

3 Theories for What Revelation's 'Wormwood' Judgment Could Really Be

Many Christians—and even churches—avoid studying the book of Revelation, often believing it to be too confusing, inapplicable or metaphorical. However, the individual who avoids this book unknowingly shortchanges themselves: Readers are told in the first few verses that those who read and truly hear this revelation will be blessed. Furthermore, believers are challenged in 1 Thessalonians 5 not to be found ignorant regarding these end-times events because we do not belong to the night or in darkness. Today, we will try to dissect one of the most mysterious judgments in Revelation: Wormwood.

In the final book of the Bible, the apostle John is well into a lengthy, colorful description of coming events. Elderly and exiled, John is an eyewitness as a series of seven seals on a vellum scroll are peeled back, one by one. Only the Lamb of God who was slain was deemed worthy to open these seals from what is obviously a very important document. Seal one through six have already been opened with dramatic and effective results. Revelation 8 starts by telling of a period of time—one half-hour—when heaven will be completely silent after the breaking of the seventh seal. Then, seven angels, appointed for this specific moment in time, prepare themselves to sound.

The third trumpet is accompanied by an ominous series of events in John's vision: "The third angel sounded, and a great star from heaven, burning like a torch, fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. The name of this star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter" (Rev. 8:10-11).

While not everyone asserts that prophecy will be dealt specifically via an incoming comet or asteroid, admittedly, a casual English reading of the entire chapter of Revelation 8 certainly lends itself to such an interpretation. That said, there are other options regarding the meaning of this Wormwood and what its arrival may portend in this prophetic “trumpet” discussion.

Often, in our corporate church imagination, the prevailing narrative regarding the blowing of the trumpet spawns visions of a spiritual entity (angel) perched peacefully on a cloud awaiting his cue. When the time has arrived, he blows the third trumpet and watches, disengaged, from his cushy seat in the heavens while a giant rock splashes into the earth’s most important freshwater source.

But maybe, just maybe, there is an angel who is more involved than this cartoon version—and perhaps we’re not looking at an impact/collision event at all.

It would be easy to keep our collective sights only on “natural space activity” (however erratic) and forget another theory about Wormwood that may, according to some scholars like Michael S. Heiser, be the most obvious conclusion regarding these poisonous waters. Could Wormwood be a fallen angel?

The notion that trumpet three, Wormwood, would be an entity—especially with how many spiritual and demonic beings these judgments are increasingly producing around this time—will probably appear in that day to both Christ’s devoted ones and the Antichrist’s followers as a real possibility.

In this article, we will explore possible alternate explanations for Wormwood in order to prepare you for the end-times reality that could begin at any moment. But first, I should explain how to approach serious interpretation of Revelation and its mysterious prophecies.

Biblical Literalism

When interpreting the Wormwood judgment, scholars arrive at many different conclusions—some easier to grasp than others. Some believe the “falling star” could actually mean a “falling angel,” and others suggest that the “bitterness” (poisoning) of wormwood actually means “famine” and has nothing to do with water. We’ll get to both of those theories in the next section. Nevertheless, both concepts demand that the question of literality in the interpretation of Revelation is at least visited briefly so readers can understand: 1) why the interpretations—even among scholars—vary so widely, and 2) why many of these theories are equally plausible.

There is a popular (and respectable) principle of biblical interpretation that many instructional books will teach as one of the first rules to follow when studying the Bible: “If a verse can be interpreted literally, it should be. The only occasion when a Scripture should not be taken literally is when doing so creates an absurdity.”

For instance, 2 Timothy 4:13 contains a clear, non-allegorical order for Timothy to bring Paul’s cloak and documents. To take 2 Timothy 4:13 as literal does not create an absurdity, because it’s not illogical or unreasonable in any way to assume Paul wanted Timothy to swing by with some supplies next time he was headed Paul’s way. However, John 3:3, taken to the fullest application of literality, means that a man must crawl through his mother’s womb again (be “born again”) before he can go to heaven. But as we know, even Nicodemus realized that a literal interpretation would create an absurdity, so he sought clarification, and Jesus further explained that this rebirth was “of ... the Spirit” (John 3:4-6), leading us today to understand that this was a metaphor.

Therefore, to follow one of the most fundamental principles of biblical interpretation, “wormwood” would be a poisoning of fresh waters (not “famine”) and “Wormwood” would be a space-

body mass object of some kind (not an “angel” or “fallen angel”). Assuming we’re dealing with asteroids and a poisoning, we have been able to conclude a literal interpretation that “does not create an absurdity.” This is perhaps why many scholars of the Word resist the allegorical or metaphorical approach to the book of Revelation any time we can see a logical, literal explanation for what’s coming.

