



2. Signs and wonders in the Apocalyptic framework

Señales y prodigios en el marco apocalíptico

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Abstract

Contemporary Christianity is fascinated with claimed supernatural manifestations. The Bible speaks about signs and wonders. How does the biblical evidence inform the contemporary fascination? The appearance of signs and wonders in the Bible centers around three pivotal periods, the exodus, the time of Jesus and the apostles, and the eschaton. While in the first they are the result of divine intervention, in the eschaton they are associated with the activities of antigod powers. Similarly, Revelation speaks of end time signs that will be performed by the false prophet. The purpose of such is to deceive if possible God's people. This sobering picture calls for spiritual vigilance towards any claims of supernatural manifestations.

Keywords

Signs and wonders — Miracles — Eschaton — Revelation

Resumen

El cristianismo contemporáneo está fascinado por las supuestas manifestaciones sobrenaturales. La Biblia habla de señales y prodigios. ¿De qué manera la evidencia bíblica influye en la fascinación contemporánea? La aparición de señales y prodigios en la Biblia se centra en tres periodos fundamentales: el éxodo, la época de Jesús y los apóstoles, y el eschaton. Mientras que en el primero son el resultado de la intervención divina, en el eschaton se asocian a las actividades de poderes antidioses. Del mismo modo, el Apocalipsis habla de señales del fin de los tiempos que serán realizadas por el falso profeta. Su propósito es engañar, si es posible, al pueblo de Dios. Este cuadro aleccionador exige vigilancia espiritual ante cualquier pretensión de manifestaciones sobrenaturales.

Palabras claves

Señales y prodigios — Milagros — Eschaton — Apocalipsis



A key characteristic of contemporary Christianity is a fascination with powerful demonstrations of the supernatural. Claims of miracles in the form of healings abound. But expectations go far beyond these. A key term to describe such expectations is the phrase “signs and wonders”. While any supernatural manifestation can be regarded as a miracle, the expression signs and wonders usually anticipates something grander. The *Holman Bible dictionary* defines signs and wonders as “events which unmistakably involve an immediate and powerful action of God designed to reveal His character or purposes”.¹ This definition is not accurate, because we will see that signs and wonders are performed not only by God. But it is accurate in highlighting the supernatural, immediate, and powerful actions entailed.

The contemporary fascination with supernatural manifestations is evident in bibliography. A simple search on Amazon reveals more than thirty books published in the last few decades that contain the words “signs and wonders” or related terms, either in the title or in subtitle.² Such fascination has no doubt been fueled by the rapid growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements but is not limited to them. Mainstream Protestants have also been affected,³ as have the Orthodox⁴ and Catholic faithfuls⁵ who have long believed in miracles performed by saints.

Considering such an outlook, this study will explore signs and wonders signs and wonders in biblical writings with an emphasis in the

¹ *Holman Bible dictionary*, s. v. “miracles, signs, wonders”, accessed on July 20, 2021, <https://www.studydrive.org/dictionaries/eng/hbd/m/miracles-signs-wonders.html>.

² Amazon, “Signs and wonders”, accessed on November 22, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/s?k=%22signs+and+wonders%22&crd=2HDHQQFUE0EG5D&qid=1732262043&sprefix=signs+and+wonders+%2Caps%2C425&ref=sr_pg_1.

³ E.g., John A. Algera, *Signs and wonders: A reformed look at the Spirit's ongoing work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2015); John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009), especially pages 205-260.

⁴ E.g., Μαρία Σκλειδα, “Άγιοι θεραπευτές των ψυχών και των σωμάτων. Θαυμαστές δυνάμεις, σημεία, τέρατα και θαυμάσια”, accessed on November 22, 2024, <https://www.pemptousia.gr/2020/04/agii-therapeftes-ton-psichon-ke-ton-somaton-thavmastes-dinamis-simia-terata-ke-thavmasia>.

⁵ E.g., Joseph Pronechen, *The fruits of Fatima: A century of signs and wonders* (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 2019).

apocalyptic timeframe. It will be divided in two parts. In the first part, the expression “signs and wonders” will be explored.

The study is descriptive and introductory. It will broach the topic and describe an outlook in the hope that it will elicit further and more detailed research.

Signs and wonders in the biblical text: An introduction

“Signs and wonders” appear together thirty-four times in the biblical text.⁶ They can be neatly divided into three categories:

1. In Israel’s history, especially the exodus
2. In the ministry of Jesus and the apostles
3. In the eschaton

We will look at representative texts from each, with more emphasis on the third category.

