

Fire in the Shaft of the Abyss

Revelation Chapter 9

Having properly identified “the abyss”¹ as the judgment/justice of God applied in a specific location and/or upon a specific people, we now need to proceed with our studies of Revelation to see how our understanding of the Abyss plays out in that book.

The first chapter of Revelation in which the lexeme “abyss” (Gk abussos) appears is chapter 9 which begins:

“And the fifth messenger sounds: And I see a star which had come² out of heaven to the land. To him (this star) is given the key to the shaft of the abyss (Gk. tou freatov thv abussou). (Revelation 9:1)”

Many commentators have pointed to the fact that the Revelation contains many symbols and metaphors. However, few have accurately identified the meaning of these symbols and metaphors. It is our position that these symbols and metaphors do actually stand for some specific location or event.

In the first verse of chapter 9 we are introduced to several symbols or metaphors. As pointed out in the article “The Abyss” in the spring 2010 edition of Fulfilled Magazine, one of these metaphors is the “abyss” which is the place/location of God’s first century “judgment/wrath” – i.e. That portion of the Promised Land which was occupied by the Jews and the Galileans in the first century. In addition to the “abyss,” we are also introduced to other symbols/metaphors such as “a star,” “heaven,” “the land” “the shaft” and “the key”.

Is it possible to know what each of these metaphors and symbols actually represented in time and history? We think that we can.

In the Bible, as many commentators have pointed out, the term “heaven” can have multiple meanings. Certainly “heaven” in some cases does refer to the

¹ See the preceding chapter or the article “The Abyss Defined” in Fulfilled Magazine Spring 2010 or see the section “The Abyss Defined” in my paper The Abyss”.

² We can see the record of this great star’s fall out of heaven in Revelation 8:10ff

abode of God. This is sometimes referred to as “the third heaven” as opposed to at least two other heavens. However, in other places it clearly refers to some other type of heaven; one of which is a civil authority such as in the Babylonian Empire with its sun, moon and stars. The proto type for this is found in Genesis 37 where Joseph’s dream of “the sun and the moon and eleven stars” bowing down to worship him is recorded:

Then he dreamed yet another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, **the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars** bowed down to me." So he told *it* to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What *is* this dream that you have dreamed? Shall **your mother (the moon Rachel)** and **I** (the sun Jacob/Israel) and **your brothers** indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?" (Genesis 37:9-10)

Here Jacob/Israel clearly identifies the “sun” as himself, the moon as Joseph’s mother and the eleven stars as Joseph’s 11 brothers. Collectively this “sun, moon, and stars” equals a family “heaven”.

As we continue to exam the Old Testament (OT) we learn from Isaiah that the term “heaven” may also reference civil Government. In Isaiah 13 we find “the burden of Babylon:”

Behold, the day of the LORD comes, Cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; And He will destroy its sinners from it. For **the stars of heaven** and their constellations will not give their light; **the sun** will be darkened in its going forth, And **the moon** will not cause its light to shine. "I will punish the world for *its* evil, And the wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, And will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a mortal more rare than fine gold, A man more than the golden wedge of Ophir. **Therefore I will shake the heavens**, And the land (earth) will move out of her place, In the wrath of the LORD of hosts And in the day of His fierce anger. (Isaiah 13:9-13)

In this passage, Isaiah describes punishment of the “world” (vs. 13) of Babylon in apocalyptic metaphors. As in Genesis 37, the “sun” represents the head of the civil government of Babylon (the king). The “moon” represents the queen mother. The “stars” represent those in positions of delegated authority, both civil and military, under the king. Collectively this is the “heaven” of Babylon.

Other passages in the OT clearly confirm this understanding:

Judgment of the “nations:”

All **the host of heaven** shall be dissolved, And **the heavens** shall be rolled up like a scroll; All **their host** shall fall down As the leaf falls from the vine, And as *fruit* falling from a fig tree. (Isaiah 34:4 NKJV)

In this passage Isaiah records the judgment of the nations in the same language which we see in Isaiah 13. Here, “all the hosts of heaven” references the sun, moon and stars of each “nation” (heaven) and “the heavens” references “all of the nations”.

The judgment of Pharaoh and Egypt:

When I put out **your light**, I will cover **the heavens**, and make its **stars** dark; I will cover **the sun** with a cloud, And **the moon** shall not give her light. **All the bright lights of the heavens** I will make dark over you, And bring darkness upon your land,’ Says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 32:7-8 NKJV)

Similar descriptions of judgments can be found in Joel 3:15-16, the judgment of enemies; Amos 8:9, judgment of Israel in the 8th century BC and elsewhere in the OT.

With the above in mind, we should see that the “heaven” in Revelation 9:1 is a cryptic reference to the Roman Empire. The “star” is a high level dignitary/official of that Empire and in later verses; we will learn his name and rank and in later chapters we will learn more about him.

The “key” represents the power to conduct the war against the Jews.

The land is obvious in this context, i.e. the Promised Land, which in the first century was occupied principally by the tribe of Judah in the land of Judea, the Jews; the tribe of Benjamin in Galilee, the Galileans; and the Samaritans (foreigners living in the portion of the land that formerly (prior to the 8th century BC) belonged to the ten tribes of the former northern kingdom.

