

Understanding Revelation – Topic 25

God's strange act

**The seven last plagues
How? When? Why?**

An exposition of Revelation 15:5-8; 16:1-11, 17-21

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Introduction and background

The introduction and background to the pouring out of the seven last plagues commences with Revelation 15:5.

After these things I looked, and behold...

This expression designates a new section or chapter. The prophet once again employs the principle of *repetition and enlargement* to emphasize his main points.

The temple of God's law

***...the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened.
Revelation 15:5***

The book of Revelation is comprised primarily of a series of temple scenes. While Revelation 14:14 -20 reveals Jesus Christ beyond the temple seated on the white cloud, God the Father still presides in the temple and the judgments are initiated from within that temple. The activity within the temple occurs while Jesus is about to come to earth to take possession of His kingdom. Note the unusual description of the temple as *the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven*.

The term *tabernacle of the testimony* is used in only one other place in the New Testament:

...the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness... Acts 7:44 (NKJV)

...the tent of the testimony... (NEB)

This term is derived from the Old Testament where it refers to the Ten Commandments, which comprise God's great moral law.¹

A law is always a revelation of the lawgiver. The Ten Commandments are called a *testimony* or *witness* because they are a revelation of the person, the character and nature of God. One author has written:

*The law is a transcript of God's character.*²

The expression *the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony* means it is the temple of God's law: Heaven declares its high estimation of the law. It is significant that seventy years after Calvary, John the Revelator declares that the eternal temple, where the Most High reigns, the hub of the universe, that 'structure' containing the eternal throne, is the *temple...of the testimony*: the Temple of the Divine Law. This confirms that God's eternal law is the foundation of His throne and government.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne... Psalm 89:14

¹ See Exodus 31:18; 32:15-16; 25:16; Numbers 17:7- 8, 10.

² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1898) 467.

The Psalmist writes again about this righteousness which is the basis of God's government:

...all Your commandments are righteousness. Psalm 119:172

The message which we must take from this introduction to the plagues is that it is rebellion against God's law that has brought about this outpouring of Divine wrath.

...the law brings about wrath... Romans 4:15 (NKJV)

...the law inflicts punishment... (Weymouth)

God's justice and punishment are not the result of caprice, emotion or anger but are based on righteous principles found in His divine law. In His amazing mercy God provided atonement for all who have broken the law so that all might escape its fearful penalty. However once the day of salvation ends, atonement is no longer available and the law will then take its course. All who have spurned the mercy of God will face the consequences.

The seven last plagues

Origin

And out of the temple came the seven angels having the seven plagues...

God's retribution falls on those who worship the beast and his image in defiance of God's requirements. As noted above, this retribution originates from within the temple. While this may appear incongruous to those who believe in a loving God, the psalmist gives us a clue to its significance.

For I was envious....when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... Until I went into the sanctuary (temple) of God; then I understood their end. Psalm 73:3,17

These plagues are not the result of natural forces; rather they are dictated by God and overseen by Christ and the angels. It is in the heavenly temple that the judgments of God are determined.

he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength.... He shall be tormented...in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. Revelation 14:10

...clothed in pure white linen and having their chests girded with golden bands. v6

This is reminiscent of the priests' attire in the earthly temple. The garments of the plague-angels represent purity of motive because their work is just and righteous.

Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God... v7

The *living creatures*, the cherubim, are associated with God's throne. Their tasks appear to be associated with its administration.³ This includes the administration of justice. The

3 AP Cooke, *A Glimpse of God on His Throne* (Sydney: Self published, 1985)

Father is not autocratic. Heavenly beings share in the ultimate responsibility of what is to occur. They are in full agreement.

God's wrath unleashed

The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power...

In Revelation two kinds of smoke are identified within the heavenly temple. There is the smoke of the incense which mingles with the prayers of the saints (Revelation 8:3-4) and there is the smoke of God's glory and power. Isaiah the prophet saw smoke in vision when he was shown the Lord upon His throne.