Texts relating to Israel’s history

Most Old Testament “signs and wonders” texts refer to God’s miraculous intervention in history. The key event with which “signs and wonders” are associated is the exodus from Egypt. A few examples will suffice:

1. “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt Pharaoh will not listen to you” (Exod 7,3-4).
2. “And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes” (Deut 6,22).

⁶ English Standard Version (ESV) throughout unless otherwise noted. Exod 7,3; Deut 4,34; 6,22; 7,19; 13,1,2; 26,8; 28,46; 29,3; 34,11; Neh 9,10; Ps 135,9; Jer 32,20.21; Dan 4,2,3; 6,27; Matt 24,24; Mark 13,22; John 4,48; Acts 2,19.22.43; 4,30; 5,12; 6,8; 7,3; 14,3; 15,12; Rom 15,19; 2 Cor 12,12; 2 Thess 2,9; Heb 2,4. Numbers vary slightly depending on the translation used, but this does not change the overall picture.

3. “And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land” (Neh 9,9-10).

One of the New Testament references also looks back to the exodus: “This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years” (Acts 7,36).

Three times “signs and wonders” appear in Daniel, twice on the lips of Nebuchadnezzar (4,2.3), and once on the lips of Darius (6,27). In the case of Nebuchadnezzar the “signs and wonders” appear in the context of his account of his pride, downfall, and restoration. The “signs and wonders” probably include the dream of the mighty tree that was cut, as well as his restoration to the kingdom after seven years of insanity. Most likely, however, they also include previous divine interventions in his life, namely the dream of the statue in Daniel 2 and the incident of the golden image, the three faithful young men, and the fiery furnace. In Daniel 6,27, in a letter to his subjects, Darius praises God after Daniel’s divine deliverance in the lion’s den.

Though in the Old Testament “signs and wonders” are performed by God, the possibility of “signs and wonders” of a non-divine origin is raised though not developed. Deuteronomy 13,1-3 contains the following strong warning:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

“Signs and wonders” therefore could be used by false prophets to lead Israel to the worship of other gods.⁷

⁷ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, WBC, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 271, the sign or wonder in question “should be viewed with scepticism”.

*Texts relating to the ministry of Jesus
and the apostles*

The main use of “signs and wonders” in the New Testament is connected to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. When an official invites Jesus to heal his ailing son Jesus replies to him: “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (John 4,48). Jesus here appears to castigate a dependence on “signs and wonders” (*cf.* Matt 12,39; 16,4).⁸

In Acts 2,22 in his Pentecost sermon Peter describes Jesus in the following words: “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know”.⁹ “Signs and wonders” here refer to the miracles Jesus did publicly, healings, feeding the five thousand, casting out demons, raising the dead.

More frequently, “signs and wonders” refer to miracles done through the apostles. For example, shortly after Peter mentions the “signs and wonders” performed by Jesus, we read: “And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (Acts 2,43). Similarly: “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles” (Acts 5,12).

Such miraculous “signs and wonders” are not the work of the apostles, but of Christ working through them:

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4,29-30).

⁸ Jesus “desired a belief characterized by dedication rather than amazement, and the second half of the episode shows that his aim was to inculcate a genuine commitment rather than merely to perform a cure”. Merrill C. Tenney, “John”, *The expositor’s Bible commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976-1992), 9:60.

⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts*, ed. by Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 28.

Eschatological texts

More important for the focus of this study are the three “signs and wonders” texts that appear in an eschatological context. Their number is small but their significance great.

Then if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Christ!” or “There he is!” do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand (Matt 24,23-25).¹⁰

And then if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Christ!” or “Look, there he is!” do not believe it. False christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand (Mark 13,21-23).

Matthew follows Mark almost *verbatim* (or vice versa depending on one’s view on Synoptic relations). They both are an echo of the warning of Deuteronomy 13,1-3 whereby “signs and wonders” could be used to lead believers astray.¹¹ While the Deuteronomy warning appears as a hypothetical scenario, the warning of Jesus is clothed in the language of prophecy and certainty. And while the warning of Deuteronomy is against the worship of other gods, the warning of Jesus is about leading believers astray—πλανάω.

The third eschatological “signs and wonders” texts comes from Paul’s brief apocalypse in 2 Thessalonians 2,1-12. In verses 8-10 we read:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (2 Thess 2,8-10).¹²

¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew”, in *The expositor’s Bible commentary*, 503, notes that believers must not be deceived by “spectacular signs and miracles”.

¹¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 781, notes that while false messiahs and false prophets would characterize “the entire age until the Parousia”, just before the coming of Jesus “there will be an unprecedented rise of miracle-working false messiahs and prophets”.

