

The “Destroyers of the Earth” in Revelation 11,18 – Who are they?

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Abstract

Revelation 11,18 is a verse that is commonly cited specifically in connection with caring for the earth and its natural resources. This paper will argue that in its appropriate context, the destruction of the earth to which Rev 11,18 refers is not the degradation of the natural environment of the earth. Rather, it refers to the outpouring of the seven plagues, for which ultimate responsibility, although it is God’s action, is attributed to the nations under the leadership of the beast. It is therefore exegetically inappropriate to use Rev 11,18 as a de-contextualized proof-text to urge environmental responsibility.

Key Words

Revelation – Two Witnesses – Ecology – Environment – Plagues – Destruction – Exegesis

Resumen

Apocalipsis 11,18 es un texto que se cita comúnmente en relación con el cuidado de la tierra y sus recursos naturales. Este artículo mostrará que, en su contexto apropiado, la destrucción de la tierra a la que se refiere Ap 11,18 no es la degradación del medio ambiente natural de la Tierra. Más bien, se refiere al derramamiento de las siete plagas, cuya responsabilidad última, aunque es una acción de Dios, se atribuye a la nación que está bajo el liderazgo de la bestia. Por lo tanto, es inadecuado exegeticamente usar Ap 11:18 como un texto prueba descontextualizado para instar a ser responsables con el medio ambiente.

Palabras clave

Apocalipsis – Dos testigos – Ecología – Medio ambiente – Plagas – Destrucción – Exégesis

Introduction

Revelation 11,18 is a verse that has been popularly used in some interesting contexts that were probably not in mind when the words were written. As an example, Jones writes in his commentary that this verse “has reference to the destroying of those who will be destroying this earth with nuclear

weapons and high-powered explosives when Christ returns to earth.”¹ Similarly, Miller comments that “we have the capacity to destroy ecosystems on a global scale. Our scientific belief in this horrific potential parallels the biblical judgment that the destroyers of the earth themselves will be destroyed.”² An even more popular application of this verse has to do with caring for the natural environment, so that the “destroyers of the earth” are understood to be those who are responsible for the degradation of the earth’s natural resources.³

To what extent are these applications of Rev 11,18 justified? This essay will argue that the destruction of the earth to which Rev 11,18 refers is not specifically the degradation of the earth’s natural environment. Rather, it refers to the outpouring of the seven plagues, for which ultimate responsibility, although they are the action of God, is attributed to the nations of the earth under the leadership of the beast. Because those nations have “morally” destroyed the earth, God will “physically” destroy the earth through the seven plagues.

The General Context of the Statement within Revelation

The verse in question states that, “[t]he nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth”. These words are proclaimed by the 24 elders in heaven who fall on their faces and worship God at the end of the narrative of the two witnesses (Rev 11,15-16) and before the vision of the woman and the dragon in Rev 12.

This passage about the destroyers of the earth occurs in one of the seven heaven/sanctuary scenes in the Apocalypse of John,⁴ which seem to

¹ G. E. Jones, *A Verse By Verse Commentary on Revelation* (East Sussex, UK: Garners Books, 2007), 130.

² Norman Miller, *Cases in Environmental Politics: Stakeholders, Interests, and Policymaking* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 32.

³ Mark Bredin, *The Ecology of the New Testament: Creation, Re-Creation, and the Environment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2010), 168, applies this same notion a little more soberly.

⁴ On the sanctuary scenes in Revelation, see K. A. Strand, “The Eight Basic Visions” in *Symposium on Revelation: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, Book 1, ed. F. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 35-50; and K. A. Strand, “Victorious-Introduction Scenes” in *Ibid.*, 73-98. See also Jon Paulien, “The Role of the Hebrew Cultus,

be used in the text to mark off natural sense units. We may extrapolate that this heaven/sanctuary scene encapsulates the outcome of the preceding narrative as well as providing a foretaste of what is to follow thematically. The statement about the destroyers of the earth is therefore best understood by analyzing the context of the preceding and following narratives.

