

Revelation 7:1-8. The Sealing Vision



This is the continuation of [The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's Horae Apocalypticae.](#)

An Election. The Faithful Distinguished Amidst Increasing Apostasy, A.D. 300-400.

[1] ¶ And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.

[2] And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea,

[3] Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.

[4] And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel.

[5] Of the tribe of Juda were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand.

[6] Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Nephthalim were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand.

[7] Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand.

[8] Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were sealed twelve thousand. (Rev 7:1-8)

IT IS OBVIOUS that the earthquake had past, inasmuch as it is said in the first verse that "The winds should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea;" and in the twelfth verse of the next chapter, the sun, moon, and stars are spoken of as again having shone forth. Still further proof is this that the earthquake, spoken of in our last lecture, was a symbolic scene, and not "the great day of the Lord's second personal coming."

In continuance of this sixth-seal vision, the Apostle saw four destroying tempest-angels under temporary restraint; the command being given from the angel of the Lord to "hurt not" anything on the Roman earth for a certain time. The intent of this figure is explained in his unintentional manner by

Gibbon, when, speaking of the Gothic invasion, he says, "The threatening tempest of barbarians, which so soon subverted the foundation of Roman greatness, was still repelled or suspended on the frontiers." When so great a revolution in favor of Christianity had just taken place, we naturally feel inclined to ask why such a judgment should now be threatened? In seeking a reply to this, we are brought to a deeply interesting subject of inquiry, namely, what had been the progress of vital and spiritual religion when the outward and professing Church was thus exalted and fostered?

We have to look into the state of things and feelings in the now Christianized empire; and, first, as to the change effected in the temporal position of Christians at this period. The cross, once so despised, was now everywhere had in honor; justice was done to the memory of the martyrs, and their righteousness was acknowledged in public edicts. The living confessors of Christ were restored from mines and dungeons, and brought in triumph to their homes. Instead of caves, vaults, and catacombs in which to worship God, there arose in all directions magnificent churches, and the services were celebrated with much pomp and outward solemnity. Instead of apostasies, which had not been unfrequent under the late terror of persecution, candidates were now daily added to the throngs who crowded round the churches for baptism; and at the festivals of Easter and Whitsuntide, these newly baptized neophytes, in their white vestments, appeared in groups round each Christian edifice. The professing Church Catholic began to be assembled in general councils under imperial sanction, at which representatives attended from every province and tongue in the great empire. The palace gates were open to the holy delegates. The Emperor bowed down before them in respectful deference, prepared to render to them both the watchful care of a father and the dutiful obedience of a son. On a medal struck at that era appeared a Phoenix, all radiant with the rising sunbeams, representing the empire as risen into new life and hope.

Such being the outward prosperity of the Christian Church, can we wonder at its general exultation, or at the high-raised expectations then formed of Rome's future prospects, now that it had become a Christian nation? Nor was this expectation altogether unnatural. The remarkable tranquility which prevailed throughout the empire, immediately consequent upon Constantine's establishment of Christianity was recorded as the token of predicted latter-day blessedness. They thought they were become, as Israel of old, God's covenanted people – that both the present and future temporal blessings promised to Israel would attach to them; and, forgetting the warnings that Antichrist must first come, even some of the most eminent of the bishops spoke of these glories as about to be realized.

"What so many of the Lord's saints and confessors," said Eusebius, "before our time desired to see, and saw not, and to hear, and heard not, – that behold now before our eyes! It was of us the prophet spake when he told how the wilderness and the solitary place should be glad, and the desert rejoice and blossom as the lily. Whereas the Church was widowed and desolate, her children have now to exclaim, Make room! enlarge thy borders! the place is too strait for us. The promise is now fulfilling, 'In righteousness shalt thou be established; all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great

shall be the peace of thy children.'" So, too, with respect to other prophecies in his Commentary on Isaiah.

Such were the hopes of the professing Church. Can there be a greater contrast than existed between this prospect and that seen by the Apostle in the true perspective of future events? "I looked and saw four tempest-angels," or four destroying agents or powers, holding back the four winds indeed, but only for a time; and then ready at the word of command to let them go: this temporary restraint, it seemed, having soon to be withdrawn, and the Roman earth to be then desolated. But wherefore?

So the question rises as to the state of religion in this fourth century, and whether indications had already arisen of unfaithfulness to their Christian profession on the part of the newly converted proselytes from the Roman world to the Christian Israel.

