

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 14, Revelation 8 and 9, The Seven Trumpets and Exodus Imagery

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This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 14; Revelation chapters 8 and 9, the seven trumpets, and the Exodus imagery.

We've seen that John draws on the Exodus motif, actually a motif we've already seen play a role with John utilizing Exodus 19.6 and drawing on the Exodus story in the sense of the whole Exodus narrative.

And we'll see this will play a role elsewhere in Revelation as well. Not only that, John doesn't only go to the original Exodus story; he will also pick up, we'll see in numerous places, and I'll mention that since this is the first place where he begins to draw at length on the Exodus motif. Later on, John also relies on Isaiah's use of the Exodus motif, which Isaiah uses as an indication of a second or a new Exodus.

Chapters 40 through 66 of Isaiah are latent with Exodus imagery, where the prophet Isaiah portrays the future deliverance of God's people as a new Exodus modeled after the first one. And so John picks up on that, and then John may then himself go back to the original Exodus from the book of Exodus and draw on some of the historical Exodus features now to narrate this new Exodus that Christ has inaugurated in creating a people, redeeming a people from bondage and slavery to Rome and to sin and evil, and now creating a kingdom of priests. And now we see God in anticipation of their deliverance and anticipation of their final inheritance in the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22.

As he did in the days of Exodus, God is, once again, pouring out his plagues and his judgment on a godless, wicked empire. So in the same way God judges Egypt, God judged Egypt for its oppression and wickedness and evil, and now God is doing that again in a new Exodus of his people and by pouring out his judgments on a wicked empire. Actually, this is nothing new with John in one sense.

To read from another apocalypse, this is an apocalypse called the Apocalypse of Abraham, and someone actually wrote in Abraham's name, recording a visionary experience. In the Apocalypse of Abraham chapter 30, notice the setting here, but I want you to notice the enumeration of the plagues at the end of this. While he was still speaking, I found myself on earth, and I said, Eternal Mighty One, I am no longer in the glory which I was above, and I do not understand all that my soul desired to understand in my heart.

And he said to me, I will explain to you the things you desired in your heart. For you have sought to know the ten plagues which I prepared against the heathen, and I prepared them beforehand in the passing of the twelve hours on earth. Here is what I tell you: it will be thus.

The first plague, sorrow for much need. The second, fiery conflagrations for the city. The third is destruction by pestilence among the cattle.

The fourth is famine in the world of their generation. The fifth, among the rulers, was destruction by earthquake and sword. The sixth is an increase in hail and snow.

The seventh wild beasts will be in their grave. The eighth, pestilence and hunger or famine will change their destruction. The ninth is execution by the sword and flight and distress.

And the tenth, thunder, voices and destroying earthquakes. So notice in the apocalypse of Abraham, the ten plagues of Egypt are used as a model for ten further judgments and plagues that affect more than Egypt, but cities, etc. etc.

And so John now also uses the plague imagery in describing a new exodus for describing the plagues that God now will pour out upon the earth. Again, I want to emphasize that it is more important than just figuring out the details of exactly what these are and exactly what they will look like; instead, it is recognizing that the significance is these interpret the nature and the meaning of God's judgment by appealing to the Exodus. One further point to make that I think may be going on here as well and may be important, and that is in the same way that the exodus plagues were, at one level, meant to judge the gods of Egypt or were aimed at the gods of Egypt.

And many have demonstrated, I think, that behind most of the plagues lied an attack on certain gods that were worshiped by the Egyptians. In the same way, I wonder if the trumpet plagues here modeled on the plagues of Egypt are not also aimed at the idolatry resident in the Roman gods and in things like emperor worship. And it'd be interesting to do further work to see if certain gods could lie behind certain of these plagues.

But certainly, having modeled them on the Egyptian plagues, I wonder if we're not to see these at one level as an attack on or judgment on the gods of Rome, on the idolatrous worship of the Roman empire, their gods, including emperor worship as well. So, having said that what I want to do is look briefly at each of the trumpets and perhaps make some comments as to what they might indicate and what they might entail. But in the end, drawing them together and trying to come up with an overall picture of what might be going on with these trumpet plagues.