The comment about the destroyers of the earth occurs within the trumpets sequence in Revelation, which is particularly associated with the theophany of “judgment”.⁵ In fact Paulien observes that “the seventh trumpet explicitly uses the word ‘judgment’ as part of the climax of the seven-fold series (Rev 11,18).”⁶ The 24 elders make their statement about the destroyers of the earth specifically in response to the sounding of the seventh angel’s trumpet (v. 15). This seventh trumpet occurs at the end of, and in response to the account of the two witnesses, which includes their testimony, their treatment at the hands of the beast from the bottomless pit and the people of the earth, and finally their rescue by God. (vv. 3-12).⁷

The sounding of the seventh trumpet heralds the second coming of Jesus,⁸ and is therefore associated not only with the events that transpire immediately preceding this event, but also with the return of Jesus which follows. The purpose of the seventh trumpet is to announce that the everlasting reign of Christ has commenced upon the earth,⁹ that the rulers of the earth are about to be overthrown, and that sin will be vanquished forever. At the most general level, the sounding of the seventh trumpet encompasses the events described in Rev 13-19, which are foreshadowed

Sanctuary, and Temple in the Plot and Structure of the book of Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 33, n° 2 (1995): 247–255; and Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002). The seven sanctuary scenes are found in Rev 1,12-20; 4,1-5.14; 8,2-6; 11,19; 15,5-8; 19,1-10; 21,1-8.

⁵ Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation’s Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7–12*, AUSDDS 11 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 209, 224.

⁶ Paulien, *Revelation’s Trumpets*, 224.

⁷ An interpretation of the meaning of the narrative of the two witnesses will not be provided here. Although some exegetical points in relation to the two witnesses will be tangentially mentioned, the focus here will be firmly centered on the specific question of the identity of the “destroyers of the earth” mentioned in v. 18.

⁸ Rev 10,17; 11,5.

⁹ Note in v. 15 - ἐγένοντο (aorist); and in v. 17 - εἴληφας (perfect) and ἐβασίλευσας (aorist).

by the declaration in 11,15-18.¹⁰ This provides a broad context for understanding the identity of the “destroyers of the earth” and the declaration of the 24 elders.

The Preceding (Specific) Context of the Statement in Revelation 11

In Rev 11,18, there are several groups mentioned:

1. “The nations” – τὰ ἔθνη
2. “Your (God’s) wrath” - ὀργή σου
3. The dead who must be judged – ὁ καιρὸς τῶν νεκρῶν κριθῆναι
4. “Your servants, the prophets (τοῖς προφήταις) and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great”
5. The destroyers of the earth – τοὺς διαφθείροντας τὴν γῆν

As noted above, this statement comes at the culmination of the narrative of the two witnesses. Each of these groups just listed is a significant protagonist in the narrative:

1. The nations appear in v. 2 (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) and in v. 9 (ἔθνων). The specific nations of Sodom and Egypt are mentioned in v .8.
2. God and His wrath appear in vv.5-6. In v.5, the wrath of God is directed against those who would harm the two witnesses. In v.6, the wrath is expressed in terms of the ability of the two witnesses to bring drought, to turn the waters into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague.
3. The righteous dead who must be judged are found in vv. 7-10. Here they are judged by the nations and by “those who dwell on the earth” as worthy of death. In v.11, God judges them as worthy of life. In verse 13, 7,000 are killed by an earthquake. The use of the number 7,000 suggests that these are followers of God, and

¹⁰ In this regard I would ascribe a more central role to the narrative of the two witnesses within the overall structure of the Apocalypse of John than does Rob Dalrymple, *Revelation and the Two Witnesses: The Implications for Understanding John’s Depiction of the People of God and His Hortatory Intent* (Eugene, OR: Resources Publications, 2011), 59–85. This does not diminish the importance of the contribution Dalrymple has made to the study of the Apocalypse of John.

this may be understood as one of the significant allusions to the Elijah narrative in this account.¹¹ This symbolic number appears to refer to servants of God who in this case have been killed by the powers of evil.

