



# *Erchomai*-nia in the seven churches of Asia: Revelation's response to eschatological imminency

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## Abstract

Commentators on Revelation routinely note that the content of the seven seals in chapter 6 corresponds closely with Jesus' apocalyptic Olivet Discourse found in each of the Synoptic Gospels. This article first reviews the literary similarities between Jesus' teaching in the Discourse and John's first judgment cycle of seven seals. It then looks at historical parallels between these and the account of Josephus in *The Jewish War*. Postulating an early date for Revelation, the article then explores the possibility that *erchomai*-nia has broken out in the churches in Asia. Evidence for political and economic disturbance in the province of Asia in the late 60s CE is presented. Jesus' prophetic teaching about the fall of Jerusalem, seemingly fulfilled in the war in Judea and the encirclement of Jerusalem by Roman troops, has provoked a mind-set of eschatological imminency in some Asian believers. John's Apocalypse, particularly in the seven seals, seeks to address this alarmist perspective and to present a different timetable related to Jesus' second coming.

**Keywords:** Revelation, seven seals, Olivet Discourse, parousia, Jewish War

## Introduction

'The book of John offers the key to everything!' exclaims Alinardo in Umberto Ecco's medieval mystery novel, *The Name of the Rose* (Ecco 1980:303). The monk is responding to Adso's question as to 'why he thought the key to the sequence of crimes lay in the book of Revelation.' The thesis in this article is a more modest one. While Revelation may not hold the key to everything, it can provide insight into eschatological issues of the late first century, particularly how the seven seals relate to a noted apocalyptic pericope found in each of the Synoptic Gospels.

John's apparent use of the Olivet Discourse as a template for the first cycle of judgments in Revelation has perplexed commentators on the book. Most commentaries on Revelation 6 routinely mention that the seals in chapter 6 correspond closely with Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Since this author views the rhetorical situation of the Asian audience as situated amidst the political and religious turmoil at the end of the 60s CE<sup>1</sup>, it seems likely that a parousiac fervor had developed at this time among the Christian communities not only in Judea but also in Asia. Preterist scholars such as Chilton (1987:82) and Gentry (1989:131) recognize the literary similarities between the Olivet Discourse and the Seven Seals. However, they see John prophesying against Israel rather than Rome, thus undermining its significance for John's Asian audience. The recent martyrdom of Peter and Paul along with

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<sup>1</sup> This article builds on the hypothesis of Revelation's early dating (cf. Wilson 2005).



that of a great multitude of believers in Rome around 65, the outbreak of the Jewish War in Judea in 66, and the suicide of Nero in 68 leading to a crisis in the principate has signalled Christians that Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of the temple and his return might be fulfilled (Wilson, 2002:5, 54, 72). As Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea heeded Jesus' warning to flee, some fled to Pella and other places of refuge such as Gilead and Bashan. This flight is mentioned in the Christian apocalypse, *Ascension of Isaiah* 4:13: 'And many faithful and saints, when they saw him for whom they were hoping, who was crucified, Jesus the Lord Christ... of these few will be left in those days as his servants, fleeing from desert to desert as they await the coming of the Beloved'<sup>2</sup>. Here the hope is expressed that the 'Beloved One' (Jesus) would come back. But as Pixner (2006:317) writes, 'With the fall of Masada in 73/74...the hope of an early parousia had waned'. While archaeological and textual evidence for this flight to Pella is very sparse, Bourke (2013:71) opines, 'No one piece of evidence viewed in isolation carries any great weight, but viewed together they form a more coherent whole, suggesting a flight to Pella was possible'.

Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, noted that the apostle Philip was buried in Hierapolis while John the apostle 'sleeps' in Ephesus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.xxxi.2; 5.xxiv.2–3). Polycrates thus recalls an emigration of Jewish leaders undoubtedly with followers from Judea to western Asia Minor. Monroy (2015:167) suggests that this migration 'could have taken place at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 under Vespasian and Titus'. Thus John was not only a Jewish refugee from the war zone but a leader in the Jesus movement recently persecuted in Rome. Possibly for these reasons the Roman governor of Asia, either C. Fonteius Agrippa or M. Sullius Nerullinus (Marek 2016:586–587), decided to place him in exile on the island of Patmos until the turbulent situation settled down. While on Patmos, John received his revelation of Jesus Christ<sup>3</sup>. The coming of Jesus Christ is one of the major themes of Revelation. From its multivalent opening—Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ which signals both its generic and eschatological content (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13)—to Jesus' own announcement of coming (*erchomai*) in judgment to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:11; ἔρχομαί σοι) and the threefold triumphant announcement, 'I am coming (*erchomai*) soon', in the final chapter (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20), the idea of parousia fills the book. On the one hand, Revelation seems to play into the end-time interpretation sweeping the Seven Churches. Yet it might also have been written to have a dampening effect on its audience. As John reinterprets the Olivet Discourse, will some of its prophecies be fulfilled in their generation or will there be a delay of the parousia?