But let me say at the very beginning; I'm convinced eight and nine together, I think, are primarily aimed at the idolatry of people, of wicked, godless people. And perhaps again, especially at the idolatry inherent in the Roman religion and Roman rule and the whole Roman system of doing things and looking at the world. Trumpet number one.

Trumpet number one is described as a fire or hail and fire mixed with blood. In my opinion, this clearly indicates that this is to be understood symbolically and not literally. You think about it, though we might be able to think of some scientific explanation that I'm not sure first-century readers would have ever caught on to.

It would seem to me that to them, hail mixed with fire would be a contradiction in a sense. And furthermore, it's mixed with blood. But the plague of hail here clearly resembling the seventh Egyptian plague from Exodus chapter nine.

And I won't go back and read that, but sometimes you can go back and read and recall the plague of hail brought about on the Egyptians. The difference, though, between the two is twofold. Notice, first of all, that this is not limited to the land of Egypt, like the Egyptian plague, but now it is a plague that is poured out on the entire earth.

Yet only one-third of the earth is affected. And you'll notice as I read chapter eight how many times one third was repeated. One-third is to be understood as greater than the one-fourth associated with the seals in chapter six.

We also said that one-third suggests a limitation of judgment. That is, no matter how severe the judgment is, it's to be seen as only limited. That is, there's still greater judgment to follow.

The indication here of only one-third, which is a limitation, may suggest God's mercy, but more primarily, it suggests that these are only preliminary judgments. These are only anticipatory of the greater judgment that is to follow. So this judgment does not affect all of the earth, but only part of it.

Because it's symbolic, we should probably not, as we've repeated a couple of times, determine the population of this present earth and then imagine one-third of them literally being affected by this. But again, one-third simply suggest a limitation of this judgment. It doesn't affect all of the earth.

But it's possible when you read this judgment, it's possible that it points to a famine that is even more intense and severe than the third seal of Revelation chapter six. But other than that, again, it's difficult to tell if this judgment is by itself. Is this trumpet a physical plague, or is it something spiritual, or is it a combination of both?

We'll, at the very end, kind of gather these together and maybe suggest what might be going on with some of these trumpets overall. Trumpet number two.

In trumpet number two, a mountain that is burning is now thrown into the sea. Probably, these two parts of this image, both burning and mountain, are significant. Burning would imply a judgment.

And then the fact that it is a mountain probably suggests a kingdom. So, the mountain represents or symbolizes a kingdom. And so what we have here is God's judgment on an evil kingdom.

Judgment pictured in terms of a burning or fire. The background from this is probably Jeremiah and chapter 51. And so we're back to the Old Testament for an understanding of our imagery.

In Jeremiah chapter 51, especially verse 25, Jeremiah 51 and verse 25, I am against you, O destroying mountain. Notice the imagery of a mountain. You who destroy the whole earth declares the Lord.

I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliffs and make you a burned out mountain. And so this imagery of a burning mountain probably comes out of a text like Jeremiah chapter 51, where even there, the mountain seems to be reflective of a kingdom. And so here the mountain probably represents an evil kingdom, more specifically in the first century, embodied in the Roman empire.

Furthermore, going back to the Exodus plague, the rest of this plague says that a third of the earth was burned up. Let's see. Actually, a third of the sea turned to blood, which recalls the Exodus plague of turning the sea and all the water turning the Nile River into blood.

So, a third of the sea is turned to blood. A third of the living creatures in it die. And a third of all the ships, interestingly, were destroyed.

So again, that mention of the ships being destroyed, is it possible again that this is to be seen as an attack on or a judgment on Rome's commerce? Again, Rome's way of doing things will be signified in the ultimate overthrow of the empire itself, symbolized by this throwing of the mountain, the burning of the mountain, and throwing it down. And is it possible, though, that it's also a judgment on the gods that lie behind Rome and the gods that lie behind the Roman commerce? Trumpet number three. And as I've said before, it's difficult to tell how physical we're to take this.