The dead who must be judged in the account of the two witnesses are the righteous dead; they must be judged so that they may be vindicated and receive their reward. This is supported by the construction of v. 18, which displays significant chiasmic parallelisms that may be represented in this manner:

A¹ (καὶ) The nations were angry
 B¹ (καὶ) and your wrath has come.
 C¹ (καὶ) The time has come for judging the dead,
 D¹ (καὶ) and for rewarding your servants
 the prophets and saints
 C² (καὶ) and your people who revere your name,
 both great and small –
 B² (καὶ) and for destroying
A² those who destroy the earth.¹²

The instances of καὶ in B1 – B2 should therefore not be seen as conjunctive in a purely syntactic sense, in other words as merely joining loosely related clauses. Rather, they may be best seen as conjoining expressions.¹³ This suggested structure brings several salient points to light. First of all, the focus of this statement is on rewarding the servants of God. Secondly, the dead who are to be judged are these same servants of God. Thirdly, the destruction of those who destroy the earth is a function of the wrath of God, and the counterpoint to God’s judgment of the righteous dead. Fourthly and finally, this suggested structure points to the identity and character of the destroyers of the earth, since they are parallel

¹¹ Other key allusions to the Elijah narrative are the reference to the three and a half years (Rev 11,3; cf. 11,2.9), the ability to stop the rainfall (11,6), and the calling down of fire from heaven (11,5). See 1 Kings 19,18.

¹² Note Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiasmic Reading of Revelation 11.1–14.5*, LNTS 283 (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 283-284, suggests the presence of chiasmic arrangements of both small and large units across the book of Revelation. For the author’s own suggestions regarding the broader structure of the “Two Witnesses” narrative, see E. Gonzalez, “The Structure of Revelation 10:11–11:18,” *Kerygma* 9, n°2 (2013): 13-26.

¹³ LSJ, “καὶ,” A.2, suggests the meaning “to adalimiting (sic) or defining expression.”

to the nations who are angry at the servants of God and at the work of God on their behalf.

Rev 11,18 therefore refers to the coming of the wrath of God against those who have mistreated and pronounced an unrighteous judgment against His servants. The Divine righteous judgment of the servants of God also implies the consequences for their oppressors, “the destroyers of the earth.” They receive the same verdict that they pronounced against God’s servants, that is, their own destruction.

4. The servants, prophets, and saints of God, and those who fear His name, are thematically central to the narrative of Rev 11. The two witnesses are called “prophets” (προφῆται - v. 10). The number two is repeated several times in the narrative: there are two witnesses, two olive trees, and two lampstands (v. 4). This suggests the need to interpret the number two symbolically in this passage,¹⁴ rather than referring to two discrete persons or entities. The symbolism of the number two particularly points to the concept of “witness.”¹⁵ Therefore, in this narrative the two witnesses appear to symbolize, at some level, the broader number of the servants of God, in contrast to those who oppose the will of God.
5. Now we turn to the “destroyers of the earth.” The notion of the destruction of the earth is evident in the narrative in the fire from the mouth of the two witnesses (v. 5), the power to shut the sky (v. 6), the turning of the waters into blood (v. 6), and the striking of the earth with plagues (v. 6). The allusions in v. 6b are clearly to Moses and the plagues on Egypt; more broadly, fire, drought, and plague were part of a common repertoire of apocalyptic disasters. Others included war, famine, and earthquakes.¹⁶ These events were not only seen as destroying communities, but were also

¹⁴ M. E. Boring, *Revelation*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 146.

¹⁵ See Luke 8,17; March 6,7; Num 35,30; Luke 10,1; Acts 1,10; Heb 6,17-18. See also G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Michigan, 2002), 420.