I purposely so apply this term "Israel," because by it the Christian Church is evidently designated in the Revelation. To those who have observed what has been before noticed relative to the temple in the Apocalyptic vision, this name will not appear out of character. A high priest in Israelitish dress, an Israelitish altar, an Israelitish temple, will almost of necessity imply a correspondent Israel for the congregation. And as the former has been before shown to be symbolic of the Christian Church in the Apocalyptic scenery, so must the latter be explained, not of the literal Israel, but of the professing Christian Church. In the Church of Christ converted Gentiles were engrafted into the flock of the believing Israel, and are so spoken of in several places in Scripture. For example, by St. Peter the temple, sacrifices, and priesthood are all spoken of figuratively as designative of the Church of Christ. "Ye are an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices;" and again, "A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." So too St. Paul to the Gentile Christians of Galatia: "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise;" and again, "As many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and on the Israel of God." (Gal. 6:16) In the Epistle to the Church in Philadelphia we read, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God;" and some of the false professors of the gospel at that place are described and reproved as they "who say they are Jews, and are not." (Rev. 3:9, 12) Moreover, in that same address to a Gentile Church, it is intimated that such of them as shall overcome shall be citizens of the New Jerusalem; while at the close of this book it is distinctly implied that the "Holy City" shall only be for the twelve tribes of Israel. (Rev. 21:12) Further proofs to the same effect might be multiplied, but these will be deemed sufficient.

In accordance with these views, our own Church, in her Collect for Good Friday, uses the same language. After praying for Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics, we are taught to say, "And so fetch them home, blessed Lord, to thy flock, that they may be saved amongst the remnant of the true Israelites, and be made one fold, under one shepherd, Jesus Christ;" – in other words, numbered amongst the 144,000.

We find that the angels were desired to "hurt not the earth, etc., until these 144,000 servants of God should have been sealed in their foreheads."

What division of Israel then was this, this 144,000 to be sealed out of all the tribes? It is clear there is a distinction here implied. The true translation from the Greek is not, "of the tribe of Simeon, – of the tribe of Levi," etc.; but "out of the tribe of Simeon," etc. If then the twelve tribes signified the whole professing Church, what meant this sealing out of them? We must view it as pointing to the true spiritual body of Christ's elect people, undistinguished by man, but marked by the eye of the all-seeing God, however mixed up and involved they might apparently be in the world around them. Their interests and citizenship being in heaven, their affections are set on things above, in contradistinction to the worldly and the thoughtless, the lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, however these latter may be styled by a Christian name and enrolled in a Christian Church. And thus, "Hurt not – until the servants of God are safe," intimated to the Apostle that all were "not Israel who were of Israel," and that unfaithfulness was to be found in the body of men publicly recognized as the Church of believers.

And was that which was thus intimated to this servant of God in accordance with the actually existing state of things? We have seen that, after the overthrow of Paganism, the whole Roman Empire, with the emperor as head, became nominally Christian. No longer in any fear of persecution, men soon began to abuse the bounty of God. Hypocritical accessions to the faith were so numerous as to draw the notice of historians of the day; amongst others, of Eusebius, whom we found a short time before anticipating such glorious things for the Church. Arianism spread so fast that the saying, "Many are called, but few chosen," was only too true, according to the concurrent testimonies of living witnesses. More and more distinct, from this time, became the two bodies of nominal and real Christians; and henceforward, through the whole of the Apocalypse, this distinction is more clearly marked.

And here let me call your attention to a species of indirect evidence of much value, of which we shall find several instances in this part of Scripture. This principle has been termed allusive contrast. It may be thus illustrated. If, in the course of history, we read of any peculiar laws and penalties having been at any time enacted against certain specified crimes or habits, we feel at once that at that particular period there must have prevailed, to some extended degree, the habitual practice of the very evils which those laws were intended to correct. The description implies the corresponding opposite. So when Ezekiel spoke of the righteous man that "hath restored to the debtor his pledge," and "spoiled none by violence," etc., (Ezek. 18:7) it implied, by allusive contrast, that injustice and oppression characterized Judah in those days, and that violence and fraud were special sins that then called for God's rebuke.