Is it more physical in nature? Is the judgment more spiritual in nature? John is primarily interested in using Exodus and Old Testament imagery to interpret and

describe the nature of God and the significance of God's judgment. But trumpet number three is very similar to trumpet number two, where a third angel now sounds a trumpet, and now we find a plague that is characterized as a great star that is burning, that now gets cast down from the sky, and it now affects the water. So notice sort of the progression from the first one that affects the earth.

The grass is affected, a third of the trees, a third of the earth, a third of the grass, and then two and three, now the waters, the ocean is affected. And so now here with trumpet number three, the third angel now issues it in the great star coming down, which affects all the water. A star was in apocalyptic literature, often symbolic of an angelic being.

And probably the great star here symbolizes some kind of an angelic being, perhaps an evil one who now comes to do harm. And the result of this star is that all the water is turned bitter, again, reflecting Exodus 7 and reflecting the harming of all the water in the Exodus plague. Now, that is repeated here.

Interestingly, it said that the star is called wormwood. That was simply, wormwood was a bitter plant. And so the picture here is of the water turning extremely bitter, even poisonous, so that it is unfit to drink and would cause harm or even death for those who actually drank it.

But it's very difficult to tell how physically we are to take this, certainly not literally. Is this referring to a physical type of judgment, a spiritual one, or a combination of both? Is this, once again, a judgment on Rome's economy? Is it a judgment on the Roman system of religion and the idolatry that lies behind it as well? Number four, then, seal number four, I'm sorry, trumpet number four results in an angel blowing his trumpet. And now note that the constellations in the heavens are affected.

And note the repetition again of the fraction one-third, suggesting limitation, suggesting this is not God's final judgment, that this is only a harbinger of more that is to come or the final judgment yet to come. But with the blowing of the fourth trumpet, all the constellations are affected. This probably reflects the plague in Exodus 10, where there is darkness throughout Egypt, except here, which is limited to one-third due to John's purpose and his intention here.

Not only is the sky darkened, but all the constellations, the sun, the moon, and the stars themselves, a third of the day and a third of the night goes without light. The question again is how physically are we to take this? Is it possible, number one, again, that this is an attack or a judgment on idolatry? Perhaps these are to be taken as an indication of God's judgment on the gods of Rome and on the religious system behind it. But is it possible also that perhaps the darkness here indicates the folly or the futility and the darkness into which idolatrous humanity has now plunged? So I think Greg Beale, in his commentary, understands this plague primarily in terms of

the spiritual darkness and the complete futility of worshipping gods, pagan gods, of pursuing idolatry, primarily for first-century readers being involved in the idolatrous practices of Rome.

So, the first four trumpets then in chapter 8 seem to be a better way to approach them, and it is possible to sort of look at them collectively. Is it possible, then? I use the word possible because with the nature of the symbolism and the fact that John's drawing primarily on Exodus plagues, it's difficult to tell, I think, exactly what he has in mind with each of these. Instead, more important is to focus on the theological significance and the theological meaning of God's judgment that is in connection with the Exodus plague.

But perhaps the first four trumpets are meant to demonstrate the complete futility of idolatry. Notice, as I said, the progression from the fact that the land is affected, the fact that the water is affected, and then in trumpet number four, the fact that all of the heavens and the constellations are affected. And is it possible then that the last one, particularly the language and imagery of darkness, is meant symbolically to portray the futility and the darkness spiritually into which those who pursue idolatry are plunged and the futility of depending on the world's resources and the resources of Rome in its idolatrous practices.

Now you have a picture of the complete futility of relying on that and the complete spiritual darkness into which those who rely on the world's resources and are involved in idolatrous practices are now plunged. And so now they suffer darkness. The suffering might be both spiritual and physical.

Again, it's very difficult to tell. But one significant point with this one that I'll come back to later is especially verse 12, and verse 12, the very last of these four plagues, trumpets, that result in darkness, is most likely this verse functions as an anticipation of the ultimate darkness and judgment that takes place in Revelation 19 and 20. And so this, by only affecting a third, again, this is a limited judgment that functions as sort of a harbinger or an anticipation of, or a warning of what the final separation from God, what the final situation of darkness, what the final suffering and futility will be like at the final judgment that gets narrated in chapters 19 and 20 for those who refuse to repent.