¹⁶ For lists of these, see 2 Bar 70,6-10; 27,1-15; Apocalypse of Abraham 30,3-5; Jub 23,13; 2 Esdr 9,3; 13,31. These appear in the New Testament in Mark 13,7-8; Luke 21,10-11; Rev 8-12. 15-16. In the Old Testament, see Jer 14,12; 21,7; 38,2; Ezek 5,12; 14,21. See Paul Volz, *Die Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde in neutestamentlichen Zeitalter: Nach den Quellen der rabbinischen, apokalyptischen und apokryphen Literatur* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 152–158.

specifically associated with the end of the world. Although in Rev 11, the means by which the “destroyers of the earth” destroy the earth is not specified, the anger of the nations in rebellion against God and His servants is clearly associated with the destruction of the earth, as per A1 and A2 in the structure above. Although it is God who sends fire, drought, and plagues, both to protect His servants and to punish their persecutors, Rev 11,5 makes it clear that these plagues are conditional on the witnesses being harmed. In other words, the responsibility for these lies with those who would harm God’s servants.

We can therefore observe that the statement of the 24 elders in 11,18 is based on the preceding narrative of the two witnesses. By analyzing and comparing the protagonists in v. 18, we can confirm that they are to be identified with the protagonists in the account of the two witnesses. The structure of v. 18 itself leads us to the conclusion that the destroyers of the earth are the nations in rebellion against God, and that they are responsible for destroying the earth through their opposition to God and to His servants. Although the responsibility lies with the nations, ultimate accountability lies with God, who executes judgment.

This conclusion is confirmed by a consideration of the broader structure of the narrative preceding Revelation 11, for which again, a chiasmic structure is proposed: The “Two Witnesses Chiasm” (Rev 10,11 – Rev 11,18)

A1 Rev 10,11 – The two witnesses commanded to prophesy /peoples, nations, languages, and kings

B1 Rev 11,1 – The judgment of the living

C1 Rev 11,2 – Gentiles reign

D1 Rev 11,3-6 – The two witnesses prophesy

E1 Rev 11,7 – The two witnesses attacked by the beast from abyss

F1 Rev 11,8-10 – The two witnesses humiliated

G Rev 11,11 – The two witnesses revived by God’s Spirit

F2 Rev 11,12 – The two witnesses exalted

E2 Rev 11,13 – Earthquake kills part of the remnant

D2 Rev 11,13 – The remnant give glory to God

C2 Rev 11,15 – Christ reigns

B2 Rev 11,18 – The judgment of the dead

A2 Rev 11,18 – God’s prophets rewarded / “destroyers of the earth” destroyed

In this structure, Rev 11,18 corresponds to Rev 10,11. In this latter verse, there are two groups of characters: firstly the prophet(s), and secondly, the “peoples, nations, languages and kings.” This second group may be equated with “those who dwell on the earth” in Rev 11,10; indeed, v.10 makes clear that the conflict in Rev 11 is between the prophets and “those who dwell on the earth.” In killing the two witnesses, the beast from the bottomless pit is acting in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants of the earth. Because of the similarities between Rev 11,18 and 10,11, we may again assert that the “destroyers of the earth” corresponds to the “peoples, nations, languages and kings” who act against God’s revealed will as given through his prophets.

So far, we have interpreted the statement in 11,18 in the light of its antecedent and of the narrative unit of which it forms a part. Our basis is that the declaration of the 24 elders is part of a sanctuary/heaven scene that summarizes or draws together the lessons from what has gone before. However, these scenes also foreshadow what is to come in the narrative; accordingly, it is also instructive to examine 11,18 in the light of what follows in the book of Revelation.

The Subsequent (General) Context of the Statement in Revelation

Firstly, Rev 11,15 makes it clear that the “destroyers of the earth” are to be understood in the context of the “kingdom of the world” becoming “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,” and of the proclamation of His everlasting reign. This is further described in Rev 17, where the kings of the earth who “hand over their power and authority to the beast” (v. 13) and “make war on the Lamb”¹⁷ are in turn conquered by the Lamb (v. 14). In this and related passages, the kings of the earth and their overthrow are explicitly associated with the beast and his destruction.

