

When does the Final Seven-Year Period Begin?

Introduction

The Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, Saints Hippolytus and Victorinus¹ and the Talmud,² all speak of a final period of seven years, or *septennium*, after which the world as we know it will come to an end through a final judgment, and the ‘world to come’ will become a consummate reality.

The Book of Revelation gives a particularly detailed account of this final period of history and resembles the prophecy of Daniel³ in describing it as composed of two consecutive halves: a first half of 1,260 days (about 3½ years), during which the two witnesses prophesy (Rev 11,3), and a second half of 42 months (also about 3½ years), when the ‘Beast from the Sea’ rules the whole world and subjects the faithful to a ‘great tribulation’ (13,5-7; 7,9-17; 15,1-4). The second half immediately follows the first half⁴ and ends with the defeat and condemnation of the Beast and his followers at the Second Coming of Christ (19,11-21). So, the mid- and end-points of the final seven-year period are easily determined from the narrative of the text itself: the end coincides with the Second Coming, while the mid-point is 42 months prior to that event and coincides with the conclusion of the first half, which is to say, with the end of 1,260-day period.

The question remains as to when the final seven-year period begins. In the text, this is indicated by the start of the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses, which is described between the 6th and the 7th trumpet blasts (11,3-13). According to a superficial reading of the narrative, therefore, the final seven-year period would appear to start between the 6th and the 7th trumpets. However, there are aspects of the text that indicate that it begins before this time. This article is a presentation of these textual clues with a view to determining, as far as possible, the timing of the start of this final period of history, which is described as being seven years in length and composed of two consecutive halves.

The Period of 1,260 days

The final week of years begins with the 1,260-day mission of the two witnesses (Rev 11,3-13). The text mentions the same time-period in connection with

¹ Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, paragraphs 43-47, and Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John*, on 11,3. Augustine of Hippo also seems to have adopted this view, although he speaks of only one witness instead of two: “And at or in connection with that judgment the following events shall come to pass, as we have learned: Elias the Tishbite shall come; the Jews shall believe; Antichrist shall persecute; Christ shall judge; the dead shall rise; the good and the wicked shall be separated; the world shall be burned and renewed. All these things, we believe, shall come to pass; but how, or in what order, human understanding cannot perfectly teach us, but only the experience of the events themselves. My opinion, however, is, that they will happen in the order in which I have related them” *City of God*, 20:30; quoted from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120120.htm> .

² Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a.

³ The Book of Daniel mentions a final seven-year period: in the first half the tyrant makes a covenant with many (Dan 9,27a), and in the second half he oppresses and persecutes the people of God (Dan 7,23-25; 9,27b).

⁴ A majority of modern scholars claim that the two time periods, of 1,260 days and 42 months, are the same and synchronous, i.e. they take place at the same time. Along with T.F. Glasson (*The Revelation of John*, Cambridge: CUP 1965, 67-70) and Alan Johnson (‘Revelation’ in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Gæbelein, Vol. 12, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1981, 502-504), we reject this view and present the consecutive interpretation stated here, cf. https://www.academia.edu/84648587/The_Two_Witnesses_in_the_Book_of_Revelation .

the exodus and protection of the woman, who represents Zion, at a place prepared for her in the desert (12,6). Zion is later identified with the 144,000 men, because they are assembled on a mount of the same name, Mt. Zion (14,1-5).⁵ Interpreting the period of 1,260 days to refer to the same period of time in both instances (at 11,3 and at 12,6), it follows that the mission of the two witnesses (11,3-13) coincides with exodus of the 144,000 to the desert (12,6; 14,1-5). So, when the text states that the plague following the sounding of the 5th trumpet does not harm the 144,000 (9,4), presumably because they have already departed to the desert by this time, it can be inferred that the period of 1,260 days starts before the 5th trumpet. And since the final week of years opens with the period of 1,260 days, then it can be stated tentatively that this final *septennium* also begins sometime before the 5th trumpet.

Themes that link the Exodus of the 144,000 with the Trumpet Series

Apart from the allusion to the exodus of the 144,000 in the trumpet series considered above (Rev 9,4), there are at least three themes that link this, and other events described in chapter 12, with the trumpet series (8,6–11,13), suggesting a total overlap between the events of that chapter and the trumpet series. That is to say that the exodus of the 144,000, at the start of the final *septennium*, may begin as early as the first trumpet blast.

