

INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 7

1 THE THEME

2 THE STRUCTURE

- a. Revelation chapter 7 is the chapter in between
- b. Comparison between chapter 6 and chapters 7 to 11
- c. Division of chapter 7

3 THE CONTENTS

4 THE BACKGROUND.

- a. The seal (7:3)
- b. The mark on the forehead (7:3)
- c. The servants of our God (7:3)
- d. The Christian Church is called by Old Testament names of God's people (7:4)

1 THE THEME

THE PROTECTION OF THE MILITANT CHURCH AND THE GLORY OF THE TRIUMPHANT CHURCH

The Militant Church is sealed and thus protected at Christ's first coming and is strengthened by the vision of the glory of the Triumphant Church at Christ's second coming.

2 THE STRUCTURE

a. Revelation chapter 7 is the chapter in between

Within the order of the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 7 is between Revelation chapter 6 (the revelation of the first six seals of persecution and affliction) and Revelation chapter 8 and 9 (the revelation of the seventh seal and the six trumpets of judgement).

The seventh seal reveals the unfathomable phenomenon of delay or of slowing down the movement of God's history of salvation and judgement towards its end. It reveals that there are other principles besides the seals, trumpets and bowls that delay Christ's second coming and the coming of the final end of this present world.

One of these principles is the fruition of godlessness and wickedness. All things in this present world must first become what they really are: the concealment of the godlessness and wickedness of this world must first be fully exposed and dealt with. The insincere pretence of the goodness of democracy, humanism and being religious must first be unmasked. The superficiality of the exact and social sciences, the arrogance of political and military power and the uselessness of economic materialism in the long run must first be brought into the light. God's moral principle in history is that the seals of oppression, persecution and affliction are always followed by the trumpets of judgement. The persistence of the world in its opposition to Jesus Christ, to his gospel and to his people (6:1-11) and its godlessness and wickedness (9:20-21; cf. Romans 1:18) must first lead to God's judgements (cf. Romans 1:19-32). It is this delay of God's judgements that evoke awesome silence in heaven.

Revelation chapter 7 deals with the question how Christians will fare when the seals of oppression, persecution and affliction on the one hand and the trumpets of judgement on the other hand break loose over the people in the world.

First these judgements are pictured as ready to break loose over the impenitent world. The four good angels who hold four winds and have been given the power to harm the earth and its inhabitants stand ready to execute judgement (7:1-3).

However, before these judgements are executed God protects Christians forever by sealing them (7:4-8) and encourages them by giving them a vision of their final glorious destiny (7:9-17).

Then in Revelation chapter 8 and 9, at the opening of the seventh seal, these judgements actually break loose.

The sealing by God does not protect Christians from being hit by the seals of oppression, persecution and affliction or by the trumpets of judgements, because these come over believers as well as unbelievers. Sometimes believers are harder hit than unbelievers. Nevertheless, “a righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all” (Psalm 34:19; cf. Job 1:12f).

God’s sealing protects Christians, not against the suffering, but against *the destruction* caused in these judgements. These persecutions and judgements cannot harm Christians in essence and cannot cause their eternal doom (Job 42; Romans 8:28-39). The seals and the trumpets are for Christians not judgements that originate in God’s wrath against Christians and are not meant to punish and destroy Christians because of their sins. They originate in God’s love for Christians and are meant to chastise, sanctify and bring Christians closer to God (Psalm 119:71; cf. Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).

Revelation chapter 7 is closely connected to Revelation chapter 6, showing that Christians are *protected* throughout the execution of God’s eternal decree of what will happen with the Church in all of world history (the seals).

Revelation chapter 7 is also closely connected to Revelation chapter 8 and 9, showing that Christians are *protected* throughout the execution of God’s warning judgements over the impenitent world (the trumpets).

The Church is NOT protected from suffering, but IS protected from eternal damnation in hell.

b. Comparison between chapter 6 and chapters 7 to 11

Although Revelation chapter 7 to 11 follows Revelation chapter 6 in *order of revelation*, they are not chronologically later than chapter 6 in *order of execution*. Thus also Revelation chapter 7 and 8 to 11 are *parallel* to Revelation chapter 6. Both sections two (chapters 4-7) and section 3 (chapters 8-11) span the whole New Testament period from Christ’s first coming to Christ’s second coming.

