INTRODUCTION TO THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

The vision of the seven trumpets is one of the most perplexing subjects in the book of Revelation and in the entire New Testament. In this introduction we need to discuss a few issues of general matter. First, the nature of the trumpets in the Bible; second, the parallel structure of the seals and the trumpets; and third, the diversity of historicists interpretations of the trumpets.

1. The Nature of the Blowing of the Seven Trumpets

In both the Old Testament and the New Testaments, the blowing of the trumpet symbolizes the intervention of God in history. In the Old Testament, the life of ancient Israel was closely connected with the blowing of trumpets. For instance, a trumpet sounding could be the summons for battle (Judges. 3:27; 6:34), an announcement at the coronation of an Israelite king (2 Sam. 15:10; 1 Kings 1:34), a call for gathering the people (Num. 10:2-7; 1 Sam. 13:3-4), and a warning of an approaching danger (Jer. 4:5. Ezek. 33:3-6).

In most cases in the Old Testament the trumpets were used in the context of temple liturgy and holy wars (Lev. 25:9; Josh. 6:4-20). The key Old Testament text for the meaning of the trumpets is Numbers 10:8-10. As this text indicates, trumpets were sacred instruments and were, as a rule, blown by priests to call on God to remember his people. It is better to say that they provided Israel with the assurance that God remembered them when their adversaries attacked them and that He would protect and deliver them (2 Chron. 13:14-15).

Whether seeking forgiveness from sins in the sanctuary or fighting against enemies, the priest blew the trumpets. God then responded by remembering his people, forgiving their sins, and delivering them from their adversaries. The concept of “remembering” before God is crucial for an understanding of the theological meaning of the seven trumpets in Rev. 8-9.

Trumpet blasts in the Old Testament designated the appearance of God in relation to the most important events in Israel’s history. In the giving of the law at Sinai there was a very loud trumpet sound (Exodus 19:16; 20:18). The loud trumpet blast caused the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 6:4-16). The trumpet sound is an integral part of the Day of the Lord concept in the Old Testament (Isaiah 27:13). Trumpet blowing will announce the approaching Day of the Lord (Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14).

This concept continues in the New Testament. Apart from Revelation 8-11 trumpets are associated with the end-time appearance and intervention of God. In His sermon on the Mount of Olives, Jesus spoke of the great trumpet sound when God’s elect are gathered together (Matthew 24:31). Paul spoke of the day when at the last trumpet sound the corruptible will put on incorruption (1 Cor. 15:51-53). A very loud trumpet blast will accompany the second coming of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:16-17). In the book of Revelation, the trumpet sound is a signal of the appearance of God in the person of Christ (Rev. 1:10; 4:1).

The vision of blowing of the seven trumpets is a series of interventions by God in response to the prayers of his people. In the opening of the fifth seal the slain saints underneath the altar plea to God for vengeance and judgment: “How long, O Lord, will you not judge and avenge our blood
(Rev. 6:10)?” This is a prayer for justice and deliverance. As Revelation 8:2-5 shows, God hears the prayers of the saints and He remembers them.

The seven trumpets are not natural calamities and disasters. They are rather a manifestation of the presence and reality of God in history. They reveal God’s reaction to the injustice and harm being done to his people throughout history. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, and he is in full control of the powers of this world that viciously oppress his people.

As we saw earlier, the scenes of the opening of the seven seals is concerned with the progress of the preaching of the gospel in the world, and with those who reject it. The events triggered by the successive opening of the seven seals affect those who profess to be God’s people but are faithless and disloyal.

Regarding the seven trumpet woes, John makes it very clear that they are not directed against humanity in general but only against those “who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads” (Rev. 9:4) and who are elsewhere in the book are referred to as “those who dwell on the earth” (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:2). These are the ones who have been hostile to the gospel and have persecuted and oppressed God’s faithful people.

It is, therefore, very appropriate to conclude that Revelation 8-11 is the portrayal of God’s dealing with different movements and forces in history that have viciously persecuted and harmed his people.