In this article first the literary similarities between Jesus' teaching in the Little Apocalypse and John's first judgment cycle will be reviewed. It will then look at historical parallels between these and the account of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem described by Jewish and Roman historians like Josephus. Finally, postulating an early date for Revelation, it will suggest that *erchomai*-nia had broken out in the churches in Asia and that one of the rhetorical functions of Revelation was to correct a misunderstanding about the time of the Lord's return.

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<sup>2</sup> For the translation see Knibb (1985:162) following the reading for 'Beloved' in B C D in note n. Knibb (1985:149) observes: 'This section of the Ascension is clearly later than the death of Nero in A.D. 68 because it refers to the expectation that Nero would come again as the "Antichrist" (see 4:2b-4a); presumably a little time would have been needed for this belief to develop, and this suggests a date at the earliest toward the end of the first century'. But why are decades needed for this belief to develop? The Nero *redivivus* myth saw its first pretender a year later in 69 CE (Wilson 2007a:116).

<sup>3</sup> Revelation is not pseudonymous since the author identifies himself in 1:1, 4, 9, and 22:8. Of course, the identity of this John is highly debated. Was he the apostle, the elder, a prophet, or some other unknown John? The authorship section in all modern commentaries on Revelation surveys this issue. For a brief summary of the issues see Wilson (2002:8). It must be emphasized that throughout church history only one grave for John has been visited by pilgrims in Ephesus (e.g., Egeria *Pereg.* 44).



### Literary connections between the seven seals and the Olivet discourse

That a close relationship exists between the seven seals of Revelation and Jesus' Olivet Discourse has frequently been observed by commentators. For example, Charles (1920:158) remarks, 'Even a cursory comparison of these lists shows that they practically present the same material'<sup>4</sup>. The Discourse's conspicuous absence from the Fourth Gospel has prompted commentators like Farrar (1884:428) to suggest that 'the Apocalypse is a stormy comment upon the great discourse of our Lord on Olivet'. This relationship has been explained further. In his well-known monograph on the subject Vos (1965:181) states, 'Both the order of the depicted events and the various depictions themselves have not infrequently been attributed to the Apocalypticist's acquaintance with the discourse recorded in Mark 13 (Matt. 24, Lk. 21)'. Speaking of Mark 13, Nel (2014:365-366) writes, 'The items listed here correspond with those mentioned in Revelation 6, and even in the same order, indicating the generality of the signs. It seems that it reflects a stock list of disasters and travails in eschatological terms'. The similarities seem to suggest a pre-synoptic tradition incorporating the development of a shared set of tropes<sup>5</sup>.

The following chart shows the literary relationship between Revelation and the Synoptics, particularly Luke (Wilson 2007a:77).<sup>6</sup>

| <b>Revelation 6</b>  | <b>Matthew 24</b>   | <b>Mark 13</b>  | <b>Luke 21</b>  |
|--|---|---|---|
| Seal 1. Conqueror as false Christ (1–2)  | False Christs (4–5)   | False Christs (5–6)   | False Christs (8)   |
| Seal 2. Wars (3–4)   | Wars (6–7a)   | Wars (7–8a)   | Wars (9–10)   |
| Seal 3. Famine (5–6)   | Famines (7b)  | Earthquakes (8b)  | Earthquakes (11)  |
| Seal 4. Pestilence [Death] (7–8)   | Earthquakes (7c)  | Famines (8c)  | Famines and pestilences (11)  |
| Seal 5. Persecution (9–11)   | Persecutions (9–10)   | Persecutions (9, 11–13)   | Persecutions (12–19)  |
| Seal 6. Earthquake, solar eclipse, ensanguinal moon, stars falling, sky rolling up; people fearful (12–16) | Solar & lunar eclipse, stars falling, heavenly bodies shaken (29) | Solar & lunar eclipse, stars falling, heavenly bodies shaken (24) | Solar, lunar & astral signs, heavenly bodies shaken; people fainting from fear (11b, 25–26) |
| Seal 7. Heavenly silence (8:1)   | Son of Man comes (30)   | Son of Man comes (26)   | Son of Man comes (27)   |

<sup>4</sup> It is remarkable that Aune (1998:2.389-392), for all his interest in sources and traditions, fails to develop this relationship to the Olivet Discourse in his literary analysis of chapter 6. This omission is likewise evident in Aune's discussion of the possible influences of the Synoptic sayings on Revelation (1998:1.cxxvi).