...the house was filled with smoke. Isaiah 6:4

God's presence at Mount Sinai was swathed in smoke.

Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. Exodus 19:18

Scripture also speaks of *the fire of God's jealousy* (2 Corinthians 11:2). This is Godly jealousy, demonstrated when the Most High is bathed in everlasting fire.

For our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:29

...and no one was able to enter into the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. v8

Here we are given a glimpse of the awfulness of God's wrath. It is so fearful that not even an angel can remain in His presence.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Hebrews 10:31

Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men... 2 Corinthians 5:11

The recipients of God's wrath are those who reject the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12. This is a fearful warning which reinforces the critical importance of those three messages.

...and no one was able to enter into the temple...

Currently there is a man in the temple - *the man Christ Jesus* - the *one mediator between God and men* (2 Timothy 2:5). However, once the plagues commence, no one will stand between the guilty and the God they have offended because Christ's intercession will have ceased. This also applies to the work of the Holy Spirit, our spiritual intercessor, who will have withdrawn from the earth. At present,

...the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Romans 8:26

While Jesus intercedes before God, the Holy Spirit will be freely available.

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever. John 14:16

However, God warns:

...My Spirit shall not strive with man forever.... Genesis 6:3

Consequently, at the close of earth's probation divine restraint will be withdrawn and the human race will be under Satan's complete control. At that time, the prediction that *in the last days perilous times shall come*, will have been completely fulfilled (2 Timothy 3:1).

One author describes this eventuality thus:

The Spirit of God, persistently resisted, has been at last withdrawn. Unsheltered by divine grace, they (the unsaved) have no protection from the wicked one. Satan will then plunge the inhabitants of the earth into one great, final trouble. As the angels of God cease to hold in check the fierce winds of human passion, all the elements of strife will be let loose. The whole world will be involved in ruin more terrible than that which came upon Jerusalem of old.⁴

Preparation needed

Scripture reveals that preparation for the pouring out of the seven last plagues is essential for God's people. This is foreshadowed in Christ's prediction of the destruction of old Jerusalem:

Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place.... Matthew 24:15

The *holy place* was the area of ground which extended several furlongs outside of Jerusalem's wall.⁵ This prediction referred to the armies of Imperial Rome which would besiege Jerusalem and destroy it (Luke 21:20-24). What literal Rome did to literal Jerusalem is typical of what spiritual Rome (the Papacy) will endeavor to do to spiritual Jerusalem (the true church). The instructions which Jesus gave, recorded in Matthew Chapter 24, also have an application to the Church now (see table below).

The flight of the saints from the cities will be a blessing in disguise. While they will be compelled to forsake everything to survive amid the mountains and the wilderness regions, they will be separated from the rest of the population - the unsaved - who have surrendered their allegiance to the beast and his image. Thus when the deadly plagues fall the saints will escape most of the terrible effects of the judgments of God.

The time is coming when large cities will be swept away and all should be warned of these coming judgments.⁶

⁴ Ellen G. White, 614.

⁵ Ibid. 26.

⁶ Ellen G White, *Evangelism* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1946) 29.

Parallels between literal Jerusalem and spiritual Jerusalem (the remnant)	
Literal Jerusalem	Spiritual Jerusalem (the Remnant)
1. Literal Rome invaded literal Jerusalem	Spiritual Rome will invade spiritual Jerusalem – the Remnant.
2. <i>Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.</i> Matthew 24:16	The saints are also to leave the large cities and later to flee to the mountains. Isaiah 33:14-17
3. <i>Let him who is on the house top... not come down to take anything out of his house (ie, take the outside stairway from rooftop to ground) v17</i> <i>And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes (immediate flight).</i>	When the sign is given, the saints must take flight immediately otherwise they will be caught and imprisoned.
4. <i>Woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days.</i> v19	A warning to the saints to cease multiplying when the end is near. The time of trouble will be too great an ordeal for those who are pregnant or who have infants.
5. <i>Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.</i> v20 (See Appendix A)	The saints will need to pray that the weather will not be severe and also that they can still honour the Sabbath at the time of their flight.

