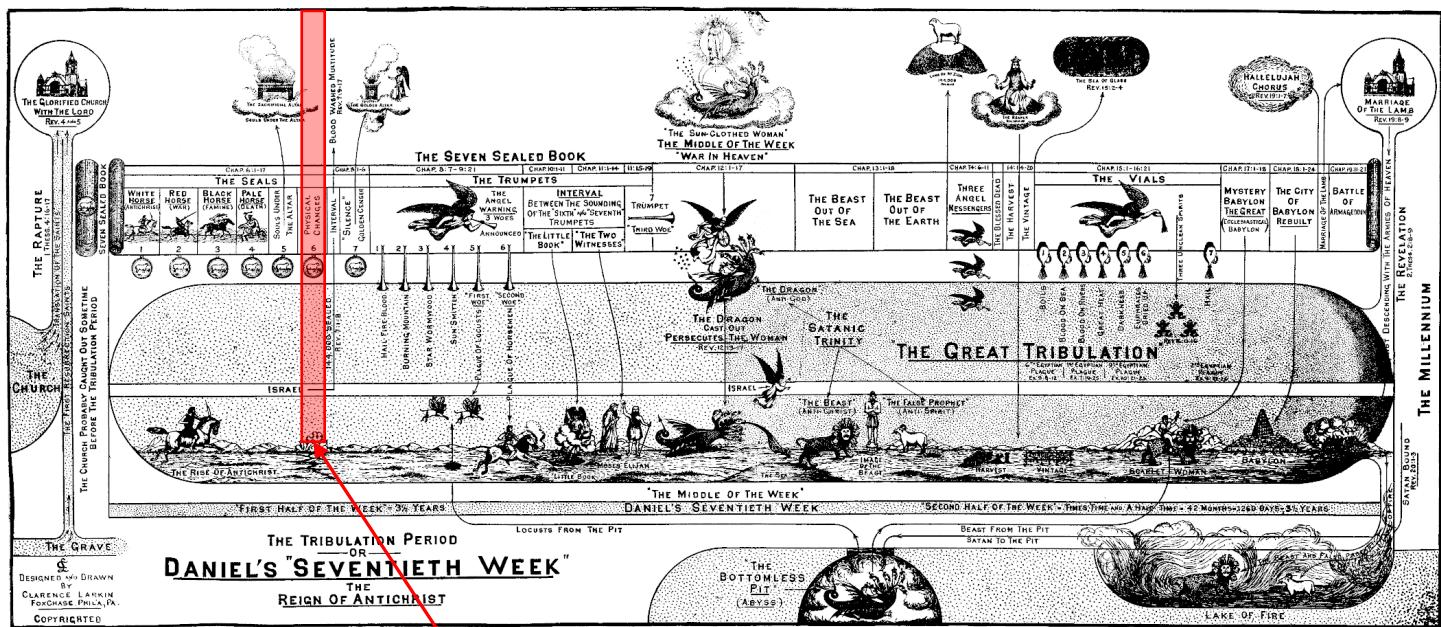
All the earth’s faults will begin to fracture simultaneously, resulting in a cataclysmic, global earthquake. moon became like blood. Accompanying the earthquake will be numerous volcanic eruptions; and large amounts of ash and debris will be blown into the earth’s atmosphere, blackening the sun and giving the moon a blood-red hue (cf. Zech. 14:6–7).

... The word “stars” can refer to any celestial body, large or small, and is not limited to normal English usage. The best

¹⁰ Clarence Larkin, *The Book of Revelation: A Study of the Last Prophetic Book of Holy Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1919), 60.

explanation is a massive asteroid or meteor shower ... The earth's atmosphere will be somehow dramatically affected and the sky as we know it disappears (cf. Isa. 34:4). every mountain and island was removed. Under the stress created by the global earthquake, great segments of the earth's plates will begin to slip and shift, realigning whole continents.¹¹

Now, call me crazy, but if these things happened the way they are describing it, I'm pretty sure **this wouldn't kill a quarter of the people on earth.** It would **exterminate mankind** and probably every living creature from the planet. In other words, this doesn't sound like the beginning of The Great Tribulation, it sounds like the end of the world!



As most Dispensationalists see it (this is Larkin's Chart), reading the book chronologically, you are here.

¹¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible: ESV* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), notes on Rev 6:12-14.

This is precisely why **Amillennialists** read these verses are describing events that are at the end, just prior to the Second Coming. These events will parallel events that take place at the end of the next several cycles, which rather than describing things that take place even later than this, are describing the very same thing. We have actually already seen this idea in the seven churches, where each letter to each church ends at Judgment Day.