The first, and perhaps the most significant theme, is that of the Exodus itself. It has not escaped the notice of commentators that the text of Revelation is saturated with allusions to the biblical Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.⁶ What has not been stressed is that these allusions are concentrated in chapters 8 to 16, and especially in chapters 8 to 12. It is not going too far to say that the entire trumpet series is modeled on the plagues of Egypt (Ex 12), the giving of the little scroll to the author (Rev 10) evokes the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the mission of the two witnesses (11,3-13) recalls the leadership of Moses, the exodus of the 144,000 to the desert (12,6; 14,1-5) reflects the exodus of the Israelites to the desert of Sinai, and the ‘great tribulation’ evokes the crossing of the Red Sea (7,9-17 with 15,1-4).

The Old Testament Exodus theme not only gives a strong sense of narrative unity to the analogous events described in Revelation, but also indicates the author’s intention that they be understood in a similar way, as the progress and development of an exodus of God’s people during a final seven year period before the Second Coming of Christ.

Furthermore, on the analogy of the biblical Exodus and the role of Moses in its initiation, the start of the mission of the two witnesses can be traced back to the start of the trumpet plagues. And since the start of the mission of the two witnesses is linked to the exodus of the 144,000, as both occur during the unique 1,260-day period, then the exodus of the 144,000 can also be traced back to the start of the trumpet plagues. We can therefore suggest that the exodus of the 144,000 takes place between the first and the fifth trumpet blasts described in the text of Revelation (8,6–9,1).

The presence of other themes in this part of the text confirms the observations made above. Trumpets have multiple associations in the Old Testament: before they became liturgical instruments that were sounded in the Temple during the daily

⁵ For a full treatment of this important conclusion, cf. https://www.academia.edu/66117811/Towards_the_mystical_interpretation_of_Revelation_12.

⁶ As outlined in https://www.academia.edu/44968014/ch_6_Imagery_in_the_Book_of_Revelation_and_its_Dominant_Theme.

services and especially at the New Year, they were primarily used in warfare to rally and direct the army of the people of God in their battles.⁷ The military significance of the trumpets would certainly fit into the context of the ‘war in heaven’ that is described in chapter 12 (12,7), again suggesting an overlap between this chapter and the trumpet series. The sounding of the trumpets signals to the armies of God’s people that a war is taking place in heaven, for which they are called to assemble and participate.

It should also be noticed that the strike-rate of ‘thirds’ links the war in heaven with the trumpet series. Just as a third of the elements are affected by the plagues of the trumpet series (8,7.9.11.12; 9,18), so also, in the heavenly war, a third of the stars of heaven are affected, and dragged down, by the tail of the defeated serpent (12,4), again confirming the overlap between the trumpet series and the events of chapter 12. The evident concurrence of the trumpet plagues with the war in heaven, which leads to the fall of a third of the stars (12,4), helps to understand why several of the trumpet plagues are depicted as the result of war in the heavens: falling hail and fire mixed with blood (1st trumpet: 8,7); the falling of something like a great mountain burning with fire (2nd trumpet: 8,8); the falling of a great star from heaven burning as a lamp (3rd trumpet: 8,10); the striking of the sun, moon and stars (4th trumpet: 8,12); the star that had fallen from heaven to earth (5th trumpet: 9,1).

The Timing of the Mission of the Two Witnesses

From the observations presented above, it is apparent that the start of the 1,260-day period, in so far as it concerns the exodus of the 144,000 to their place in the desert, starts around the time of the first trumpet and is completed by the fifth trumpet.⁸

In so far as it concerns the two witnesses, there is further evidence in the text indicating that their mission also starts around the time of the first trumpet. This evidence is contained in the imagery of the sealed scroll (5,1.6-9) and the little scroll (10,1-2). The breaking of the last seal of the scroll by the Lamb (8,1), which implies he can then open and unroll it, is so clearly related to the giving of the little scroll to John, the author of Revelation (10,10), that it is hard to understand why these events are separated by the first six trumpet plagues (8,6 – 9,13). Taking these two events to be closely related in time, it would be reasonable to interpret the opening of the scroll in heaven, shortly before the first of the trumpet series, as the catalyst for the transfer of the little scroll to John. And since the transfer of the little scroll to John is followed by the public announcement of its contents by the two witnesses during their mission,⁹ it is reasonable to suppose that the mission of the two witnesses starts around the time of the first trumpet sound. The description of the mission of the two witnesses in the interval between the sixth and seventh trumpets (Rev 10) is most probably intended to draw attention to the moment of its conclusion and fulfilment.