And I would emphasize, like the seals as well, that we should probably read this in light of this not only being God's judgment on Rome but also God's judgment on the churches who refuse to repent. Chapters 2 and 3, those churches that refuse to repent, those churches that are compromising their faithful witness, those churches that are engaged in the godless, idolatrous, evil system of Rome, for them, they too will be recipients of these plagues. So the first four trumpets may kind of collectively be a judgment on Rome's idolatry and on those who participate in Rome's idolatry by demonstrating the futility of relying on the earth's resources, on the world's

resources, by demonstrating the futility and spiritual darkness of relying on an idolatrous system and the spiritual darkness into which they are plunged and the futility they're plunged into because of their idolatrous practices.

Now, in chapter 9, which we said is prefaced by this interesting word from an eagle who utters three woes. These three woes then set up the final three trumpets. And we said two of them are introduced and enacted in chapter 9. In chapter 9, the third one will await chapter 11.

But chapter 9 now narrates two further judgments. And what I want to say very briefly is something about the woes. The woes come out of prophetic literature and they are usually used in the context of judgment.

They are a woe upon someone, a pronouncement of a woe because of the judgment that is about to come. So the woes here function as sort of a wake up to pay attention to the judgments that are about to come. The woe is pronounced because of the awfulness of the judgment.

So I would expect then that the further trumpets in chapter 9 will perhaps be of a more hideous nature than even the first four in chapter 8. Notice also how chapter 9 begins with a couple of plagues that will be of a very different character from chapter 8. Notice how verse 13 anticipates this, not only with the repetition of the woes but note the break that occurs in verse 13 of chapter 8, suggesting that the chapter division at chapter 9 is not well placed at all. If anywhere, it should be in chapter 8, verse 13. Not only are we introduced to these three woes, but note verse 13, where John says, I looked, and I heard, almost drawing attention to a new section.

As we said, the final trumpets are identified as having three woes. The next trumpet then, trumpet number five, trumpet number five, or row number one, begins in chapter 9. And let me read chapter 9, which is the account of the next two trumpets or the first two woes. And what you'll note immediately is the disproportionate amount of length given to these two trumpets over against the first four of chapter 8. Remember, the first four trumpets don't even begin until verse six.

And so the first four trumpets are narrated in fairly quick succession. But now in chapter 9, the next two trumpets are expanded in quite a bit of detail, perhaps suggesting their significance. In fact, I would suggest that these are to be seen as more significant.

And as two woes, we're to understand that these are going to be horrific and significant plagues. And so starting at chapter 9 and verse 1, these are the trumpet five and six or woes one and two. The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth.

The star was given the key to the shaft of the abyss. When he opened the abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the abyss and out of the smoke came locusts down upon the earth.

And they were given power like that of a scorpion of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. From Revelation chapter 7, where God's servants, the 144,000, are sealed, or the church, God's people, are sealed.

They were not given power to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days, men sought death but did not find it.

They will long to die, but death will elude them or escape them. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads, they had something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces.

Their hair was like a woman's hair. Their teeth were like a lion's teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron.

And the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails that sting like scorpions. And in their tails, they had the power to torment people for five months.

They had as king over them the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollon. The first woe is past; two others are yet to come. Two other woes are yet to come.

The sixth angel, or the second woe now, sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates. And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind.

The number of the mounted troops was 200 million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this.

Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur that came out of their mouths.

The fire and power of the horses were in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails were like snakes with heads with which to inflict injury. The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the works of their hands. They did not stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, idols that cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders, their magical arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts." So that is the final two trumpets in at least the first six of the trumpet sequence.

As you read that, to me, it sounds more like something that might be found in a Lord of the Rings novel or movie. And I don't want to, in a sense, ruin this by simply going through and trying to deal with every detail and dissecting it. Again, I want to, at one level, allow the text to stand and allow you to feel the effect of combining all these images of breastplates and human features, insect features, animal-like features, and war-like features wearing breastplates into this one horrifying image.