The judgments symbolically portrayed in the seven trumpet plagues are God’s response to the suffering of his saints and their plea: “How long will you not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). The message of the blowing of the seven trumpets is clear and plain: “Not too long! In fact, God has been already judging the enemies of his people all along throughout history.”

God judges those who have failed to receive His seal on their foreheads. In other words, these people have rejected the transforming power of the Holy Spirit on their hearts and the opportunity to be recognized and accepted by God. Human wickedness does not go unnoticed in heaven. The wicked experience God’s judgments in the seven trumpet plagues, which are in reality the foretaste of the ultimate plagues of Revelation 16.

The sounding trumpets and the subsequent plagues are just the preliminary judgments and have redemptive purposes. Each trumpet blow is designed to humble people and drive them to repentance, even though that purpose is not achieved (Rev. 9:20-21). It is the failure to repent which makes the pouring of the seven last plagues inevitable and unavoidable.

2. Parallel Structure of the Seals and the Trumpets

The scene of the blowing of the seven trumpets begins with the cross, as does the scene of the opening of the seven seals of Revelation 6. The conclusions of both scenes bring us to the time of the end. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that both the seven seals and the seven trumpets refer to the same period in history between the cross and the Second Coming.
This comparison shows significant parallelism. **First**, both seals and the trumpets are arranged in groups of four and three; the first four differ from the last three in form and weight.

**Second**, both seals and the trumpets are interrupted by interludes. Between the opening of the sixth and seventh seal is inserted the vision of the sealed saints with the purpose to answer the question of who can stand on the last day (chapter 7).

Likewise, between the sixth and the seventh trumpet sound is inserted the vision of the angel with the open scroll, the measuring of the temple, and the witnessing and fate of the two witnesses (chapters 10-11). While the purpose of chapter 7 is to answer the question raised in Rev. 6:17 regarding who will be able to stand, chapters 10-11 seem to provide the answer to the question regarding the task of the church in that troublous period.

**Third**, both the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet refer to the time before the execution of the final judgment.

It would be correct to understand that both scenes - the opening of the seven seals and the blowing of the seven trumpets - cover the same period of Christian history, although not sequentially, from the first century AD, following the death of Jesus on the cross and His ascension into heaven, to the time of the end.

However, whereas the scene of the opening of the seven seals portrays the progress of the gospel in the world and its effect on those who profess to be God’s people but are faithless and disloyal, the vision of the blowing of the seven trumpets portrays the judgment of God on those who reject the gospel, “those who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads,” and who viciously oppress and persecute God’s faithful people.

### 3. The Diversity of the Historicism Interpretations of the Trumpets

REVELATION 8

Revelation 8:2–6 serves as the introduction to the section of the blowing of the seven trumpets. At the trumpets’ sound, a chain of events is unleashed upon the earth. Before the angels blow their trumpets, the prayers of God’s people are offered with incense. This section provides the reader with the key to the interpretation of the seven-trumpet vision.

V2. “The seven angels.” John first observes seven angels with seven trumpets commissioned to announce a new series of woes to be sent upon the inhabitants of the earth. The definite article suggests that the identity of these seven angels, as a specific group, was well-known to the readers of John’s day. The problem is that the seven angels who stand before God are not mentioned earlier in the Bible.

However, Isaiah mentions “the angels of His presence” (Isa. 63:9), and Luke 1:19 speaks of Gabriel who stands in the presence of God. Whoever these seven angels might be, they are a special class of heavenly beings. Their position before God characterizes their readiness for service. It is quite possible that these seven angels are the same angels who later pour out the seven last plagues (Rev. 15:16).

V3. Then John sees another angel, unspecified angel with a “golden censer” standing at “the altar.” The text does not specify which altar is in view here. It is likely the altar of burnt offering (which was located outside the Old Testament temple setting) as distinguished from the golden altar of incense, mentioned later in the verse, which was before the throne.

In the Old Testament temple, the golden altar of incense was “in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony” (Exod. 30:6–7). After receiving much “incense,” the angel administers the incense by offering it with “the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar” of incense before the throne.

