

## R. Govett on the First Woe

### The Creation Concept

The following is Govett's commentary on the prophecy of the plague of scorpion-locusts described in Revelation 9:1-11, from: Robert Govett, *The Apocalypse expounded by Scripture*. Chas. J. Thynne & Jarvis, Ltd. London. 1929. pp. 182-196.

### Chapter IX

“And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit.”

With the woe-trumpets the time of Great Tribulation on earth begins. Matt. xxiv. 21, 22. It is the time of Satan's ejection out of heaven by the power of Jesus. Rev. xii. 7-12. Of that time it is written, “Woe to the earth, and to the sea! for the devil is come down to you having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short season.”

With this fifth trumpet new personages appear upon the scene, and a new mode of procedure is adopted. The fifth and sixth plagues come, not from heaven, but from the earth, or from beneath it.

What is the star before us? Not a literal star, but an intelligent being. “But how do you sever between the literality of the stars of the former trumpet, and of this?” Because the actions ascribed to this star are impossible to unintelligent matter. A star could neither take a key nor unlock a door. Judges iii. 25. And this star begins to act after the force of its fall is already spent. But whatever is related of the stars of the former plague is perfectly consistent with the idea of their being literal stars. There the stars are simply smitten; and the consequence is a natural one, the obscuration of their light.

Who, then, is this star? Satan. He is come down to deceive the nations, transformed as “an angel of light” (2 Cor. xi. 14). Angels are described as stars in the Almighty's speech to Job (Job xxxviii. 7). Jesus describes Himself as “the bright and morning star” (Rev. xxii. 16).

Satan reaches earth not voluntarily, but as cast out of heaven; as the twelfth chapter of this book assures us. xii. 8, 9, 12. There he is cast out, as the result of his defeat by Michael. Here, therefore, he is described in reference to that, as already “a star out of the heaven fallen to the earth.” So the Saviour prophetically beheld him, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven” (Luke x. 18). [1]

The key was given to this fallen star. Our translators have rightly put "to him" instead of "to it," as seeing that an intelligent being is necessarily supposed. That word "was given" connects this plague with all the main incidents of the Apocalypse. It was by order of the throne. And this key, as we are informed in the first chapter of Revelation, belongs properly to Jesus. i. 18. The key now committed to him is the key of "Death," or of the bottomless pit. xx. 13, 14. As to Jesus is given the key of Hades, and at His opening of it His elect come forth; so to Satan now, at the opening of the Wild Beast's kingdom, the key of the place of the lost is given, and his False Christ, False Prophet, and army come forth. Satan opens the pit: and throughout his time of empire it stands open. The angel shuts it while Jesus reigns: it is kept fast closed then, and Satan's power is at an end. Men are made fearfully immortal during five months of Satan's reign, as during the Saviour's kingdom the days of man will be as the days of a tree spent in sunshine and in joy. "Hallelujah" is the cry when God reigns: "Woe, woe, woe," when Satan does.

It is not the door of a house that is opened, but the mouth of a pit. As a good angel shuts it for a good purpose; so an evil angel opens it for an evil purpose. The good angel that shuts descends at his own will from heaven. The evil angel is cast down from it against his will.

To the prison below a liberator comes. Now to the interior of a prison none have access but the officers of a prison, or those employed by them. Here Satan enters not as a captive, but, standing without, by authority given, lets loose as many as he is permitted. He does not break in by force, but enters by authority bestowed. The exile from heaven opens, the dweller in heaven shuts the pit, both suitably. Satan is not in the pit, as many suppose. He descends to it. But it is not simply "the key of the bottomless pit," as our translators have it, but "the key of the well of the bottomless pit." This gives us new information. It supposes a shaft, or well, or mine sunk through the crust of the earth, till we arrive at the entrance to the hollow interior of the globe, which is closed by gates. Of these the Scripture speaks more than once. The Abyss, or bottomless pit, is a place of departed souls. "Who shall descend into the bottomless pit? (That is, to bring up Christ again from the dead)" (Rom. x. 7). It is a dungeon, and a place of punishment, as is manifested by the fear of the demons, lest they should be cast in thither. "And they besought Him that He would not command them to go away into the bottomless pit" (Luke viii. 28, 31). This afterwards appears from this very book; for into it Satan is cast, during the thousand years. xx. 3. The dungeons of olden time were usually pits under ground. Gen. xl. 15; xli. 14; Jer, xxxviii. 6, 13. God's prison is also situated beneath the earth.