<sup>5</sup> The language of Barclay (2016:174) is consciously paralleled and who discusses the similarities between Matthew 23 and 1 Thessalonians 2.

<sup>6</sup> The only difference between the chart here and the published chart called 'Seven Seals and the Apocalypses in the Synoptic Gospels' is that 'famines and pestilences' have been combined.



This chart differs in several ways from that presented by Charles (1920:158)<sup>7</sup>. In the first position for the Synoptic Apocalypses Charles shows 'Wars', while for Seal 1 'War'. However, the emphasis in the Synoptics is the false Christs, while in Revelation 6:2 it is on the rider, not war. The rider of the first seal, after being identified, is subsequently referred to three times with personal pronouns. In fact, πόλεμος is not even used in the verse but instead νικάω, the key word used repeatedly in chapters 2–3 and then in 5:5 with the Lamb. In the second place Charles's 'International Strife' has been changed to 'War'. Charles keeps 'Famines' and 'Pestilences' in individual slots in Luke. Finally, he fails to include Seal 7 as well as the coming of the Son of Man.

Court (1979:51) presents a much more complex chart of the relationship between the seven seals of Revelation 6 and the apocalyptic tradition of the Synoptic Gospels, which purports to give 'a fairer picture of the total situation'. However, his chart does not add anything to the simpler chart presented above. John's omission of the triumphant coming of the Son of Man with the vindication of the elect is an important divergence that, according to Court (1979:52), 'is deferred until its proper place in the Seer's extended sequence of events (Rev. 19ff.)'<sup>8</sup>. Thus any idea of imminence suggested by *erchomai* in the opening chapters (Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:11) is absent in a noteworthy way in the seventh seal.

## Seal 1

There is general unanimity among commentators regarding the identification of the four<sup>9</sup> riders, or cavaliers<sup>10</sup>, in the first four seals of Revelation 6:1–8 except for the first. What is the symbolic meaning of the rider on the white horse? Is this a messianic figure representing Christ in his triumph as victor over death and Hades, or is it a false Christ epitomized by the second beast/false prophet whose job is to elicit worship for the first beast? If Jesus' apocalyptic teaching has influenced the form and content of John's vision, can this help us in determining which interpretation is most plausible? In the Olivet Discourse the appearance of a false Christ is predicted first<sup>11</sup>. Therefore Vos (1965:182) draws this exegetically viable conclusion: 'If the seals...are based upon the consecutive parallels in the apocalyptic discourse, it is very likely that the first seal is also based upon an element of the same discourse'<sup>12</sup>. The work of the Antichrist parodies the triumph of Jesus and thus emphasises the false character of this rider's conquering.

## Seal 2

Instead of replicating the language of 'wars and rumours of wars' in Mark and Matthew and 'wars and insurrections' in Luke, John uses more metaphorical language. Charles (1920:165) suggests that here John has followed another Jesus saying with eschatological force drawn from Matthew 10:34 and Luke 11:51 where he declares, Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον βαλεῖν εἰρήνην ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν· οὐκ ἦλθον βαλεῖν εἰρήνην ἀλλὰ μάχαιραν.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles's chart is reproduced by Court (1979:49). Vos (1965:186) also presents a chart on this relationship; a chart in Afrikaans can be found in Du Rand (2007:266).

<sup>8</sup> Boxall (2006:105) also notes this important point.

<sup>9</sup> The trope of four severe judgments is found in Ezekiel 14:21: τέσσαρας ἐκδικήσεις μου τὰς πονηρὰς ῥομφαίαν καὶ λιμὸν καὶ θηρία πονηρὰ καὶ θάνατον. Again John adapts his material by omitting wild beasts and inserting 'conqueror' in the first place. The other three rider judgments follow Ezekiel's order.

<sup>10</sup> Zechariah similarly saw a rider and four coloured horses sent forth into the earth (1:8–11).

<sup>11</sup> Boxall (2006:106) rightly identifies the Antichrist in the first seal in his chart.

<sup>12</sup> Aune (1992:2.394), however, demurs: 'However, there are no convincing arguments for accepting this identification'.



