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## The Eschatological Enemies of the Church: A Biblical Exposition of Revelation 9:1-11 and an Examination of Interpretations of The Locusts from the Abyss

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## I. Introduction

From the opening sentence of the Bible, God establishes truth: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”<sup>1</sup> (Gen. 1:1). The first two chapters of the Bible lovingly present humanity with the truth of its origin, purpose, and future. They inform mankind that God is the Creator of all things and by His command he brought them forth. He is the ultimate authority. With just three words, “Let there be” He called forth light, life, creation, and order. Our existence is evidence of God’s existence and His Word is the foundation of truth. God could have created the universe with his hands, or he could have contracted out the work to angels, but he did not. He spoke forth creation himself so that we would know that He is the Lord and that His Word has authority.

His Word is truth (Jn. 17:17) and it has the authority to bring forth life and instruct us so that we can fulfill the purposes that God has for us and live out his truth. The enemy knows this and for this reason, his strategy in overcoming the kingdom of God has always been to attack the truth by implanting seeds of doubt and offering counterfeit truths and solutions that suit our own selfish interests. Through this same method of attacking truth in the garden of Eden, the serpent enticed Eve, birthed sin, instigated the fall of all humanity, and shattered the perfect relationship between God and humanity.

After the fall, mankind came face to face with its own corrupt desires and the Bible records the struggle to overcome them from the third chapter of Genesis until the final battle in Revelation. The book of Revelation describes the effects that humanity’s choices have on the world during the time of the end when sin reaches its fullness. Revelation is certainly rich with symbolism and horrifying images, but its main focus is on God’s truth; Satan’s strategies to

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scripture is from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Zondervan, 2007).

destroy it, God’s judgments towards those that reject it, and the final victory that is accomplished through it. This rejection of God’s truth is the reason for the plague of locusts that are unleashed from the abyss. The locusts in Revelation nine are not physical mutant creatures sent to attack the ungodly but are rather the false teachers and their apostate followers that devour the church from within and prevent the truth from growing and bearing fruit.

## II. The Root of the Problem

The Greek word for sin is ἁμαρτία (hamartia) and it means “error, offense, guilty subject”<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for sin is חַטָּאת (chattâ’âh) and it means to miss the mark, an offense or to transgress.<sup>3</sup> Sin was birthed in the garden when Adam and Eve gave it life by committing the first sin in human history. However, the first mention of the word “sin” is in Genesis 4:7 after Cain presents his contemptible offering and God tells him, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Gen. 4:7). Like Cain, our human nature is a sinful nature and in our unregenerate state, sin affects our every thought, emotion, desire, and action. Satan tempted Eve to open sin’s gate in the garden and he tempts us to open it and give it reign over our lives.

The choice that Adam and Eve had in the garden is the same choice that every human being has been faced with since then. It is the same choice that Pilate issued shortly before turning Jesus over to be crucified: “ Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him” (Matt. 27:17-18). Self-interest drove the Jewish people

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<sup>2</sup> James Strong. *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1007.

to choose the murderer over the author of life. Self-interest drove Eve to listen to the lies of the serpent and disobey God. Both made choices fueled by their own internal desire to be like God. They wanted the authority. This is the struggle that has been haunting mankind since the Fall. Man, in his natural state is driven by worldly self-interest. John defines these worldly desires as the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 Jn. 2:16). These worldly desires blind our hearts and minds to God’s truth. Churches and the religious are not immune.

At the root of man’s very being is the desire to please himself. Over the course of the years, the sin of selfishness has become full-grown to the point today’s society elevates the love of self above any other love. Society claims that in order to love anyone correctly you must first love yourself wholly. Secular music deems that the “greatest love of all, is to love yourself.”<sup>4</sup> The unfortunate part about it is the fact that songs like this go unnoticed. The lyrics with vulgar language and sexual innuendos stand out because we know they are sinful. Unfortunately, this is how deep many people’s knowledge of sin goes, they only see the surface. Foul language is only a symptom, not the disease. Our failure to move past the surface and address the heart has allowed the enemy to wrap us so deep in darkness that we cannot even recognize how far we have fallen. Our fallen spiritual condition is what ultimately leads to the events recorded in Revelation. God’s truth has been cast to the ground and evil is now seen as good and good is now seen as evil. The church is not immune, in fact it may be considered more guilty because the church has the very words of God. The church has abandoned its first love and is now content with complacency believing that a relationship with Jesus is nothing more than filing into a church building on Sunday and listening to a preacher speak as long as he is finished in time for

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<sup>4</sup> Whitney Houston and Michael Masser. "The Greatest Love of All" Arista Records. 1985.

lunch and football. Jesus is calling his bride to something more and he will use the tribulation to purify her and rid her of the defilement that she is now steeped in.