Yet the very first rule of biblical interpretation, which must be acknowledged before any and all others in any serious approach to Scripture, is this: “There can only be one, true meaning of the verse in question, and that is the meaning that the author of that book intended for his original readers. No interpretation that disagrees with the author of the book (and, by extension, the Holy Spirit who led such a composition) can ever be the right one.”

The real issue lies in getting to the bottom of what that author meant, and not in deciding what we think makes the most sense to us today. That faulty approach is called eisegesis—“putting into Scripture what was never there”—which is the opposite of exegesis—“pulling out of Scripture what has been there from the beginning.” It’s also to commit the error of placing hermeneutics (what it means to us, today) ahead of exegesis (what it meant to them back then).

Yet this conundrum has never been bigger than when we get to Revelation, for the following reasons:

Unlike a didactic work or a historical narrative, John was documenting a future reality, not a past one, and the language of his vision often demands allowance for the same kind of prophetic imagery we have seen elsewhere in the Word, ripe with symbolism and metaphor, much like some of the messages given by the major prophets of the Old Testament.

Parts of Revelation can be interpreted literally without creating an absurdity, whereas other areas absolutely cannot.

As will be shown shortly, the original audience can and did recognize a language and imagery (“star” as “angel”) from first-century authors that is lost from mainstream Bible studies today. This unfortunately tends to leave the interpretation of a difficult book like Revelation only to those supremely educated scholars whose field of specialty (like Heiser and Gregory K. Beale) lies in comprehending the full and complete culture at the time of the original author’s penning. Since this is a minority, that means that an extreme minority of the church is sorting it all out, and the responsibility of comprehending “literal” versus “nonliteral” appears insurmountable for many.

Based on those points, we may be tempted to say all these trumpet judgments are symbols, and none of them are literal. If John intended to share his already overwhelming prophetic vision in language his contemporaries would understand—perhaps because what he saw was already so hard to put into words of any language—then we, too, should be willing to visit that possibility. It all boils down to context.

Rethinking Wormwood

Well-known among Bible scholars, but largely undiscussed in lay-Christianity, is the fact that the word “star” is frequently a personification of either a saint or angel in the Word, as well as classic and ancient extrabiblical Jewish writings or apocryphal accounts. One major, scriptural point of comparison scholars also make is the link between Michael as guardian angel in Daniel 12:1, and his relation to the intelligent and personified “stars” two verses later. This association was so well known by the New Testament writers that it felt like a natural extension of terms by the time John of Patmos wrote that “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches” in Revelation 1:20b.

And elsewhere, in *The New Bible Commentary*, the close proximity of the other stars of the trumpet judgments as

angelic messengers of death appears obvious enough to immediately consider Wormwood an angel as well: "Since the star that falls at the sounding of the fifth trumpet (9:1) is an angelic being, it is possible that Wormwood is also an angel."

But another question is now presented: If the "star" is really an "angel" and not an asteroid that might set off eruptive phenomena or some equivalent, then what, exactly, are the "bitter waters" that result in death?

When we trace "wormwood" back to its Hebrew root, *la'anah*, it represents extreme suffering and destruction—the opposite of righteousness and justice. That could mean just about anything in an eschatological trumpet judgment creating mass death. Beale postulates that Wormwood may not be referring to a literal poisoning of fresh waters, but a pouring out of bitter suffering, a curse, that results in death by famine.

Though Wormwood is described as "burning," fire isn't remotely limited to literality. Even on some occasions when fire has meant a literal flame, it has also indicated a personification or theophany (Ex. 3:2-6, 13:21, 19:18). Most pertinent to our study, however, are moments when "fire" represents a symbol of the wrath of God or a judgment:

God's wrath is fire. Psalm 89:46 says, "How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? How long shall Your wrath burn like fire?" (See also Ezek. 21:31, 22:31, 38:19).

God's rebuke is fire. Isaiah 66:15 says, "For the Lord shall come with fire and with His chariots like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury and His rebuke with flames of fire."

God's fury is fire. Lamentations 2:4 says, "He has bent His bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like an adversary; He has killed all who were pleasant to His eye; in the tabernacle of the daughter of Zion, He has poured out His fury

like fire.”

God’s jealousy is fire. Zephaniah 3:8 says, “Therefore wait for Me, declares the Lord, until the day when I rise up to seize the plunder; for My decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger; for all the earth will be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.”

There are more examples, but you get the idea. Fire is used throughout the Word to represent a judgment of God upon the earth. With this in mind, one of the most powerful arguments for “fire” as a judgment of God in the form of famine is Ezekiel 5.

