

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 370

Revelation 6

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Episode Summary

Revelation 6 introduces the reader to the unsealing of the scroll of Revelation 5. The first such act unleashes the four horsemen of the apocalypse. A variety of Old Testament passages and images are involved in the ensuing description of the terrible events that follow. In this episode, we look again at John's use of the Old Testament to describe God's eschatological judgment on the world.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 370: Revelation 6. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How's it going?

MH: Pretty good. I had my first Fantasy Baseball draft last week, Trey, and I'm relatively happy. It looks good. [TS makes snoring noises] [laughs]

TS: So this is something I can get behind our audience being annoyed at us.

MH: Oh, I'm not going to belabor it! I'm just...

TS: No, I'm just teasing. I'm teasing. How'd you do in the draft?

MH: I think I did pretty well. You know? It's a Roto league, so we'll see. Now I get to just see and watch which guys get injured. [laughs] You know?

TS: Yeah...

MH: That's my Fantasy experience right there.

TS: Well, at the time of this recording, it's actually March Madness weekend. So I'm excited because my Texas Tech made it *and* Abilene Christian University made it—ACU made it. So ACU is going to play Texas tomorrow (from the time of this recording). So by the time this is out, we're already going to know the end of all of this.

MH: I forgot all about that because I don't watch basketball. But yeah. I don't even know who's supposed to win.

TS: Gonzaga was number 1 overall.

MH: Oh, really? Well, I've been on their campus once. So I guess I have a connection, since they're in the Northwest.

TS: Oh yeah? What were you doing on their campus?

MH: There was a regional SBL meeting on their campus one year. So I went out and gave a paper and did what you do at regional meetings: walk around and listen to stuff.

TS: That's awesome.

MH: So... That's my experience, you know? At least I was there. [laughs]

TS: Yeah, that's good stuff. We were talking about sports memorabilia before, and my son just turned 12 a few weeks ago, and my parents gave him an autographed Emmett Smith jersey. So I asked him, "Hey, do you want to keep that in my office?" And of course, that didn't go down well. But *I* didn't get anything like that. We were talking. *I* didn't get anything like that for *my* birthday.

MH: Yeah. "Hey, Mom and Dad. Why did you waste your retirement [laughs] on your grandson? You could've done that on me!"

TS: Exactly. "I'm your son, and I don't get anything." So I'm looking at an autographed Emmett Smith. We haven't hung it up yet. So I'm looking at it. And it's giving me good vibes here. [MH laughs] Especially since we're about to go and talk about the four horsemen here coming up.

MH: Yeah, there you go. We'll accept that as a segue. How's that?

TS: Okay.

MH: That's acceptable.

TS: Okay, I'll take it.

MH: That's a football reference and a Revelation reference. So...

TS: You're welcome.

MH: [laughs] Okay. And the good news, we should add, is that we're actually going to get through Revelation 6 in one episode! So there's no two, three, four,

ad infinitum parts to this. And I judge these things by, "Okay, since the series is about John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation, how much Old Testament stuff's going on the passage? Can I get through that in one pass or not?" So that's how we judge these things. And in this case, yeah, we can. Some of these things are going to be familiar from chapter 5. But the new stuff put in here we're going to be able to do it. So I'm going to read to start off here the first eight verses (Revelation 6:1-8), and that'll get us into what we need to do, at least as far as our beginning point, just to refresh everybody's memory.

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" ² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶ And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

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⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

So that's the first eight verses. Obviously, there are some familiar things here. We've got the Lamb. We've got the living creatures (these cherubim sort of figures from earlier in Revelation 4 and 5). We've got the reference to Death and Hades (again, this is back in Revelation 1 and Revelation 3). So there are a few familiar things here, but there's going to be at least one case where we're going to note kind of a bit of a twist in what John is getting us to think about.

But let's just start with the obvious: "the Lamb opened one of the seals" in the first verse. Now Aune in his commentary observes something kind of obvious at the beginning here. He says:

Since it is obviously very difficult to imagine a lamb opening a sealed scroll [MH: like how would he do that without fingers and thumbs?], It is possible that the figure of the Lamb has subsequently been superimposed on an originally anthropomorphic figure... The group of four visions in 6:1–8 is structured by using the four cherubim, each of whom summons one of the four horsemen, which afflict the world with a variety of plagues.

Now this raises an interesting (but to be honest with you, it's not terribly important) point, about when John describes the Lamb, is he actually looking at a lamb? Or is he using the word "lamb" to describe Jesus? Like "I looked... and a Lamb that was slain, and he's standing before God." This is Revelation 5 language. I mean, it is possible (I would agree with Aune) that what John's actually looking at is Jesus. But he uses the language of "the Lamb" because John does that elsewhere. If we have the same author here as in Gospel (and we sort of presume that), we have references to Jesus as *the Lamb of God* that takes away the sin of the world. When John says that in John 1 at the Jordan there while he's baptizing, "Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world," okay, obviously he's referencing to Jesus. And it's equally as obvious it's not a vision. I mean, that's a real-time, boots-on-the-ground event. But it does create this question, especially when the "Lamb" is doing things that in this case require fingers and thumbs, at least you would think that that's what's going on here. How else do you open a sealed scroll? Maybe the Lamb just *looked* at it? Who knows? We're not told. But it at least opens the door, and commentators have gone back and forth, like, "Okay, what's John actually looking at?" And as I just read in the Aune quote, maybe the figure of the Lamb has been subsequently superimposed on an originally anthropomorphic figure. The ultimate answer is "who knows?" Because all we do have is the verbiage (the vocabulary). We have things that seem incongruent with the vocabulary. But hey, it's an apocalyptic vision. Kind of like the way dreams don't need to really conform to reality as we experience it. Alright. So an apocalyptic vision may not need these sort of niceties either. But I thought I'd mention it because it is part of the discussion. Again, I don't think it's terribly important either way. But just... We run into it right away.