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple...

The voice comes from the temple because that is where God is enthroned. The plagues are under His direction. God is in control: this is an assurance to the saints.

The plagues involve extreme suffering and pain and will cause the death of millions of the unsaved. Thus the notion of a loving God inflicting the seven last plagues on humanity raises questions in the minds of some believers. Some conclude that in doing this God transgresses His own holy law. But God is the owner of life. He may give life and He may take it away. Created beings are forbidden to take life because it is not theirs to take. So when God punishes and kills, He is not transgressing his law. Remember that the plagues are poured out *in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.* (Revelation 14:10).

Literal and symbolic interpretations

The plagues are poured out upon six entities – the earth, sea, waters, sun, atmosphere and peoples of the planet.

Consistency would normally require that all seven plagues be understood as either completely literal or entirely symbolic. However, most commentators agree that six are to be considered literally and one symbolically. The sixth plague, which refers to the *drying up of the Euphrates*, is usually interpreted symbolically.

It is interesting that in the seven seals prediction of Revelation 6 and 8:1, six of the seals are also symbolic while one - the sixth - is literal. Likewise, in the seven trumpets prediction six are symbolic while one - the seventh - is literal. However, in the seven last plagues prediction, six are literal and the sixth is symbolic. There is no clear explanation for this apparent lack of consistency with the other groups of seven, but it should be remembered that Jesus often spoke in parables (Matthew 13:10 -17). It is not surprising, then, that God deliberately hides the truth from the insincere and only the dedicated searcher will find it (Matthew 7:6-8).

Fortunately there is a principle which can inform us as to why only the sixth plague must be applied symbolically. Six of the plagues are based upon the Old Testament description of the plagues of Egypt, when God punished that nation and delivered His people Israel. In the book of Revelation whatever pertains to Egypt is applied in a literal sense. The sixth plague is based on the Old Testament description of the punishment that fell on ancient Babylon, allowing literal Israel to be delivered from Babylonian captivity. In Revelation anything which pertains to Babylon has a symbolic - or spiritual - application.

The first plague

So the first went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore...

Other translations render this punishment as follows:

<i>A loathsome and painful sore</i>	TCNY
<i>A foul and painful sore</i>	Amplified NT
<i>A severe and malignant sore</i>	Lam
<i>A loathsome and malignant sore</i>	Phillips
<i>A foul and malignant sore</i>	NEB
<i>A terrible and painful sore</i>	GNB

The Greek word is *helkos* which means *ulcer, a suppurating wound*. The Septuagint uses the same word when referring to the boils of one of the Egyptian plagues (Exodus 9:9-10).

So severe is the continuous pain of these sores that during the fifth plague Scripture declares *they gnawed their tongues because of pain* (v10). Pain-killing drugs will be either useless or non-existent. Nothing will bring relief. This plague specifically

...came upon the men who had the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. Revelation 16:2

This description is reminiscent of the third angel's message and its terrible warning. Revelation 16 depicts its fulfillment. It is a reminder to us that God means what He says, and this passage makes clear the importance of the third angel's message.

Extent

The first plague cannot be a localized plague. It must be a worldwide blight because as we have already learned the mark of the beast will be world-wide:

...all the world marveled and followed after the beast. Revelation 13:3

All who dwell on the earth will worship him... Revelation 13:8

There are authoritative statements which maintain that the first plague will be worldwide. We must therefore reconcile these with the following other statements:

This plague will not be universal.⁷

The plagues are not universal or the inhabitants would be wholly cut off, yet they will be the most awful scourge that has been known to mortals.⁸

We need to understand the meaning of the term *universal*. We find that it means:

The whole or the whole of created things, applicable to every member of a genus.⁹

This serves to clarify the issue. The plagues will not fall on every member of the human race. They fall only on those who have rejected Christ. They do not fall upon