### **III. The Two Sides of Wisdom**

One of the reasons that the book of Revelation has a myriad of interpretations is because many scholars do not view its contents through spiritual eyes, only physical. Much of the symbolism in Revelation points directly to the Old Testament texts but after we get the context of the symbolism from the Old Testament, we must then understand it spiritually through the lens of the New Testament. The Bible is clear that true wisdom has two sides (Job 11:6) and those two sides are physical and spiritual. Each event in the Old Testament was a real physical event and most of them point directly to spiritual realities that we now face in our age. “Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men *symbolic of things to come*” (Zech. 3:8, emphasis mine). The Old Testament is saturated with physical battles that took place between God’s people and their enemies but in our current age, our battles are spiritual battles that we fight with spiritual weapons. In our current age, seeing is believing but our fight is a fight of faith: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7). Paul says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). We are to learn from the things seen and apply them to the things unseen. The physical exists to illuminate the spiritual and the physical always comes first: “The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46). There is spiritual food (1 Cor. 10:3), spiritual drink (1 Cor. 10:4), spiritual seed (1 Cor. 9:11) and there are spiritual realities; “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but

in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words (1 Cor. 2:13). The Old Testament temple was merely symbolic of the spiritual temple and people of Israel were God's people through the physical law that brings death, but we are the spiritual Israel who was born of the Spirit who brings life. In order to understand the symbolism in Revelation, we must first understand the difference in the realities of the flesh and the realities of the spirit. Jesus referred to this as having "ears to hear" or "eyes to see" (Rom. 11:8). This is why the Pharisees had eyes but could not see. They could only see the physical side of wisdom, not the spiritual. They did not have spiritual senses because they had not been born spiritually which is why Jesus informed Nicodemus that he must be born again of the Spirit. He was born physically and had physical eyes that could see, but he lacked spiritual sight because he had not been born of the Spirit of God by the will of God, only by flesh by the will of man.

Revelation still has physical counterparts but for the most part, its symbolism is to be understood in its original context but applied to what is unseen. "In comparison with the rest of the New Testament, the use of the Old Testament in the Apocalypse of John has not been given a proportionate amount of attention."<sup>5</sup> "The index of allusions and quotations in the back of the *United Bible Societies Greek New Testament* reveals that Revelation contains more Old Testament allusions than any other New Testament book, but it does not record a single quotation."<sup>6</sup> This misunderstanding has led to many wrong interpretations of apache helicopters and microchips when the reality is, it is a spiritual battle over truth that is taking place and the target is our minds and hearts. Jesus gave us the command to abide in him and the tribulation will illuminate the fact that the church, for the most part, does not abide in him; it abides in self.

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<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson and H.G.M. Williamson, eds., *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 318.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, and Barclay Moon Newman, *The UBS Greek New Testament* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 897-911.

#### **IV. The Tribulation: Refined by Fire**

Many scholars believe the church will be removed before the great tribulation. According to the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, five of the seven churches are defiled with worldliness. We know that Jesus chose these specific churches in John's day because the same issues would haunt the end-time church. These churches allowed sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, complacency, and scripture says, "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Of the seven churches, Jesus only promises to keep the church of Philadelphia from the great hour of tribulation that will come upon the whole world. They are already pure, and their patient endurance shows they trust in him and not themselves or the world (Rev. 2:13). They know the truth and it has set them free. The church in Smyrna mirrors the Philadelphia church in that they do not receive any criticism or correction, but for reasons only known to Jesus, his will is that some of them remain faithful unto death (Rev. 8-11). If he gives them no criticisms but only commendations yet still wills that they be persecuted and some killed, would it be just to remove the worldly churches who have not yet repented of their sin?