### Seal 3

Here John follows the order of Matthew introducing ‘famine’ by using a description of its results, a trope found in numerous ancient writers<sup>13</sup>. Attempts by scholars such as Hemer (2001:158-159) attempt to link this particular famine with a decree issued by Domitian in 92 CE<sup>14</sup>, this view has foundered because that decree was never enforced in Asia<sup>15</sup>.

### Seal 4

John’s linkage of pestilence (aka death; θάνατος) as a consequence of sword, famine, and wild animals is a traditional motif drawn from Old Testament judgment texts (i.e., 2 Chronicles 20:9; Jeremiah 24:10; Ezekiel 5:17). Of the Synoptic authors, only Luke similarly draws a close connection between the two. However, he substitutes λοιμός for θάνατος. As Marshall (1978:765) writes, ‘λοιμός ... is traditionally linked with λοιμός’.

### Seal 5

Rapske (1994:399) sees the persecutions of Paul recorded in Acts being anticipated in the Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 21:12 being handed over to ‘synagogues and prisons’ is fulfilled in Acts 6:9; 9:2, 21; 22:19, while standing before ‘kings and governors’ is fulfilled with his appearance before Herod Agrippa as well as Felix and Festus (Acts 23:26–26:32)<sup>16</sup>. The cry of those under the throne, ἕως πότε... οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδικεῖς τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν, echoes the plaintiff pleas of the psalmists for divine vindication (e.g., Psalms. 13:2 [12:3 LXX]; 94:3 [93:3 LXX])<sup>17</sup>. The expression ἕως πότε, according to Beale (1999:392), ‘is typically used throughout the Greek OT for questions concerning when God will finally punish persecutors and vindicate the oppressed’. Those speaking are explicitly identified as having been killed, undoubtedly for their witness like Antipas (Revelation 2:13). After being given a white robe, they are told to rest longer until others are killed through persecution before God can vindicate them. That this group is told to ἀναπαύσονται ἔτι χρόνον μικρὸν suggests that the promised rest at the end of persecution would not happen in the near future but be delayed until later.

### Seal 6

While the heavenly signs heralding judgment follow in Revelation, these signs do not appear next in the Olivet Discourse. Instead Jesus gives warnings about the abomination of desolation (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14), the desolation of Jerusalem (Luke 21: 20-24), and the flight of the righteous (Matthew 24:16–20; Mark 13:14–18; Luke 21:21), content absent in John’s seven seals. However, these motifs are introduced later in Revelation 11–13 and 16–17. In the Olivet Discourse earthquakes are one of the signs of judgment. However, this sign is omitted in the

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cicero, *Verr.* 3.81.

<sup>14</sup> Hemer (2001:158) further states that the edict provides ‘interesting light here on the likely dating of the Revelation’. He prefers a late date for the book.

<sup>15</sup> Suetonius, *Dom.* 7.2, 14.2; see Kraybill (1996:148).

<sup>16</sup> Rapske (1994:399) also notes that ‘prisons’ is not found in the Matthean and Markan versions and that in them the order is ‘governors and kings’, which suggests ‘only Gentile potentates are in view’. The Lukan ‘kings and governors’ is further ‘confirmed in the order in Acts’.

<sup>17</sup> The close literary resemblance of this cry to that made to Antiochus V by the anti-Hasmonean inhabitants of Acra, ἕως πότε οὐ ποιήσῃ κρίσιν καὶ ἐκδικήσεις τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἡμῶν (1 Maccabees 6:22), appears coincidental.



earlier seals of Revelation 6. It finally appears in the sixth seal in the singular as 'the great earthquake' that introduces the other heavenly signs that precede the last judgment. John personifies the first four judgements using language borrowed from Zechariah 1:8 and 6:1–8. As Charles (1920: 160) explains, 'Now, since "earthquakes" cannot be so personified, they are related to the sixth Seal, and their place is taken by "pestilence"'<sup>18</sup>.

Signs in the sun, moon, and stars that signal coming judgment are a standard trope in apocalyptic literature (Aune 1992:2.415–416; cf. Smalley 2012:166–167). The description of the dissolution of the cosmos in Revelation 6 most closely follows the language in Mark and Matthew, which themselves echo Old Testament language (cf. Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15). The language in Luke 21 is more general. Nevertheless, Vos (1965:185) observes that 'only Luke includes a specific reference to the fear which shall overcome men in their expectation of the approaching events'. This feature is given a greater development in Revelation 6:15–17, where seven groups within Greco-Roman society are specifically mentioned as fearful of the approaching apocalyptic judgment (Wilson 2002:293). Charles (1920:159) renders a mixed opinion as to John's source here: on the one hand, he asserts that the author 'shows a greater dependence of the Lucan form of the narrative' but later claims that the language of the heavenly signs in Mark and Matthew is 'almost the same language as in our text'. It is therefore difficult to decide which Gospel(s) John is more dependent upon.