So that the readers would have hopefully been impacted by what they heard, and John certainly would have been impacted by seeing this, and now, hopefully, the reader shares something of the effect, including us, by simply reading it as a whole. So, we need to hear the vision as a whole. We need to see it as a whole.

We need to visualize it as a whole and get its effect before we simply go through and dissect its parts and try to figure out exactly what they're referring to. In fact, I'm not sure that all of the parts of the description of these locusts and all of the parts of the description of these horses and riders bear dissection or necessarily are meant to indicate distinct, separate ideas. But maybe, again, it's the combination of these and the effect that they have together and what they portray about these locusts and what they portray about these riders on the horses.

But I want to look at a handful of features in this description of these final two trumpets, and that is the two groups, very large groups, the group of locusts and then the group of horses and the riders described in some detail in this text. Look at just a handful of features and significant features and then try to wrestle with what might be the identity of these groups. And once again, are they similar? Are they the same? Are they separate features? What exactly are these things? What do they represent? This is the text, and I'll just raise that now because I think our response to such an interpretation should be obvious.

However, chapter nine is one of the texts that has been very famously identified with various instruments of modern-day warfare. Even going back earlier, the beginning of chapter nine begins with smoke coming out of the abyss and the language later on with the horses of sulfur and smoke coming out of their mouths. This is often evoked imagery of nuclear warfare taking place, and some have thought that that's exactly what John was predicting.

The locusts have indicated instruments of war in the form of certain helicopters, etc., etc. and the sound of their wings resembling the propeller blades on a helicopter etc., etc. So this has usually been one of those texts that we have tried to make sense of by reading it in light of modern-day phenomena, that is, modern-day military weapons and instruments of war. But again, we have to ask ourselves and go back to the type of literature and some of our principles of interpretation, one of them being, number one, that John is using imagery and language that is meant to communicate symbolically.

It would be language and imagery that primarily come out of Old Testament and apocalyptic texts that many of his readers would have been very familiar with. But second, we said one of the important principles is that for any interpretation of Revelation to be compelling, it must meet the criteria that it must be something that John could have intended and his first-century readers living in a pre-technological, modern military, pre-nuclear age could have understood and could have made sense of. So, given that, there's no way John could have been seeing or intending modern methods of warfare and intending helicopters and nuclear war.

John would not have seen that, and his readers would never have picked up on it. So, such interpretations probably should be rejected. However, there may be a little bit of value in something like that. When we read this, we're simply not used to locus and things like that.

John, what John does is pick up, especially if you're not, you weren't raised on a ranch or a farm; I've been to situations where there has been a locus plague and to see the devastation they cause in stripping the land of crops. So someone in that context might resonate with locus, but some who don't have experience with locus or have never seen something like this might not impact them the same way. But John is actually drawing on images that his readers would have understood and, in a sense, blowing them up into bigger-than-life scenarios to get his readers to understand and to respond and react appropriately.

He plays on their fears, which locus plague would have been a genuine fear of scorpions and vicious lions and animals and things like that. Understanding what an abyss symbolizes in the Old Testament Jewish literature and Greco-Roman literature, John takes all that and blows them up into a larger-than-life scenario, taking images that play on the fears and hopes of his readers. So, we might be able to at least rescue some of what our modern-day attempts do by saying what evokes fear in our minds. Well, is it a nuclear war, or is it a modern method of war?

The fear of a possible world war that involves the potential for nuclear destruction. Those kinds of things could function for us in the same way that the images do here. I am not suggesting that's exactly what John was predicting, but when we think of plagues and judgment, when we think of God's final judgment, sometimes it might

be helpful to identify what things in our own modern-day are things that we fear, things that indicate destruction, things that indicate widespread warfare, things that indicate chaos and evil, and to look at those to help us to perhaps respond in the same way that the original readers would have responded to the images in Revelation chapter 9, without suggesting our modern day warfare and scenarios and images is what John was actually predicting.

No, that's not the case. But those sorts of things might help us to understand the impact of and to evoke fears and responses in us in the same way it would have in John's first reader. Now, the first thing that John sees then in chapter 9 is another angel or another star that falls from the sky.