Christians are being put to death daily all over the world. They are remaining faithful and laying down their lives for the sake of Christ yet many Americans are fixated on the idea that they can walk down a church aisle, profess to be a Christian, and then be "raptured" from the tribulation all while not giving Jesus anything more of themselves other than an hour on Sunday morning. The church is self-centered. Even its motives of salvation are self-centered. The church wants Christ's benefits without any burden of carrying a cross (Lk. 9:23). Jesus in his graciousness will indeed send his church through the tribulation for her own good. She is a blind and defiled bride who cannot see that she is committing adultery with the world and needs to be awakened to the reality of how far she has fallen. Jesus tells the church in Sardis that they are

dead! He is not going to rapture a dead church! Dead means they do not have the Spirit of God and they are still in the realm of the flesh: “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (Jn. 3:6). If they do not have the Spirit, they do not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9) and should not expect to be “raptured.” The church has gone the way of the Israelites and as we know from God’s character as displayed in the Old Testament, when his people turn from the living God to serve idols, he judges them. He does not change. The tribulation is designed to expose our idols and destroy them at the same time. As silver and gold is purified in the fire until it reflects the face of the blacksmith, the church will be purified and tested through the tribulation until she reflects the face of her God. “In the whole land,” declares the Lord, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people ’and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’” (Zech. 8:9). Again, “The great city split into *three parts*, and the cities of the nations collapsed” (Rev. 16:19, emphasis mine).

The tribulation will be the world’s darkest hour and it will need the light of the church to point them to the truth. The belief that the church will be removed beforehand is not healthy for the ones that Jesus is still calling to repent. It seems like a tactic of the enemy to sell the idea of deliverance from tribulation without repentance, testing, or purity. Enoch was taken because he walked with God, so if the church is still walking with the world like Revelation warns us she will be, she shouldn’t anticipate being removed rather should look forward to having the sin in her removed.



## V. The Locusts from the Abyss: An Exposition of Revelation 9:1-11

The Old Testament illuminates the fact that when God's people get complacent or turn from him to serve idols, the only thing that draws their attention back to God is trouble: "Whenever God slew them, they would seek him; they eagerly turned to him again" (Ps. 78:34). Psalm 78 describes the history of God's people and how with each generation, the people drift further and further away from him, yet because of the Lord's great love they were not consumed, and neither are we (Lam. 3:22). God does not give us what we deserve. He shows divine patience. But he does judge sin because he is a just God. His judgments come in many forms but much of the time they involve removing his hedge of protection and allowing the enemy to conquer or giving people over to their own wicked desires and allowing them to learn lessons the hard way. It is like telling your child not to run on the hardwood floor in socks because it is slippery, and you do not want them to get hurt. After the one-hundredth warning, you just stop warning them and then they eventually fall and slide right into the wall. Pain can be a great teacher. God does this with his truth. If we do not believe and trust that God's way is right, then he will allow us to go our own way. If pride develops then he will actively oppose us; "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (Js. 4:6). This opposition is what takes place in Revelation 9 when the locusts are released.

"Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone" (Rev. 9:3-5, ESV).

Commentaries offer several different interpretations of these locusts and whether they are to be interpreted literally or figuratively. Southern Baptist pastor David Jeremiah believes they are spirits from the lower world that will bear the likeness of horses, lions, and scorpions while

some will look like men.<sup>7</sup> He states, “They will be hideous, but powerful, invincible, indestructible, and intelligent.”<sup>8</sup> According to the *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*, these locusts are “humanoids but not human.”<sup>9</sup> Ed Hindson writes, “They are either demonic hordes, human armies, or radiation-poisoned and mutated creatures.”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to add, “Whatever these things are, they fly, make noise, are armored, and sting people without killing them. Some type of neutralizing ‘ray’ may be intended.”<sup>11</sup> All of these interpretations agree that these locusts are physical beings that strike using modern warfare, however, when we examine the text through the lens of the Bible, this is not entirely accurate. These locusts are false teachers and their apostate followers.