The “destroyers of the earth” are also connected with the time “for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name” (11,18). This phrase is somewhat paralleled by Rev 18,24, where it is stated that in Babylon “was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth” (καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ αἷμα προφητῶν καὶ ἁγίων εὗρέθη καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐσφαγμένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). The “saints and

¹⁷ Rev 17,14. We see the same theme in Rev 18,9 and 19,11-20.

prophets” (ἁγίων καὶ προφητῶν) appear also in 16,6; it appears that when the “saints” and the “prophets” are mentioned together in Revelation, it is in the context of martyrdom. This should inform us of the nature of the “destruction” wreaked by God’s enemies in the same verse, as well as the nature of the “reward” which the 24 elders declare that they are to receive in 11,18.

In 19,2, although the words “saints” and “prophets” are not used, the servants of God are mentioned (τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ). This provides a parallel with 11,18, where τοῖς δούλοις σου is used to refer collectively to God’s prophets and saints. In this verse (19,2) we are told that God has “judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” The connection between 19,2 and 11,18 is notably strengthened because the 24 elders, last seen worshipping God in 11,16, are presented as falling on their faces and worshipping God in 19,4 when the declaration of God is made concerning the avenging of the blood of God’s servants on the great prostitute.

In the context of the martyrdom of the two witnesses, the “time for rewarding your servants, the prophets, and saints” should therefore be understood principally as a reference to the martyrs. Indeed, it is the beast and its ally Babylon who are held accountable for the “blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.”¹⁸ It is therefore in response to the pouring out of the seven plagues¹⁹ that the voice of the great multitude in heaven is heard to proclaim, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (Rev 19,1-2).

In the statement of the 24 elders, the “destroyers of the earth” are also connected with the time in which the wrath of God is manifested. Subsequently in the book of Revelation, the notion of the manifestation of the wrath of God is specifically focused on the description of the seven plagues in Rev 15,1.5-16,17; we read that in the seven plagues, “the wrath of God is finished” (ὅτι ἐν αὐταῖς ἐτελέσθη ὁ θυμὸς τοῦ θεοῦ – 15,1). This is to be compared with the declaration in 11,18 that God’s “wrath has

¹⁸ Rev 18,24; see also Rev 13,15.

¹⁹ See Rev 18,8.

come.”²⁰ The seven plagues are specifically associated with the beast²¹ and his followers as the recipients of the plagues. The time of the judgment of the dead should be particularly understood in terms of the description given in Rev 20,

Satan will... come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were... The dead were judged (ἐκρίθησαν οἱ νεκροί) according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them... (vv. 7.10.12)

This passage in Rev 20 should furthermore be paralleled with the description in Rev 19,19-20,

And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet... These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.

Ultimately, the time for rewarding God’s servants is the time of the judgment of the dead that is described in these passages, both in terms of the righteous dead receiving their rewards, as well as in terms of their vindication through the condemnation of the beast and the nations of the earth. In v. 12 the “book of life” is specifically mentioned as being opened. This is significant, because while the lake of fire and the second death are mentioned in vv. 10.14-15, it should not be forgotten that Rev 21,1-27 is devoted to the rewards for God’s servants.

In the text of Revelation after ch.11, it is evident that it is the beast that is at the heart of antagonism against God, precisely as it is the beast from the bottomless pit (Rev 11,7) that is the antagonist of God in the account of the two witnesses. Just as the beast makes war on and slays the two witnesses, so too the beast is the great persecuting power in the subsequent chapters of Revelation. It is the beast, Babylon, and the nations who follow them who are responsible for the destruction of the earth, through their

²⁰ NKJV/NIV. Note ἔρχομαι – present tense.

²¹ Rev 15,2; 16,2.10.13.

opposition to God and their moral corruption of the earth. In God’s economy, He Himself delivers the seven plagues upon the earth, the destruction for which the enemies of God are ultimately responsible.