We said that, especially in apocalyptic literature and elsewhere, stars often indicate angelic beings, and that's probably what is happening here. What is the primary function of this angel? This is a good indication of the apocalyptic nature of Revelation, where angelic beings play different roles, but the function of this angel is to hold the key to the abyss and to actually go and unlock it to let out for other angelic beings or demonic beings from the abyss. Now, the abyss is a term that appears to have a fairly long history in apocalyptic literature, but even in the book of Revelation, the abyss in much apocalyptic literature is sort of the prison or the home of demonic beings.

In Revelation itself, in chapter 11, we'll see that the beast, an evil, chaotic, demonic type of figure, the beast comes out of the abyss in chapter 11. In chapter 17 and verse 8, the beast is described as coming out of the abyss, which is appropriate, the abyss is the home of or the prison of evil, demonic, spiritual, and supernatural beings. And then, in chapter 20, verses 1 and 3, Satan is locked in the abyss and later let out of it so that the abyss here immediately should conjure up in our minds the home of evil, demonic, satanic, supernatural beings.

And what happens when the abyss is opened is smoke comes out. And in this smoke, we find basically a group of locusts, a whole cloud of locusts emerging from this smoke. The locusts are what get attention in the rest of this, the description of the fifth seal or the fifth trumpet.

The locusts have at least for judgment; as a symbol for God's judgment, the locusts have at least two Old Testament antecedents. One of them is the locust plague from Exodus 10 and 1 through 15. The other is a locust plague from Joel chapters 1 and 2, chapters 1:2 through 2:11. Actually, in Joel chapters 1 and 2, we read about an invading locust plague.

And I'll just read some of this, but hear this, you elders, this is Joel chapter 1 and verse 2. Hear this, you elders, listen to all you who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefather? Tell it to your

children and let your children tell it to their children, et cetera. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten.

What the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten. What the young locusts have left, other locusts have eaten. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep.

Wail all you drinkers of wine. Wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips. A nation has invaded your land, powerful without number, that it has teeth like a lion, fangs of a lioness.

It laid waste to my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white. I'll stop right there, and I'll jump to chapter 2 and just read a few of those verses, but all of this section compares the devastation of a foreign invasion with the invasion of a locust plague.

Chapter 2, notice the connection with the trumpet now. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound the alarm on the holy hill.

Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand. A day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, like dawn spreading across the mountain.

Notice that language of darkness and blackness, which is what the smoke produces when it comes out of the abyss in Revelation chapter 9. A large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor will ever be in an age to come. Before them, fire devours behind them like flame blazes. Before them, the land is like the Garden of Eden.

Behind them, there is a desert waste, and nothing escapes. So the idea is, before they get there, the land is nice and like the Garden of Eden. After they get through it, there is nothing but destruction.

Everything has been laid waste. They have the appearance of horses. They gallop along like cavalry.

With a noise like that of a chariot, they leap over the mountains like crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish. Every face turns pale.

They charge like warriors. They scale walls like soldiers. They are much in line, not swerving from their course.

They do not jostle each other. Each marches straight ahead. Verse 9. They rush upon the city.

They run along the wall. They climb into the houses like thieves that enter through the windows. Before them the earth shakes and trembles.

The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. Interesting connection with plague number four. In other words, the plague number four, the trumpet number four in Revelation 8, which is the stars and skies being darkened, now seems to relate to the locust plague in chapter 9. The connection is already found in Joel chapter 2. The Lord thunders at the head of his army.

His forces are beyond number and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the Lord is great. It is dreadful.

Who can endure it? So, John has taken, based on drawing on the Egyptian plagues, beginning with Exodus 10, taken the locust plague, but also drawn in another great locust plague, which clearly is used metaphorically in Joel chapters 1 and 2, now to portray the extreme and complete devastation and destruction that this locust plague will now produce in chapter 9. And even today, as I've said, if anyone has ever seen a locust plague, or if you're a farmer or rancher, or you've seen evidence of the locust plague, one can understand the horror of the destruction that a locust plague kind of blown up into larger than life could produce in the readers. But this clearly is no ordinary locust plague. It's a combination of insects, animals, scorpions, and even human beings meant to evoke terror and horror in the readers.