Some confirmation of this observation is to be found in the similarity between the nature of the first six trumpet plagues and the plagues brought by the two

⁷ Cf. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1973, 253-4.

⁸ Their exodus is completed by this time, but the 144,000 remain at this place for 1,260 days (12,6) and a time two times and half a time (12,14), which is an expression derived from Daniel (cf. Dan 7,23-25; 12,7) and denoting the severe persecution of God’s people for 3½ years—the duration identified with the period of 42 months in the Book of Revelation. So the exodus and protection of the 144,000 in the desert occupies the full final week of years (i.e. 1,260 days followed by 42 months).

⁹ Cf. https://www.academia.edu/84648587/The_Two_Witnesses_in_the_Book_of_Revelation .

witnesses. The similarities are listed by G. Beale, who summarizes the comparison as follows: “Therefore the nature of both the trumpets and the witnesses’ prophesying and the spiritually depressing effects of both are apparently the same. The witnesses’ testimony is like the first four trumpets, which deprived the ungodly of earthly security because of their persecution and idolatry in order to indicate their separation from God (...). The effects of the witnesses’ message, like the fifth and sixth trumpets, also torment and punish hardened unbelievers. That the ungodly suffering judgment here are the same as those suffering under the trumpet woes is suggested by 10:11, where John is told to “prophesy *again*” to people throughout the world”.¹⁰

The Events that Immediately Precede the First Trumpet

The identification of the first trumpet with the start of the 1,260-day period, and the events associated with it (the mission of the two witnesses and the exodus of the 144,000), prompts a closer examination of the preceding period. In this way, it may be possible to clarify the evolution of these events.

After the Lamb has broken the seventh and last seal of his scroll (8,1), and before the first trumpet is blown (8,7), the author reports a period of silence, during which incense is offered on the altar in heaven (8,1-5). As in the daily liturgy of the ancient temple in Jerusalem, this is a time of prayer: “And the smoke of the incense went up with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God” (8,4; cf. Lk 1,10; Jdt 9,1; Ps 141,1-2; m.Tamid 5:5; 6:1-3). And then immediately before the first trumpet is sounded: “the angel took the censer and filled it from the fire of the altar and threw it to the earth, and there were thunders and noises and lightnings and an earthquake” (Rev 8,5).

It has already been noted that the breaking of the last seal of the scroll enables the Lamb to open it in order to modify and finally reveal its contents (cf. 3,5).¹¹ At the same time, we suggest that the leading edge of the Lamb’s scroll is detached (the part with writing on the outside in 5,1), rolled up into a smaller, ingestible scroll and then taken by an angel to John, with the instruction to swallow and eat it (Rev 10). In effect, one imagines these actions taking place during the period of silence in heaven, so that by the time the first trumpet is sounded the two witnesses, as the public announcers of the prophecy contained in the little scroll and recorded by John, are ready to start their mission. Understanding the casting of heavenly fire to the earth (8,5) as a “new Pentecost”, it is indeed tempting to see a link between this divine action and the empowerment of the two witnesses (cf. 11,3), so that they can begin their public mission with the sounding of the first trumpet (8,7).

The vocation of the 144,000 can be similarly understood in the context of the silence in heaven (8,1-4). The preparation of the 144,000 for their exodus to the desert (12,6) is described, in the text, in two distinct stages: the first is their mystical sealing with the seal of the living God on their forehead (7,1-8), and the second is the ecstatic mystical experience that identifies them with the great sign of the woman who represents faithful Zion (12,1-2).¹² If one accepts that the order of the heavenly liturgy follows the order of the daily morning service in the ancient temple, and if one sees the sealing of the 144,000 as analogous to the priestly blessing, then it is logical to see

¹⁰ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 585-87, citation from 586.

¹¹ This is the central part of the judgment process, cf. https://www.academia.edu/80634814/The_Final_Judgment_in_the_Book_of_Revelation.