...those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Revelation 12:17

The three angels' messages go to *every nation, kindred, tongue and people*, meaning that they go to the whole world. The plagues, then, must also be worldwide but not universal. There is a distinct difference between the terms *universal* and *worldwide*. As the author who used the term *universal* has written:

The people of every country on the globe will be led to follow her (America's) example (in enforcing the mark of the beast).¹⁰

The second plague

Then the second angel poured out his bowl upon the sea; and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature in the sea died. Revelation 16:3

The second plague affects the world's oceans. The inference of the word *blood* is that the sea will become poisonous, putrid and deadly. The waters which turned to blood in the plague upon Egypt did not coagulate, yet became so poisonous that all the fish therein died (Exodus 7:17-20). This plague will affect the waters similarly.

To place all this in context, it is a medical fact that great care is required while conducting autopsies because the blood of a dead person can be toxic. When we

⁷ F.D.Nichol, ed. *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1957), 7:840.

⁸ Ellen G. White, 628.

⁹ "The Universal Dictionary of the English Language", in Edited by Henry C Wylde, (Oxford: Routledge, 1960),

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948) 6:18.

contemplate the vast amount of life in the oceans we can understand what a horrendous calamity this will prove to be. Dead sea-life by the multiplied billions will be washed ashore; layer upon layer will lie along the coasts and clog the estuaries. Not only will the harbors, river mouths and beaches be choked with rotting sea life, but the overpowering stench will pollute the air for kilometers and make breathing a misery.

Two examples of such an occurrence have occurred on a small local scale off the coast of Florida, as reported by the United States Admiralty and published by *Australian Associated Press* (AAP).

FORT MEYERS (Florida), Tuesday (AAP). 'Red Tide' Reappears. The reappearance of a 'red tide', which experts say is caused by tiny sea organisms known as 'gymnodinium', has been reported by commercial fishermen in waters off the Gulf coast. Dead deep-sea fish are stated to be strewn along the beaches. One fisherman is reported to have been rendered unconscious by fumes given off by the organisms. Bulldozers were required to clear beaches of dead fish when the reddish waters were last reported in January.¹¹

The AAP report says that the red tide has reappeared. Its first appearance is detailed in United States Admiralty records kept in Washington, DC. At that time the extent of the strange occurrence was an area of water off the Florida coast five hundred kilometers long and seventy kilometers wide. All the fish in this area of ocean died and the water had the appearance of blood, having a poisonous effect on sea-life.¹²

As with the first plague, the second plague will not be universal, but it will be world-wide because

*...all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication...
Revelation 18:3*

It follows therefore that the unsaved of all nations will be subject to this punishment meted out by heaven.

The third plague

Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water and they became blood. Revelation 16:4

In a few short words the third catastrophe is described. All the drinking water of the world becomes *blood*. However it will not be *as of a dead man*, which is toxic. It will more likely be like blood in both appearance and odour. In other words, the waters of the streams will become undrinkable. Again, this plague is based on an Egyptian plague which was described as follows:

Stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their streams, over their rivers, over their ponds, and over all their pools of water, that they may become blood...both in vessels of wood and vessels of stone. Exodus 7:19

The result of the third plague is that all the activities for which we use water will be nauseating. All potable water - even if it is bottled - will be red and repulsive and the

¹¹ Quoted in *The Mercury* (Hobart), Wednesday 25 June 1947.

¹² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* 628-629.

natural reaction of the population will be to refuse to use it or drink it. However the fourth plague will compel them to drink.

The fourth plague

Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat. v8-9

This passage is depicting an intense heat wave. It is possible at this time that power sources will be inoperative and therefore refrigeration and air conditioning will be unavailable. The natural and desperate response of the population will be a need for fluids to quell a raging thirst. However, regardless of the nature of the form of the liquid available, it will be blood-red, foul-smelling and repulsive. Yet because of the unrelenting, inescapable heat, people will be compelled to drink.

At this present time we can resort to the beach for relief from the heat of scorching summer weather, however near the close of history the shorelines of all continents and islands will be heaped with vast masses of rotting flesh and the accompanying stench of decay. To add to the torment forest fires will increase the heat and prevent people seeking the coolness of outdoor shade.