Revelation chapter 6 views the whole New Testament period with respect to the revelation and execution of *God’s eternal plan*, especially the victorious course of Christ and his gospel in world history and the suffering it brings for especially Christians. Revelation chapters 7 to 11 view the whole New Testament period with respect to the revelation and execution of *God’s judgements* over the impenitent world which opposes Christ, his gospel and Christians, and they view God’s *protection* of God’s people throughout those judgements.

c. Division of chapter 7

Revelation chapter 7 is divided into two parts:

Chapter 7:1-8 is a vision of the Militant Church on earth before Christ’s second coming.

Chapter 7:9-17 is a vision of the Triumphant Church in heaven after Christ’s second coming.

3 THE CONTENTS

Revelation 7:1-8 is a picture of what happens at Christ’s first coming. The Militant Church on earth (the Church before Christ’s second coming) is sealed before the seals of oppression, persecution and affliction (chapter 6) and the trumpets of judgements (chapter 9 and 9) break loose in the world. This symbolises that Christians are enabled to cope with the oppression and persecution by their enemies (John 16:33; Romans 8:37) and that they are completely protected against going lost into damnation (John 5:24; 10:28; 17:12).

Revelation 7:9-17 is a picture of what happens at Christ’s second coming. The Triumphant Church in heaven and thereafter on the new earth (the Church after Christ’s second coming and after the final judgement) is seen standing with Christ after their final and complete victory. This is a great encouragement and very reassuring for Christians!

4 THE BACKGROUND

a. The seal (7:3)

The seal symbolises three things:

(1) Ownership. “Place me like a seal over your heart” (Song of Songs 8:6). Christians are sealed with the Holy Spirit as a sign of belonging to Christ (Ephesians 1:13; Romans 8:16; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 2 Timothy 2:19) right up to the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30; Romans 8:23).

(2) Certification of genuine character (Esther 3:12) and assurance of the reality it signifies (Romans 4:11).

(3) Protection against tampering (Matthew 27:66). Christians are protected throughout life (Isaiah 43:1-4), especially protected against eternal damnation (John 10:28-29; Romans 5:9-10).

b. The mark on the forehead (7:3)

(1) The mark on the forehead, hand and door of God’s people (Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:5-9).

In the Old Testament observing the festival of Unleavened Bread functioned as “a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips” (Exodus 13:9). This is clearly *figurative*.

“Having the law of the LORD your God on your heart, impressing it on your children, talking about them in your home and outside your home, from morning till evening, tying it as symbols on your hand and binding it on your forehead, and writing it on the doorframes of your houses and gates” visibly expressed your love for the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:5-9; cf. John 14:21,23). Although it would not be wrong to write God’s law literally and visibly on your forehead, hand and door, God’s intention is rather that our constant thinking (forehead), constant activities (hand) and constant living (door of house) would give visible expression to God’s law (especially God’s law of love)!

The New Testament expression of this is Colossians 3:17,23, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

(2) The mark on the forehead of the spiritual remnant of Israel (Ezekiel 9:1-11).

In Ezekiel 9:1-11 God gave Ezekiel a vision about sealing. God was going to punish the grievous sins of Israel and Judah. First God sent a man with a writing kit to put a mark on the foreheads of those people who grieve and lament over all the detestable things done in Jerusalem. Then God sent city guards with deadly weapons to kill everyone who had no mark of protection on his forehead! This is clearly *figurative*.

The people with this figurative mark on their foreheads represented the spiritual remnant of Israel (Isaiah 1:8-9; 4:2; 6:13; 10:20-22; 28:5; 37:4,31-32; 46:3; Joel 2:32; Romans 9:29) that would NOT be killed in God’s judgement (Genesis 4:15).

(3) The mark of members of the trade-guilds in Thyatira (2:18-29).