This “star which had come out of heaven (Rome) to the land” of Promise and the presentation of “the key” of war to this “star” are of very special importance for the people of the land, as well as, for John’s primary audience of readers in the seven churches of Asia.

John marks this special occasion by switching his terminology from “land” to “shaft of the abyss” right in the middle of this verse. However, John not only changes his language, he adds a very important new element, “the shaft (pit) of the.” It should be apparent to most readers that the lexeme “land” in

verse 1a parallels the term “abyss” in 1b, but what is this “shaft (passage way to) the abyss?”

As we should now see, in the above passage of Revelation (9:1), the “star (that had fallen) from heaven” and “landed” on the land was Vespasian the Roman general that was dispatched from Rome (“heaven”) by the ruler of Rome, Nero.

“The key,” of course, was the authorization to make war against the Jews in Galilee and Judaea (the shaft and the abyss, this is proven by the fact that the “shaft” does not appear in any other text in Revelation, although “the abyss” continues to occur). When Vespasian “opened” the war against the Jews, the capture, destruction and burning of the cities of Galilee caused a great “smoke out of the shaft” or smoke rising up above the land of Galilee.

In verse 2:

And he opened the **shaft of the abyss** (tou freatov thv abussou, KJV bottomless pit); and there arose a smoke out of the **shaft** (Gk. freatov **passageway to the abyss**, abussou), as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the **shaft**, freatov.

John tells his intended readers that the “star;” identified as “him,” in 1b, used “the key” and “opened the shaft (passage way to) the abyss.” Did you notice that “the star” opened the shaft (passage way) to the abyss; *he did not open the abyss* as is often asserted by commentators and indicated in the KJV and other translations. What is this shaft (passage way) to the abyss?

If the abyss is the judgment in the land of Judaea, then the “shaft to the abyss” would be the judgment beginning in the land of Galilee which provided access to Judaea for travelers approaching Jerusalem, Judaea from the north. Josephus provides graphic descriptions confirming this view.³

Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the land. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power. (Rev 9:3)

In this verse we are introduced to two new symbols: “locusts” and “scorpions”. The “locusts” came out of the smoke “upon the land” of Judea. Here the war of the Jews moves from Galilee of the Gentiles to Judea of the Jews. These “locusts” represent the soldiers of the Roman army, while the

³ Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Book 3.

“scorpions of the land” represent the Jewish zealot army of Judea, particularly the tyrants, including John Levi of Gischala. These latter individuals (the tyrants) fought against the Roman army and against their own people, the Jews!

They (the locusts) were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. (Rev 9:4)

The locusts were commanded to “not hurt the grass of the land, neither any green thing, neither any tree.” However, they were permitted to harm “those men... which (did) not have the seal of Yahweh in their foreheads, but not kill them for five months (this was the abeyance of the war ordered by Vespasian when he heard that Nero was dead).

While the Romans were not prosecuting the war, as per Vespasian’s orders after the death of Nero (ca. five months, vs.5), the Zealots were wreaking havoc in the city of Jerusalem within the land of Judaea. This was the sting of the “scorpion of the land” recorded in verse 4:

And they were not given *authority* to kill them, but to torment them *for* five months. Their torment *was* like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man. (Rev 9:4)

Josephus describes this situation in all its gory detail in Book 4⁴ and reveals that the people in Jerusalem sought death but could not find it.⁵

In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them. (Rev 9:5)

After verse 5 John switches back to the locusts and provides a cryptic description in symbolic/apocalyptic language of the Roman army.

The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were crowns of something like gold, and their faces *were* like the faces of men. 8 They had hair like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ *teeth*.

⁴ Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 4, chapter 4, paragraph 3, page 532 (et al.), Whiston, Kregel Publications

⁵ Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 4, chapter 5, paragraph 3, page 534 (et al.), Whiston, Kregel Publications

9 And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle.

Locusts shaped like horses. It does not take much imagination here, John is describing the tacked up horses in the cavalry of the Roman army. Here “the heads” refers to the men riding the horses and the “crowns” refer to their helmets shining brilliantly in the fall sunshine and it should be obvious that the “breastplates” refer to the iron mail chest protection of the troops. Apparently these riders had long hair that flowed freely from beneath their helmets. The “teeth” would, of course, be a reference to the weaponry of the Roman army. While “the sound of their wings as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle is an epic description of the famed Roman Charioteers as they travel to do battle.

Then John switches from the description of the Roman troops (locusts) in verses 7-9 to some comments about the “scorpion” troops in verse 10.

They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. Their power was to hurt men five months. (Rev 9:7-10)

As we demonstrated above the “scorpions” represent the Jewish Zealot army and their “tails” describes their weaponry, especially their knives and swords as described by Josephus.

Moving on to 9:11, John wrote, “And they (the “locusts” of verse 3ff) have a commander (king) over them, the messenger of the abyss, whose name is Abaddon (Hebrew) -Apollyon (Greek) - Destroyer (English). In this verse, as in other apocalyptic Scriptures (cf. Joel 2:25) the “locusts” are the soldiers of invading armies and their commander is the messenger of destruction (judgment) to the abyss (land of Judaea, v1). Therefore, this confirms that John is using “abyss” as a metaphor for the judgment of God in the land of Judea in chapter 9 and that it is the place where God’s wrath/judgment is to take place in the first century.

To learn more of what is to happen in the abyss we need to move on to Revelation chapters 11, 17, and 20.