

Revelation 8:1-5. The Seventh Seal



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

The Incense Vision. Saint-Worship Begun, A.D. 324-395.

[1] ¶ And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.

[2] And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets.

[3] And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

[4] And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.

[5] And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings, and an earthquake. (Rev 8:15)

IN THE LECTURE upon the sealing vision we had to notice the intimation given to St. John of apostasy and unfaithfulness, begun and carried forward to a large extent in the professing Christian Church from the time that Christianity became the national religion of the Roman Empire.

But could such falling away occur and judgment from God not follow? And whence did such judgment arise, as we might justly anticipate?

There stood the four tempest-angels, prepared to execute the order and let loose the blasts. In other words, there stood waiting on the frontiers the barbarian hordes, ready to execute the work of desolation on the Roman Empire. There was silence in heaven. No trumpet-blast had sounded. All was serene, tranquil, and silent. It was the stillness before the storm; and while such stillness lasted what vision came before the eyes of the Evangelist? "Another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer."

There are three points here to be specially noted in the passage: – First, the angel-priest ministering. Whom can we suppose to be here intended but the Lord Jesus? For he is "the great High Priest over the house of God passed into the heavens." In that character he appeared in the opening of the first chapter. None but the high priest in the Jewish temple used a golden censer; the common priests used one of silver. This angel, who goes into the holy place and afterwards scatters altar-fire over the apostatizing land of Roman

Christendom, must be the same as the sealing-angel whom we saw to be Christ Jesus, but now in his priestly and mediatorial character about to present as an offering the prayers of his people.

Secondly, we must note the position of the Angel. He stood at the altar, and much incense was given him. The Jewish law was, that the high priest should stand, receive the incense from the worshippers, and then, taking coals from the altar on his censer, should carry the coals and incense together into the sanctuary; and, after laying the latter on the golden altar before the veil, burn it with the sacred fire. Any other than this was called strange fire; for using which Nadab and Abihu, though sons of Aaron, were instantly struck dead by God. And why such particularity? It was that a deep mystery was shadowed forth in this Mosaic ordinance, viz., that the prayers and praises of God's people, unless purified by and associated with the meritorious atoning-sacrifice of the Lamb of God, could never rise up acceptably before the mercy-seat of Jehovah. In the symbolic vision before us, the Angel's standing by the altar and receiving and offering up the incense shows that such association here too was necessary. Association with Christ in his twofold character, both as sacrifice and as priest, is figured out, even as the true Christian's privilege is stated: "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (i.e., an intercessory priest), and he is the propitiatory (or sacrifice) for our sins." (1 John 2:1,2)

Thirdly, who were, and who were not, the offerers that gave him incense? The offerers were "the saints," i.e., the 144,000 – the sealed ones. The prayers of "all these," we read – and mark well, of these alone – rose up. Here comes in the force of allusive contrast. No other offerers came, no other prayers rose up. So it is expressly noted, for we read of wrath soon after being poured out on the earth, i.e., on the inhabitants of it, showing that they were not present at this service in the altar-court.

Had then the members of the professing Church indeed forsaken the altar-court? had they indeed renounced the privilege of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice and his mediatorship? Such seemed truly the meaning of the symbol. It appeared as if some renunciation of this privilege would about this period of time become apparent, not only in private but in public worship, and that the saints would be distinguished from the professing Church by their adherence to Christ's mediation and propitiatory atoning sacrifice for acceptance with God. This first step in apostasy was about this time taken by the visible Church.

If we consult history, we shall see how the invocation of saints and martyrs and new means of propitiating God had just then come into fashion among the inhabitants of the Roman world, and that while professing to be Christians, they were rapidly falling back into Christ-renouncing idolatry. This was, in fact, the second step into Antichristian apostasy, and the more to be marked as here the invisible world was called in to strengthen the delusion. A recent writer of Church history describes well the then state of things. Speaking of the horror with which the early Christians viewed idolatry, he says: "So definite and broad was the space which in this point separated between Christianity and Paganism, that it seemed impossible that a compromise should be effected between principles so hostile. Yet the contrary

result took place. A reconciliation, which in the beginning of the fourth century could not easily have been imagined, was virtually accomplished before its termination. Those who had sealed a Christian's faith by a martyr's death were exalted above men and enthroned among celestial beings. Superstition gave birth to credulity. Those who sat among the powers of heaven might (it was thought) sustain by miraculous assistance their votaries on earth... Hence the stupid veneration for bones and relics. People were taught that prayer was never so surely efficacious as when offered at the tomb of some saint." Gibbon gives a sketch of the state of public worship then prevailing. "If in the beginning of the fifth century some of the primitive fathers had been suddenly raised from the dead to assist at the festival of some popular saint or martyr, they would have gazed with astonishment and indignation on the profane spectacle which had succeeded to the pure and spiritual worship of a Christian congregation. As soon as the doors of the Church were thrown open, they must have been offended by the smoke of incense, the perfume of flowers, and the glare of lamps and tapers, which diffused at noonday a gaudy, superfluous, and, in their opinion, a sacrilegious light. If they approached the balustrade of the altar, they made their way through the prostrate crowd... (whose) devout kisses were imprinted on the walls and pavement of the sacred edifice; and their fervent prayers were directed (whatever might be the language of their Church) to the bones, the blood, or the ashes of the saints, which were usually concealed by a linen or silken veil from the eyes of the vulgar. They frequented the tombs of the martyrs in hope of obtaining from their powerful intercession every sort of spiritual, but more especially of temporal blessings. (Were their wishes fulfilled,) they again hastened to the martyrs' tombs to celebrate with grateful thanksgivings their obligations to the memory and relics of those heavenly patrons. The walls were hung round with symbols of the favors which they had received, – eyes and hands and feet of gold and silver, and edifying pictures which could not long escape the abuse of indiscreet or idolatrous devotion, represented the image, the attributes, and the miracles of the tutelar saint." Such is Gibbon's account of the state of public worship at this epoch, A.D. 395: this being the very time we are now arrived at in symbolic history, when the angels were about to let go the wind, and the time also in Roman history of the commencement of the Gothic irruptions after the death of the Emperor Theodosius.