Progressive, Worsening Repetition of “The End” in Revelations Seven Cycles						
Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Cycle 4	Cycle 5	Cycle 6	Cycle 7
7 Church endings	6:12-17	11:18-19	14:14-20	16:17-21	19:11-21	20:7-14
Note: There are also positive endings in the seven cycles. See the seven church endings; 7:17; 11:15-17; 14:1-5; 16:5-7; 19:1-10; 21-22.						

But we also need to note that **Preterists** read this as being fulfilled in 70 AD. This is fascinating, because if we were to read these things the way Dispensationalists do, that would obviously be impossible. So to understand why, we need to take a look at the OT as well as Jesus’ Olivet Discourse.

We saw last time that the language of the Olivet Discourse shares a lot in common with the language of the six seals. This includes even the fifth seal with its “**witness**” the martyrs had borne. Everyone acknowledges this.

Conceptual and Linguistic Parallels in the Olivet Discourse and the Six Seals

Revelation 6	Matthew 24
Red Horse (6:3-4)	War (24:6-7a)
Famine (6:8)	Famine (24:7)
Witness (6:9)	Witness to nations (24:14)
Believers killed (6:9-11)	Believers killed (24:9)
Earthquake (6:12)	Earthquake (24:7)
Sun and moon eclipsed (6:12)	Sun and moon darkened (24:29)
Stars fall (6:13)	Stars fall (24:29)
Fig tree (6:13)	Fig tree (24:32)
Kings and everyone of the earth hid themselves (6:15)	Tribes of the earth mourn (24:30)
Hid themselves in the mountains (6:15)	Flee to the mountains (24:16)
Calling to the rocks, “Fall on us” (6:16)	Not one stone left on another (24:2)

The difference is, many interpret the Olivet Discourse as **entirely future**, just like they do Revelation. But this is incorrect. Notice that Jesus leaves **the temple** and as he does, he points out to his disciples “**the buildings of the temple**” (**Matt 24:1**). He then says, “**You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down**” (**2**). He is talking about the destruction, not of some future third temple, but literally of the Herod’s Second Temple, the one they are looking at.

So the disciples ask him, “**Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?**” (**3**). There are **three basic interpretations** of what

they are asking. The first is that they are asking one question which is still entirely future to us. This view makes no sense of the destruction of temple in 70 AD, which is the most obvious question they are asking about.¹²

A second view sees Jesus only answering questions that are now in our past. They see the “end of the age” as the “end of the old covenant,” which was ceremonially torn in two when Israel’s temple was destroyed. This view has a lot more going for it, especially because it addresses the disciples’ most basic question.

A third view capitalizes on the technical language of the *Parousia*, language that they believe is reserved for the Second Coming. In this view, Jesus answers their first question about

¹² See for example Larkin, 62–64. Here is his chart.

Answer To First Question		
Matt. 24:4–5	1-Seal False Christ's	Rev. 6:1–2
Matt. 24:6–7	2-Seal Wars	Rev. 6:3–4
Matt. 24:7	3-Seal Famines	Rev. 6:5–6
Matt. 24:7–8	4-Seal Pestilence and Death	Rev. 6:7–8
Matt. 24:9–13	5-Seal Martyrdom	Rev. 6:9–11
Matt. 24:14	The Gospel Now Being Preached, Is The “Gospel Of The Grace Of God.” Acts 20:24.	
Answer To Second Question		
Matt. 24:15	“The Sign” Of The “Desolator” Dan. 9:27	
Matt. 24:16–22	The “Great Tribulation”	
Answer To Third Question		
Matt. 24:29–30	6-Seal Physical Changes	Rev. 6:12–17
Matt. 24:32–35	The “Fig-Tree” Sign Jewish Race	Rev. 6:15

the temple in vv. 4-35 (with the exception of vs. 27, which is a clarification that in this “coming” in judgment in 70 AD upon the Jews will not be like the Second Coming, which everyone will see). Starting in Vs. 36 and moving through chapter 25, Jesus turns his attention to the Second Coming, which the disciples were not expecting, or at the very least, were confusing with the destruction of the temple.

This last view is my view. But what is important to notice is how all the parallel language and ideas of Revelation 6 and Matthew 24 are found *in the first 35 verses!* In other words, all the parallel language is where Jesus deals with the destruction of the temple. I don’t think this is coincidental and it is a main reason why I have no problem with someone who interprets the six seals as dealing with the nation of Israel as judgment for their crimes against the Messiah. If you read it this way, then you must read the kings and everyone calling for the rocks to fall upon them as those in the “land” not on the entire earth.

Some may say that the language here, however, is too apocalyptic to have been already fulfilled in our past. I mean, the stars are falling to the sky and the sky is vanishing like a scroll. But that’s precisely my point in saying that Dispensationalists say this will happen at the beginning of

the Great Tribulation with nearly seven more years to go before the thousand-year reign of Christ, which itself ends in another terrible destruction and only then is the Second Coming. If they can have such literal horrors not destroying everyone on the planet, surely a preterist can too.