‘To seal’ can mean *to brand* cattle, *to tattoo* slaves and soldiers in the service of the emperor or *to put a mark* on the forehead (neck, hand) of a member of a guild. In Thyatira Christ is *not looking for a visible mark on their body*, but is searching their hearts and minds (2:23) and their moral and religious life (2:20) in order to determine whether they have succumbed to false teachers or whether they have held on to their Christian heritage until Christ comes (2:24-25).

Thyatira was a centre of communication, with many people passing through, and it thus became a trading centre. There were many trade-guilds, like wool-workers, linen-workers, garments industries, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, etc. These trade-guilds functioned like trade-unions and were associated with the worship of tutelary-deities. Each trade had its own guardian god. If a person wished to get ahead in the world, he had to belong to a guild and this implied that he worshipped its guardian god. He was expected to attend the guild-festivals and to eat the food as a gift from this guardian god. After the meal he was expected to participate in the gross immoral fun. Thus, on the one hand, if a Christian refused to participate, he became the object of ridicule and persecution. And if he quit the trade-union, he lost his job and his status in society. But, on the other hand, if a Christian remained within the guild, he had to participate. Then he denied the Lord.

c. The servants of our God (7:3)

In the Old Testament Jesus Christ is called ‘the Servant of the LORD’ (Isaiah 49:1-13).

As such he is the Representative, the Saviour and the Covenant of the people of the new community.

In the New Testament Christians are called the servants of God (Luke 17:10; 1 Peter 2:16).

The book of Revelation was written to the servants of God or Christ (1:1), to everyone “who reads the words of this prophecy ... and take to heart what is written in it” (1:3). The servants of Christ in Revelation 2:20 are certainly Christians from Gentile background, people that belong to “all the churches (congregations)” in the world (2:23,29)! The servants of God in Revelation 5:10 are people saved by the blood of Christ and are from every tribe and language and people and nation on earth! They are Christians. The servants and fellow servants in Revelation 6:11 refer to Christians that have laid down their lives because they possessed the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus. They were believers in Jesus Christ and possessed the Bible. In Revelation 22:3 the servants that serve God and the Lamb on the new earth are the Old Testament and the New Testament believers who constitute the New Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb.

Thus, in Revelation 7:3 the servants do not refer to Jews, but to Jews *and Gentiles* who believe in Jesus Christ! The word ‘servants’ refers to all Christians!

d. The Christian Church is called by the Old Testament names of God’s people (7:4)

Jesus.

The Old Testament Israel is called the ‘church or assembly’ (Greek: *ekklesia*), which means, God’s called out people (Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:28). Jesus also calls the New Testament Christian community *the ‘church’* (*ekklesia*) (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus calls the Church consisting of Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles *one flock with one Shepherd* (John 10:16; cf. Isaiah 40:1; Ezekiel 34:1-24; 1 Peter 5:2).

Jesus calls the Church *a kingdom and priests*, the same he called Israel in Exodus 19:6 (Revelation 1:6).

In Matthew 19:28 (Luke 22:30) Jesus says that in the restored universe, when he would sit on the throne of his glory, his disciples would be seated on twelve thrones, judging *the twelve tribes of Israel*.¹ The twelve tribes of Israel could refer to the total number of elect gathered out of the Jews from the beginning to the end of world history (Romans 11:26), or to the total number of elect gathered from both the Jews and the Gentiles from the beginning to the end of history (Galatians 6:16). But in either case the phrase ‘the twelve tribes of Israel’ must refer to *regenerated Christians*, because in a renewed universe nothing unclean will ever enter (Revelation 21:27). The disciples will judge them, probably in the sense of *reigning over and being radiant above* them (Daniel 12:3; Matthew 20:21; Revelation 3:21).

Jesus did not come to replace the Old Testament covenant people of God (Israel) as God’s people, but to lead it to become what he intended it to become, namely, the New Testament covenant people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Likewise in Revelation 7:3 Jesus calls the 144 000 servants of God *‘the twelve tribes of Israel’*. They are Christians! They are a symbol for the full number of believers from the Jews and the non-Jews who serve the living God throughout the history of the world.