Let it not be supposed that it was only the young, the weak, and the ignorant who thus ran into folly and superstition. The highest of their bishops and doctors led the way, and the multitude followed. Pagans, of whom a few were left, as well as heretics, ridiculed the heathenish character of the new worship. In the year 396, Eunapius, the Pagan, exclaims, "These are the gods the earth nowadays brings forth; these the intercessors with the gods, – men called martyrs, before whose bones and skulls, pickled and salted, the monks kneel and lay prostrate, covered with filth and dust." The Manichaean heretic, Faustus, A.D. 400, says, "You have but exchanged the old idols for martyrs, and offer to the latter the same prayers as once to the former." The monk St. Jerome did truly step forth to repel such charges. He disclaimed idolatry, but he admitted and maintained that the dead saints were omnipresent, had influence with God, could hear and answer prayer, and even work miracles in behalf of the suppliant, as also punish neglecters and

torture demons. He spoke of them as intercessors and mediators and ministers between God and man. Thus was Christ set aside; for how could these saints act as successful mediators, except as having a stock of merit of their own sufficient to propitiate God? How is Jesus Christ a prevailing Advocate with the Father, except as being "Christ the righteous," who hath made atonement for our sins?" (1 John 2:2, 3) But to the merits of departed saints, as we have seen, were added the merits of the living Church; gifts and calms-deeds were offered at the saints' tombs. So was the true offering of incense at God's altar forsaken. In the language of the prophet, "They had forsaken God, the fountain of living waters, and hewn to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that could hold no water," (Jer. 2:13) committing thus two evils. And the sad apostasy went forward. For whether it be the sacraments, or the Church forms, or tradition, or the dead saints, or the living priests; whatever it be that interposes and hinders the direct personal communion of each sinner's soul with Christ as its Mediator, atonement, righteousness, and Saviour, it is altogether contrary to the written Word of God, taken in its simple unperverted sense. Had the early Church but kept fast to this written Word for its guide and rule, nothing could have misled it.

How innocent, nay, more, how even amiable, were the first steps that led to martyr-worship! What more natural than that the remains of those who suffered for Christ's sake should be carefully preserved, and their birthday into eternal glory annually remembered! What more natural than on these days to have a service at their tomb! Are they present? Do they hear us and see us? How natural to speak to them, and ask their prayer! Here began the danger of interfering with the mediatorship of Jesus. Had not the word of prophecy spoken of the worship of demons or deified dead men as being one mark of the apostasy? (Rev. 9:20) As it was, the warning note was neglected. One Council, indeed, forbade the worship of angels, but dead saints were not to be considered as such. In this distinction appeared the deceit of Satan, the bold and crafty deviser of all this mischief. The angels could not be connected with a particular spot or edifice on earth: the dead saints were more readily associated with the priestly functionaries of the church built over the place where their bodies were entombed. Who so effectual a helper to the saints' favor as the priest that watched the saints' relics? Hence it arose that the priest also in the eyes of the populace became a mediator, and a dispenser of the favor and wrath of Heaven. He was regarded with superstitious awe as holy and elect, and as having connection with the invisible world: – a regard tending too surely to increase pride and vanity amongst the clergy. Thus saint-worship, like the former error of baptism, became abiding. The great step in Antichristian apostasy was taken. The infidel Gibbon and the Christian writer and bishop, Van Mildert, speak alike "of heathenism as revived in the empire." To use the words of Coleridge, "The pastors of the Church had gradually changed the life and light of the Gospel into the very superstitions they were commissioned to disperse, and thus paganized Christianity in order to Christen paganism." Well might the Apocalyptic prophecy speak of these heathenized Christians as of the rest of the world, under the title "the inhabitants of the earth."

But were there no true worshippers left? None who acknowledged and held close to their High Priest and Intercessor, Jesus Christ? Far from it. "There was

given to the angel much incense, that he should offer it, with the prayers of all the saints, upon the golden altar before the throne." And the names of some of the number remain on record. "Whom shall I look to as my mediator," said Augustine; "shall I go to angels? Many have tried it, and deserve to be the sport of the illusions they loved. A mediator between God and man must have the nature of both. The true Mediator, whom in thy secret mercy thou hast shown to the humble, the man Jesus Christ, hath appeared Mediator between mortal sinners and the immortal Holy One; that by his divine righteousness he might justify the ungodly. He was shown to ancient saints that they might be saved by faith in his future sufferings, and we by faith in the same sufferings already past. How hast thou loved us, O Father, delivering up thy Son for us, for whom he our Priest and Sacrifice, was subjected to death! Well may my hope be strong in such an Intercessor." Nor was Augustine singular. We may hope those members of the Laodicean Council, of which we before spoke, were influenced by love to Christ in forbidding angel-worship. Mention is made of Jovinian and Vigilantius, the latter called "the Protestant of his age," who, even more prominently than Augustine, protested against the prevailing errors. They were cast out as heretics by their fellowmen, but can we doubt their acceptance with their Lord? "Their prayers ascended with the incense smoke out of the angel's hand unto God."

And for the earthly ones in Roman Christendom, – what of them? The angel took the censer, and filled it with fire, and cast it (the fire) upon the earth." The signal was given. "And there were thunderings, and lightnings, and voices, and an earthquake. And the seven angels prepared themselves to sound."

Continued in [Revelation 8:6-12. The First Four Trumpets](#)

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