Also, it's intriguing that this locust plague does not harm the vegetation, which you would expect, but instead, this locust plague is unique in that it harms humanity, those who do not have the seal from Revelation chapter 7. Probably, when we ask the question of what or who these locusts are in Revelation chapter 9, they're obviously symbolic, but symbolic of what? And Grant Osborne, in his commentary on Revelation, says this is probably the most bizarre description of anything found in the book of Revelation. How are we to identify these? Most likely, and I find that there's fairly widespread agreement on this in commentaries, we should probably identify this locust plague as demonic beings. I think that is clear immediately from the fact that they come out of the abyss.

Again, in apocalyptic literature, even in the book of Revelation, the abyss is the source of the beast. It's the source of satanic, demonic beings, supernatural beings, so we should take these locusts not as helicopters and airplanes or not as a literal physical locust, but we should take these as symbolic of a demonic onslaught in the destruction that they cause. What, then, is the harm or the torment that the locusts cause? A couple of times, it said the locusts are permitted to torment human beings.

They do so by the tail that resembles a scorpion. By that, they have the authority to harm and torment and cause problems for human beings. Once more, I think it's difficult to tell exactly.

Is this physical torment? If so, what is it? Is it spiritual torment? Is it a combination of both? Perhaps we're to see it again in light of the fourth trumpet in chapter 8, verse 12, that is bringing darkness, causing darkness and futility, so that we're to understand this as the locusts harm and torment people by further plunging them into despair and darkness, and further demonstrating the futility of their idolatry. In other words, is it possible that they are causing spiritual harm so awful that the author can say they even seek death, and death even flees from them? But one feature I want to point to, or two interesting further features about the description of this locust plague, is, first of all, the fact that it is said that the locusts were allowed to operate for five months. Some have tried, as with other numbers and time periods in Revelation, to read this literally.

Probably the best explanation is that five months was the typical life cycle of a locust, so we're not to take this literally. Maybe it does, again, indicate limitation that this is not the final judgment but the five months should not be taken as indicating a short period of time, nor should it be taken as five literal months, but simply to indicate that the author is simply drawing on the language of the typical lifestyle of a locust, is they would basically be alive for five months, so now he symbolically portrays the locust as doing their work for a period of five months, the typical lifestyle of a locust in that day. A second interesting feature that's unusual is that the locusts seem to have a leader in chapter 9 and verse 11, a leader that is described with two words, the Hebrew word Abaddon and the Greek word Apollon, both of these suggesting destruction or destroyer as the name of the leader, which is completely fitting for the leader of this group of locusts, so the leader probably being another angelic being, perhaps the one who the star that falls down and opens the abyss, the star symbolizing an angelic being, is it possible that this is the leader of the locust? There are a couple of other possibilities for this leader, who is called Abaddon or Apollon in either Hebrew or Greek.

One of them is that this may be an allusion, picking up again on the Exodus plagues; this may be an allusion to the angel of death in the Exodus plagues. It may also be an allusion to an idea in a couple of places in the apocalyptic literature of an angel of death whom God has assigned to the underworld as responsible for the demonic beings. That could also be the allusion to this angel, to this leader who is called the destroyer, the one who destroys, the one who brings destruction.

But in either case, the imagery is to add to the destructive nature of what is going on. These locusts, much like the locusts described in Joel chapter two, seem to have a leader. That is, they go in order, and they go out as an army, and they seem to have a leader who is also bent on destruction.

Now, what is interesting about this plague then is it's as if the author is telling his readers, readers in the first century, that behind the pagan gods that they're tempted to worship, behind the gods of Rome and the idolatrous system of Rome and its activities, ultimately lie Satan and his demons. Ironically, the very gods that they would worship and the very idolatrous images that they would worship, which becomes clear at the very end in verses 20 and 21, were introduced, especially 20, to the idols that they worshiped, that they refused to repent from worshiping. Those very idols actually ironically turn on them and seek to do them harm and destroy them.