As explained earlier, in order to understand the symbolism in Revelation, we have to look to the past in order to understand the future and, in this case, our present. Moyise points out that, “the relevant question concerning the presence of Old Testament quotations or allusions in the New Testament is not, 'has the author respected the context', but 'in what ways do the two contexts interact?’”<sup>12</sup> John describes the locusts by saying,

“The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails with stingers, like scorpions, and in their tails, they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is Apollyon (that is, Destroyer)” (Rev. 9:7-11).

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<sup>7</sup> David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 168.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Hindson, *Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series: Revelation* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 108.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield, SI England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 19.

The book of Joel describes a similar situation in Israel's past. When describing the locust invasion, Joel states, "A nation has invaded my land, a mighty army without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white" (Joel 1:6-7). Joel also states that because of the locusts, the new wine has been snatched from their lips (Joel 1:5) and that the priests are in mourning because the fields are ruined, the ground is dried up, the harvest is destroyed, and the people's joy is withered away. (Joel 1:9-12).

The locusts in Revelation 9 belong to the "Destroyer" who we know is Satan because the "thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy" (Jn. 10:10). These locusts were not permitted to harm the "grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads" (v. 4). According to Bruce M. Metzger, "the vividness of John's description is not meant to provide individual details to be interpreted, but to create a vivid impression on the hearers' imaginations and to evoke thereby a visceral response of fear for the fate that awaits those who have denied the one God."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, many scholars share this opinion and regrettably miss important details in the text like the significance of the grass, green plants, and trees. Every word in scripture is recorded for a reason and it goes much deeper than a lot of well-known scholars give it credit. The fact that these locusts are not permitted to harm the grass, green plants, and trees is because these are symbolic of the people of the kingdom of God. The Greek word John uses here for plants is *chortos*<sup>14</sup> which means herbage, grass, or plant. This is the same word Matthew uses when recording Jesus' parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). In the parable, the good seed that grows into the good plants are the people of the kingdom and the

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 8.

<sup>14</sup> William and Robert Mounce, *Greek and English Interlinear New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1195.

bad seed produces weeds which the enemy plants. The opposite of the green plants would be the desolate land that the locusts leave behind. The locusts cannot harm the good plants because they are filled with the Spirit of God which is the seal of God on their forehead; “you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13). Green plants mean they are alive and bear fruit. When Jesus was on his way to be crucified, he told the women who were crying not to cry for him but to cry for themselves and for their children because “if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:31). The truly born again believers who have been born again by the Spirit of God are alive and are referred to in the Old Testament as oaks of righteousness; “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor” (Isa. 61:3). John records when Jesus was followed by the hungry crowds, “Jesus said, ‘Have the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down” (Jn. 6:10). John would not have recorded the amount of grass if it were not significant. One of the underlying spiritual lessons here is that Jesus will lead us to people and to leaders who have life (the Spirit) in them when we follow him and rely on him to feed us. “Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15). When his children ask for bread, he does not give them a stone (Matt. 7:9).

John states that the locusts looked like horses prepared for battle and on their heads, they wore something like crowns of gold (v. 7). Crowns are a symbol of victory and authority. When writing to his protégé Timothy, Paul points out that only those that compete by the rules can win the crown and he charges Timothy to entrust what he has told him to “reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2) and that the “hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops” (2 Tim. 2:6). The problem Timothy is having is the same

problem we have today, and that problem is what the locusts represent, false teachers. Paul goes on to tell Timothy “do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Paul is instructing Timothy how to properly earn his crown; teach the truth. The locusts wore something like crowns of gold meaning they have the position of authority and appear to be victorious in handling the word of truth, but they do not.

The Corinthian church also had a problem with these locusts. Paul describes them as “false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ.” He goes on to say, “and no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). In Revelation 4:4 we read that the elders are “dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads” so we should expect Satan to counterfeit this by planting weeds among our elders who “will secretly introduce destructive heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1). This is why is it crucial to rely on God and not on what other men have taught.