Now Beale, when he opens his discussion of the chapter, he writes this. It's similar, but a few differences here:

Rev. 6:1–8 is intended to show that Christ rules over such an apparently chaotic world and that suffering does not occur indiscriminately or by chance.

That's actually going to be a fairly important thought. Because who holds the keys to Death and Hades? That would be Jesus. That would be the risen Christ. Again, we've had that in a previous episode. So keep that in the back of your mind, and we'll get back to it. Beale writes:

This section reveals, in fact, that destructive events are brought about by Christ for both redemptive and judicial purposes... The command for each of the four destructive horses and riders originates from the throne room, where Christ [MH: i.e., the Lamb] opens each seal. The cherubim around the throne issue commands to the horseman in response to the opening of each seal. Only then do the horsemen wreak their havoc.

10:00 So what Beale is doing here is he's linking the release of the apocalypse to the command (by virtue of the opening of the seals) of the Lamb. Jesus is the one that launches the war here. That's the bottom line. Okay? We don't often think of Jesus this way. We don't think of the *Lamb* like this, frankly. And if you remember back in chapter 5 when we talked about the Lamb, the imagery works two ways. We think of a lamb as being cute and harmless and skipping around in the field. We think of the ewe lamb from the parable with Nathan and David, and how pathetic that is, and so on and so forth. And the lamb was a sacrificial victim in Old Testament (Jewish) culture. But lamb imagery was also used of the gods and of rule, and of power, and of might. So there are two sides to the metaphor. And here very obviously we're not seeing the passive victim side. We're seeing the other side.

Now other scholars have noted as they proceed through this that the most obvious Old Testament source for these first eight verses is Zechariah 6:1–8. So I'm going to read that. Because once I read through it, you'll see that this is where the obvious points of connect are. Not the only ones, but this is the most obvious. So Zechariah 6 begins this way:

Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots [MH: it's not four horsemen; it's four chariots] came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze. ²The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, ³the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. ⁴Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?" ⁵And the angel answered and said to me, "These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth. ⁶The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country." ⁷When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and *patrol* the earth. And he said, "Go, patrol the earth." So they patrolled the earth. ⁸Then he cried to me, "Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country."

So this is a bit more obscure (if I can use that word). I mean, how can anything be more obscure than the book of Revelation? Well, let's try Zechariah on for size. We've seen John repurpose passages in Zechariah already, and here he is again. Virtually all Old Testament scholars acknowledge some relationship between the four horses of Zechariah 6 (or the four chariots—teams of horses)... So they're going to look at those four chariot teams and they're going to link them back to the teams of horses in Zechariah 1.

So the steps go this way: "I'm reading Revelation 6. That takes my mind back to Zechariah 6. And the precedent for Zechariah 6 was Zechariah 1, because there are also chariot teams of horses there." The problem is, well, all Old Testament scholars are going to notice these things. And again, New Testament scholars are going to notice these things too, because the references at least on the surface are pretty obvious. The question is, "What's the nature of the relationship between Revelation 6, Zechariah 6, and of course, looping in Zechariah 1?" And that is hotly debated. Ultimately sort of aligning all three of these passages (Revelation 6, Zechariah 6, and Zechariah 1) is peripheral to what we're doing here on the podcast. You can read long sections (pages and pages and pages) of "How do we reconcile the colors precisely in Revelation 6 with the ones in Zechariah 6? Does dappled mean grey?" All this sort of stuff. "How do we go from three chariot teams to four? And then to the four individual horses..." Look. For our purposes, we don't really need to care about this. There are ways that commentators fix or resolve these issues. They fix these problems. If you want the mathematical resolution to these things and the color palette resolution to these things, you can go consult a good exegetical commentary. I would think, though, for our purposes, some general conclusions are more relevant—more germane. So I'm just going to give you four of them here.

1. The scenes in Zechariah 1 and 6 include an angel figure that may be the Angel of Yahweh. We ran into this when we discussed Revelation 1:4. So we might have the Angel of the Lord in Zechariah 1 and 6. We can't be completely certain that that's the case, but you can make a case for it. And that's going to matter when we're looking at Revelation here.

2. In Revelation 6, the four horsemen are unleashed from God's throne, which is an integral element of the Divine Council scene in Revelation 4-5. So let's not lose sight of that.

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3. Third, the four horses correspond to the four corners of the earth. In other words, all the earth is under patrol or is going to be affected (in the case of Revelation, negatively). All four corners of the earth. The whole earth is going to... There's going to be an impact here. And again, back to the language of Zechariah 6, they're patrolling. And there are commentators that... Some of them would see that as a neutral term. Others would say, "Well, they're going out with more purpose than that, and what John says about the purpose (these plagues—warfare and death) is not inconsistent with Zechariah 6." Okay, wonderful. We're

not going to drill down or we'd have three or four parts, just looking at each horse individually. I don't want to spend an episode on a horse, four times. There *are* ways to reconcile these things. But again, (1) we've got possibly the Angel of the Lord, (2) we've got the Divine Council element with God's throne, (3) we've got the whole earth (the four corners of the earth) affected by this.