James, Peter and Paul follow Jesus in naming God’s New Testament people: the twelve tribes of Israel.

James.

The Church is called *the twelve tribes in the diaspora (dispersion)* (James 1:1)². In the period between the exile and the beginning of the New Testament the Israelites made a distinction between those Israelites that had returned from exile and those Israelites that remained living in foreign countries. The Israelites who lived in foreign countries as well as the foreign countries themselves were called ‘the dispersion’. The whole area beyond the Promised Land was regarded as the dispersion (John 7:35).

¹ κρινοντες (vppa) τας δωδεκα φυλας του Ισραηλ

² τας δωδεκε φυλαις ταις εν τη διασπορα

However, the oldest book in the New Testament, James (A.D. 43) was directed to “the twelve tribes in the diaspora (dispersion)”. This old expression no longer referred to the natural Jews in the dispersion, but to the Christians in the dispersion, even though the majority may have been Jewish Christians. James called them ‘brothers’ in Christ (James 1:1). James was not writing to Jews, but was figuratively referring to Christians, who live in dispersion everywhere in the world, far from their heavenly home. He directed his letter to Christians, who had no permanent place here on earth, but lived scattered everywhere on earth (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:9-10,16; 12:22-24; 13:14). The twelve tribes in dispersion is a good description of the Church of Jesus Christ that is being persecuted and oppressed on earth throughout her pilgrim’s journey to their eternal home.

Paul.

God has made the believers in Christ who come from the Gentiles fellow citizens of God’s people and members of God’s household (Ephesians 2:11-22) on complete equal terms with the believers in Christ from the Jews (Ephesians 3:2-6). There is no longer any difference between a Jew and a Gentile (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11)! All believers, no matter whether they were Jews or Gentiles before, are baptised by one Spirit into the one Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

The Church consisting of believing Jews and believing Gentiles belongs to Christ, is called Abraham’s seed or Abraham’s children and is the heir according to God’s promise (Galatians 3:29). The Church is called the Jerusalem that is above (the Heavenly Jerusalem) (Galatians 4:26). The Jewish and Gentile members of the Church in Galatia who believe in the cross of Jesus Christ, who have crucified the sinful world and who are a new creation are regarded as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:14-16).³

Paul clearly teaches that not all the people who descend from physical Israel (the Jews) belong to the Israel of God (the believers)(Romans 9:6). Natural Jews are still “Israel according to the flesh”, that is, people uncircumcised in their hearts (1 Corinthians 10:18), but Christians are “the Israel of God”, that is, people circumcised in their hearts. A man is a “real Jew” only when he is born again, that is, when his heart has been circumcised by the Spirit (Romans 2:28-29). And Abraham is the spiritual father only of believers among the physically circumcised (Jews) and believers among the physically uncircumcised (Gentiles)(Romans 4:11-12). God has redeemed all Gentile believers in Christ so that they may become his temple and his covenant people (2 Corinthians 6:16; Titus 2:14).

God’s Old Testament people are not abandoned and are also not replaced by the New Testament Church. God’s Old Testament people, Israel, was already ‘the Church’ (Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:28). Israel was continued and extended to include the born-again believers from all the Gentile nations. Israel became what God intended her to be: a people of God from every nation on earth (Genesis 22:17-18; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:2-6; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5:9-10).

Peter.

Peter was not writing to Jews, but to Christians in Asia Minor. Nevertheless, he called them by names also used of God’s Old Testament people. The Church is called God’s elect dispersed (in the diaspora) throughout places in the world (1 Peter 1:1)⁴. Christians are people chosen by God and sanctified by the Spirit unto obedience and cleansing of Jesus’ blood (1 Peter 1:2). Christians are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” – all terms used of God’s Old Testament people (1 Peter 2:9-10). They are as “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Peter 2:11; cf. Hebrews 11:13).

Conclusion. God’s Old Testament people, Israel, is not put aside or replaced by the Church, but is rather led to reach her final intended reality as God’s New Testament people, the Church consisting of people of God from every nation in the world!

³ Ισραηλ του θεου

⁴ εκλεκτοις παρεπιδημοις διασπορας