John writes that these locusts have faces like human faces and hair like women’s hair. They appear to be humans dedicated to the Lord, but they are actually under the control of the destroyer, Satan. According to Steve Gregg, their long hair may be referring to their transvestitism.<sup>15</sup> Ian Boxall deduces that John may be referring to the length of the hair which could point to the Parthians who were famous for the long hair of their warriors.<sup>16</sup> Daniel Akin writes “hair like women’s hair is perhaps an indication of the long antennae of locusts or to the

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<sup>15</sup> Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 232.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Blackwell, *Reading Revelation in Context: John’s Apocalypse and Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 91.

seductiveness of their strategies.”<sup>17</sup> Akin is not far off regarding the seductiveness of their strategies because their strategies are of Satan and he has a long history of seduction. The hair is not a reference to antennae or to transvestitism but is rather a reference to the Nazarite vow which is symbolic of belonging to the Lord. John Melescue echoes this when he states, “in the Old Testament, long hair was a symbol of strength...it was also an indication of one’s special vow with the Lord.”<sup>18</sup> “If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the Lord as a Nazirite... no razor may be used on their head. They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the Lord is over; they must let their hair grow long” (Num. 6:1-5). Samson was a Nazirite and his strength was from his hair just as the church’s strength is from their relationship and dedication to the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah instructed the Israelites to “cut their hair” (Jer. 7:29) because their religion was false and futile, and their actions showed it. They trusted in the words and teachings rather than The Word and One true teacher: God. Jeremiah was told by the Lord to “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message... Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” (Jer. 7:7:2,4). God tells them they are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless (Jer. 7:8) and that they “cling to deceit and refuse to return” (Jer. 8:5). The deceit they and we cling to is religion and its false teaching that does not require our hearts and minds to be fully devoted to God and his rule. God issues the warning to them which we would do good to listen to, you “follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?” (Jer.

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2016), 182.

<sup>18</sup> John Melescue, *Revelation the World Conquest of the Kingdom of God* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013), 199.

7:9-10). Because they are adamant not to obey the truth but to follow the false teachings, God says ““This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips” (Jer. 7:28). Then he commands them to ““Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath” (Jer. 7:29). Their dedication to the Lord was just in pretense and it was superficial, so he demanded they *cut their hair* because they were no longer dedicated to him. The locusts operate under this same header. They appear to be full of truth, but their tongues practice deceit and the poison of vipers is on their lips (Rom. 3:3).

The faces of the locusts are like human faces because they reflect the flesh. The Lord’s face was not shining upon them (Num. 6:25). They have not been born again into the kingdom of God and they do not have the Spirit of God dwelling within them. Paul writes, “Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (2 Cor. 3:7-8). Moses’ face reflected holiness even though the law was temporary and brought death. Our faces should therefore also reflect holiness because we have been given the Spirit who is *not* temporary and brings life. This is what Paul means when saying, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The body of Christ should reflect the face of Christ and the mind of Christ because we are united with him in Spirit.

John describes the locusts as looking “like horses prepared for battle” (Rev. 9:7) and “breastplates like breastplates of iron” (Rev. 9:9). These both testify to the pride of the locusts. When referring to the kings and officials of Judah, the priests, and the prophets, and the people

of Jerusalem, Jeremiah declares his message from the Lord that they are like “horses charging into battle” because “they each pursue their own course” (Jer. 8:6). They are not walking by the Spirit, “their feet rush into sin” and “the way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace” (Isa 59:7-8). They serve their own will, not the will of God.

Their iron breastplates speak to the hardness of their hearts. They trust in their own wisdom and religious knowledge taught by men and refuse to listen to the truth or turn and be healed (Matt. 13:15). To this, the Lord says, “How can you say, “We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord,” when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have” (Jer. 8:8-9)? Paul states “such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:2). Believers are to guard our hearts by putting on the breastplate of faith and love (1 Thes. 5:8) and the breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:4) but the locusts guard their heart with pride as hard as iron, preventing the truth from penetrating.

This is a major problem in the church today as many pastors, teachers, and Christians instinctively read the Bible through the lens of doctrines taught by men. Christians scream “sola scriptura” but they are quick to let Calvin, Luther, MacArthur, or whomever, tell them what to think. It is God who opens our minds to understand scripture (Lk. 24:45). The fruit of man-made doctrine is division rooted in pride and our religious doctrines have no breath in them. We are no longer Bereans, we simply file into churches, listen to the pastor, and put our faith in his message. God calls his people to abide in his Word so they can know truth and bear fruit. The reason the church is not bearing fruit is because it has severed itself from The Vine and has



become puffed up on the teachings of men. This is why Paul instructs the Corinthian church not to go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6). When we lean on our systematic theology textbooks and doctrines of reformed theologians, we are elevating them to a level reserved for Christ and Christ alone. As Paul states, “You are still worldly...for when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task...so then, no more boasting about human leaders! (1 Cor. 3:3-5, 21).