*...the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty...
fire has devoured the open pastures... the water brooks are dried up...
Joel 1:15-20*

No doubt this plague will destroy the food supplies of the world. Crops will fail resulting in a famine which will afflict the world as never before.

*The wicked are dying from hunger and pestilence. There shall be many dead bodies in every place, they shall cast them forth with silence.*¹³

This is a scene of horror, agony and torture. Each plague exacerbates the situation. Does this scene depict a God of vindictive cruelty? Why torment the unsaved if they have already forfeited eternal life? Do these plagues vindicate Satan's claims about God being unjust and vengeful?

The plagues are what Scripture describes as God's *strange* or *unusual* work.

For the Lord will rise up as at Mount Perazim, He will be angry as in the valley of Gibeon - that He may do His work, His awesome work; and bring to pass His act, His unusual act. (KJV – His strange act). Isaiah 28:21

Scripture records a few isolated instances of God's wrath falling in a limited fashion upon sinners. However during the seven last plagues God's wrath is awe-inspiring and fearful. It will be exhibited as never before.

The last generation of humans will be the generation that will have been given more opportunities, more privileges and more enlightenment than any other generation in history. Their rejection of truth and their persecution of the righteous that live amongst them will make them the most deserving of divine punishment of any generation in all of history.

¹³ Ibid. 628, 629.

Notice the verdict of the unfallen beings who will witness the terrible scenes.

And I heard the angel of the waters saying, "You are righteous, O Lord, the One who is and who was and who is to be, because You have judged these things. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments." Revelation 16:5-7

The blood of God's people will be shed during the coming time of trouble, but only prior to the close of probation. After probation closes none of the saints will suffer martyrdom or death. *Michael* (Christ) will not allow His people to be killed (Daniel 12:1). This is because martyrdoms are only permitted by God for the purpose of witness, to convict those who view the martyr's stand for the truth of God and to lead them to Christ. After the close of probation no one remains to be convinced. All have made their final decision and the day of salvation has ended. Consequently, further martyrdoms would be pointless. However, in a world-wide attempt to rid the earth of righteous dissent the death decree is issued.

He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. Revelation 13:15

While the unsaved will not be permitted to take the lives of the saints after the close of probation, God will nevertheless regard their intention to kill the saints as seriously as if they had achieved their nefarious aim.

By condemning the people of God to death they have as truly incurred the guilt of their blood, as if it had been shed by their hands.¹⁴

These plagues have demonstrated God's justice. Any individual or power that afflicts His faithful people is put on notice.

... "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord... Hebrews 10:30

The death decree against the saints will encompass all nations.

Many of all nations and of all classes, high and low, rich and poor, black and white, will be cast into the most unjust and cruel bondage.¹⁵

There will be, in different lands, a simultaneous movement... for their destruction.¹⁶

Every country on the globe will be led to follow the example of the United States.¹⁷

On the basis of these statements, it can be concluded that the third and fourth plagues must also be worldwide.

¹⁴ Ibid. 628.

¹⁵ Ibid. 626

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* 6:18.

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* 635.

The flight of the saints

How will the saints fare amid the devastation of the plagues? The following statement reveals that they will suffer some of their effects:

*The people of God will not be free from suffering; but while persecuted and distressed, while they endure privation, and suffer for want of food, they will not be left to perish. That God who cared for Elijah will not pass by one of his self-sacrificing children. He who numbers the hairs of their head will care for them, and in time of famine they shall be satisfied.*¹⁸

Various Scriptures reveal how God will succor his people during the plagues:

The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, he who despises the gain of oppressions, who gestures with his hands, refusing bribes, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil: he will dwell on high; his place of defense will be the fortress of rocks; bread will be given him, his water will be sure. Your eyes will see the King in His beauty; they will see the land that is very far off. Isaiah 33:14-17

The above Scripture reveals that the saints will find refuge in the *high places*, that is, in the mountain regions and in the wilderness.