***Ius Talionis* and the Identification of the Destroyers of the Earth**

The legal principle of *ius talionis* is found across many cultures of the ancient world; it is not merely a Jewish notion.²² However, the idea was also common in Second-Temple Judaism²³ and early Christianity; David Fiensy, for example, has demonstrated that the Jewish notion of *lex talionis* is used to structure the *Apocalypse of Peter*: Each punishment corresponds to each vice, so that “the punishment fits the crime, like repays like.”²⁴ Broer notes four direct mentions of the *talio* in the New Testament;²⁵ however in addition to the instances he provides, it is clear that Revelation also explicitly refers to the *ius talionis*. Certainly Rev 11,18 is an application of this principle, about which Richard Bauckham comments,

[t]his is an example of the eschatological *ius talionis*, a way of speaking of God’s eschatological judgment in which the description of the punishment matches verbally the description of the sin...In this case, the verbal correspondence is achieved by the use of a Greek verb (*diaphtheirō*) which can mean both ‘destroy’, in the sense of causing to perish, and ‘ruin’, in the sense of corrupting with evil.²⁶

In this regard, the chiasmic structure proposed above should be borne in mind. The principle of *ius talionis* applies in terms of Rev 11,18 being the capstone summary statement encapsulating the judicial issues involved in the narrative of the two witnesses. If we see the narrative of the two witnesses as foreshadowing the key themes of Revelation 13-19, then we

²² Ingo Broer, “Das Ius Talionis im Neuen Testament,” *New Testament Studies* , 40 (1994): 1.

²³ Ibid. See *Jubilees* 4,31-32 and *2 Maccabees* 5,9-10. Examples in the NT are found in Mark 8,38; 1 Cor 3,17; and Rev 22,18-19.

²⁴ David Fiensy, “Lex Talionis in the ‘Apocalypse of Peter,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 76, n° 2 (1983): 256.

²⁵ Broer, “Ius Talionis,” 2, referring to Rom 12,17; 1 Thess 5,15; 1 Peter 3,9; and Matt 5,38-42.

²⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NITT (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52. Bauckham also noted a similar use of the word φθείρω in the context of *ius talionis* in 1 Cor 3,17: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (εἴ τις τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φθείρει φθερεῖ τούτον ὁ θεός.)

Revelation 11	Revelation 16
Condition Unfulfilled – “if anyone would harm them...” (v. 5)	Condition Fulfilled – “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets” (v. 6)
“fire (πῦρ) pours from their mouth and consumes their foes” (v. 5)	The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire (πῦρ). They were scorched by the fierce heat (v. 8–9)
“They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall...” (v. 6)	The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up... (v. 12)
“they have power over the waters (ὕδωρ) to turn them into blood (αἷμα)” (v. 6)	The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood (αἷμα) of a corpse... The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water (τὰς πηγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων), and they became blood (αἷμα). (vv. 3–4)

These plagues specifically and respectively demonstrate the power of God over fire, water, and blood. This is no coincidence, since these three elements are central to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and to the concept of cleansing throughout the canonical Scriptures.²⁷ In this sense, Rev 11 should be understood as providing an anticipatory foretaste of what is to come.

The narrative of the two witnesses culminates in the declaration of 11,18. As a key statement that anticipates the outpouring of the judgments of God, if we are to properly identify the destroyers of the earth we must take note both upon whom the wrath of God is poured out, and the reason for these judgments. The “wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture” (14,8) is drunk by Babylon and those “who worship the beast and his image” (14,9). These correspond to the beast and to the nations that follow it in Rev 11. The reasons they must receive these plagues are described in Rev 14 as being spiritual fornication (πορνεία – v. 8) and false worship (προσκυνέω – v. 9), which have

²⁷ See Mal 3,2; Num 19,13-19; 31,22-24; Matt 3,11; Ex 30,17-21; Ezek 36,25; Eph 5,25-26; and Heb 9,22. In addition to the three plagues specifically mentioned in Rev 11, other plagues are also poured out by the first, fifth, and seventh angels.

resulted in their persecution and killing of the saints and the prophets (19,6).