## Seal 7

The tension building through the opening of the first six seals is suddenly interrupted. Instead an interlude is introduced wherein the 144,000 and the great multitude are introduced in chapter 7. The opening of the seventh seal occurs only at the conclusion of this interlude. In 8:1 Seal 7 is finally opened with the result: ἐγένετο σιγή ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ὡς ἡμῶριον. No break for thirty minutes, however, occurs in the Olivet Discourse. After the heavenly signs are observed, the Son of Man comes, and he is universally seen by the nations who mourn his appearance (Matthew 24:28–30). This departure from the parallel tracking that has occurred up to this point is notable. John, by departing from the Olivet Discourse tradition, seems to be signalling to his audience that the expected coming of the Son of Man will not happen. Rather, there will be a delay in which the sealing and expansion of the body of Christ to every nation, people, tribe, and language must occur.

## Sources for John's use of the Olivet Discourse

The source of John's imagery has been debated. Du Rand (2007:266) suggests: 'Die enigste verklaring is waarskynlik dat al hierdie geskrifte (met parallele) teruggryp na tipiese eskatologiese en apokaliptiese oorlewerings'. Rather than relying on general traditions, the content of the seals suggests that the Revelator utilised specific ones reflected in the three Synoptic Apocalypses<sup>19</sup>. Charles (1920:159) concludes that John depended on the *vorlage* of the Little Apocalypse behind the present Synoptics instead of using two Gospels or oral tradition. Court (1979:49-51) concurs

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<sup>18</sup> Charles (1920:160) suggests a second 'weightier' reason for the transposition of 'earthquakes' to the sixth seal, observing that the order of the seals is related to their growing intensity, hence 'earthquakes' was moved. However, such an intensification is difficult to see in the order, which is presented as simply a literary device. The content of the six seals was undoubtedly happening concurrently in various degrees.

<sup>19</sup> Although Smalley (2012:146) suggests that Luke is the pattern for the content, nevertheless, he notes that 'this comparability need not imply John's literary dependence on Luke'.



that the author of Revelation is dependent upon a substantial portion of the Gospel apocalyptic tradition, but this dependence is primarily on overall pattern and parallels of order.

Bauckham's essay 'John for readers of Mark' offers a potential fresh understanding to this relationship. In it he asks several key questions regarding the relationship of these two Gospels. One reason that leads Bauckham (1998b:158-161) to conclude that there is a relationship between Mark and John is the existence of narrative sequence, which he traces over the course of both books. As we have seen, narrative sequence is also detectable in Revelation 6 and thus suggestive of a relationship with the Olivet Discourse. Given the literary relationship in the seven seals that has just been presented, it might be useful to consider a complementary subject: 'Synoptic Gospels for readers of Revelation'. Of course, this begs the question when the Gospels were written and circulated among the churches of Asia<sup>20</sup>. Commentators such as Carson and Moo (2005:156, 182, 210) suggest a date of the late 60s for Matthew, the late 50s or the 60s for Mark, and the mid or late 60s for Luke. This conservative dating accords with the premise of Robinson (1976:10) who has advanced the controversial but credible hypothesis 'that the whole of the New Testament was written before 70'. It is thus conceivable that John's audience was familiar with the Olivet Discourse, either through oral tradition or one or more written Gospels.

Presuming such a knowledge in his audience, John assumed they would have 'ears to hear' the content of the seals, like his intertextual allusions to such people and events as Balaam, Jezebel, the Exodus, and Megiddo. This then begs the question how the audience would view John's representation of the Olivet Discourse. Would they see it as complementing or supplementing Jesus' prophecy? Given their present existential crisis and assuming an early date before the fall of Jerusalem<sup>21</sup>, John's audience were supposed to see the seals as a prophetic updating of Jesus' teaching now applicable for their own *sitz im leben*. The similar language and symbolism between the seven seals and the Olivet Discourse must have clued the audience that identical prophetic events were being presented. Bauckham finds John providing explicit help with Mark for readers of the Fourth Gospel, and his point that the literary relationship was not accidental is well taken. He (1998b:170) concludes that 'there are points where the text of the Gospel virtually requires to be understood as inviting readers/hearers who also know Mark to relate the two Gospel narratives in a complementary way'. John is providing similar assistance for readers of the Apocalypse to interpret the Olivet Discourse in their own rhetorical and historical situation.