4. And fourthly, the horses in Zechariah are actually chariot teams. And the chariots in the Old Testament context were instruments of war, so I think it is arguable that the judgment idea is not absent in Zechariah. We'll say that much. The chariot teams are sent out to punish the nations that are oppressing God's people.

So if you read Zechariah in context, what I'm suggesting is that because it's a chariot team, I'm going to be on the side of the commentators that say, "You know, if he was just going out for a look, he'd go single rider on a horse. If you send a chariot, that implies something violent or it implies judgment, because this is an instrument of war." And in the context of Zechariah, that passage is about God avenging his people—God punishing the nations that are oppressing God's people. And that is very much in concert with the flavor of Revelation even at this point. Because haven't we just read through the letters where God is basically saying (Jesus is saying), "Hey, endure to the end. And the Lord knows your suffering. The Lord knows those who are persecuting or oppressing you, and he will not forget that. And they will have their day. The Lord is not going to let this pass without a judgment here." And so this is unleashed in chapter 6. So the contexts are actually more similar than you'd think.

Now by analogy (just to summarize all of that), in Revelation 6, we have the Lamb unleashing judgment on the world (the four corners—the whole world) by means of the four horsemen. And they are going to punish the world (i.e., those who are oppressing—persecuting—the ones who follow the Lamb). Remember Revelation 5, the martyrs that get the white robes? This is the context for this. It's very much a Day of the Lord kind of feel to it. The Lord is going to avenge his own.

Now if the figure in Zechariah among the myrtles (back to Zechariah here) with these chariot teams is in fact the Angel of Yahweh... If that's the case (and just go back to where we talked about Revelation 1:4 and 1:5), then by analogy, that would align the Angel to Jesus. And of course, this is part of the Two Powers thinking (the Two Powers motif). But it's not merely... I'm bringing it up not to make an ontological point. The Angel of Yahweh who is Yahweh... That's Jesus. So we've got Godhead language here. Okay, this is well-traversed territory for this podcast. And of course, I spent a lot of time on the "God as man in the Old Testament" theme in *Unseen Realm*. But I want to make a different point, not an ontological one.

The Angel of Yahweh did indeed wreak destruction on God's enemies in the Old Testament. Let's think about what the Angel *does* on occasion. For example, the Angel "with the drawn sword in his hand" (Joshua 5) to precipitate the conquest. Another example is the Angel of 1 Chronicles 21 that assaults Jerusalem. In those two scenes (Joshua 5, 1 Chronicles 21), the figure there (the Angel of the Lord and the commander—the Captain of the Lord's Host) are the same entity. They're the same figure. Again, I've spent a lot of time in *Unseen Realm* and in other books establishing why this is the case. And the key phrase is the drawn sword in the hand. That phrase is used only three times in Hebrew as it's written in the Hebrew Bible. And the other two (besides Joshua 5) are absolutely clear Angel of the Lord passages. So we have a correlation here. And you have a warrior figure here. Now I'm going to quote a little bit that I wrote in the *Angels* book about this because this gets looped into other passages, including the Destroyer at Passover. So just bear with me here as I summarize some of this material. I wrote in the *Angels* book:

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It is clear from both passages [MH: Joshua 5 and 1 Chronicles 21] that the angel of Yahweh is in view and that he brings "destruction" [MH: *mashhîit* is the term used in 1 Chronicles 21]. Interestingly, this is the identical term used to describe the angel of death in the account of the death of the firstborn on the eve of the first Passover.

I'm going to read Exodus 12:13, 21, 23:

¹³The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you *to destroy* [*mashhîit*] you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

²¹Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb.

²³For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow *the destroyer* [*mashhîit*] to enter your houses to strike you. (Exod 12:13, 21, 23)

Continuing on with what I wrote in *Angels*:

The *mashhîit* who was the angel of Yahweh in 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 24 is here distinguished from Yahweh by the line, "the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow *the destroyer* [*mashhîit*] to enter your houses to strike you." Yet we

read elsewhere [MH: in other passages] that it was *Yahweh* [MH: himself] who destroyed the firstborn:

Let me just stop there. If you look at this drawn sword, the *mashhîit* language, go back to Passover, “the LORD will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer [the *mashhîit*] to enter your houses.” So those are clearly two figures. But yet in other passages, Yahweh is the destroyer. So you have this blending, where the destroyer is but isn’t Yahweh—this whole Two Powers thing going on. Here are some of the passages that loop Yahweh into this:

Psalm 105:26, 36:

**²⁶ He sent Moses, his servant,
and Aaron, whom he had chosen.
³⁶ He struck down all the firstborn in their land,
the firstfruits of all their strength.**

Psalm 135:5, 8:

**⁵ For I know that the LORD is great,
and that our Lord is above all gods.
⁸ He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
both of man and of beast;**

So the first passage there was Psalm 105:26, 36. “*He* [God] struck down all the firstborn.” And the second one was, “He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt.” Again, the divine name Yahweh is in that passage. That’s Psalm 135:5, 8. There’s another one, Psalm 136:3, 10:

**³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
¹⁰ to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
for his steadfast love endures forever;**

So it sure looks like Yahweh and the destroyer are one in the same, but yet they’re different (this Two Powers thing). Some people have argued, though, that Psalm 78:48–51 complicates this, that it gets in the way. And I’m going to suggest that it really doesn’t. But I’m going to read the passage.