¹² David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 129, notes that signs and wonders together with “power” (δύναμις) also appear in Acts 2,22 of the work of Jesus.

Here the “signs and wonders” are false. This could mean either of two things. First, it might be that there is an appearance of “signs and wonders” but there is no actual supernatural manifestation, just an appearance of it. They are counterfeit.¹³ Perhaps this harkens back to Pharaoh’s time when Egypt’s magicians tried to replicate some of the miracles done through Aaron and Moses, and appeared to succeed initially, but lacked the power of the divine “signs and wonders”. Nonetheless, there will be power in these manifestations and an aim and ability to deceive. Second, it might be that the false “signs and wonders” do indeed involve supernatural manifestation, but their purpose is to deceive, and therefore they are termed “false.”

*Observations on the “signs
and wonders” texts*

There are several important points that can be drawn from this perusal of “signs and wonders” texts. First, they can refer to different supernatural manifestations. In the “signs and wonders” texts referring to the exodus, “signs and wonders” refer primarily to divine intervention in nature: blood, darkness, insects and animals, the opening of the Red Sea, a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. By contrast, in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, “signs and wonders” refer primarily to healing miracles and the casting out of demons.

Second, with few exceptions, the “signs and wonders” texts refer to one of three brief timeframes in the history of humanity: the exodus, the time of Jesus and the apostles, the eschaton. All three are pivotal in salvation history. The exodus formally launches Israel as the people chosen to convey the message of God to the world and provide a descent for the coming of the Messiah; the time of Jesus and the apostles marks the moment when the plan of salvation reaches a climax on the cross, and the Christian church that is to carry the good news to all the earth is established; the eschaton marks the time just before the consummation

The implication is probably that we see here is an expectation of a power that wants to impersonate or replicate the works of Jesus.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 129.

of human history as we know it. It seems then that pivotal points in salvation history are marked by strong supernatural manifestations.

Third, in the first two timeframes, “signs and wonders” are the sole prerogative of God. When Pharaoh’s magicians try to replicate some of the miracles of Moses, they are defeated. They are also utterly powerless to stop the acts of God that bring devastation in Egypt and deliverance to God’s people. Similarly, the working of miracles by Jesus and the apostles is unmatched by anything anyone else can master. Thus, both the sons of Sceva and the woman with a python spirit who try to emulate or stop the apostles are defeated. Immediately after the incident with the sons of Sceva, those who practiced magic arts in Ephesus burn their books, their value being a staggering 50,000 pieces of silver (Acts 19,17-20). While Deuteronomy 13,1-3 allows the possibility of “signs and wonders” by false prophets, it remains only a possibility for most of history, only to be realized at the eschaton.

Fourth, this picture is completely reversed at the eschaton. In the three relevant texts it is the false christs and false prophets who perform “signs and wonders”, in fulfilment perhaps of the warning of Deuteronomy 13,1-3. Indeed, as far as the biblical evidence goes, only the false christs and prophets perform “signs and wonders”. The “signs and wonders” of the false messiahs and prophets can involve direct supernatural manifestation (Matt 24,23-25; Mark 13:21-23), or possible the appearance of it (2 Thess 2,1-12).

That is not to say that God removes Himself from the miracle business. The Bible does speak of the latter rain that will be given to prepare God’s people for the Second Coming. It also speaks of the gifts given to the early church. Though operating at different intensity through the ages, depending on the needs of God’s people, they will be operative throughout history including the eschaton. However, it seems that “signs and wonders” are *not* one of the identifying marks of God’s end-time people.

Fifth, the false “signs and wonders” aim to deceive and lead astray, to lawlessness. The false christs and prophets endeavor to convince that they are the real thing. The fact that the deception will almost deceive even

the elect indicates that the imitation will be hard to distinguish from the original. The lawless one will similarly manifest powerful “signs and wonders”, but he will deceive only those who have “refused to love the truth” (2 Thess 2,10). Both the synoptics and Paul then agree that despite deceptive appearances, the elect will not be deceived.

Sixth, we can draw some implications on the nature of the “signs and wonders”. The mention of false christs indicates an attempt to imitate Christ, which in turn suggests “signs and wonders” like the ones Jesus performed: healings, casting out of demons, feeding the needy.

The mention of false prophets is harder to pinpoint. Is it a reference to fake apostles? Possible, even though the apostles were called apostles rather than prophets. More likely, it could be a reference to the prophets of the Old Testament through whom “signs and wonders” were performed, mainly Moses. If so, and since the “signs and wonders” associated with the ministry of Moses and the exodus involved nature, perhaps the false prophets will perform them in nature. It seems then that what God has forbidden Satan to perform in the past, He allows him to do at the eschaton.