John's familiarity with oral tradition or a written Gospel was not necessarily a prerequisite for his use of the Olivet Discourse as an inter-text for the Seven Seals. If John the Revelator can be identified as the disciple/apostle, then he had personal autopsy of the discourse (Matthew 24:3; Mark 13:3; Luke 20:45). This option is seldom discussed in scholarly literature because of the prevalence to postulate the existence of two, even three Johns in the Ephesian community. While Revelation does not explicitly state that John the apostle is the same as John the Revelator, there is much internal evidence to support that conclusion and no objective evidence that would contravene such an identification (Wilson forthcoming). In a recent major commentary on the Greek text Smalley (2012:4) offers that 'the further conclusion may be drawn that Revelation antedated the Gospel, and was composed by John the apostle himself'. If this hypothesis is accepted, it is then possible to postulate that the seven seals are not dependent upon either the Synoptics or oral tradition, but upon John's own recollection of Jesus' discourse. Thus any

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<sup>20</sup> The argument by Bauckham (1998a:30-44 esp.) that the Gospels were written to circulate around the churches generally and not just within particular communities is the most plausible perspective.

<sup>21</sup> This crisis was a real, not perceived, one, contra Yarbro Collins (1984:106). For a brief discussion of the issue of 'perceived crisis' see Wilson (1997:74-76).



variations in the Seven Seals could stem from the author himself and not his dependence upon oral or written sources. John's own interpretation of the Discourse perhaps became foremost for his audience as he utilises Jesus' apocalyptic teaching for his own rhetorical purposes in Revelation 6<sup>22</sup>.

### **The rhetorical function of the seven seals among the Asian churches**

Regarding function, Court (1979:52) offers this the intriguing statement, 'When the author of Revelation is so dependent upon the apocalyptic tradition used in the Synoptic Gospels, the possibility that he has used this material for substantially the same reasons as the Evangelists and for a similar purpose is worthy of serious consideration'. What might have been the purpose for which one or more of the Evangelists used this tradition? This purpose is perhaps made most explicit by the identical narrative aside found in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14: ὁ ἀναγινώσκων νοεῖτω. This aside, although absent in Luke, is followed in each of the Synoptics by the same imperatival injunction: τότε οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ φευγέτωσαν εἰς τὰ ὄρη (Matthew 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:21). Blomberg (1992:358–59) notes the significance for this appeal to a Judean audience in the late 60s: 'At the beginning of the Roman war with Israel in the late sixties, many Christians did indeed flee Jerusalem perhaps recalling Jesus' words'. The narrative aside made by the Evangelists alerted their audiences to the prophetic significance of the events occurring around them that were fulfilling Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse. They now needed to act upon that information to preserve their lives. The four ὁδὲ sayings similarly function as narrative asides in the Apocalypse (13:10, 18; 14:12; 17:9). Their critical placement by John in his visions of the beasts and the great whore suggests a dire situation that demands an immediate response by his audience<sup>23</sup>.

The narrative aside in Matthew and Mark is replaced in Luke 21:20 by the admonition, 'When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies...'. Only in Luke is Jerusalem specifically mentioned as the place that the armies surround and from which the faithful must flee (also v. 24). As Marshall (1978:770) notes, 'Mark refers cryptically to the "desolating sacrilege" and to the need for the people of Judaea to flee.... By contrast Luke specifically names Jerusalem and refers clearly to a siege'. Marshall's explanation (1978:771) is that Luke has rewritten Mark to clarify the allusion to the events of 66–70 CE in the light of the historical events. Yet a more satisfying view is that Mark's cryptic language was clarified by Luke before 70 CE to make it more intelligible to Gentile believers<sup>24</sup>. Whether he is accepting his own interpretation or that of the Evangelists, John presents the events occurring in Judea and beyond as fulfilling Jesus' prophecy.