V4. “And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints ascended before God from the hand of the angel.” Here is a firm assurance that the prayers of the saints beneath the altar reach “the throne of grace” and are heard by God in the heavenly places. The angel in Revelation 8 receives the incense with the prayers of the saints at the altar of burnt offering.

This is especially significant in light of the fact that in the scene of the opening of the fifth seal, the slain saints beneath the altar of burnt offering pray for judgment on “those who dwell on the earth” (6:10). According to Revelation 5:8, this incense represents the prayers of the saints; these are evidently the prayers for justice and judgment of the saints under the altar in the scene of the opening of the fifth seal.

V5. Suddenly the scene changes. We see here the angel fills the censer with fire from the golden altar and “throws it to the earth.” Throwing the censer filled with fire produces “thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5). This is the signal for the seven angels to blow their trumpets.

This hurling of the censer filled with fire upon rebellious humanity mirrors the scene in Ezekiel’s vision in which the man clothed in linen takes coals of fire from between the cherubim; the man
then scatters them over Jerusalem as a token of divine judgment because of the abominations committed in it (Ezek. 10:1–2). In light of this Old Testament background, the throwing of coals of fire down upon the earth in Revelation 8:5 symbolizes judgment action.

The throwing of fire to the earth is followed by the manifestation of divine wrath in the form of "peals of thunder and voices and flashes of lightning and an earthquake." These are the symbols of the appearance of God, much like his appearance on the Mount of Sinai with fire, thunder, lightning, and earthquake (Exod. 19:16-19). This phenomenon represents the answer to prayer, which God is about to give to his people. He is preparing to bring his righteous judgments and vengeance upon those who viciously harassed and oppressed the faithful.

This introductory scene is built on a special service in the Hebrew temple – the daily sacrifice known as “tamid.” After the sacrificial lamb had been placed upon the altar of sacrifice, the blood was poured out at the base of the altar. The appointed priest would take a golden censer and fill it with coals from the altar. He would then take incense into the temple and offer it upon the golden altar in the Holy Place. Having offered the incense, the priest would come out of the temple and throw the censer down on the pavement between the altar of sacrifice and the entrance of the temple, producing a very loud noise. At that moment, seven priests blew trumpets, marking the end of the daily services.

**What time in history do the seven trumpets refer to?** The daily services of the earthly temple give us a clue to the beginning of the seven trumpets’ sounding. In the earthly temple, the trumpets were sounded after the sacrifice had been offered upon the altar. By following this pattern, the sounding of the seven trumpets began after Jesus’s death on the cross. They occur while Jesus intercedes in heaven (8:3-5) and the gospel is preached (10:8-11:14). The trumpets, thus, concern the Christian age – from the cross to the Second Coming, until the seventh trumpet sounds, and God establishes His kingdom (11:15-18).

1. **Rev. 8:7 – The Blowing of the First Trumpet**

V7. “Hail and fire mixed with blood.” In the Old Testament hail and fire accompanied by much bloodshed were God’s weapons of judgment used against those who opposed him and oppress his people. Hail mixed with fire was God’s judgment on Egypt, which was the seventh plague (Exodus 9:23-25). Another scene is found in Ezekiel 38:22-23, where God judges the enemies of Judah by bringing hail and fire mixed with blood upon them.

“A third.” The trumpets plaques affect the third of the earth. In the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah, judgments against apostate Israel are described in terms of plagues affecting one third after another of the nation (Ezek. 5:12-13; Zech. 13:8-9). In Revelation 12:4 the tail of the great red dragon in heaven – Satan himself – swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth, meaning that one third of the angels of heaven followed him and were under his control. So, to conclude, we can say that “the third part” of the first trumpet in Rev. 8 denotes a portion of Satan’s kingdom experiencing divine judgments.

“The trees and all green grass.” In the Old Testament symbols of trees and green grass are used figuratively with reference to Israel and God’s covenant people (Jer. 11:16; Ezekiel 20:47; Isa. 61:3). Fire destroying vegetation symbolizes God’s weapons of judgment used against his own
people when they became unfaithful to the covenant and are thus equated with the opponents of God. In the New Testament we have the same symbolism (Matthew 3:10; Luke 23:28-31; Matthew 7:17-19).