Signs in Revelation

Neither the expression “signs and wonders” nor the word “wonder(s)” appear in Revelation. Nonetheless, Revelation takes an interest in signs, and they play a prominent role. A discussion of signs in Revelation is included in this study, because it corroborates the outlook gained about through the “signs and wonders” texts. The word appears three times in the singular and four in the plural. They will be discussed in this manner because the plural uses entail a different outlook from the singular uses.

“Sign” in the singular

Of the three singular uses the first two have no direct bearing on the study. They do not describe supernatural manifestations but

unexpected sights—a woman clothed in white with the moon under her feet (Rev 12,1), and a red dragon, symbol of Satan (Rev 12,3).¹⁴

The third is the sight of seven angels (Rev 15,1) who are about to pour out the seven last plagues on earth, which represent the completion of “the wrath of God”. There are linguistic/thematic parallels between the seven last plagues and the ten plagues of Egypt.¹⁵

We noted earlier that the exodus, inclusive of the plagues, is the event most alluded to by the expression “signs and wonders”. As such, John might want to point to the seven last plagues as an example of “signs and wonders”, a reflection of what happened in Egypt. However, while the parallel between the two sets of plagues is likely, John avoids the expression “signs and wonders”. He does use *σημείον* in the singular, “sign,” but the “sign” in question is the appearance of the angels who carry the bowls with the plagues, rather than the plagues themselves. If the word *σημείον* is in any way reflective of the exodus “signs and wonders”, the reflection is faint.

¹⁴ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 679, suggests that the three singular uses are interconnected because 12,3 and 15,1 are introduced with the words “another sign”. This is correct as far as the flow of the prophetic timeframe is concerned; however, the first two singulars do not involve a direct miraculous divine intervention – indeed in 12,3 the great sign is a red dragon, a symbol of Satan (12,9). Leon Morris, in *Revelation: An introduction and commentary*, TNT vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1987), 152, notes that though in John *semeion* is used in the gospel of John of Jesus’ miracles, “here [12,1] it seems to refer to a significant person rather than a significant happening” and compares with the use 12,3 and 15,1).

¹⁵ In Exodus 7,14-25 (plague 1) the Nile turns to blood and this causes thirst; in Revelation 16,4-9 (plagues 2 and 3) the ocean and rivers turn to blood which causes thirst. In Exodus 8,1-15 (plague 2) frogs appear; in Revelation 16,12-16 unclean spirits resembling frogs deceive the kings of the earth. In Exod 8,16-19 (plague 3) gnats appear leading Pharaoh’s magicians to acknowledge that God is at work; in Revelation 16,9.11.21 the wicked acknowledge that God is at work. In Exodus 9,8-12 boils appear (plague 6); in Revelation 16,2 the wicked receive painful sores. In Exodus 9,23-25 hail and fire descend upon Egypt (plague 7); in Revelation 16,17-21 great hail falls on the earth (plague 7). In Exodus 10,21-29 a heavy darkness fell upon Egypt (plague 9); in Revelation 16,10-11 a great darkness that causes pain falls on the wicked (plague 5).

Cf. Jack Hillard, *Understanding Revelation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 139: “... in some respects the seven last plagues were similar to the ten plagues God brought on Egypt (Exodus 5:1-12:30)”. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 869-70, sees a connection to the “plagues” of the seven seals and seven trumpets prophecies though admits that the word “plague” is not used in either.

"Signs" in the plural

More relevant for our purposes is the plural *σημεῖα* used four times in Revelation. Aune points out that in all four plural instances Revelation uses the expression *ποιεῖν σημεῖα*, "performs signs", "which is a favorite expression in the fourth Gospel, occurring thirteen times (John 2,23; 3,2; 4,54; 6,2.14.30; 7,31; 9,16; 10,41; 11,47; 12,18.37; 20,30)".¹⁶ If we assume the same author for both works, then this would be an intentional construction to suggest that the antigod powers involved in these end-time signs endeavor to imitate the works of Jesus. Morris adds that in all four instances it "denotes miracles worked by evil powers".¹⁷

The first two plural "signs" (Rev 13,13.14) describe the signs the land beast performs in front of the people of the earth. There is a gamut of signs involved as evidenced by the use of the plural *σημεῖα*. Two are mentioned, the land beast giving "breath" to the image of the sea beast;¹⁸ and the land beast bringing fire down from heaven, a sign elsewhere performed by God.¹⁹ Stefanovic draws a parallel between the heavenly Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the satanic or counterfeit trinity, dragon, sea beast, land beast respectively.²⁰ He draws a parallel between the tongues of fire

¹⁶ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 758-59.