¹² For a full account of this, see https://www.academia.edu/66117811/Towards_the_mystical_interpretation_of_Revelation_12.

their sealing as actually taking place whilst the smoke of the incense is rising from the golden altar within in the Sanctuary.¹³ This was indeed the time when the priestly blessing was pronounced in the ancient rite. In the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation, it corresponds to the silent period in heaven, when incense was rising with the prayers of the saints. Regarding the immediate preparation of the 144,000, which we understand as an ecstatic mystical experience (12,1-6), it is appropriate to see this occurring as an effect of the fire that is cast from heaven to earth (8,5). This act, which we have termed a “new Pentecost”, can therefore be understood as the divine act which initiates the start of the period of 1,260 days, which in turn forms the first half of the final week of years. It forms the immediate preparation of the two witnesses for their mission and also of the 144,000 for their exodus to the desert. In general, it can be understood as analogous to that part of the daily temple liturgy in which the offerings are thrown onto the fire of the outer altar to return in their entirety to God.¹⁴ It can therefore be understood as the immediate preparation for the people of God to witness their faith and be ready for martyrdom. For those who have been called to the specific task of prophecy (the two witnesses) and sanctification in this world (144,000), the infusion of heavenly fire empowers them towards the fulfilment of their particular roles.

The events immediately preceding the trumpet series are therefore loaded with significance for the successful transition into the final week of years, as prophesied in the Book of Revelation.

The Structure of the Final Week of Years

The present study would not be complete without an attempt to place the entire final week of years within the narrative sequence of the text as defined by the successive series of sevens, in particular the final three series which embrace “the things that must take place in the future” (4,1); namely, the breaking of the series of seven seals of the scroll which lead to the blowing of the series of seven trumpets which finally lead to the outpouring of the series of seven bowls.

From the observations laid out above, the final week of years has its origins in the half-hour silence, when incense is offered on the heavenly altar and the smoke rises with the prayers of the saints (8,1-4). Its immediate preparation is the casting of fire from this altar onto the earth (8,5), and its start is marked by the sounding of the first trumpet.

The first half of this final period of seven years, otherwise known as the period of 1,260-days, ends just before the seventh (and last) trumpet, at the completion of the mission of the two witnesses (11,7-13). At this point, the ultimate antagonist of Christ, called ‘the Beast from the abyss’ reveals himself by ordering the murder of the two witnesses, after which he proceeds to rule the world and persecute God’s faithful for 42 months (11,7; 13,1-5-8).¹⁵ This is the second half of the final week of years, which lasts until the defeat of the Beast and his forces at the Second Coming of Christ (16,13-14; 18,11-19). The Second Coming of Christ brings history to an end with the

¹³ Cf. John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan 2003, 48-51.

¹⁴ Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 51-3.

¹⁵ Also during this period the Holy City is profaned (11,2) and since the expression ‘time, times and half a time’ (12,14) is a synonym for the 42-month period of persecution (see note 8), this is also a time when the 144,000 continue to be nourished and protected at the place prepared for them in the desert (12,14).

final judgment (20,11-15),¹⁶ which in turn leads to the removal of all that is evil and the realization of the new creation with new Jerusalem at its centre (Rev 21–22).

On the basis of this reading, therefore, the greater part of the text of Revelation (from Rev 8 – 22) is a detailed prophecy of the final week of years—that brief but most difficult period in the history of the church and the world (cf. Mt 24,22).¹⁷

Where are we now?

Although much more speculative than the previous sections, it is a useful exercise to ask where we are, now, in the narrative of “the things that must take place in the future” (4,1), which starts with the Ascension of Christ (Rev 5) and ends with the perfect fulfilment of God’s plan at the end of the present age (11,15-19; 19,6 – 22,5). As noted above, this narrative is structured by the three successive series of seals, trumpets and bowls, and is focused more and more on the events at the end.¹⁸

The narrative begins when the Lamb breaks the seals of the scroll given to him by God (Rev 5-6). The breaking of the first four seals reveals the preparation of the four horses and their riders for their mission in the world (6,1-8). We know that these seals have been broken, because the effects of the four horsemen are fully visible: the Gospel has gone out around the world (the white horse), violence and murder are widespread (the red horse), social injustice and misery are extreme (the black horse) and large numbers of people (at least a quarter) die because of war, famine and disease (the pale green horse).

The breaking of the 5th seal reveals the martyrs in heaven asking how long it will be before justice is done to them at the final judgment (6,9-11). It is not so easy to determine if this seal has been broken, since it has no visible effects on the earth. However, since the martyrs were told to wait ‘a short time more’, we know that the breaking of the 5th seal takes place only ‘a short time’ before the final judgment. The mission of the four horsemen therefore represents the entire course of history from the Ascension of Christ up until ‘a short time’ before the end.