The key text for understanding the tree symbolism in the first trumpet is found in Jesus’ prophecy about the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Luke 23:31. It is clear that Jesus referred here to Himself as the green tree, and to apostate Jews as dry trees. Most scholars maintain that Jesus was referring here to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

The first trumpet blast portrays the consequences that were brought upon those who rejected and crucified Jesus and opposed the Gospel. The event that took place at the blowing of the first trumpet was the judgment brought over the nation of Israel that rejected Jesus and His Gospel. The event took place in 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed.

2. Rev. 8:8-9 – The Blowing of the Second Trumpet

V8. “A great mountain burning with fire.” In the Old Testament a mountain often represents a kingdom or empire (Ps. 48:1; Isa. 2:2-3; Jer. 35:2-3). In the judgment passages of the Old Testament, mountains as representing nations are always the objects of God’s judgment, never the agents. The scene of second trumpet is built on the description of the fall of ancient Babylon in the prophecy of Jeremiah 51:24-25. Babylon is compared with a “destroying mountain” and it will be judged. Babylon is to become a burning mountain, which is thrown into the sea and becomes covered by it.

In Revelation 18:8, John describes the destruction of spiritual Babylon as being “burned with fire, because the Lord God who judges her is strong.” At the time of writing of Revelation, the term “Babylon” was used in reference to great Roman Empire. Both Peter and John used “Babylon” as the cryptic name for Rome (1Peter 5:13; Rev. 17:18).

The Christians saw in Rome the new Babylon. When John wrote this message to them they understood that the symbolic burning mountain is the prophecy about the fall of the Roman Empire as the enemy of God’s people. Rome, being attacked by the barbaric tribes finally gave up in 476 AD.

“Was cast into the sea.” The destruction of ancient Babylon is described in the prophecy of Jeremiah as sinking into the sea (Jer. 51:42). John used the same language to describe the spiritual Babylon in Rev. 18:21.

V9. The burning mountain sinking into the sea turns the sea into “blood,” leaving “one third” of the marine life dead. This brings to mind the first Egyptian plague in which the waters were turned into blood and the fish were destroyed. The sea in the Old Testament often symbolizes people in their opposition to God (Isa. 57:20; Jer. 51:41-42; Dan. 7:2-3).

“A third of the ships were destroyed.” As conveyers of wealth, ships symbolize a nation’s pride in its self-sufficiency. The second trumpet thus describes the fall of the Roman Empire and the devastation of its economic and social order.
3. Rev. 8:10-11 – The Blowing of the Third Trumpet

V10. “A Great Star.” Stars in the Bible often symbolize angels. In Job 38:7, angels are called stars. We find the same definition in Revelation 9:1. In Revelation 12:4, Satan pulls a third of the stars down to earth. These stars are the angels thrown out of heaven with Satan in Rev. 12:9. The fact that the star is referred as “great” indicates we are dealing with a superior angel.

The Great Star fallen from heaven reminds us of Isaiah 14:12-15, which mentions a “star of the morning” referring to Lucifer. Luke 10:18 says that Satan fell from heaven like lightning. So, the great star in the third trumpet is a symbol of Satan himself in his rebellion against God.

“The rivers and the springs of water.” The rivers and the springs of water often symbolize the spiritual nourishment (Isa. 12:3; Jer. 2:13). Jesus said in John 7:38-39, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive.” The scene of the third trumpet shows Satan’s involvement in polluting the source and streams of truth through human religious teachers and leaders, causing them to have a deadly poisonous effect.

V11. “Wormwood.” Wormwood comes from the Greek word “apsinthos,” which is the name for the group of herbs, “artemesia absinthius” in the Near East, notorious for its bitterness (Deut. 29:17-18). The wormwood is not poisonous, but poisonous effects were often associated with it. Because idolatrous Israel forsook God and rejected his word, God threatened through Jeremiah to give them wormwood to eat and poisoned water to drink (Jer. 9:13-15).