Let us bear this principle in mind as we advance in the history of the sealed and unsealed Israel. We cannot doubt its having been the Saviour, the Angel of God, who gave the command, "Hurt not – till we have sealed the servants of God." There is a description by St. Paul of the seal of God. It is said to bear this motto, "The Lord knoweth them that are his;" and, "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2 Tim. 2:19) With this seal they were sealed in their foreheads, in token of their Lord's approval of their open and consistent course of holy walk. Illuminated by the

Saviour's influence and registered in his Book of Life, they were thus marked as for himself; and this sealing was given to them individually, as a preservative unto eternal salvation; and as a collective body, in token that a living succession of these sealed ones should be continued in all ages of the Church as the lights of the world and the witnesses for God.

The sealed ones are identified with the palm-bearing multitudes afterwards mentioned; and in this manner a glimpse is given in vision of their future blessedness. After coming out of a great tribulation, which was just then commencing, they are seen in perspective through the duration of time, in numbers numberless, with all their accumulated generations, safe arrived in the blessed presence of God. The palms they bore indicated their triumphant issue from the conflict; their white' robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb, were emblems of their justification through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. A welcome greeting sounded forth from the twenty-four representatives of the Church; and, from the angels, a united song of thanksgiving and praise to the Lamb, – the Author of his servants' redemption. But we must not anticipate. More of these hereafter.

We might here ask, and not without reason, Did not all the Church consider themselves as being of the number of the elect – of those whom the Holy Spirit sanctified? Else, why were they called Christians? But this general supposition, so often wanting support in fact, did it not in itself show that even at that early time no small deception had been progressing? Must there not have been some Antichristian principle which had taken root, and had led men to imagine that, without any real vitality, there might be a religion which would be equally efficacious; some ceremonial system, which, while less strict inwardly, would be outwardly more formal, and would equally serve to conduct them to the same termination?

Now let us see if, at that very period to which we have advanced, we can find an explanation of this distinction we have made, or rather, which was made by the angel, as before mentioned.

An esteemed writer of Church history says of these times, i.e., just after Constantine had established Christianity, "There was much outward religion, but this could not make men saints in heart and life. The true doctrine of justification by faith was scarce to be seen, and that of real conversion very much lost, or eternal baptism placed in its stead." Such is the testimony of many other able historians too numerous to be inserted here, but all telling the same story.

Our attention is particularly drawn by them to errors relative to baptism, which, partially in the third, but more eminently in the fourth century, became apparent, and may be considered as an essential development of the Antichristian apostasy. So far as the outward rite, all was in due order. Members were regularly admitted into the congregation of the visible Church by the bishops and presbyters. And thus far it was well. But we do not read of these newly baptized looking in faith to Jesus, as the soul's Light and Life, whereby alone to secure the spiritual blessings shadowed out in the sacrament. We read nothing of this. But we do read that exaggerated and unscriptural notions widely prevailed of the virtue attached to the outward

rate, as of itself sufficient to secure these blessings, i.e., when duly performed by the presbyter or priest, as it became the custom then to call him. Titles of honor had accumulated which led the way to these errors. One writer tells us that "baptism was called the seal, the illumination, the preservative, the investiture from corruption, the salvation." A bishop of that time says, "It was the ransom to captives, the remission of offenses, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the garment of light, the holy seal indissoluble, the chariot to heaven, the luxury of paradise, the procuring of the kingdom, the gift of adoption." Not only was a magical virtue attached to it for the washing away of sin, but all evil was supposed to be averted by it, as by a charm. New ceremonies too were added. It is said the candidate turned to the west, while the priest uttered words of exorcism, by which it was supposed he was delivered from the power of the Prince of darkness; then to the east, to receive with the immersion the illumination of the Spirit. He was then enrolled in the church register as one of the number of the Christian Israel. A crown was borne by him in token of his victory over sin and the world; a white dress put on to denote one washed from sin and robed for immortality: in this he was led up to the altar, and received with psalmody, in foretaste of future hymnings of the blessed. When first admitted as a candidate he was called "chosen," now was further added the title of "saint and faithful; "and so were called all who entered into the Church by baptism.

Another error likewise relative to baptism, which followed on those already named, was the practice of delaying the ceremony often till death was near. "This was done," says Neander, "that men might the longer give themselves to sin; and yet in the hour of death, being purified by the magical annihilation of their sins, might be received into eternal life." It was, in fact, what may be called "the extreme unction of that day." We cannot but regret that Constantine the Great fell himself into this error.