The breaking of the 6th seal (6,12-17) reveals the ‘Day of the Lord’ taking place so suddenly and severely that no one among the human race would be able to survive or withstand his anger. This fearful vision can be identified with a frightening aspect of modern history, namely the threat of world-wide nuclear war and destruction. Even by hiding themselves in underground bunkers (cf. 6,15-16), it is unlikely that any human beings could survive this event or its consequences—the ‘nuclear winter’. However, according to the text, the destructive events which precede the ‘Day of the Lord’ are withheld (7,1), in order to give time for the ‘sealing’ of the 144,000 men (7,2-8), for the prayers of all the saints to be heard (8,1-5), and for a last opportunity to repent (8,6 – 9,21; 11,3-13).

¹⁶ Although the millennial reign of Christ (the ‘Millennium’: 20,1-6) is described between the two stages of the final war (19,11-21, 20,7-10), this does not necessarily mean that it is established on earth at that time, as the millenialists (or chiliasts) assert. For arguments in favour of interpreting this period as the reign of Christ and his saints in the Church during this present age of salvation, see https://www.academia.edu/78868602/The_Millennium_and_the_Mystery_of_Iniquity. To those who have not been able to accept his millennial reign in this age, it will be revealed retrospectively, at the end of this age, “as a yesterday already passed” (Ps 90,4).

¹⁷ The temporal structure of the entire text of Revelation can therefore be summed up as follows: the messages to the churches are contemporary with the author, John (end of first century); the breaking of the first six seals of the scroll figuratively represent ‘history’ from the Ascension of Christ up to the time of final judgment (sixth seal); the trumpet and bowl series represent the final seven years of history.

¹⁸ This is because the next in the series arises from the last member of the preceding series.

The breaking of the 7th seal reveals the offering of incense in the heavenly Sanctuary as the time when the prayers of all the saints rise to God to be heard and granted. Heavenly fire is then thrown to the earth and the series of seven trumpet blasts follows. In comparison with the vision of the 6th seal, the events announced by the trumpets lead up to the ‘Day of the Lord’ and the completion of God’s Kingdom (11,15-19) in a more gradual and divinely controlled way.

The sounding of the first four trumpets coincides with clearly observable damage to the environment (8,1-12): a third of the trees, the land and its grass are burned; a third of the ships sink, a third of the sea is contaminated and a third of the sea creatures die; a third of the fresh-water becomes undrinkable, and the polluted air obscures a third of the light coming from the sun, moon and stars. Although, in our own environment, we can see damage of the same kind as that which follows the sounding of the first four trumpets (forest fires, contamination of seawater, fresh-water contamination, air pollution), we cannot yet see all the effects or the full degree of damage predicted. Furthermore, according to the arguments presented above, the first four trumpets should see the two witnesses prophesying and the 144,000 fleeing to their place in the desert, but neither of these activities are yet in evidence. So, we can be reasonably sure that the first four trumpets have not yet sounded, and can tentatively suggest that they correspond to a series of ‘natural disasters’ which will add to the already high levels of environmental damage from anthropogenic causes.

The 5th and 6th trumpets announce destructive agents that torment (9,1-12) and kill men (9,13-19), but men do not change their attitude towards the things that they make or do (9,20-21). It has been proposed that the vision following the 5th trumpet describes aeroplanes, but it is not yet evident how, or in what circumstances, these will be used to spread a toxic agent like the toxin of a scorpion, in order to torment men for a few months. It may indeed be true that the vision following the 6th trumpet refers to cars (200 million in number), but it is not yet evident how such a large proportion of men (a third) come to be killed by these machines, unless their drivers are struck by madness (cf. Zech 12,4) in the ‘hour’ when this disaster is destined to occur (Rev 9,15).

The 7th and last trumpet announces the completion of God’s Kingdom (11,15), which includes a final series of judgments causing further damage to humans and their environment (the seven bowl plagues, 15,1.5 – 16,18). This trumpet has certainly not yet been sounded.

According to this reading of the signs of our times, therefore, we are presently between the opening of the 7th seal and the sounding of the 1st trumpet. There is a silence in heaven accompanying the offering of incense, and the prayers of the faithful are rising before God (8,1-4). This is followed by the throwing of fire to the earth (8,5) and the start of the sequence of events announced by the trumpets and culminating in the fulfilment of the God’s plan (11,15-19)—the final week of years described in detail in the Book of Revelation. So “very soon” appears to be the answer to the question “when does the final seven-year period begin?”.

John Ben-Daniel
Old City, Jerusalem
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