¹⁷ Morris, *Revelation*, 166.

¹⁸ Ian Paul, *Revelation: An introduction and commentary*, TNTC 20 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 237, explains that talking images with the following words: "... the development of automata and the use of ventriloquism in the ancient world as part of pagan religion and in particular as part of the imperial cult". Obviously, much more is at stake in this end-time image, that go beyond mere deceptive tricks.

¹⁹ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 759, points to the ministry of Elijah, namely the fire that came down from heaven (1 Kgs 18,38) and the fire that consumed the soldiers who came to arrest him (2 Kgs 1,10) which he compares with the request of James and John for fire to come down on the Samaritans (Luke 9,54). Other instances can also be invoked (e.g., Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 760), especially the fire that consumed David's sacrifice (1 Chr 21,26), the sacrifices at the inauguration of the temple (2 Chr 8,1), and the fires that devoured Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10,1-2), and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19,24). Perhaps even the first that fell upon Egypt together with hailstone (Exod 9,23). In Job 1,16 the fire that destroyed Job's sheep is described as "the fire of God" though reading the statement in the context of the two heavenly councils (Job 1,6-12; Job 2,1-7) it seems that Satan is the active agent in the catastrophes that fall upon Job.

²⁰ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 369-371.

that came down on Pentecost (Acts 2,3) and the land beast that brings down fire from heaven (Rev 13,13),²¹ a counterfeit Pentecost.

While it is the land beast that performs the signs, it does so through power given to it, ἃ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ, possibly by the dragon,²² or by God, in which case the ἃ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ would be a divine passive and should be translated, “he was permitted”.²³ The aim of the signs is to impress and coerce those who dwell on the earth to worship the image of the sea beast. It manages to deceive the earth dwellers, usually a reference to the unsaved. By contrast, those who receive the seal of God, are protected from the deceptions of the land beast (Rev 14,9-11).

The third occurrence (Rev 16,14) appears after the plagues have begun to fall and shortly before the second coming. Demonic spirits, unclean like frogs,²⁴ proceed to perform signs. The mission of the spirits is to assemble the kings of the earth for battle in preparation for the day of God.

The fourth and final occurrence, on the day of God, the false prophet is arrested to be thrown into the lake of fire. He is the one who performed signs and led to world to worship the image of the sea beast. As such, he is identified with the land beast of Revelation 13.²⁵

Observation on the “signs” texts of Revelation and conclusion

John’s “signs” parallel closely the apocalyptic “signs and wonders” texts of the synoptic and Pauline apocalypses. They all envision a great

²¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

²² See e.g., Morris, *Revelation*, 166.

²³ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 760.

²⁴ ESV/KJV/NKJ/YLT, “three unclean spirits like frogs;” RSV/NRS “three foul spirits like frogs;” NIV, “three evil spirits that looked like frogs”. The English translations, even the YLT, miss the force of the original. The Greek πνεύματα τρία ἀκάθαρτα ὡς βάραχοι should more accurately be translated as “three spirits unclean like frogs”. The Greek can mean either that the unclean spirits look like frogs (if we assume a comma after “unclean”), or that they are as unclean as frogs are (if we assume a comma before “unclean”). The second nuance is more likely since unclean spirits do not appear in the Bible in the shape of animals, but they are compared to unclean animals (e.g., Rev 18,2) in their uncleanliness. It is possible that both nuances are in view.

²⁵ Morris, *Revelation*, 236; Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 371; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 760.

movement of eschatological deception. In the two synoptic apocalypses, it is false christs and false prophets who lead out; in Paul it is the man of lawlessness; in Revelation it is the land beast/false prophet.

They all agree that “signs and wonders” aim to deceive. But it is only the unsaved that are deceived, the earth dwellers in Revelation, those who did not love the truth, in Paul, all but the elect in the synoptic apocalypses.

The picture is sobering. The language is intense—false christs, false prophets, man of lawlessness, land beast. The deception unprecedented—for the first time Satan is allowed to replicate supernatural manifestations that throughout history were the prerogative of God. The stakes are highest—salvation or damnation.

As Carson put it, “empty-headed credulity is as great an enemy of true faith as chronic skepticism. Christian faith involves the sober responsibility of neither believing lies nor trusting imposters”.²⁶

²⁶ Carson, “Matthew”, in *The expositor’s Bible commentary*, 503.