The poor and needy seek water, but there is none, their tongues fail for thirst. I, the LORD, will hear them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in desolate heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. Isaiah 41:17-18

The ninety-first Psalm has been recognized as having a final application to the time of trouble which occurs during the seven last plagues.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust." Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence (the first plague). He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night (the fifth plague), nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday (the seventh plague). A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look, and see the reward of the wicked. Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. Psalm 91:1-11

When all drinking water is as blood, it is possible that God will bring water from the rocks as he did for Israel in the Sinai wilderness. When there is no food and the saints face starvation, God may provide manna, just as he did long ago. Regardless, He will ensure the saints' survival: God will provide for His people in this terrible time.

¹⁸ Ibid. 629.

The fifth plague

Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. Revelation 16:10

The fifth plague is poured out upon the *throne* - the control centre - of the beast. The result of this plague is comprehensive and oppressive darkness. Since the beast represents the Papacy the major focus must be upon the Vatican State. However the plague doesn't just affect this small principality because the passage states that the beast's kingdom also becomes *full of darkness*. By this time the kingdom of the Papacy will have become worldwide:

...all the world marveled and followed the beast. Revelation 13:3

All who dwell upon the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life... Revelation 13:8

The world has rejected the spiritual light of the Lamb and chosen instead the spiritual darkness of the beast, and now God grants them literal darkness. This means that the entire globe will be enshrouded by the blackness of the darkest night. This darkness will be so intense that nothing will be able to penetrate it. As the prophet Zephaniah declared:

That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Zephaniah 1:15

It is a darkness that will be felt as well as seen, like the darkness of the Egyptian plague.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness which may even be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. Exodus 10:21-22

In contrast to the previous plague where there was extreme heat and hunger and thirst, now there is extreme cold accompanying the hunger and thirst amid the terrifying impenetrable darkness. With the sun's rays no longer evident, and with the resultant intense cold, the unsaved will experience terrible misery. All heating systems and power supplies will have failed and in the concentrated cold the deep, ulcerated sores that cover the bodies of the wicked will be so painful that *they will gnaw their tongues* in agony.

The wording of the original Greek indicates that the darkness is not short and swift, but prolonged. This leads us to enquire as to the duration of the plagues.

Duration of the plagues

When the purpose of the plagues is understood it is apparent that time must elapse for their purpose to be realized. On this basis the duration of the plagues would have to be much longer than a few days or even weeks. The Revelator, alluding to the period of the

plagues, specifically uses the term *one day* and according to the usual interpretation of time in a symbolic prophecy, this represents a period of one year.¹⁹

Some have concluded that because the term *one hour* is used three times in Revelation Chapter 18 in connection with Babylon's punishment, the plagues must be of very short duration. When the three expressions of *one hour* are analyzed however, it is quite clear that they apply to the final dissolution of Babylon.

In one hour is your judgment (punishment) come. Revelation 18:10

Revelation 18:9 reveals that this refers to the symbolic burning of Babylon.

For in one hour such great riches came to nothing. Revelation 18:17

Revelation 18:15 demonstrates that the one hour refers to Babylon's torment.

For in one hour is she made desolate. Revelation 18:19

Revelation 18:18 reveals that the *one hour* referred to also refers to the symbolic burning of Babylon. It is apparent then that the *one hour* of punishment will be meted out during the final three of the seven plagues, which are especially targeted at Babylon:

- The fifth plague is poured upon the throne of the beast, the central power of Babylon.
- The sixth plague is poured upon the Euphrates, the numerous peoples supporting Babylon.
- The seventh plague completes the punishment and fall of Babylon.

Babylon's composition

Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Revelation 16:19

Babylon is divided into three entities to facilitate the appropriation of punishments because some of Babylon's adherents are guiltier than others. According to Revelation 16:13-14 the three symbolic entities which compose Babylon are:

1. **The Dragon** - Kings, rulers and governors under the brand of antichrist.²⁰
2. **The Beast** - The Papacy.
3. **The False Prophet** - Apostate Protestantism.²¹

(Topic 26 of *Understanding Revelation* explains in detail what these three symbols represent).