**⁴⁸ He gave over their cattle to the hail
and their flocks to thunderbolts.**

- 49 He let loose on them his burning anger,
wrath, indignation, and distress,
a company of destroying angels [MH: the Hebrew is *mal'akê rā'îm*].**
- 50 He made a path for his anger;
he did not spare them from death,
but gave their lives over to the plague.**
- 51 He struck down every firstborn in Egypt,
the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.**

So some would say, “God didn’t do this destroying; it was this *mashhîit* who isn’t Yahweh.” And people will deny the correlations and then assign the destruction to “a company of destroying angels” to get God off the hook here. The complication is only surface level. In *Angels* I wrote:

The ESV’s translation, “destroying angels,” is somewhat misleading with respect to the terminology we are attempting to trace. The Hebrew term translated “destroying” is *not* the word *mashhîit* associated with the destroyer in the passages we saw earlier. We should also observe that Psalm 78:49 does not say the “destroying angels” killed the firstborn [MH: it never actually says that]. That act is, once again, attributed to Yahweh (v. 51) [MH: of Psalm 78]. Yahweh may have sent angels to enact the other plagues, but the death of the firstborn is attributed to him [MH: and, of course, to the *mashhîit*, who is the Angel of the Lord]. These angels [MH: the group of angels] do not act in the role of the destroyer.

That is the single figure who is also Yahweh. Now the point to be taken here... Why am I bringing all this up? Again, it’s Old Testament context for what we read in Revelation 6. Because here it is not Yahweh or the Angel... Is it or isn’t it the Angel of the Lord? I mean, it’s the risen Christ. But if you’re going back to Zechariah for the parallel, if indeed that is *the* Angel of the Lord (i.e., the destroyer), that would make a lot of sense. Because look what the Lamb does in Revelation 6. He unleashes death and plagues and all this sort of stuff. It’s kind of interesting if you (and we’ll do this in a subsequent episode) start to think about the use of the “plague” imagery for what happens on earth in Revelation. Because at one point you have the Passover lamb slain and the Angel of the Lord is the one destroying the firstborn. And now as Revelation progresses—as the salvation plan of God progresses—you have the Lamb now who is Christ, who is also the destroyer. I mean, it’s a reversal. It’s a folding back of the elements. And now instead of the people of God having to duck the plagues here, it’s still God (now it’s the risen Christ) unleashing all this on the enemies of the people of God and so on and so forth. So there’s a parallel, but yet there’s also this reversal unfolding of certain of the elements. It’s kind of interesting.

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But anyway, the point for today to be taken here is that in Revelation 6, the slot that would be reserved for either Yahweh or the destroyer (the destroying angel, who is the Angel of the Lord) is Jesus. The language here is Day of the Lord judgment. And Jesus is *not* the gentle savior. He is the destroying judge. And this isn't commonly the way we think about Jesus. Let's just be honest. We often do not put this... When we think Christology, we don't think of this. [laughs] But this is part of Christology. I'm not going to rabbit trail too much, but if you're interested, I have put an article in the protected folder. Tremper Longman, who was an Old Testament prof for many years at Westminster Seminary (now he's at, I think it's Westmont in California)... Tremper Longman's article is titled "The Divine Warrior: the New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif." It's in *Westminster Theological Journal* back in 1982. It's a really good article because it shows how the New Testament portrayal of Jesus is not just a passive suffering servant—the Lamb, the sacrificial victim. There are a lot of passages (and it's not just Revelation 6) that use divine warrior imagery of the risen Christ. And some of it's even before you get to Acts and beyond. I mean, there are hints of it. So it's just very interesting. But this is part of Christology. Here in Revelation 6 we don't have the gentle savior; we have the destroying judge. It's the same person.

Now another issue that arises from the opening of the scroll by the Lamb is whether the plagues represented by the four horsemen are sequential or simultaneous. And this (for me, anyway) was interesting enough to park on a little bit, because we *assume* that... And popular prophecy talk... So let's drift over into that a little bit. We assume a sequence of plagues. (This one followed by this one followed by this one followed by this one.) But there's actually an issue with that. So Beale summarizes the issue or the problem. And he writes:

The visionary sequence of the four seals being opened could represent the sequential occurrence of each disaster, one after another. But more probably the disasters are simultaneous. This is suggested in that (1) the fourth seal summarizes the prior three (see below on 6:8); (2) the models of Ezek. 14:12–13; Zech. 6:5–8; and the Synoptic [MH: Gospel] eschatological discourse, on which Rev. 6:1–8 is based, portray events of tribulation occurring simultaneously; indeed, the Synoptic parallels, though fairly uniform, even have different sequences of the trials from Rev. 6:1–11; (3) the glorified saints in Rev. 6:9–11 [MH: we haven't gotten there yet, but we'll just loop this in] appear to have suffered under all four trials portrayed in the seals. Nevertheless, a logical pattern repeatable throughout the age is discernible: conquest (the first rider), together with civil unrest (especially for persecuted Christians—the second rider), leads to famine (the third rider) and death (the fourth rider)... Ezek. 14:12–23 is also formative for this section [MH: we'll get to that momentarily] (cf. Deut. 32:23–25). Ezek. 14:21 is explicitly quoted in Rev. 6:8b, where it functions as a general summary of the preceding trials of conquest, sword, and famine, the first two of

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which include “death.” This quotation of Ezekiel also adds one more trial: affliction by beasts. The quoted words have the same function in Ezek. 14:21, where they clearly sum up the four preceding statements about trials as “four evil judgments.” These punishments come on nations in general when they are unfaithful to God. The trials there are listed respectively as lack of bread and “famine” (14:13), “wild beasts” (14:15), “sword” (14:17), and “death” (14:19). The point of Ezek. 14:21 is that *all* Israelites will suffer persecution because of rampant idolatry (cf. 14:3–11). The purpose of the trials is to punish the majority of the nation because of its sin and simultaneously to purify the righteous remnant by testing their faith (cf. 14:14, 16, 18, 20, 22–23).