2. "And he opened the well of the bottomless pit, and there came smoke out of the well as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened from the smoke of the well."

The first consequence of the opened abyss is the coming forth of smoke. This shows its interior to be the place of fire. It is "as the smoke of a great furnace." It tells of a fierce flame, the cause of the thick smoke. xviii. 9, 18 ; xix. 3. While the opening of the pit is due to supernatural agency, the results of it are natural.

The consequence of the smoke is next described. Smoke always follows the opening of a passage into the deep interior of the earth. From the active volcanoes of the earth smoke is continually proceeding. But this is a sudden eruption, not from any known opening into earth, but from a place till then closed. It is attended with earthquake and flame, and the destruction of herb and

tree, of man and beast, in its immediate vicinity. The predicted eruption appears to have burst forth in Judaea. This is the scene described by Moses and the prophets. "The whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning, it is not sown nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath" (Deut. xxix. 23). Jer. iv. 23-28.

So vast is the opening, so dense the smoke, that from earth in general the light of the sun is intercepted. But this is the least portion of the plague.

3. "And out of the smoke came forth locusts into the earth; and to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power."

These are no common locusts: (1) For they eat no vegetable productions. (2) The locusts of earth have no king. Prov. xxx. 27. These have. (3) In the plague of Egypt the inspired recorder had said, "Before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such" (Exod. x. 14). (4) Yet they are literal creatures, resembling the literal animals named: the lion, the horse, the scorpion, the man. Their forms only are described: not any moral character. The grass, herbs, trees, which they are not to injure are literal: so then are they. They are not bad men: for they trouble only the wicked.

The sun is first spoken of as subject to the darkness, for the eruption commences in the day. But the darkening of "air" shuts out all light from the heavenly bodies. If the sun's light be withdrawn by eclipse, the stars shine out, and supply his place. But, on this occasion, as smoke fills the air, neither sun, moon, nor stars can contribute any light.

These locusts usually dwell in the abyss, and amidst its fire and smoke. They are no inhabitants of earth. Creatures in general are stifled by smoke, and certainly consumed by fire.

Earth has its poisonous and noxious creatures, but these have already been used in wrath, and in vain. "The wild beasts of the earth" were commissioned under the fourth seal. vi. 8. But though they injured and slew, they availed not to stay the progress of sin. Now the creatures of the infernal regions are let loose. Will men own the hand of God, and repent? Never has such a plague followed on any previous eruption of a volcano and its smoke. Will men confess this the design of God in visitation for sin? Or will they regard it as a natural event?

Here is the proof of the literality of these creatures. (1) Whatever can be taken literally without absurdity, is literal. (2) Whenever an instrument has actually been used before of God, whether it be the very same, or one resembling it in principle, it cannot be absurd to account it literal when predicted in the future. But God in former days used noxious insects as a plague. These then are literal creatures. As the smoke is literal, producing its ordinary effects, so are the locusts actual creatures; and not mere symbols of a heresy, or of an invading army.

But if their chief feature of injury resembles that of the scorpion, why are they directly and prominently called "locusts"? (1) First, it is evident that they are so denominated, from the locust-plague wherewith Egypt was visited. (2) Next, they are winged creatures, and fly through the air; not being like scorpions, confined to the ground. They ascend from the bottomless pit, and "the sound of their wings," as we afterwards learn, is terrible. (3) Also their immense numbers are intimated thereby; and (4) probably in those points of the body which are not specially described, they resemble the locust.

There is force in the seeming insignificant addition, "as the scorpions of the earth have power." These are creatures from beneath, never seen before by man. They are compared, therefore, with known animals, whose abode is on earth. From the familiar forms of the surface, the student of the prophetic page is led to comprehend the appearance of creatures hitherto unseen.

How remarkable in this connection are the words of our Lord! "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold I give unto you power to tread on serpents, and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you: notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject to you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven" (Luke x. 18-2). The scorpions here, and the serpents of the next plague, belong to Satan. But they are forbid to hurt God's own people. The star fallen from heaven is Satan.