¹⁹ Numbers 14:34; Ezekiel 4:6 (margin).

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 3rd ed. (Boise, ID.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1962) 39.

²¹ A.P. Cooke, *Three Powers and Armageddon* (Sydney: Self-published, 2010).

Of these three entities, the Beast and the False Prophet will be the guiltiest of all. They comprise the spiritual leadership of Babylon, deceiving the rest of mankind and leading them to perdition. Their punishment will be ten times greater than that of other segments of Babylon.

*Their suffering was tenfold greater than that of their people.*²²

Focus of the plagues

It seems likely that the first four plagues will fall upon the apostate Babylonian world. The number *four* in Scripture often denotes universality, or the totality of a population. The final three plagues, however, concentrate upon the leadership of Babylon.

The *one day* (one year) duration must be necessary for the significance of the plagues to be understood. Not only are the plagues an administration of divine punishment, but they are also a revelation of heaven's righteousness and justice. The plagues will reveal the true character and spirit of the unsaved and the justice of their punishment.

Looking at it objectively, it could appear that the majority of the world's inhabitants have been deceived by the leaders of Babylon and may not necessarily be in rebellion against God. Therefore subjecting them to the plagues could be deemed harsh and unjust. In light of this concern, a period of time will be essential in order to demonstrate the true spirit of the unsaved. This time period would necessarily exceed a few days or weeks for this to be fully demonstrated.

With this in mind, it is significant that during the first three plagues there is no apparent reaction on the part of the unsaved against God. However during the fourth, fifth and seventh plagues the unsaved finally give vent to their true feelings:

- Fourth plague - *And they blasphemed the name of God...and they did not repent and give Him glory. v9*
- Fifth plague - *They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores and did not repent of their deeds. v11*
- Seventh plague - *Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail... v21*

The normal reaction of humans to such extreme pain would be to cry to God for mercy and relief. Finally, however, when the fourth plague falls upon them, the unsaved will burst forth in rebellion, blaspheming God. They do not repent. This will reveal to the universe their true condition. Though they had been misled, deluded, and hoodwinked by the religious leaders, at heart they themselves are also in rebellion against God.

Further evidence that the plagues will require more than a short period of time is that during the sixth plague the followers will withdraw their support for the false religious leaders and turn against them. Time will be required for this attitude to develop. This is because when the plagues commence, the supporters of the religious leaders are seen to be in complete harmony with them. It is not until the sixth plague that their eyes have been opened and they realize that their religious leaders have deluded them and used them for their own ambitious ends.

²² Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, DC.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1882) 282.

Further insight into the plagues' duration

Further insight regarding the duration of the plagues is found in the experience of the Jews in the days of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus of Persia, as recorded in the Book of Esther. A decree was issued against God's ancient people that on a certain date, eleven months after the issuance of the decree, the Jews were to be put to death.²³ This experience was a "type" of the situation which would face God's people at the end of time. It provides an insight into how the death decree against the saints is to be enacted.

*The decree which is to go forth against the people of God will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus against the Jews in the time of Esther.*²⁴

The book of Esther records how Haman, the principle enemy of the Jews initiated the decree and set the exact date on which the decree would be issued followed by the exact date on which it was to be executed. According to Ezra 3:6-15 an eleven month period elapsed between the issuance of the decree and its execution. Because the decree against the saints in the end-time will be very similar to that issued by Ahasuerus, it is reasonable to expect that the period between the issuing of the death decree of Revelation 13:15 and its execution could likewise be a period of eleven months.

If this application is valid, it means that if the death decree is issued around the close of probation, with its execution scheduled for eleven months later, this is what will lead to the events of the sixth plague. It also means that the duration of the plagues would need to be about twelve months - one prophetic day.

The sixth plague will be covered in Topics 26-28 of *Understanding Revelation*.