Wormwood in the Old Testament was a symbol of divine punishment for apostasy. The falling of the great star and the defiling of the fresh waters are symbols of apostasy and perverted gospel teachings. As a consequence of that apostasy, “many among people died from the waters, because they were made bitter.” When the sources of spiritual life are polluted by apostasy and false teachings, the result is the spiritual death of those who drink from these water supplies.

The blowing of the third trumpet has to do with the period in history following the fall of the Roman Empire. This period is often referred to as the medieval period (6th to 14th century AD). During this period, we witness a great spiritual decline and apostasy, when the mainstream Christianity departed from the apostolic gospel and perverted the sound teachings of the Bible. The gospel truth was replaced with church tradition and dogma. The third trumpet describes the medieval apostasy and its consequences – the spiritual death of many who drank from its polluted and poisonous water.

4. Rev. 8:12-13 – The Blowing of the Fourth Trumpet

V12. “Became darkened.” Darkening of the celestial bodies in the Old Testament prophetic books is a consistent symbol of the appearance of God in judgment (Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7-8, Amos 5:18). As the trumpets before this one should be understood symbolically, not as a literal darkening of the sky. As the absence of light, “darkness” is the lack of spiritual understanding and insight that results from the absence of the gospel (Isa. 8:20; 60:1–2; Matt. 4:16). Darkness in the Old Testament is a consistent symbol of judgment for sin and apostasy (Micah 3:6).
Light in the New Testament stands for the gospel. Jesus is the true light that enlightens everyone in the world (John 1:9). Darkness is the absence of the gospel; it is a symbol of sin. When people reject the gospel light for darkness, they bring God’s judgment upon themselves (John 3:19). It is in this sense that the symbolism of darkness of the fourth trumpet plague must be understood.

The fourth trumpet depicts the period following the Dark Ages, which deepened the prevailing darkness in the world. The Reformation of the sixteenth century rediscovered the gospel and restored the Bible as the rule of faith and teaching. However, the vibrant generation of reformers was succeeded by a lifeless generation, known as Protestant Scholasticism, which was characterized by theological polemics and controversies. Christianity became less of a personal relationship with Christ and more of a membership in the official church. This situation had a deadly effect upon Christianity.

The Reformation marked the end of religion’s dominance over the minds of people and the beginning of the intellectual revolution in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Enlightenment period, or the Age of Reason, ended the dominance of Christian faith in the Western world. While this situation led to the rise of rationalism, skepticism, humanism, and liberalism, it ultimately gave birth to secularism.

Despite its positive impact on science, politics, religious liberty, arts, and education, secularism’s materialistic orientation, denial of supernaturalism, and skepticism toward faith of any kind allowed human reason to replace the Bible’s authority. The negative aspects of secularism gradually eroded the Christian faith. The fourth trumpet must be understood as describing the partial darkening of the spiritual sources of the true light, namely the Bible, under the prevailing influence of secularism (Rev. 11:7).

There are five elements mentioned in Rev. 8:12. The question is, “Where do we find all these elements together: sun, moon, stars, day, night?” The answer is, in the Creation story, particularly in the first and fourth days of creation. We see here that every element in Creation dealing with light is being affected by the darkness. Satan’s direct attack on Creation was the Evolution theory that arose at this time in history when the darkening of truth is taking place.

V13. “A vulture.” Greek word aetos may mean both “a vulture” and “an eagle.” The aetos here in 8:13 is probably the vulture (cf. Rev. 19:17–18). In the Old Testament, the vulture is a symbol of impending judgments and disaster (Ezek. 32:4; Hos. 8:1). The vulture here in Rev. 8:13 also evokes Jesus’ words with regards to the Second Coming: “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Matt. 24:28; Luke 17:37).

Although the first four trumpets were “woes” themselves, they were mainly the divine warnings to the wicked. The scene now is moving from the divine warnings to the manifestation of the demonic woes. They are now to be unleashed. The next two trumpets plaques represent “spiritual torment and death” which result from demoniac activities on those who persist in resisting the divine invitation to repent. In the next three trumpets there is an intensification of divine judgments on those who are spiritually dead as the result of apostasy and persisting in hostility towards the gospel. The worst is yet to come.