4. "And it was said to them, that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who have not the seal of God on their foreheads."

They are under control. Though released, it is not in order to do their own will. "It was said to them;" where we must fill up the ellipsis with the words, "by God," as in other places.

This command of God supposes the locusts intelligent up to a certain point. Commands are given only to those who can comprehend them. But the degree of intelligence supposed is not greater than that which belongs to a dog. They are free to touch only those who are unsealed by God. A dog can be trained to distinguish game, and to point at it, while he disregards birds which the sportsman cares not for. Or he can be taught to fly at beggars, while he suffers the well-dressed to pass unhurt.

The mark on the chosen of God must be a literal and visible one, to be recognized by these creatures. From the prohibition against hurting the vegetable creation, we gather, that but for that injunction, these creatures would injure it.

The grass, herbs, and trees, then, are literal here. They had been before injured by the fire and hail of the first trumpet. But now they are not to be stricken. Men are the prey of these locusts.

That the inhabitants of the earth are to be plagued directly now, is the characteristic of the woe-trumpets; or, at least, of the two first. Disregarded judgments grow in terrors. The objects of the plague are described as men unsealed by God. This throws us back on the sealing of the seventh chapter. The sealed are abiding on earth still. Therefore I conclude that the plagues succeed one another quickly, and not after intervals of centuries; else the sealed ones had died off.

From this limitation of the objects of their injury we may infer, that but for that, they would have attacked the holy ones of God, equally with the wicked, or in preference to them. He who sends them forth forbids them to torment any but His enemies. That their nature and tendencies are to injure is shown by this, that the negative in each case comes first, and the positive point is permissive only, not a command. "It was said to them that they should not hurt the grass, but the men which have not the seal of God." "It was given, that they should not kill them." So, in the next plague, all that is requisite is to loose the fierce angels of evil: no restriction is laid on them, and they slay.

5. "And it was given to them, that they should not kill them, but that they should be

tormented five months; and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when it striketh a man.”

Ordinarily tormentors dwell in the prison, and the culprits to be tormented are brought to them. Here the tormentors are let loose among the habitations of earth. The globe is one vast prison. It has become like the pit for its wickedness; it is like it also in punishment.

That the torment is bodily pain is proved by this, that it stands opposed to death. These locusts torment, without killing. But all prefer death to their tormenting.

But for the limit set by God, they would willingly have slain the objects of their attack. But this plague is torment—insufferable pain of body. God’s ordinary plagues are frequently unto death: but here He would show how many and varied are the arrows of His quiver. In the infernal flames we find the cause of the “smoke” which ascends from beneath; and from the place of torment ascend the “locusts” that inflict anguish. Earth is a picture of the place of the damned. Darkness and smoke shut out the light of the sun; and beneath its sulphurous pall the godless are tormented, even as the damned themselves.

The duration of this plague is fixed. It is the first instance of a date given to a plague. “Five months.” How dread a lot, insufferable anguish of body five months!

The pain suffered is like that of a scorpion. The scorpion’s sting is perhaps the intensest bodily pain that any animal can inflict.

“The scorpion is one of the most loathsome objects in nature. It resembles a small lobster; its head appears to be joined and continued to the breast; it has two eyes in the middle of its head, and two towards the extremity, between which come as it were two arms, which are divided into two parts, like the claws of a lobster. It has eight legs proceeding from its breast, every one of which is divided into six parts, covered with hair, and armed with talons or claws. The belly is divided into seven rings, from the last of which the tail proceeds, which is divided into seven little heads of which the last is furnished with a sting. In some are observed six eyes, and in others eight may be perceived. The tail is long, and formed after the manner of a string of beads, tied end to end, one to another; the last bigger than the others, and somewhat longer; to the end of which are sometimes two strings, which are hollow, and filled with a cold poison, which it injects into the wound it inflicts. It is of a blackish colour, and moves sideways like a crab. Darting with great force at the object of its fury, it fixes violently with its snout, and by its feet, on the persons which it seizes, and cannot be disengaged without difficulty.