Now the point here is that... Let’s think about this. When we talked about the scroll itself, we actually did get into this a little bit. And that is, the scroll has seven seals. Just think of a scroll, sealed seven times. If you open the first four, you still can’t read the scroll. So this notion of, you open one seal and now you can read it, what happens? It mars the linear succession idea. And so what Beale is arguing... We talked about that last time, but he’s also bringing it up here. The linear idea of the judgments isn’t really a good one, because you have the fourth summarizing the previous three. You’ve got the synoptic Gospels. They don’t always have the same order. Sometimes there are these summary statements that occur simultaneously. In other words, you may have to wait till all the seals are open for all of this stuff to explode. It’s not typically the way we think. And certain eschatological systems (certain End Times systems) actually sort of depend on sequencing. So that’s all I’ll say there. And it’s not really a great argument. So let’s go into Revelation 6:9-11. I’ll read that:

⁹ When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

A bit ominous, but let’s just pick our way through a few things. “Under the altar” in Revelation 6:9. What’s the altar? What is the meaning of “altar”? There are two possibilities here. Aune comments on this, but he doesn’t really commit himself to either possibility, but I’ll read what he says anyway:

Since in Jewish thought the earthly temple was modeled after the heavenly temple, it is appropriate to ask to what the eight occurrences of the term “altar” in Revelation refer. The tabernacle..., the Solomonic temple, and the Herodian temple had two distinct altars, the “outer” altar or the “altar of burnt offering,”

located (along with the bronze laver) in the court before the entrance to the holy place, i.e., in the “Court of Priests” [MH: that’s Josephus’ language] (Jos. *J. W.* 5.225), and the “inner” altar or the golden altar of incense, situated just in front of the *pāroket* or curtain separating the holy place or nave from the *dēbîr* or most holy place (Lev 4:18).

So you’ve actually got two altars here. But he doesn’t really land anywhere. Now Beale does a little bit more with this. So I’m going to share what he writes. He says:

The mention of the “altar” here in association with those slain evokes the sacrificial nature of their suffering. This altar is not the brazen altar of sacrifice, although the sacrificial blood was poured out at the base of that altar (Lev. 4:18, 30, 34), and in Rev. 6:10 the sacrificed saints are under the altar (also in Lev. 17:11 the “blood” sprinkled on this altar is said to have “the *soul* [MH: *nepshesh*—the life] of the flesh” in it). The better identification is with the golden altar of incense, which stood in the vicinity of the holy of holies (clearly referred to in 8:3–5 and 9:13 and in the developments of those references in 11:1; 14:18; and 16:7). The sacrificial blood of the Day of Atonement was poured on this [MH: *that*] altar, and incense was burned on it (Exod. 30:1–10; Lev. 4:7; Heb. 9:4).

The saints are, strangely, “under the altar” instead of on it. This may allude merely to blood running down to the base of the altar after having been poured on its top. But what is more probably in mind is the association or virtual equation in both Revelation and Jewish writings of this altar with the throne of God, whose sovereign purposes ultimately protect the saints. Therefore, placing the saints under the altar emphasizes the divine protection that has held sway over their “soul” despite even their loss of physical life because of persecution.

35:00

So he’s angling for altar of incense because of its proximity to the throne (i.e., the Ark of the Covenant, behind the veil in the Old Testament) and also because in other references to the altar in the book of Revelation, it’s more clearly the altar of incense. And so Beale is landing there and he’s doing some extrapolation here of what the imagery might convey. And in this case, it’s the ultimate protection. If the saints are under this particular altar (the altar of incense right outside the curtain where God’s throne is—that seems to be the best match), well then what that would speak to is that even if you lose your physical life, you’re still going to be with the Lord. That kind of thing. So this is where Beale angles toward and where he lands. And I’m persuaded by that only because of the subsequent references to the altar more clearly being the altar of incense. So that would make sense to me.

And again, what John is doing here is he’s assuming a certain amount of knowledge of the temple furnishings and where they’re situated and ritual

procedure in the Old Testament. He's repurposing that to equate it with the throne that he's described in Revelation 4 and 5, where the Lamb is. The Lamb's not enthroned yet, but the Lamb is in the presence of the Lord. And so judgment is going out from this location, and it's simultaneously the same location where the souls of the faithful are still there. They're there in the presence of God and they're given white robes, and "Yes, you're going to be with the Lord forever." So he's using the imagery to create both a judgment context (the judgment is coming out from the one who has authority, ultimately the one who has the keys of Death and Hades)... If Jesus is in control of Death and Hades now (and he is, because John has just made that point a few chapters earlier), then he gets to decide the severity of the judgment and where the final destination of those judged is going to be. And if you're on his side, yes, even if you lose your physical life in the wake of all this upheaval—this chaos, this apocalyptic stuff—be assured that the Lord knows who you are and you will be with him. That's the messaging. And John is using Old Testament imagery to communicate those ideas.