But what's more important to note is that this kind of apocalyptic language was actually [used by the prophets](#) to refer to the judgment of God against the nation of Israel when he sent her into captivity *the first time*. Listen to Jeremiah describing the condition he of Israel after the first temple was destroyed:¹³

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.

¹³ Here's another one from David who is simply praising God for delivering him from his enemies. "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations of the heavens trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; he was seen on the wings of the wind. He made darkness around him his canopy, thick clouds, a gathering of water" ([2Sam 22:8-12](#)). Imagine if we were to take this literal-physically!

I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

For thus says the LORD, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark; for I have spoken; I have purposed; I have not relented, nor will I turn back.”

(Jer 4:23-28)

This is why it is so important to know your Old Testament. 10,000 volcanos did not literally blow up at this moment. The human race (or even the Jewish people) were not wiped off the face of the earth. The physical land of Israel did not literally become Genesis 1:2 all over again. This is covenantal language for the covenant judgments of God that return things to the place in time before the covenant, where, spiritually speaking, everything was darkness and hopeless. As Jeremiah had just said in the previous chapter (Jer 3:8), God was giving Israel her certificate of divorce.

All of this helps us see why and how Jesus would use such strong language in Matthew 24 of the destruction of the temple. The nation of Israel, God's great fig tree (Jer

8:13; 24:1-10; Hos 9:10, 16-17; Micah 7:1-6), had been cursed by Jesus just before they put him to death (Matt 21:19; 24:32) and now judgment time had come. But in my opinion, 70 AD does not explain it all.

For example, the fig tree in Matthew 24:32 is clearly Israel. That's the whole point. However, the fig tree in Revelation 6 does not appear to be. At the very least, it comes in the context of God being furious at “the nations.” Listen to the prophet.

Draw near, O *nations*, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; *the world*, and all that comes from it.

For the LORD is enraged *against all the nations*, and furious *against all their host*; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.

Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.

All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

(Isa 34:1-4)

Isaiah 34:4 ESV	Isaiah 34:4 LXX	Rev 6:13-14
All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.	And all the powers of the heavens shall melt, and the sky shall be rolled up like a scroll: and all the stars shall fall like leaves from a vine, and as leaves fall from a fig tree.	and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up.

This prophecy is *against all the nations*, not just Israel. Since this language in Revelation 6 comes straight out of Isaiah 34, it is special pleading to say that this is *only* about Israel.¹⁴ If we add the parallel language of the sun and moon changing which comes from Joel 2 or Ezek 32 and several other passages which are about the nations, this confirms to me that Revelation 6 is not merely about Israel in 70 AD.

Joel 2:31, 11 ESV	Joel 2:31, 11 LXX	Rev 6:12, 17
The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood , before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.	The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood , before the great and glorious day of the Lord come.	When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood...
For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?	for the day of the Lord is great, very glorious, and who shall be able to resist it?	for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

¹⁴ In fact, though he certainly knows this comes from Isaiah 34, Gentry does not bring this point up. I think I know why.

Ezek 32:6-8 ESV	Ezek 32:6-8 LXX	Rev 6: 12, 13
<p>I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood, and the ravines will be full of you.</p> <p>When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light.</p> <p>All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD.</p>	<p>And the land shall be drenched with thy dung, because of thy multitude upon the mountains: I will fill the valleys with thee.</p> <p>And I will veil the heavens when thou art extinguished, and will darken the stars thereof; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light.</p> <p>All the <i>bodies</i> that give light in the sky, shall be darkened over thee, and I will bring darkness upon the earth, saith the Lord God.</p>	<p>When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood... (12)</p> <p>And the stars of the sky fell to the earth ... The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up.</p>

In this way, as we come to **the end of the sixth seal**, we read, “**Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (**Rev 6:15-16**). Again, **preterists** read this as referring only to 70 AD and as such the kings are the rulers of Israel, along with their generals and the rich and powerful and even the slaves and**

free—the whole nation which is being judged by God as the old covenant is finally dissolved like the heavens themselves. But I think it is quite fine to read this **universally**, starting with Israel and making its way outward to the rest of the world.

One more reason for this has to do with this cosmic language of the sky vanishing and the stars falling and so on. Beale explains something important. “The cosmic metaphors [and earthquakes] of vv. 12–14 are figurative of the fall of human kingdoms and not the literal dissolution of the world in the OT and NT ...”¹⁵ The reason they fall, he says, is because they have been worshiping the creation, making idols and worshiping the gods that the LORD alone has created.