”No animal in the creation seems endued with a nature so irascible. When taken, they exert their utmost rage against the glass which contains them; will attempt to sting a stick when put near them; will sting animals confined with them, without provocation; are the cruellest enemies to each other. Maupertuis put a hundred together in the same glass: instantly they vented their rage in mutual destruction, universal carnage! In a few days only fourteen remained, which had killed and devoured all the others.” [2]

The pain is proverbial: far exceeding that of whips made by men. “My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions “ (2 Chron. x. 11). God has tried whips first, and men

have not repented. Now scorpions form his lash of vengeance. Hell-torments are now seen to be no fable. These locusts are witnesses, that there is a worm that can abide the fire.

6. "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it: and they shall desire to die, and death fleeth from them."

It produces not repentance, but desire for death. They seek an escape from anguish, not reconciliation with the offended Majesty of heaven. "The goodness of God" was leading men to penitence during the Church dispensation. Now he seeks to produce it by judgment: but well-nigh without effect in each case. "Men shall seek death." The article in the Greek before "men" denotes the universality of the desire. Far as the torment extends, so far does the desire reach. But men now not only desire death, as a mode of escape from the torment they suffer, but they seek it. That is, they use means to effect their purpose. Life is so weak a thread, that it is easily broken. The cord, the knife, the cup, the stream, the pistol, the fumes of deadly ingredients, offer many modes of exit from life. And ordinarily it is as easily found as sought.

But the peculiarity of those woeful five months will be, that they shall not find it. Here is another supernatural feature. How this desire of the tormented shall be defeated, we are not told. Probably the locust-scorpions will prevent it. How terrible the pain, which will make the desire of death universal! How dread the disappointment. that even this disastrous remedy shall not be permitted!

Men are herein still more like lost souls. There is no refuge, no protection from these winged invaders; nor is death itself permitted them.

To impress this dread state of mankind yet more fully on our mind, the statement is repeated under another form. "Death flees from them." Ordinarily he comes undesired, uncalled; every means that skill can suggest is used to keep him at bay. But he breaks through all. Here the earnest wooing of him avails not. Men must live against their wills, and live in anguish. Ordinarily, the attempt at suicide is restrained, wherever expected, by the vigilant eyes of friends, and the police. Here, police and all are alike infected with the desire. But neither singly, nor by joint action, can they effect their purpose. The desire to die occurs only in this case. Under the other plagues. it is no more mentioned.

7. "And the likenesses of the locusts were like unto horses prepared for war; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men."

The apostle addresses himself now to depict the appearance of these creatures. So important is this point, that four verses are devoted to the purpose. One reason of this, doubtless, is to manifest that these are not ordinary locusts. Common locusts were creatures well known to John and the Asiatics. But who, save one inspired and enlightened of God, could describe to us the shapes of beings of the infernal pit? There is in humanity an awe and terror arising from the first encounter with new and noxious creatures of strange forms. This is further heightened in the present case, by their coming from beneath amidst gross darkness. What shrieks of terror, what groans of anguish, what swoons of the fear-stricken and feeble, what curses of impotent fury from the strong, will mount up from earth's cities and vales amidst the sable night that overspreads all and shuts out day!

Their general appearance resembles a horse in armour, and encircled by its war-housings.

They have crowns, or rather something of that shape, on their heads, and it resembles gold in its yellow colour, perhaps in its substance. These armies from beneath answer to the armies of heaven that come down with Christ. The armies of heaven are enthroned and crowned with Christ. The risen with Christ have authority to reign over men a thousand years. These have authority to torment men five months. In Satan's first resurrection, tormentors come up from below. In Christ's, rulers descend from heaven.

Their faces are like those of human beings. Ordinary locusts have no such appearance: much less have they the hair of women.

But this is what is constantly forgotten in the case of the Apocalypse. The creature there sketched by its resemblances to man and lions is supposed to be a man!

8. "And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions."

This would seem to prove, that they must be very much larger than ordinary locusts.

The common locusts have naught resembling human hair, much less female tresses.