Court (1979:54) also asks, 'If the author of Revelation is in any real sense an heir to this tradition, then we would expect this work to contain a reapplication of these ideas to a new set of circumstances subsequent to the composition of the Synoptic Gospels'. But why is a new set of circumstances necessary for there to be a reapplication? And why does this need to be subsequent to the Gospels, unless a late date of Revelation is assumed? Indeed John does reapply these ideas, but to the same circumstances that are confronting Jewish believers in

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<sup>22</sup> Again, this is not to discount the fact that John's Asian audience may also have been familiar with the Olivet Discourse through one or more of the Synoptic Gospels.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the literary function of narrative asides see Aune (2003:312-314). Regarding the first saying in 13:10 Aune (1992:2:751) writes, 'This first instance functions as an explanatory narrative aside'. See also Du Rand (2016).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Geldenhuys (1951:532); Beasley-Murray (1954:260). Ellis (1974:244) observes that 'Luke adopts a version of Jesus' 'abomination' oracle (Mark 13:14 ff.) that has been restated for a generation experiencing its fulfilment'.



Jerusalem and Judea along with Jewish and Gentile believers in Diaspora locations like Asia. Carson (2007:141) notes how issues of date affect an author's perspective: 'If two historians wrote the history of World War II, one writing around 1953 during the Eisenhower years, and another around 1993 during the Clinton administration, one would expect to find significant differences of perspective. The later writer, after all, would almost certainly be influenced in some way by Viet Nam. If a third historian wrote a history of World War II in 2003, after 9/11, doubtless the stance would be discernibly different again'.

The fulfilment of the predictions of the Olivet Discourse paralleled by the Seven Seals can also be seen in Jewish and Roman historical events that occurred during the decade of the 60s. The following chart presents these interesting parallels:

| Revelation 6   | Contemporaneous Historical Events  |
|--|--|
| Seal 1. Conqueror as false Christ (1–2)  | Josephus: false prophet ( <i>B.J.</i> 6.285–86); false Jesus ( <i>B.J.</i> 6.301–9)  |
| Seal 2. War (3–4)  | 66 Judaea revolts; 67 Gaul revolts; 68 Spain revolts; 69 Roman civil war   |
| Seal 3. Famine (5–6)   | Josephus ( <i>B.J.</i> 5.424–38; 6.193–213)  |
| Seal 4. Death [Pestilence] (7–8)   | Tacitus ( <i>Ann.</i> 16.13); Suetonius ( <i>Nero</i> 39)  |
| Seal 5. Persecution (9–11)   | Suetonius ( <i>Nero</i> , 16); Tacitus ( <i>Ann.</i> 15.44)  |
| Seal 6. Earthquake, solar eclipse, ensanguinal moon, stars falling, sky rolling up (12–14) | Josephus: star and comet ( <i>B.J.</i> 6.289–90), chariots and troops ( <i>B.J.</i> 6.298) seen in the sky; Cassius Dio (64.11): ensanguinal moon seen by Vitellius in 69 CE |
| Seal 7. Heavenly silence (8:1)   |  |

Whether these prophetic events were expected to occur seriatim is unknown. However, the suggestion by Beale (1999:370, 371) that they do not is appealing. He writes that 'more probably the disasters are simultaneous.... the Synoptic eschatological discourse, on which Rev. 6:1–8 is based, portray events of tribulation occurring simultaneously'. This is precisely what was happening during the Jewish War and the Year of the Four Emperors in Rome. As Jones (1992:117) writes, 'Such an extensive civil war coming after a century of peace could well have convinced John that the second coming was nigh and motivated him to write the Apocalypse to prepare his people'.

Nel (2015:300) accords the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 a similar rhetorical function. Its apocalyptic rhetoric addresses the serious situation that the Roman church was then facing and reminded them that Jesus suffered similarly by the Romans. Opposition, division, persecution, and betrayal were 'meaningful subjects to the Christian community that had suffered for the name of Jesus and was expecting more suffering'. He concludes by noting that the Christian community in Rome during the late 60s did experience such things according to the historical evidence<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Arguing along similar lines of dating as this article, Nel (2015:301) writes, 'No period better suits the internal and external evidence of the Gospel than that of the Jewish War against Roman forces that led to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE'.



## Birth Pangs in Asia

The political upheaval following Nero's suicide, according to Kreitzer (1996:88 n.6), 'is certainly responsible for helping to create an atmosphere of eager expectation and excitement concerning what the future held in store'. The 'birth pangs' occurring in Rome and Jerusalem were certainly known by the residents of Asia. Coins issued in Asia portrayed the bust of Galba while coins of Otho and Vitellius were minted in Antioch and Alexandria (Wilson 2005:173). In July 69 Mucianus, the governor of Syria, passed from Antioch to Byzantium with an advance guard followed by over 13,000 veterans of the VI Legion (Tacitus *Hist.* 2.83–84). Along the way locals were pressed to contribute to the war effort (Morgan 2006, 188–189). Undoubtedly emissaries were also sent to Asia, the richest province in the Roman East, to solicit generous financial support for Vespasian's quest to consolidate power. Since the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 CE, pilgrimages by Asian Jews to the temple were undoubtedly interrupted (cf. Acts 1:9; 21:27). And it is unlikely that the Roman authorities would have allowed the collection of the annual temple tax, lest these funds find their way into rebel hands (Stebnicka 2015:117–120).