Now, remember, the Bible closely identifies especially **heavenly objects** like the sun, moon, stars, and planets **with the gods** of the nations; this is who they are ultimately worshiping (e.g., Deut. 4:19; 17:1–4; 2 Kgs. 23:4–5; Jer. 8:2; Ezek. 8:16; Amos 5:25–27; Acts 7:41–43). And since both Israel and the nations have been worshiping the

¹⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 402.

creation, “Creation itself (sun, moon, stars, trees, animals, etc.) has become an idol that must be removed.”¹⁶

This is a punishment not just upon men, but upon the fallen wicked **heavenly beings** that men worship. “On that day the **LORD** will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth” (**Isa 24:21**). It is also a judgment upon the **earth**, which has been polluted by unholy worship. It is a judgment, as we saw with the four horsemen, that involves **the heavenly host itself calling forth** (represented by the four cardinal points of the zodiac) **riders** (represented by four others in the zodiac) to carry out this judgment upon creation. Yes, God still has a loyal host of heaven whom he can call to arms at any moment. And make no mistake, he has before and he will again. As **Deborah** sang long ago, “From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera” (**Jdg 5:20**). As Josephus records at the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, “Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year … At the ninth hour of the night, so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day-time. A certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose

¹⁶ Ibid.

the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities” (*Josephus, Wars* 6:5:3 §298). How much more at the end?

As the sixth seal comes to an end, we are left with only a couple of things to contemplate. “If the most permanent and stable parts of creation will be shaken to their roots (e.g., mountains and islands), so will those living on the earth. Their earthly securities will be ripped away so that they will appear spiritually naked before God’s judgment seat on the last day. They will try unsuccessfully to hide their destitute condition from the divine gaze (vv 15–16) and to escape from the coming wrath (v 17). They will even rather die from the falling rocks and mountains than face God’s judgment (v 16).”¹⁷

This is a dire situation for everyone on earth who does not know the Lamb. For what do they say, “Hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has

¹⁷ Ibid., 403.

come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:16-17). And yet, we would expect him to say the Lion at this point. But he says the Lamb. It is the Lamb who opens the seals, because it is the Lamb who has spilled his blood that we might be saved from such a coming cosmic calamity.

The way out? It isn’t to hide *from* him. You can call on the rocks to cover you all day long. All they will do is fall on you and crush your bones. Nothing can hide from his all-seeing gaze. No. Your only hope is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While the kings of the earth are trying to hide themselves in a mountain, “Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king. He withdrew to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15). Why? Because his time had not yet come. He would not rule by force, but *by suffering* for the saints. Just before he did this he prayed to his Father, “I have kept them … whom you have given me … and not one of them perished” (John 17:12). This power secures his statement to the slain in heaven that they should rest until the number of their fellow servants be completed.

As you think on this chapter in days and years ahead, your mind is certain to return to the question, “How long?” Jesus now asks, “How long until you will repent of your sins

and come to living waters?” As they acknowledged that the Lord was holy and true, so Jesus prays for his saints, “Sanctify them.” Make them holy “in the truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17-19). If you understand this, then return to the parallel of this wrathful Lamb at the end of chapter 5. Sing the song of the Lamb in your own heart and sing it from the rooftops with the whole of creation. “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev 5:13). For this Lamb does only what is good and right. God will judge you in Christ for your sins if you turn to him. And he will acquit you of your idolatry. But if you are not in Christ, he will have the Lamb himself judge you. And woe to him who cannot hide himself from his wrath.

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Appendix: Revelation 6 Parallels in Revelation

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|---|--|
| (6:15) "the great men, the rich and the mighty, every slave and free man, hid themselves in caves" (57) | (13:16) "He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave , to receive a mark" (59) |
| (6:11) "the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who would be killed was completed" (61) | (13:15) "speak and cause as many as would not worship the beast to be killed " (58) |
| (6:8) "authority was given to him over a fourth of the earth to kill ... by the beasts of the earth " (64) | (14:3) "the 144, 000 who were redeemed from the earth " (64) |
| (6:1) "Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals" (71) | (14:10) "tormented with fire and brimstone ... in the presence of the Lamb " (71) |
| (6:15–16) "the kings of the earth ... say, "Fall on us and hide us" (91–92) | (17:18–18:2) "the great city which reigns over the kings of the earth ... Babylon is fallen" (92–94) |
| (6:13) "And the stars of the sky fell to the earth" (94) | (18:2) "Fallen, fallen is Babylon" (94) |
| (6:10) "How long, O Lord ... until You judge and avenge ...?" (97) | (18:6–8) "Give her back as she gave ... her plagues will come in one day ... the Lord God judges her" (98–100) |
| (6:6) "a quart of wheat for a denarius ... and barley ... and do not harm the oil and wine" (101) | (18:12) "merchandise of gold and silver ... wine and oil ... and wheat" (104) |