The lions teeth are peculiar, and characteristic of him. They are of two kinds, the fangs. or front teeth; and the grinders. The fangs have a single sharp point. The grinders have three points, the centre one being the most elevated. Which of these two classes is intended, we are not told; probably both are included. Ordinary locusts have no teeth of bone. They have but four in number, crossing one another like the blades of scissors. To a gaminiverous insect, the teeth of a carnivorous quadruped would be highly unsuitable. With these teeth the locusts make their way through every obstruction: perhaps by them they seize their victim.

9. "And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses rushing into battle.

It would seem, from the sound of their wings, that they must be creatures of large dimensions: small wings, however numerous could not create a sound like chariots of many horses at full speed. They are like horses in armour; and now their breastplates are named. It would seem as though these were their defence against men's attempts to destroy them. For, doubtless, men will use every means to rid themselves of so dire a calamity. Thus Joel says, "When they fall upon the sword, they shall not be wounded" (Joel ii. 8). It should here be observed that Joel's description of a locust- army to come runs remarkably parallel with this. Joel ii. He describes the awful darkness, the trembling of men, the fire bursting forth. "The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses, and as horsemen so shall they run." Their noise is like chariots on rocks: men are in pain in their presence. They shall keep rank. They are winged creatures: and thus height will be no security against them. "They shall enter in at the windows as a thief." These infernal cherubim are like (1) horses, (2) men, (3) women. (4) lions, (5) birds, and (6) scorpions.

The sound of their wings is warlike, and mighty. Chariots in which many horses are driven abreast and run with speed make a terrible sound. The sound of the wings of the cherubim was like great waters, and like the sound of an army. Ezek. i. 24.

The sound of the advent of the common locusts is not terrible. Their noise when eating is like that of an army foraging in secret, as Volney says.

10. "And they have tails like scorpions, and stings: and in their tails was their power to hurt men five months."

In the serpent, the tail is the weakest part. But in the tail lies the power of the scorpion. As these locusts hurt like scorpions, and the pain produced by their stroke is like the scorpion's, so the instrument by which the blow is inflicted is like the scorpion's. The serpent tailed horses of the next plague inflict the injuries of serpents.

The apostle now describes that part of the creature which made it terrible to men. For locusts in general are easily slain by men, and are formidable only to the vegetable creation. As they were to hurt men, they have an instrument suited for the purpose, greatly resembling one long dreaded in the east.

11. "They have over them (as) king the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, and in the Greek he hath his name Apollyon."

The ordinary locusts have no king, but they go forth in bands. Prov. xxx. 27. But these from beneath have a king set over them, of a different nature from themselves, as appears from the passages in other parts of the book which speak of him. Probably this is the reason why he is not called "king of the locusts," but it is said, "They have a king over them." This is the preposition used where a foreigner is forbidden as king of Israel. We can but conclude that this king, "the angel of the bottomless pit," is the False Christ, who is the great antagonist of our Lord. He is first named "the Wild Beast," when he wars with the Witnesses and slays them. There he is described as "the Wild Beast that cometh up out of the bottomless pit" (xi. 7). But none of eminence is mentioned as coming up thence, save the King of the Locusts. By this characteristic he is mentioned once more. xvii. 8.

Of our Lord it is said, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus [Saviour]; for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. i. 21). Here, the king of the locusts is named "DESTROYER," for he shall destroy his people in their sins.

Abaddon and Apollyon both signify "destroyer." Abaddon is the name of the bottomless pit in Hebrew. "Hades (Sheol) is naked before him, and Destruction (Abaddon) hath no covering" (Job xxvi. ti). "Hades and Abaddon are before the Lord" (Prov. xv. 11; xxvii. 20). Thus the angel of the pit takes the name of the pit. It is the place of destruction; he is the Destroyer. The Saviour is "Christ the Lord" (Luke ii. 11). The Destroyer is Antichrist the False King and Lord. The one descended from heaven: the other ascends from the pit.

By the title of "Destroyer" and equivalent words, the person before us is known to the prophets. Jer. iv. 7; Jer. vi. 26; Isa. xvi. 4; Dan. viii. 24, 25; Dan. ix. 26; xi. 44.

## **Author's Notes & References**

1. Isa. xiv. 12 resembles this, but seems to be spoken of the False Christ.
2. Paxton's Illustrations of Scripture, pp. 123, 125.