The locusts of Revelation act the direct opposite of Paul’s warning. They desire to elevate themselves and their teaching because they are not of God, they are the synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9, 3:9) who sell lies and slander the true spirit-filled believers of Smyrna and Philadelphia. They have gone the way of Cain who killed his brother because he was righteous. Jude writes, “these people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage” (Jude 16). The locusts cannot harm the true spirit-filled believers because they have the Spirit and know the truth, so the locusts continue to devour the truth with teeth of lions (Rev. 9:8) by slandering those that speak the truth in hopes of turning others away from their message of truth. The Bible illuminates the fact that wherever the truth is planted, there will be locusts to destroy the growth; “But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers” (Acts 14:2).

Verse 10 illuminates that the locusts have “tails with stingers, like scorpions, and in their tails, they had power to torment people for five months” (Rev. 9:10). Five months is the normal lifespan of a locust<sup>19</sup> so we should expect them to attack the truth of God and destroy the harvest and any signs of spiritual growth throughout the course of their entire ministry. Robert Mounce

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<sup>19</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Ephesians- Revelation* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1989), 594.

adds that the locust lifespan, “corresponds as well to the dry season (spring through late summer) in which the danger of a locust invasion is always present. Whatever the source of the number, it represents a limited period of time (not necessarily a short period of time) during which people in torment may yet turn from their wickedness and repent (cf. vv. 20– 21).”<sup>20</sup>

Their tails with stingers point to the sting of death that comes from the law. This is further evidence that the locusts are of the flesh and not the spirit. They resemble Ishmael and not Isaac because they have only been born by the flesh and the will of man and not by the Spirit in fulfillment of the promise. They have not been born again. When God called Ezekiel, he said, “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me... do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions” (Ezk. 2:6). Scorpions live in dry desolate environments and they are nocturnal, coming out only in the darkness, or in the case of Revelation, when the “the sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss” (Rev. 9:2). Scorpions have the ability to completely blend in with their environment and remain hidden unless you shine an ultraviolet light on them. When the ultraviolet light is pointed at them, they glow in the dark and are instantly exposed. Just as the UV light exposes scorpions, the Holy Spirit will expose false teachers and their teachings to us. False teachers blend in. They are often not the teachers and pastors that are being slandered on every website, blog post, and youtube video, but the ones that people praise; “Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). The church born of the flesh persecutes the church born of the Spirit even to this day because it is new wine in new wineskins

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<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 152.

and “no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’” (Luke 5:39). “Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now” (Gal. 4:28-29).

The tails of the locusts are where their power comes from. Isaiah illuminates the meaning of the tail when he writes, “But the people have not returned to him who struck them, nor have they sought the Lord Almighty. So, the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed in a single day; the elders and dignitaries are the head, the prophets who teach lies are the tail. Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray” (Isa.9:13-16). Again, the Old Testament is needed to understand the meaning of John’s vision. We have to keep in mind that while John saw the vision, the words he recorded were guided by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also wrote the Old Testament and it is his ministry to remind us of what has already been said in the Word; “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn.14:26). These scorpions are considered the tail because they do not obey the commands of God. The head is reserved for the obedient in the body of Christ. “The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom “(Deut. 28:13).

Jesus tells us that false prophets are to be recognized by their fruit; “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?” (Matt. 7:16). He does this because we cannot bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit unless the Holy Spirit himself lives within us. Demons have good theology; they knew Jesus was the Son of God

before the disciples even realized it. They also believe that God is One (Js. 2:19). Jesus did not tell us to identify them by their sermons, he told us to look deeper and make sure they were not like the Pharisees who were hypocrites and full of pride in themselves and their knowledge. Are they gathering or scattering the flock? Do they build up or destroy? Divide or unite? Jesus knows that none of us will have perfect theology because only God has perfect theology. We cannot bear fruit unless we are born of the Spirit, abide in him, and crucify our flesh with its passions and desires. The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23) and the acts of the flesh are; “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal. 5:19-20). This is how we are to examine ourselves and examine others, by fruit not knowledge, titles, degrees, or the like.

