Revelation Study 4
The Seven Trumpets

Read: Rev 8:2-14:20

Structure
The 7th seal is opened (8:1), thus beginning the revelation of the contents of the scroll with the blasting of 7 Trumpets. Trumpets were a common symbol of revelation of God's judgment.

The 7 Trumpets have the same structure as the 7 seals had, namely 4+3. In both cases the first 4 (seals & trumpets) are described briefly and refer to terrestrial events. These are then followed by 3 heavenly or spiritual events (which nevertheless still affect the earth or even take place on earth).

In terms of apocalyptic structure (see Study 2: The Shape of Apocalyptic) we can also divide the 7 seals & trumpets as follows:

1 – 4 History – Well-known events from the past
5 – 6 Current or future penultimate events
7 Final judgment and consummation

In detail, then the structure is as follows:

8:1-6 7th Seal & introduction to the 7 Trumpets
8:7-13 1st 4 Trumpets & introduction to 3 Woes
9:1-12 5th Trumpet / 1st Woe
9:13-11:14 6th Trumpet / 2nd Woe
10:1-11 The Angel & the Little Scroll
11:1-13 The Two Witnesses
11:15-14:20 7th Trumpet / 3rd Woe
11:15-19 The Song of Praise
12:1-14:20 The Dragon & The Lamb

8:1-6 7th Seal & introduction to the 7 Trumpets
Once the 7th Seal is broken, the events of the judgment are set in motion by the prayers of the saints (6:9-11). They are assisted in their prayers by and angel who brings their prayers before God.

8:7-13 1st 4 Trumpets & introduction to 3 Woes
The 1st 4 Trumpets announce judgment on the earth, its plant-life (1), the sea (2), fresh water (3) and heavenly bodies (4). These judgments also remind us of the plagues of Egypt before the Exodus.
Notice that only 1/3 of the earth is destroyed by each plague.
An eagle (8:13) announces the coming of 3 more plagues ("Woe, woe, woe").

9:1-12 5th Trumpet / 1st Woe

Whereas the first 4 judgments have parallels in the natural world (plagues, pestilence & eclipse), the 5th Trumpet introduces something quite supernatural. Here the demons of the Abyss are unleashed (by God's fiat - 9:1) to cause (spiritual?) destruction among the godless.

The locusts which remind us again of the Egyptian plagues are quite supernatural in form and we are left to guess what sort of spiritual torment and destruction our author envisages for the godless. Whatever is it, it does not kill them (9:6) and is not shared by God's people (9:4).

Notice here the mention of God's seal on the foreheads of the faithful.

9:13-11:14 6th Trumpet / 2nd Woe

The second woe is worse than the first. Now a supernatural demonic army is unleashed (again by God's fiat – 9:14), and this time they kill a third of the population. Their deaths are the result of their sins which are listed in 9:20-21. The total depravity of the godless is shown by their refusal to repent of their evil, even in the light of the death it brings.

10:1-11 The Angel & the Little Scroll

Here we have a mysterious interlude between the 6th & 7th Trumpets. First an angel appears and makes a revelation through 7 thunders which may not be recorded. Why not?

Then an oath is made that the 7th Trumpet will introduce God's very final judgment.

A small scroll is then presented to the visionary. He eats the small scroll which enables him to prophesy.

This section is probably intended to heighten the tension in preparation for the 7th Trumpet – its prophecy has been specially entrusted to John and its contents will be final.

11:1-13 The Two Witnesses

Another mysterious interlude prepares us for the 7th Trumpet. This time the Jewish (i.e. non-gentile) portion of the Temple is measured (11:1-2) and two witnesses appear to prophesy in Jerusalem. Who are the two witnesses? Individuals? Grace and Truth? The Church? Moses & Elijah? The Law and Prophets?

Whatever their identity, they are given a limited period to prophesy. 42 months = 1260 days = 3½ years = ½ of 7 years. Does this mean ½ time? ½ of history – the Jewish half of God's history before Christ and the Church. This would seem to be suggested by the parallels between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and the witnesses' 3½ days of death before their resurrection. Notice that both Moses (law) and Elijah (prophets) had supernatural ends to their lives (11:12, Deut 34:6, 2 Kings 2:11)

11:15-14:20 7th Trumpet / 3rd Woe

It can be convincingly argued that this section is the very heart of the book of Revelation. Certainly, its theme of the showdown between the Lamb and his followers on the one hand and the Dragon and two Beasts on the other is central to the whole book. Moreover, the historical detail in this section suggests its proximity to current experience of John's readers.

In terms of its placement in the apocalyptic structure we should note the following:

- The trumpets are the second cycle of sevens. (The 7 seals dealt with past events, the 7 bowls of plagues will deal with the final judgment – leaving this cycle to describe current events.
- Within this cycle of 7, we are at the seventh trumpet. The first 4 recounted recent earthly suffering, 5&6 told about spiritual judgment. Now the 7th trumpet/3rd woe talks about the ultimate outcome of the current situation.