Now for the white robe in Revelation 6:11, you can just see our discussion back in Revelation 3:4. We're not going to say any more about that with the white robe imagery, and some of the other stuff that goes with it. Let's move to 6:12-17. I'll read the passage. John writes:

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb [MH: there you go again with the one on the throne and the Lamb distinguished], ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come [MH: "their wrath"—there are two of them], and who can stand?"

Now this section amalgamates a number of Old Testament passages. This is where John is just throwing everything into the blender again. Beale writes:

The judgment of the world is depicted with stock-in-trade OT imagery for the dissolution of the cosmos. This portrayal is based on a mosaic of OT passages that are brought together because of the cosmic metaphors of judgment that they have in common. The quarry of texts [MH: that's a nice line] from which the description has been drawn is composed primarily of [MH: here's the grocery list]

Isa. 13:10–13; 24:1–6, 19–23; 34:4; Ezek. 32:6–8; Joel 2:10, 30–31; 3:15–16; and Hab. 3:6–11 [MH: and then Beale notes you might get some allusions to Amos 8:8–9; Jeremiah 4:23–28; and Psalm 68:7–8]. The same OT texts are also influential in Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24–25; and Acts 2:19–20 [MH: which also quotes Joel 2:30–31]...

40:00

In other words, to use Beale’s phrase, the same quarry that John is mining all of these Old Testament passages from (they all have apocalyptic flavoring in the Old Testament) are not only repurposed here in what John’s doing in Revelation 6, but they get repurposed in Synoptic Gospel apocalyptic passages and the book of Acts discussion (this is Acts 2:19-20) about the inauguration of the new covenant, the coming of the Holy Spirit and so on and so forth. So all of these things are sort of just thrown into the blender. Beale later observes that “the most formative influence among these texts” (and this is a point of interest for those of you who are familiar with *Unseen Realm* context) “is Isaiah 34:4, after which Revelation 6:13–14a has most closely been patterned.” And he’s saying, “Well, what’s the big deal?” Go back to Isaiah 34:4. Let’s just read the whole thing. We’ll read verses 1-4. Because this is where you get both the judgment of the powers on the earth and also the powers in the heavens (the spiritual world). Isaiah 34, starting in verse 1:

**Draw near, O nations, to hear,
and give attention, O peoples!
Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;
the world, and all that comes from it.
² For the LORD is enraged against all the nations,
and furious against all their host;**

That’s a key phrase: “*their* host.” So God is angry at the nations *and* he’s angry at *their* host.

he has devoted them to destruction [MH: which is the *cherem* language of the conquest back in the days of Moses and Joshua], has given them over for slaughter.

**³ Their slain shall be cast out,
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;
the mountains shall flow with their blood.**

**⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.**

**All their host shall fall [MH: there it is again: “*their* host shall fall”],
as leaves fall from the vine,
like leaves falling from the fig tree.**

So verse 4 is, “All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from a fig tree.” Now if you’re in my *Unseen Realm* class at the Awakening School, I know this is going to be familiar because we actually spent some time in a class period on it, but I’ll give you the quick version here. And I mentioned it I believe... I don't know if I mentioned this in *Unseen Realm*. It might be another book. But if you do a search for *tseva'am* (“their host”)... It’s just the word *tseva*... Lord of hosts is *Adonai tseva'ot*. The singular is *tseva*. It refers to an army or a group or the host of heaven, celestial objects. But *tseva'am* is that word with a plural suffix (their host) attached to it. If you do a search specifically on that word form with that suffix, every time it’s used in the Hebrew Bible it speaks of celestial objects, not earthly armies. Every time.

So Isaiah 34, we have here in the Septuagint, “and the powers (*dynamis*)...” That’s a word that Paul is going to use for supernatural powers of darkness.

And the powers of the heavens will melt, and the heaven will be rolled up like a scroll; and all the stars will fall... as leaves fall from a fig tree.

And over in Revelation 6:13-14, John is going to be using the Septuagint (or it at least looks that way). He says, “and the stars of the heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind, and the heaven was split as a scroll having been rolled up.” So he draws a little bit from Isaiah 34. He’s going to be looping other passages into it. But it’s very clear that he’s thinking about celestial catastrophe. And again, the celestial language in Old Testament thought and Second Temple Jewish thought is not always, but frequently, used of supernatural powers. And that is certainly the way that Isaiah 34:4 is using this. Because it adds this thought to the human armies earlier in the passage. It’s very clear that God is going to judge both. At the Day of the Lord, the human powers oppressing the people of God are going to get what’s coming to them, and so are the spiritual powers going to get what’s coming to them. The phrase “stars fell from heaven” that is in Revelation 6:13, you can look that up in Matthew 24:29, Mark 13:25. In Isaiah 34:4 plays an important role here. Because it’s easy to read through this passage. And again, lots of End Times systems do this (the ones that want to see black helicopters and all this). They’re only thinking about earthly armies. And again, what I’m saying is, “Well, some of the language just goes beyond that.” Let’s not forget that element.