The locusts of Revelation are no different than the locusts of the Old Testament. They come to steal, kill, and destroy. They are under the control of Satan and bear the mark of the beast on their foreheads which is a mind devoted to things of the flesh instead of the will of God. They are full of pride, hypocrisy, unfaithfulness, darkness, and spiritual death and they do not even recognize it. If they did, they would repent, but they do not repent because they do not accept the fact that they need to. They are puffed up by their own knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1) as the Pharisees were.

John writes “during those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them” (Rev. 9:6). Scholars seem to agree that this is referring to the suicide or the desire to die because of the torment from the locusts. This is not the case. John is referring to the day when they wake up and realize they have sold their inheritance for a bite of

Esau's stew. They will seek repentance and will then be willing to die to the flesh and its desires, but Jesus will have already closed the door; "Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' "But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from'" (Luke 13:25). Jesus' warning in Matthew 7 echoes the same point.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt. 7:21-23)

These are people that are caught off guard by the fact that they do not belong to Jesus. They taught doctrines of men and their listeners followed all the rules that their religion gave them. They walked down the church aisle, said the magic prayer, gave ten percent of their money, and attended church every Sunday. They placed their faith in religion instead of God. They did not love God with all of their heart, soul, and mind. They loved the world and themselves. They desired to keep their lives rather than repent and deny themselves and follow Jesus, so as Jesus stated, they lost them; "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Matt. 16:25).

## VI. Conclusion

Steve Moyise points out that the authors of the New Testament inferred the meaning of the ancient text from the events brought about by God in which they themselves were involved.<sup>21</sup> Many Old Testament texts simply could not have been understood at the time they were written because they alluded to future events. The religious people of Jesus' day had clearly tried to

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<sup>21</sup> Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield, SI England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 12.

assign meaning to Old Testament texts based off their limited understanding and when Jesus came to illuminate the scriptures, the religious people rejected his teaching in favor of their own. This is why Jesus states that new wine must go in new skins (Lk. 5:37). Perhaps many scholars have gone the same route with the book of Revelation and have tried to understand it before its time and have unfortunately led to mass confusion regarding its meaning and blindness to its present fulfillment. Because of the teaching of the Jewish religious leaders, the people were caught off guard by Jesus' first coming and unless we are willing to humbly become fools in order to become wise, we may end up being caught off guard by his second coming. Darkness precedes the locusts in both contexts because when there is no light, the locusts have free reign. This is why we are to keep our lamps burning (Lk. 12:35). The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were locusts that destroyed the truth and shaped it into a religious system founded upon their own knowledge and understanding. They thought they were the authority and that their temple was God's dwelling place but "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands" (Acts 17:24). Then the real authority and temple showed up and they considered Jesus and his followers false because of their pride and hardness of heart. God poured out his Spirit on Pentecost enabling his people to know the truth and to teach it to others, and the locusts followed the true disciples from city to city in hopes of devouring its growth wherever it should sprout up. This is happening again today. If we hold too fast to religious teachings and biblical understanding of other men, we will not only miss God, but we will end up fighting against him because of the pride in our hearts. God is not silent, and the Holy Spirit has not stopped speaking.

The locusts destroy the truth and inject moral poison causing the vine to wither, and the trees do not produce their fruit. Walter Scott states that the locusts produce a "venom of

falsehood, born in the pit and doctrines, teachings, and principles conceived in the abyss are received by the apostate part of the nation and create in their souls and consciousness, intolerable anguish.”<sup>22</sup> There is no healing brought to the nations because the church continues to drink the poison from the scorpions and are swayed by their obnoxious pride. The church has fallen for the “discernment ministries” rather than listening to the author of discernment. “We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said” (Acts 15:24). All they know of God exists within the mind; it has not made its way to the heart because their hearts are deceived by their own understanding, false teachings, and selfish desires. Jesus is our husband and desires his bride to be pure. When we turn to idols, we are committing spiritual adultery and he weeps. Nevertheless, the Lord says, “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate” (Joel 2:12-13).

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<sup>22</sup> David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 146.

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