11:15-19 The Song of Praise

The noise in Heaven (11:15) at the sound of the 7th trumpet contrasts with the silence following the opening of the 7th seal (8:1). Heaven listens in silence to the prayers of the saints (8:4), but the answer to their prayers (11:15) is met with loud celebration. We are reminded that God is on the throne.

12:1-14:20 The Dragon & The Lamb

The final trumpet involves the conflict between the Dragon and the Lamb (who are they?). In this section John is speaking right into the current experience of his readers and offering meaning to their current oppression. The confrontation between Church and Empire is the conflict between God and Satan, but the outcome is certain. Why? Because Satan has already been defeated in Heaven.

12:1-6 The Dragon vs the Woman

The Woman represents God's people (12 crowns). Is this Mary giving birth to Jesus, or Israel and the Church giving birth to the Messiah? Either way, the Dragon wishes to destroy this woman and her progeny but is thwarted. The child is born and is taken up to heaven – while the Woman flees to a place of protection in the wilderness.

12:7-12 Victory over the Dragon in Heaven

The Dragon (Satan) follows the child to heaven where he is soundly defeated and cast down to earth. As Caird puts it "Michael's victory is simply the heavenly and symbolic counterpart of the earthly reality of the cross."

Note in 12:11 that it is through Christ's suffering and their participation in that suffering that the saints attain the victory –

not through armed resistance! Important for John's readers it is made clear that the triumph over Satan is assured and Christ's reign is established – so rather than capitulating in the face of persecution, the church should stand strong.

12:13-17 The Dragon vs the Woman

Unable to defeat the Lamb in heaven, the Dragon again turns his attention to the Woman (Church) and her other offspring (members). The "offspring" are "those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." The dragon cannot touch the Woman, so he makes war on her offspring instead. The implication seems to be that while the members are exposed to suffering, Satan has no ultimate chance of winning and so their victory is guaranteed.

13:1-10 The 1st Beast

In the course of his war on the Woman's offspring, the dragon confers power on a Beast who becomes his agent. In many respects the Beast is a counterfeit of the Lamb: he is given power; he appears to have died and yet lives; he is worshipped.

Who is this Beast? It seems the beast denotes the Roman Empire generally and its emperors in particular – possibly Nero. It was common for emperors to demand worship from their subjects to entrench loyalty. John makes participation in this emperor cult tantamount to exclusion from the Church (13:8).

13:11-18 The 2nd Beast

A second beast (later called the false prophet) arises to support the first. The first wields secular, imperial power, the second wields religious power. Is John referring to a regional priestly representative of the emperor entrusted with the task of enforcing the emperor cult?

This beast forces people to wear the mark of the beast. What was this mark? Religious markings were widely used in many cults. Alternatively, the mark could refer to seals used to stamp official documents, or to the documents issued as proof of participation in the emperor cult. The purpose of these certificates was to exclude those without them from various social and business interactions.

The Number of the Beast – 666

Perhaps the best known conundrum in Revelation is the mysterious number of the beast – 666. Various solutions are suggested for this mystery, most of which are based on the ancient practice of gematria. Gematria was the art of corresponding numbers to words or names based on the fact that Hebrew and Greek (as well as Latin) used letters for numbers. On this basis any number of solutions have been

suggested for the identity of the beast since the early times – none entirely satisfactory as this quote from Mounce suggests:

> *"The solution most commonly accepted today is that 666 is the numerical equivalent of Nero Caesar….What is not generally stressed is that this solution asks us to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name, and that with a defective spelling."*

Another approach is to read the number symbolically within the symbolic world of Revelation. So 666 falls short of perfection in each digit. It is the trinity of imperfection. So it is the evil trinity (Dragon, 1st beast & 2nd beast) which apes the Holy Trinity (777) but falls short and fails.

14:1-5 The Lamb & the 144,000

The followers of Christ bear the mark of the Son and the Father rather than the mark of the beast. And they are given a new song to sing.

In v4 we are told that they are virgins "who have not defiled themselves with women." Is this to be read literally? If so sex – even within marriage – would disqualify the saints. Were they perhaps the ones who had not defiled themselves spiritually by resisting the advances of the great harlot, Rome?

14:6-13 3 Angels announce God's Judgment

In the first of two visions relating to the final judgment, 3 angels announce God's judgment in the matter. First, eternal good tidings because God's rulership has been established. Second, the declaration that Babylon (Rome?) has fallen. Third, the punishment awaiting the followers of the beast.

14:14-20 Final Judgment & the Harvest of the Earth

The second vision describes the actual sentencing following the judgment in two events. First, the harvest of the earth and second the vintage of the earth. The 1600 stadia (v20) emphasizes the fact that the whole of the earth is involved in this judgment (4x4x1000).