The very gods that they follow are the very gods that ironically torment them. So, the first plague of chapter nine then seems to be identified with a plague of evil, demonic beings. The function of that plague is, once again, an attack on their idolatry by demonstrating the demonic nature of the idolatry and, in a sense, the destructive nature of it, that the very gods they worship, the very idolatrous system in Rome they participate in, now turns against them to destroy them, to demonstrate the futility, demonstrate the spiritual darkness that they are plunged in, something so horrid that death would be a viable alternative, as now constituting God's judgment on idolatrous Rome, but also on anyone who would participate in that, including members of the seven churches of Revelation chapter two and three.

Trumpet number six, or woe number two. In verse 13, intriguingly, this trumpet plague is introduced in a way that's unique from the other ones. Although similar to the previous one, it also involves an angelic being apparently opening something up to allow something to take place.

That is, in verse 13, we're introduced to an angel who sounds his trumpet, and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar. So, note we have the altar again, and here the horns of the golden altar are mentioned, so we're in a sense back in the heavenly throne room and a heavenly scene, and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar, and here is what it says. It addresses a sixth angel who has the trumpet, and what this angel is to do is now to the fourth angel, or this angel is to sound his trumpet and to release four angels who are bound in the river Euphrates.

So, now we have all kinds of angelic beings playing a role again, suggesting once again that primarily this plague will be a supernatural one or this plague will involve angelic or demonic type of beings. But then what happens once these four angels that are bound in the Euphrates are released? Then a multitude of horses or mounted troops, horses with their riders now rush out, and once again, it's apparent that they mean to do harm, that they mean to destroy, and they mean to defeat and conquer. Now, the first question is, who in the world are these four angels bound at the Euphrates? Who are the four angels, and what do they represent? Why four of them, and why the Euphrates? It may be that these four angels here are the same

four angels back in chapter seven that hold back the four winds, that is, the four winds of judgment.

Now, back in chapters seven and one and two, remember that vision before, the four winds are allowed to blow, the four plagues, God commands the angels to hold them back until he can seal his servants, those who are able to withstand this, those who will not be harmed. Now, perhaps we see the four angels or the four winds released and now able to go out and cause harm, able to go out and wreak havoc; that is, the winds being symbolic of judgment. Now, these four angels will be released, and their judgment will ensue.

The next question to ask is, why the Euphrates River? Many people have tried to take this literally, and there's even been a lot of interest in what's going on in the Euphrates River in the modern day and how troops could cross it and things like that. Most likely, though, again, John is drawing on symbolic imagery or language from the Old Testament and using it symbolically in his own vision to say something. The key is understanding that Euphrates might play a twofold role.

Once again, it might be evocative of more than one background. The Euphrates River played a role in Old Testament prophetic text in the expectation of an invasion from the north or an invasion that would come across the Euphrates River. So, there's an Old Testament background where the Euphrates would be an appropriate place for an army to cross in light of Old Testament expectations.

That's where you would expect an invasion. That's who you'd expect an army to come, an invading army to come from the direction of the Euphrates River. Also, though, with the Greco-Roman Empire, the Euphrates was sort of the easternmost boundary of the Roman Empire.

Another interesting thing is that one of the Roman Empire's fiercest enemies, the so-called Parthian warriors, would have resided in that region. So, for a Greco-Roman background, someone would have seen the Euphrates. That is the direction from which the Parthian army, the fierce enemies of Rome, would come.

Or, from an Old Testament perspective, in light of Old Testament prophetic literature, that is where you would expect an invading army as well. So, the mention of the Euphrates River here is not meant to be taken literally, but its mention is evocative again of an invading army. So, they hear the word Euphrates; here comes an invading army in fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, but also playing on the fears of those living in the Roman Empire.

We'll talk a little bit more than about who are these four angels, what is it they do, and what is this invading army that emerges on the scene. How might it relate to the locust plague that the author describes in the first part of chapter nine?

This is Dr. Dave Mathewson in his course on the book of Revelation. This is session 14, Revelation chapters 8 and 9, the seven trumpets and the Exodus imagery.