Such troubles soon appeared within Asia and the Seven Churches. The first Nero pretender appeared on the Aegean island of Cynthus in July 69. Calpurnius Asprenas, the new governor of Galatia and Pamphylia, took him into custody and had him executed. The corpse was then taken to Ephesus where it was displayed publicly before being removed to Rome (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8–9; Suetonius, *Ner.* 57). Nevertheless, the belief in a resurrected Nero (Nero *redivivus*) persisted in Asia (Wilson 2007a, 116). Thonemann (2011:152) writes, 'The eastern perturbations appear to have led to a period of turbulence, even crisis, in the province of Asia'.<sup>26</sup> The breakdown of civil order apparently encouraged local dissidents to revolt. A vicious civil war occurred in Sardis between Pardalas and Tyrrhenus. That Laodicea and Hierapolis issued coins in the early 70s bearing the image of the proconsul T. Clodius Eprius Marcellus and proclaiming concord (*homonoia*) suggests that these cities in the Lycus valley were also involved. This revolt was put down by the Romans during the early years of Vespasian's reign.

Charles (1920:160–61) suggests that the contents of some of the seals have 'more or less clear historical reference to contemporary events'. He interprets these as: Seal 1–Parthian Empire, Seal 2–Rome as the source of social disorder and destruction, Seal 3–possibly the edict of Domitian, and Seal 5–martyrdoms under Nero. However, he concludes that 'these references are due to our author, and do not belong to the original eschatological scheme'. Nevertheless, he suggests that 'such contemporary historical references are, however, to be looked for'. But since Charles dates Revelation late, he sees the contemporary events as Domitianic and those of the 60s as *ex eventu* prophecy. This article has looked for contemporary historical references and argued that the contemporary events addressed by John fit better in the late 60s and that the coming destruction of the temple in 70 CE is *ante eventu*<sup>27</sup>.

## Conclusion

Since Jesus' ascension to heaven in Acts 1:9–10, Christians have longed for his return. In this author's lifetime there have been three movements predicting the return of Jesus Christ around specific dates—1988, 2000, and 2011. 1988 was the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the

<sup>26</sup> I am also indebted to Thonemann for the information that follows, especially his note 47.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall (2001:88–97) is a recent commentator to concur with this assessment of dating. Nevertheless, I disagree with Marshall's hypothesis that the Apocalypse is a Jewish, not a Christian, document.



state of Israel, and prophecy teachers gave us 88 reasons why Jesus would return that year (Whisenant 1998). The new millennium in 2000, even though 2001 was technically its beginning, elicited all kinds of apocalyptic Y2K predictions regarding the global meltdown of the commercial world, especially the banking system. Prophecy teachers such as Jeffrey (1998) and Lindsey and Ford (1998) again had a heyday, writing numerous books to prepare their followers for the global consequences. Then 2011 brought attention to the California-based Harold Camping (2008) who predicted the end of the world. Of course, his prediction was in the spotlight along with other non-Christian ‘prophets’ who were similarly predicting a global catastrophic event in 2012 based on a certain reading of the Mayan calendar. Such irrational, even manic, behavior around the parousia is not peculiar to our time, however. Looking back over the history of the church, similar apocalyptic movements have happened: the Montanists, the beginning of the second millennium in 1000, the messianic claims of Sabbatai Zevi in Smyrna in 1666 (Wilson 2007b:77–78), and the Millerite movement that predicted the Second Advent in 1843<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, it should not be strange that the early church found itself in a similar mind-set of *erchomai*-nia in the late 60s near the completion of the one generation, forty-year period, prophesied by Jesus. His teaching about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple had produced an eschatological expectation among many Asian believers whose world was now also in crisis. Therefore, John, by re-visioning the Olivet Discourse in the seven seals, was attempting to correct misunderstandings prevalent among his audience that the fulfilment of these signs was signaling that the Lord’s return was imminent.

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<sup>28</sup> Wainwright (1993) traces some of this history in Part One of his *Mysterious Apocalypse*.



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