The prophecy regarding the “thirds” begins with friction between Israel and the Babylonian armies, during the symbolic act of cutting Ezekiel’s hair:

“As for you, son of man, take a sharp sword. Take and cause it to pass upon your head and upon your beard as a barber’s razor. Then take balances to weigh and divide the hair. You shall burn with fire a third part in the midst of the city when the days of the siege are fulfilled. Then you shall take a third part and strike it with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter in the wind. And I will draw out a sword after them. You shall also take a few in number from them and bind them in the edges of your robes. Then take some of them again and cast them into the midst of the fire and burn them in the fire. For a fire shall come out into all the house of Israel” (Ezek. 5:1-4).

It seems pretty clear by this point that fire is judgment, but obviously not a literal flame that engulfs and kills “all” the house of Israel. Looking a little way down the road in the same narrative, we read what this “fire” actually refers to:

“I will do in you what I have not done, and the like of which I will not do anymore, because of all your abominations.

Therefore the fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and the sons shall eat their fathers. ... A third part of you shall die by pestilence or by famine; they shall be consumed in your midst. ... When I send upon them the deadly arrows of famine which shall be for their destruction and which I will send to destroy you, then I will also increase the famine upon you and break your staff of bread. So I will send upon you famine and wild beasts, and they shall bereave you of children. And pestilence and bloodshed shall pass through you. And I will bring the sword upon you. I the Lord have spoken it" (Ezek. 5:9-17).

This passage is a clear and present indicator that "fire" as a judgment can mean "famine." (For a fuller explanation of this topic—and how the first two trumpets fit this pattern as well—read *The Wormwood Prophecy*.)

Battle of the Ages

Scripture makes no small point about it: The third trumpet will be devastating and terrifying. It may be delivered via a meteor collision. It could come as a sweeping famine. A nuclear event is not entirely out of the question. Perhaps an asteroid will strike a nuclear power plant, and the ensuing desolation will launch a dearth unlike any the world has yet seen.

Or perhaps the event will have a different, darker undertone.

Maybe the third trumpet—or all the trumpets—will be a byproduct of spiritual warfare taking place in heavenly realms, between which our planet—along with many other unsuspecting cosmic bodies—will become caught in the crossfire.

Some may think that this possibility is surely an exaggeration, but consider this: we often make the assumption that since angels can appear in a fleshly, human form (Heb. 13:2), and since Jesus walked the earth as a man, in the flesh

(1 Tim. 3:16), that entities within the spiritual realm are of similar size and capability as human beings. But nothing could be further from the truth. We know from Scripture that God's strength is unending (Job 9:4), His knowledge is infinite (Ps. 147:5) and all victory is His (Col. 2:15).

Furthermore, Revelation 10:1-3 gives us insight as to what one particular angel appearing during this time will look like: "Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud and a rainbow on his head. His face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. He set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and cried out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he cried out, seven thunders sounded their voices."

This one holy entity is so large that the Bible tells us he literally stands over the land and sea. His voice—as a roar of a lion—is enough to call forth the response of seven thunders. Thus, this being has the strength to provoke natural elements upon the earth.

Revelation is filled with accountings of holy angels interacting with natural elements in the earthly realm out of obedience to God, but what of the fallen ones? What about those entities who were once similar to the angels of heaven, but rebelled alongside Lucifer so long ago? Will these agents of evil attempt to manipulate created fixtures as well?

We know in that day, Satan will be rallying his forces to wreak havoc upon the earth because he is aware that his time is short (Rev. 12:12). It stands to reason that during these last days, the battle between good and evil, which has raged on since the beginning of the world, would culminate into a climax: the battle of the ages.

To some, this may seem far-fetched, especially since some people interpret the trumpets to represent more subtle means

of judgement, such as famine or pestilence. To jump to the conclusion that these instruments of judgment could really mean that bodies within the universe are being knocked around like ping-pong balls seems to some individuals to be quite a jump.

But the next trumpets clearly illustrate that cosmic disturbance will be completely unlike anything our solar system has experienced: "The fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day had no light, and likewise a third of the night" (Rev. 8:12).

This upheaval will permanently change things on earth. There is no reparation that can be made for the type of damage that will occur for our planet and its surrounding orbital bodies during this catastrophic event.

When the trumpets begin to sound, a dark day has indeed arrived for planet Earth and all those who inhabit it. Death, disease, warfare, pain, torment and dread will run rampant across all who dwell therein on that terrifying day. The only hope for mankind in that moment will be found in whether or not they are one of God's own. For those who reject Him, the nightmare will be just beginning.

But for God's children, Revelation 21:4 tells us a beautiful and joyous reunion with their Maker awaits them: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death. Neither shall there be any more sorrow nor crying nor pain, for the former things have passed away."

Thomas Horn is the CEO of SkyWatchTV and the founder of Defender Films and Defender Publishing.

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