45:00 So the observation for our purposes is because the Septuagint of Isaiah 34:4 translates the Hebrew “all their host” (*tseva'am*) with *dynamis*, a term that can describe a... I’ll just quote a lexicon here so people know that I’m not making it up. This is Arndt and Gingrich. *Dynamis* is a term that can describe “a personal transcendent spirit or heavenly agent.” Because this language in the Greek includes that semantic, and because he’s drawing specifically on Isaiah 34:4, when you go to Revelation 6:13-14, he talks about the stars of heaven falling, he’s not talking about an asteroid catastrophe. We’re not talking about something

NASA can defeat. Dispense with the uber-literalism. We're talking about the judgment of cosmic powers of darkness along with suffering and apocalyptic violence on the earth. These two things go together, folks. This is the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. This is the Daniel 10 worldview. The powers on earth... Behind them are other supernatural powers that are using them, manipulating them, steering things to the ends to which they want. If in Revelation we're describing the judgment of human powers that are persecuting believers, you would think—you would think—that John wouldn't *leave out* the judgment of the fallen gods of the Old Testament—the corrupt sons of God (Psalm 82), the princes of the nations (Daniel 10). Now what I'm suggesting to you is, he's not leaving it out. He knows it; he sees it; and by virtue of his allusions here, he's tracking with it. This is... We need to be a little more careful on what we read.

Now I'm going to say a little more about the “falling stars” language. This is language used in the Second Temple period in Second Temple Jewish literature of supernatural powers in rebellion. You find this elsewhere. And it's not just the Septuagint of Isaiah 34:4. For instance, you've got... Just a list of references in 1 Enoch. We'll just use Enoch. We could go beyond Enoch, but here it is. 1 Enoch 18:13, 21:3, 46:7, 86:3, 88:3, 90:21. All of these use the phrasing about “falling stars” of the Watchers (supernatural powers in rebellion or the fallen gods of the nations, however we want to say that). Nickelsburg in his commentary on 1 Enoch says this about 1 Enoch 86:3. He says:

In 1 Enoch 86:1-3 stars are an image for the Watchers, and in Daniel 12:3 and 1 Enoch 104:2 stars and angels may even be identified with one another. An extremely close connection is indicated in 1 Enoch 82:4-20, thus when 1 Enoch 18:15 speaks of “transgressing stars” it is alluding to a variation on the myth of the rebellion of the Watchers.

Okay, that's Nickelsberg. You know what? You also get “wandering star” language in the New Testament, do you not? “Wandering stars” is not something that, “Well, I hope NASA noticed that.” No, it's language that describes supernatural powers in rebellion—enemies of the people of God. So let's not forget that. Isaiah 34 really hits on both of these things. It's an important juxtaposition describing an eschatological judgment that includes the gods of the nations akin to Psalm 82, along with human powers. So in light of all this, it's unwise to assume that what John describes in Revelation 6:13-14 is a meteor shower, or near earth asteroid impact, or some other literal astronomical cataclysm. The judgment of the powers may in fact be the intended meaning.

Now Beale... Beale's not doing anything deliberately Divine Council, okay? But he actually notes this possibility in his own defense of not reading the content of these verses overly literally. He writes this:

The reference to “stars,” “mountains,” and “islands” as symbols of human or divine powers in the LXX, the Jewish writings, and the Apocalypse itself would point further to a figurative interpretation.

I would agree. Although I like the word “metaphorical” better. Because “figurative” makes it seem like... I think a word like “figurative” for evangelical readers makes it fall into that category, “Well, if it’s figurative it’s not real then.” No, it is. A metaphor depends... Its coherence depends on something that is literally real. So when you get language like this we have to remember that when Scripture uses metaphorical, symbolic, (we’ll use the word “figurative” here to be nice) figurative language, the point is not that we’re talking about something that is less than real. We’re talking about something *more* than real, in a physical, earthly sense. Okay? We’ve got to keep that in mind.

50:00

One final note on the altar is in order. As was the case with the 24 elders, there exists (believe it or not) an astral interpretation of this feature. Aune, in his Revelation commentary, actually alerts readers to this point, even though he’s not going to buy it. But he at least does it. He writes... He’s referencing other scholars. Everybody except Malina is written in German.

Boll [MH: Sattler, and Malina] reminds us that there was a constellation called [the] Altar located in the southern sky in the Milky Way [MH: and then he quotes a few Greek and Latin classical texts: Ptolemy, Hipparchus, Eudoxus, so on and so forth] (Greek βωμός, θυτήριον, or θυμιατήριον; Latin *ara* or *turibulum*; see Aratus *Phaenomena* 403; Quintus Smyrnaeus 4.554; Ptolemy *Tetrabiblos* 28; Hipparchus 1.8.14–15; Eudoxus according to Hipparchus 1.11.6; Cicero *De natura deorum* 2.44; 3.40; *Arat.* 428 [184]; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 2.139; Manilius *Astron.* 1.421, 431; 5.18; Vitruvius 9.5.1 [*turibulum*]). Boll considered the souls clothed in white under the altar to be the stars in the Milky Way, over which the Altar constellation is situated.

Isn’t that interesting? You’ve got... In the astronomical interpretation (or the astral interpretation) you’ve got *the altar*. And underneath it, you’ve got a series of stars. And stars, of course, is going to be used elsewhere both in the Bible and outside the Bible for celestial beings and/or believers who have been glorified. You know, just pointing it out. It’s at least on the table here. So...

Boll considered the souls clothed in white under the altar to be the stars in the Milky Way, over which the Altar constellation is situated.

So in Boll’s mind, John is using astral imagery to communicate the same point about: “Believers are secure. They’re going to be glorified. They’re going to be with the Lord. They’re going to be part of the Council.” The theological endpoints are the same. It’s just: “What is the metaphorical strategy for communicating the idea?” And Boll and Malina and others opt for the astral interpretation. They think

that the metaphors are astral in nature. That's all we're saying here. It's just that this perspective is quite neglected when it comes to Revelation commentaries. And obviously there are exceptions, which is why we're reading this stuff. So he continues. Aune isn't buying this.