Bauckham picks up this notion of πορνεία by noting that in Rev 19,2, it is Babylon, “the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality (ἐφθείρεν τὴν γῆν ἐν τῇ πορνείᾳ αὐτῆς).” The word translated here as “corrupted” is the same root word used for “destroyers” in 11,18. For that reason, Bauckham also rightly remarks that the “destroyers of the earth are the powers of evil: the dragon, the beast, and the harlot of Babylon.”²⁸ It is to be noted that in Rev 19,2, the accountability for the execution of this judgment is clearly attributed to the great prostitute. However, God Himself takes responsibility for executing the judgment.

The Nature of the Destruction of the Earth

Richard Bauckham highlights an allusion to the Genesis Flood story in Rev 11,18:

[T]he extent to which the Creator’s faithfulness to his creation is the theme of Revelation can be appreciated if we notice a significant allusion to the Genesis Flood story in Revelation 11:18...the phrase – ‘for destroying the destroyers of the earth’ – also alludes to the equivalent wordplay in Genesis 6:11-13,17, where the Hebrew verb... [תהו]...has the same double meaning.²⁹

If this allusion is correct, in what sense is the earth said to be “corrupt” in Gen 6? It has been corrupted by the “wickedness” and “evil” of humanity (Gen 6,5). The word used for “corrupt” in the LXX of Gen 6,11 is φθείρω, the same root word that is used for “destroy” in Rev 11,18. Gen 6,11 states that “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence,” and this is rendered in the LXX as ἐφθάρη δὲ ἡ γῆ ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπλήσθη ἡ γῆ ἀδικίας. The Hebrew wordplay in Gen 6,11-13 is therefore preserved in the LXX, which in turn also strongly emphasizes the semantic connection with Rev 11,18. This should help us to understand the meaning of 11,18 as it would have been understood by its first recipients.

²⁸ Bauckham, *Theology*, 52. Similarly, Joseph L. Trafton, *Reading Revelation: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, RNTS (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 113, observes that, the “‘destroyers of the earth’ are to be equated with Babylon”.

²⁹ Bauckham, *Theology*, 52.

In both Gen 6,11 and Rev 11,18 we have the corruption of the earth expressed with the same words, together with the concept of violence. In Gen 6 the word is being used in two senses: firstly in humanity’s corruption of the earth (6,11), and secondly in God’s destruction of the earth (καταφθείρω – v. 13). We might say that God destroys the earth because humanity has already destroyed it with its wickedness.

The same wordplay between the two meanings of φθείρω, to “corrupt” and to “destroy,” may be understood in Rev 11,18. God destroys the destroyers of the earth because they have destroyed the earth through their evil, wickedness, and violence. Within this context it is again reasonable to make a distinction in Rev 11,18 between the accountability for the destruction, which is borne by the “nations,” and the judicial execution of justice, a responsibility that is assumed by God.

If there is a reasonable connection between Gen 6,11-13 and Rev 11,18, then this should help us to understand the nature of the destruction wreaked by the “destroyers of the earth.” If the parallel holds with Gen 6,11-13, then the “destroyers of the earth” must be said to have destroyed the earth through their evil and wickedness. It is not principally a literal and physical destruction, rather it is principally a moral destruction.³⁰ To be even more specific, Rev 11,18, when understood in its context, says the “destroyers” have destroyed the earth through their “violence” against the servants of God, the prophets and the saints.

However Stefanovic remarks on a stronger and perhaps more pertinent allusion in Rev 11,18, to Jer 51,25, where God declares, “Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the LORD, which destroys the whole earth”³¹ (διαφθείρον πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν - LXX); Rev 11,18 parallels key aspects of this passage.

In Jeremiah, God makes His declaration specifically in the context of the fall of Babylon (v. 8): God will “stir up the spirit of a destroyer” against Babylon (v. 1). God here attributes the responsibility for the destruction, or the “fall” of Babylon, to her own sins (v. 47,52-53) and crimes. In particular God declares that “Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, just as for Babylon have fallen the slain of all the earth” (Jer 51,49). In other

³⁰ Contra Bredin, who in *Ecology*, 172, seems to refer to the plagues as a naturalistic (cause and effect) result of humanity’s actions against creation.