One of the most fatal mistakes which the Church at that period committed was "the holding reserve relative to God's written Word." It was made part of a religious system to observe a close reserve, except to the baptized, relative to one of the most important doctrinal truths, viz., the propitiatory atonement of the Son of God, as the great object of justifying and saving faith.

Beyond all this, it had begun to be deemed allowable, for approved ends, to pervert Scripture. Silent and slow advance had been made towards this point, by permitting tradition to supersede the written Word. No wonder then that the only true source of light, life, and justification to the soul should have been forgotten. No wonder that there arose a superstitious exaltation of the ceremonial; that misapprehensions of the proper functions of the clergy prevailed; the communion table changed into an altar; the commemorative supper into something approaching to a sacrifice of the mass. So did Judaism mix itself up with heathenism, and, as we shall soon see, serve materially to help forward the Antichristian and apostatizing principle to a fuller development; one, indeed, the grand object of which was (and ever has it been followed out with admirable consistency by its designing originator, the master spirit of evil), that it should, within the Christian Church itself,

while professedly exalting Christ and his institutions, practically set him aside out of its system, the priesthood, in one and all its offices, being substituted in his stead.

These were the great and growing evils which were marked out, in allusive contrast, by this significant action of the Apocalyptic angel. To these 144,000, and to these alone, were given the titles "called, and chosen, and faithful;" and these alone are said to have received God's seal on their foreheads, even the seal of baptism by the Holy Spirit. The nominal Church took these titles in virtue of outward rites; the spiritual Church through the direct ministry and revelation of Jesus Christ, made to them by himself, and were enrolled by him in his own register, – the Book of Life. Instead of an outward charm against evil, the Lord is himself their guard: "Hurt not the earth, till my servants are safe." Instead of white garments before men, they have the angel pointing them out as the blessed company who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and are received, but not until after a victorious conflict, with the triumphant emblem of palms in their hands, into the heavenly presence, amidst the hymnings of angels and their own hosannas of praise to their Saviour and God. Nor should we omit to notice that the professing Church, moreover, had its palmbearing; a practice already become customary. On the Sunday preceding Easter, the congregations used to go forth with palms and with hosannas to give greetings to their bishops and presbyters, the authors of their supposed salvation; and not without similar anticipations of future happiness, to place their palms on the altar and hymn Alleluias.

We have noticed Constantine as amongst those who fell into the error of deferring baptism until the immediate prospect of death. It will be interesting, before we conclude, to hear the account of this great man's last hours. The history is given by Eusebius. On finding his health declining, Constantine gathered the bishops round him, and declared his wish to have the rite of baptism administered, as that whereby all the sins of his past life were to be cleansed and washed away. "This," said he to them, "is the time so long looked for by me, thirsting and praying that I might partake of the salvation of God. This is the time for my enjoying the seal that confers immortality. I had wished to have partaken of this washing in the Jordan, where the Saviour was baptized as an example to us; but God, who knows what is best, has ordered that it should be here. Now then let there be no hesitation. If the Lord of life and death will that my life be prolonged, and it be once settled that I be numbered amongst His people, I promise I will lay down to myself a rule of life becoming." Then they, after the usual ritual, imparted to him the holy mysteries. " And thus Constantine, alone of Roman emperors, in the Church of the martyrdom of Jesus, was regenerated and made perfect; and, having the divine seal impressed upon him, he rejoiced "in spirit, and was filled with heavenly light. Then, after the other ceremonies, he put on a dress of white, bright as the light; for he would no more touch the purple; and raising his voice, he thanked God, and spoke of his happiness as having been thought worthy of eternal life. Then having admitted some of the generals and captains of his troops, as they wept around him, and wished him years of prolonged life, he answered them that he had now been made partaker of that which was the true life; that none but himself could be

aware of the blessings he had received; and that he was fain to depart, and not delay his passage to God! All this took place at the Whitsuntide festival; and on Whitsunday itself, at the noontide hour of the day by the sun, Constantine was received up to his God.”

It is clear that the writer of the foregoing account had, as well as Constantine, imbibed in no small degree some of those pernicious errors. Eusebius was Bishop of Caesarea in A.D. 313. He was the intimate friend of Constantine, and wrote his life. He opposed the doctrines of Arius. He also wrote an Ecclesiastical or Church History, from which we often make extracts in these lectures.

Continued in [Revelation 7:9-17. The Palm-Bearing Vision](#)

All chapters of The Last Prophecy: An Abridgment of Elliott's *Horae Apocalypticæ*

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