This interpretation seems forced, however, since the altar mentioned here in v 9 is one of the furnishings of the heavenly temple referred to elsewhere in Revelation (8:3[2x], 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7; cf. 11:1), and astral deification is not so much as hinted at in the rest of Revelation, though it is certainly known in Jewish apocalyptic (e.g., Dan 12:3).

Well, you know, there's a problem here. There are actually two problems here. Aune's opinion that this option seems forced is inconsistent with his own content. I mean, we've quoted him here in prior episodes. The very citation—the very quote I just read you—notes that the temple is *heavenly*. [laughs] Okay? Which raises the question as to why the altar could not also be heavenly! It's a heavenly temple. A heavenly altar... Don't they kind of go together? [sighs] In addition, Daniel 12:1-3 has already been used by John, and those verses do indeed point to deification or identification of the righteous with the stars and therefore with the celestial council. And Aune's been all over that. So he's a little bit internally inconsistent here. It seems strained to presume that John needs to keep repeating the idea with the same words for it to be legitimate. But I guess that's what Aune needs to feel a little more positive to it. But anyway, at least he brings it up. To his credit, he brings it up. Others do not. And again, for my money, it's at least on the table.

55:00

The question again (going back to what I said a few minutes ago) is... Your theological endpoints are the same. It's just which metaphor (or metaphors) is John drawing on to communicate this set of ideas? Is it astral or is it something else? And again, I agree. If you think way back to the very first episode we did on introducing the Old Testament in Revelation (I think it was the first episode) when I mentioned Malina... Whenever I did that for the first time. I agree with criticisms of his work, that he neglects looking for solutions in the Old Testament. That is certainly a flaw. But that doesn't mean that we have to choose between one or the other. It's not an A or a B. "Do I choose Old Testament antecedents and metaphors and symbols and verses? Or do I choose astral metaphors and Second Temple stuff that uses that kind of content? Do I choose one or the other?" And it's not an either/or; it's a both/and. John can be doing both at the same time. He can be moving from one to the other. There's no cosmic rule that says we have to pick a pile. And honestly, there never is. Okay? So we need to have all these things on the table and take a look at them, and then just ask ourselves, "What are the possibilities John can be using this or that or the other thing, or a combination thereof?" A lot of this stuff is floating through his mind and he's just picking freely in the way he describes things. And again, this is not to say that John didn't see certain things. He's recording things that he did see. But

it's not like he's writing this stuff while he's in a trance. That's what he says in the very beginning. "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." If that's the case, then this is at least in part a recollection, and John is trying to communicate what he saw. And so he's also trying to add *meaning* to what he saw. He's trying to connect with his readers, so that they will understand the implications of what he saw. So it could be, we just have to read what he's produced for us in the book of Revelation with all of these things at our disposal. That's my only argument. They should all be on the table. We shouldn't be required or forced to only play in one sandbox as opposed to the other. I just don't see any point to that.

But anyway, I would just cautiously suggest as we wrap up here that if Revelation 4-5 is describing glorified believers being part of the Divine Council, or at least includes that idea (again, we spent a lot of time on Revelation 4-5), then an astral point of reference could be another layer in John's thinking. While isolating the meaning to Revelation's altar to astral thinking goes too far (Malina's guilty of that), the same can be said for eliminating that possibility altogether.

So we're going to be doing more of this as we proceed. Because there are going to be places where astral stuff might really give us some help here—might really lend some clarity (if we can even use the word "clarity" of Revelation for basically anything). I'll go back to "help." It might *help* us a little bit. [laughs] You know? "Clarity" seems a little too bold. All these things should be on the table.

So that's Revelation 6, obviously dipping into Old Testament stuff with specific referents to altar, Zechariah's horses, and chariots and all this stuff. But he's also referencing Old Testament *concepts* (like celestial judgment of the fallen gods, like the divine warrior who now is the Lamb). All these things are drawn from the Old Testament. They frame what John is trying to communicate and describe in terms of what he was shown. And so the more of this kind of stuff we know, the more apt we will be to not try to parse these things in light of our own modern metaphors, or in light of our own modern expectations. And I think that's a good thing. I think that's a wise thing. Because Revelation was written to a specific audience at a specific time. Let's just call it the first century (looping in both date possibilities here). And the people who are reading it need to understand it. Those are the ones that it was written to. Whatever we say is going on in the text, the people of the first century need to be able to parse this. It's a simple idea: reading the text in context. And all of these things we've talked about today are part of that context. Lots of things to draw on, and John doesn't limit himself, and so neither should we.

TS: If only there was an astral prophecy book that we could... [MH laughs] That would help us understand. If only there was...

MH: [laughs] Gosh. You're getting a bit of it here, so...

TS: If only there was...

MH: This may be the only way it ever gets out. [laughter]

TS: I don't know how many hints I have to drop here to get that thing produced. But... Well, hey, next time... We're going to be dealing with the 144,000. And it seems like you've tackled that before, maybe in a Q&A or something. But...

MH: Yeah, we have dipped into it. And that can be pretty dense. I'm not going to promise just one part there. But we'll try.

TS: Okay.

MH: *Reversing Hermon* gets into this a little bit with the tribe of Dan being omitted and all that stuff. So I'm betting that's probably going to take us two times. But we'll see.

TS: Alright, sounds good. We'll be looking forward to it. With that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.