The seventh plague

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" v17

God's wrath has been manifested against rebellion. Now justice is satisfied. The conflict has come to its end. God has no pleasure in the administration of punishment, but justice demands that it has to be administered and no doubt heaven is relieved to see the process concluded.

And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings...

This depicts the awe-inspiring events that end the plagues and usher in the Second Advent of Christ. One author describes them thus:

*Fierce lightnings leap from the heavens, enveloping the earth in a sheet of flame. Above the terrific roar of thunder, voices, mysterious and awful, declare the doom of the wicked.*²⁵

²³ Esther 3:6, 7, 12-13.

²⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* 5:450.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1917) 605.

...and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. v18-20

This will be the greatest earthquake in all of history and corresponds with the second earthquake of the sixth seal.

...and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. Revelation 6:14

Because of this final plague the earth is turned into a desolate wilderness. All the proud works of men are brought down to the dust. The lofty skyscrapers that presently pierce the sky will collapse as a result of the earthquake. The cities of the earth with their teeming millions will be annihilated.

The time is coming when large cities will be swept away.²⁶

The proudest cities of the earth are laid low. The lordly palaces, upon which the world's great men have lavished their wealth in order to glorify themselves, are crumbling to ruin before their eyes.²⁷

No wonder God instructs His people beforehand to leave the cities and to retire to secluded country places.²⁸ Yet how will they fare when they are among the mountains and the mightiest of earthquakes levels the mountains and fills the valleys? The author of the book *The Great Controversy* states:

The mountains shake like a reed in the wind, and ragged rocks are scattered on every side. There is a roar as of a coming tempest. The sea is lashed into fury...The whole earth heaves and swells like the waves of the sea. Its surface is breaking up...Mountain chains are sinking. Inhabited islands disappear. The seaports are swallowed up by the angry waters.²⁹

The saints of God will participate in the most awe inspiring experience ever to transpire upon the earth. As the psalmist wrote:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling. Psalm 46:1-3

For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. Psalm 91:11-12

At this time the ministry of angels will be a special feature in the protection and deliverance of the saints.

²⁶ Ellen G White, ; Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1946) 29.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* 637.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* 5:464-465.

²⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* 637.

And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great. v21

A talent is approximately 25 kilograms (or 56 pounds) in weight. Imagine the devastation as these massive hailstones hurtle from the sky and smash onto the earth. This will complete the destruction of human civilization and result in worldwide desolation.

There is some evidence for the existence of ice in outer space and in the upper atmosphere. The delicate, wispy cirrus clouds are understood to be ice crystals floating in a band between seven to twelve kilometers above the earth. Regardless, God can create whatever is needed to fulfill His purposes.

In Siberia there is a giant crater three kilometers in diameter and eighty kilometers in circumference. It was found that instead of being composed of metal, it was filled with mud. The flattening of forests for kilometers in every direction indicated that a cosmic iceberg had hit the earth. It was so immense that even the friction of the earth's atmosphere failed to melt it. Scripture intimates that God has huge quantities of ice in reserve for the time of trouble.

*Have you entered the treasury of snow, or have you seen the treasury of hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war?
Job 38:22-23*

The psalmist sang under inspiration:

Fire and hail, snow and clouds; stormy wind, fulfilling His word... Psalm 148:8

Conclusion

Christ returns at the climax of the plagues to reward every individual *according to his work*. To those of the unsaved who have survived the seven last plagues, it means their destruction. To the remnant of the saints who have passed through the plagues unscathed, and have experienced the marvelous protection of God, it means life everlasting.

*Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him and He will save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.
Isaiah 25:9*

Appendix A

There is a view that the reason Jesus gave the instruction in Matthew 24:20 regarding avoiding flight on the Sabbath was that the gates in Jerusalem were shut on the Sabbath, and consequently His disciples would not be able to escape. In the siege of Jerusalem, however, the gates were shut continuously. It is therefore obvious that the reason for Jesus' instruction was that forty years after his resurrection, the fourth commandment was still valid.

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