³¹ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 359.

words, the destruction of Babylon is specifically because of her destruction of the people of God, and more broadly because she is held responsible for “the slain of all the earth.” For these reasons, “destroyers” will come from the LORD against Babylon, to execute judgment against her,³² and the LORD will lay Babylon waste (v. 54) because the “LORD is a God of recompense” and “he will surely repay” (v. 56).

It is apparent that there are clear parallels between this passage and the themes of Revelation concerning the enemies of God³³ and their judicial destruction by God. Specifically, in the LXX, the word used for “destroying” is the same root word as in Rev 11,18 and Rev 19,2.³⁴ Stefanovic notes the connections between Rev 11,18 and what follows in the book of Revelation, writing that “[t]he destruction of the destroyers of the earth in Revelation 11,18 is a clear reference to the end-time Babylon described in Revelation 19,2 as corrupting (or destroying [φθειρω]) the earth with immorality, which is a further reference to Revelation 17,1-6.” As we have noted, the reference in 11,18 to the destruction by God is best understood in the context of the seven plagues; therefore, the recipients of the plagues must be identified with the “destroyers of the earth,” that is, the beast and its false system, including Babylon, the kings of the earth, and all those who worship the beast.

In the narrative of Revelation 11, the inhabitants of the earth rejoice and celebrate the action of the beast against the two witnesses (v.10). We must observe that there are notable parallels between the persecuting function of the beast in Rev 11 and the beasts of Rev 13. Indeed, there are significant “inverted” parallels, so that the beast that arises out of the earth may be seen as the evil mirror of the two witnesses, both in the mention of the fire (cf. Rev 11,5), and in the revival of the first beast (cf. Rev 11,11).

The key concept here is that in Revelation 11, although God is the “Lord of the earth” (Rev 11,4), the earth has become so corrupted under the leadership of the beast that its inhabitants are arrayed against God and His witnesses. This is indeed also the idea in Rev 13, so that the beast that arises out of the earth “makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the

³² Jer 51,52; cf. v.56.

³³ Notably Jer 51,8 cf. Rev 14,8; 18,2, among many other parallels. There are also a remarkable series of inverted parallels between the beast from the bottomless pit of Rev 11,7 and the beast that comes out of the earth in Rev 13,11-18.

³⁴ Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 359.

first beast” (v. 12) and “deceives those who dwell on earth” (v. 14), imposing its mark upon all (v. 16). This is followed in ch.15 by a warning against the beast and the reception of his mark (Rev 14,9), and a call to worship the true God (Rev 14,6-7). The consequence of the earth’s failure to respond to these warnings is found in Rev 15-16 with the pouring out of the seven plagues.

Conclusions

The phrase “destroying the destroyers of the earth” must be understood in the context of the narrative with which it is connected, in relation to the “wrath of God” and in terms of the broader structure of Revelation 11-20. When this is done, it is evident that it is exegetically inappropriate to use Rev 11,18 to urge environmental responsibility. A correct understanding of this text in its context reveals it to be referring to the moral destruction of the world generally, and to the persecution and martyrdom of God’s messengers specifically. God’s response will be to pour out the seven plagues, according to the principle of *Ius Talionis*. While environmental irresponsibility may be understood as being subsumed by the issues of morality and rebellion against God in a theological sense, it is not the primary concern of this text.

In spite of this, Rev 11,18 continues to be an ever-ready and popular weapon with which to combat those who are perceived to be destroying the natural environment. We may certainly affirm that, “God is passionately concerned for what he has created and works to affirm his creation against those who destroy it.”³⁵ However, the way in which Rev 11,18 has been popularly used in the past has been misleading. There are many other ways in which we may appropriately affirm from Scripture our responsibility to care for creation, and we should avoid using Rev 11,18 as a principal proof-text for this purpose.

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³⁵ Bredin, *Ecology*, 168.