

The Sealing of Humans in Revelation 7:2-3 and 9:4

By Ekkehardt Mueller

In Revelation 7:2–5, 8 and Revelation 9:4 the divine sealing of humans is mentioned. The first passage belongs to the section on the seven seals; the second belongs to the trumpets. Are these two passages talking about the same event or do they refer to different processes of sealing? This question is quite important for the direct interpretation of the verse. The way it is answered may also influence one's decision whether to opt for recapitulation of the seals by the trumpets or to choose progression. Depending on our decision, the outcome in terms of understanding historical events and end-time events could be quite different.

Sealing in Scripture and in Revelation

The term “seal” (*sphragis*) in Scripture describes literal seals (e.g., Exod 35:22; 1 Kgs 20:8 LXX) and metaphorical seals (e.g., humans, Songs 8:6; Hagg 2:23; 1 Cor 9:2; the seal of righteousness, Rom 4:11; God's firm foundation, 2 Tim 2:9). In Revelation, seven seals are mentioned with which the scroll in God's hand is sealed.¹ Twice humans receive a seal (Rev 7:2; 9:4).

The verb “to seal” (*sphragizō*) is used for the sealing of objects (e.g., Est 8:8; Job 24:16; Isa 29:11; Jer 39:10; Dan 12:4; Matt 27:66), words (Dan 12:9; Rev 22:10), transgressions (Job 14:17), thunders (Rev 10:4); the abyss (Rev 20:3), but also humans (e.g., Songs 4:12; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30), including Jesus (John 6:27). In Revelation, the servants of God are sealed (Rev 7:3), the 144,000 (Rev 7:4–5, 8).

So in Revelation humans come in two groups: (1) the 144,000 as God's servants in Revelation 7:2–8 who are sealed under the sixth seal, while others are not sealed, and (2) those in Revelation 9:4 who have not received the seal of God and consequently are tortured by the symbolic locusts under the fifth trumpet.

In our opinion, the opening of the first seal describes events beginning in the first century AD.² The subsequent seals run through human history, reaching Christ's second coming and at least the Millennium after the Parousia—perhaps even the New Earth.³ The trumpets begin at the same time as the seals and reach to the time of the final establishment of God's kingdom. The seven seals and the seven trumpets are roughly parallel. The sealing in Revelation 7 is a sealing in connection with the time immediately preceding the Parousia. But this may be different, with the sealed and unsealed humans in the fifth trumpet, which precedes the last events of human history. Thus, we are back to the question of whether the sealing in Revelation 7:2–5, 8 and the one in Revelation 9:4 are identical.

Similarities Between the Sealing in Revelation 7:3 and the Seal in Revelation 9:4

A number of striking similarities can be found in the two texts. These similarities comprise the following:

- *Harm*. Both texts use the same verb “to harm” (*adikeō*), although in different verbal forms:
legōn: mē adikēsēte (“saying: do not harm,” Rev 7:3)
kai errethē autais hina mē adikēsousin (“they were told not to harm,” Rev 9:4)
- *Three elements of nature*. Both texts mention “earth” and “trees,” although in Revelation 9:4 “earth” comes only in the phrase “the grass of the earth.” So in one case the earth is affected, while in the other case the grass (of the earth) is mentioned.
mē adikēsēte tēn gēn mēte tēn thalassan mēte *ta dendra* (“do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees,” Rev 7:3)
ton horton tēn gēn oude pan chlōron oude pan dendron (“the grass of the earth nor any green thing nor any tree,” Rev 9:4)
- *Vocabulary related to sealing*. Both texts mention a process of sealing or the non-possession of a divine seal.
- *Foreheads*. In both cases, the seal is related to the foreheads. Both instances allude to Ezekiel 9:2-4.

Based on these similarities and a non-historicist approach to Revelation by the vast majority of Revelation scholars, the sealing and the non-sealing of Revelation 7 and 9 are more or less directly associated with each other.⁴

Dissimilarities

A careful study of biblical texts that share similarities does not only look for what these texts or passages have in common but also what distinguishes them from each other. Therefore, one has to ask: what are the differences between Revelation 7:3 and 9:4? There are a number of marked differences in spite of close similarities. These differences include the following:

- *Divine action versus demonic action.* In Revelation 7:2 four angels are commanded to refrain temporarily from doing harm to elements of nature, while in Revelation 9:4 the locusts are commanded not to do harm to certain elements of nature.
- *The scope.* These elements of nature are somewhat different. In Revelation 7:3 one finds the earth, sea, and trees, while Revelation 9:4 refers to the grass of the earth, anything green, and any tree. These descriptions may indicate that Revelation 7:3 is dealing with a larger or universal issue. It deals with creation in general and not only with vegetation.
- *Harmed objects versus harmed persons.* In Revelation 7:3 those who will be harmed are these symbolic elements of nature, while in Revelation 9:4 it is those humans who do not have the seal of God.
- *Sealing in the future versus non-sealing in the past.* In Revelation 7:3 the servants of God still need to be sealed, while in Revelation 9:4 the humans affected are those who do not have the seal of God. Obviously, they have not received the seal in the past and therefore do not have it, while it is assumed that there are other persons who have already been sealed in the past.
- *The focus.* The group that is to be sealed in Revelation 7:3 is positive. It is the “servants of our God.” The group in Revelation 9:4 is negative. These are “human beings” who do not have the seal of God. Thus, the focus is different: the sealed versus the non-sealed.
- *The vocabulary.* In Revelation 7:3 the verb “to seal” is used in connection with the “servants of our God.” In the previous verse the noun “seal” appears. The angel ascending from the east has this seal, and it is obviously this angel who is involved in the sealing process of true believers. In Revelation 9:4 only the noun “seal” is employed in connection with humans (*anthrōpos*). No angel is reported to be involved in any kind of sealing process.
- *The context.* The trumpets are directed against the earth dwellers (Rev 8:13) throughout the Christian era, while the seals seem to deal more directly with the people of God. Therefore, the emphasis is different as the following points will indicate. The earth dwellers appearing in the fifth trumpet do not have the seal of God as contrasted with true believers. However, since earth dwellers in the book of Revelation are not limited to the last period of human history (Rev 6:10; 11:10; 13:8, etc.), their counterpart—the people of God having the seal of God—should not be either. In contrast, the 144,000 sealed with the seal of God are clearly an eschatological group experiencing the second coming while alive.⁵
- *The protection of the trees.* It could be argued that Revelation 9:4 refers to a later stage than the one implied in Revelation 7—namely a stage in which the redeemed have already been sealed, while in Revelation 7:3 they are still waiting to be sealed. However, this does not seem to work well. In both cases the trees are preserved. In Revelation 7:3 the trees are preserved until after the sealing of the servants of God. However, in Revelation 9:4 trees are still completely protected. If Revelation 9:4 were a later stage—namely after the sealing of Revelation 7:3—we would expect that the trees should no longer be protected.
- *The time frame.* Revelation 7:3 is part of the sixth seal. Revelation 9:4 is part of the fifth trumpet. Revelation 7:3 deals with events just prior to the Second Coming, because those being sealed are the ones who are able to stand when Jesus returns (Rev 6:17). They are the 144,000 which are an end-time group only (Rev 7 and 14). Revelation 9:4, as part of the fifth trumpet, takes place in the time prior to the sixth trumpet and obviously also prior to the sixth seal. The expansion of the sixth trumpet concentrates on the time after the forty-two months or the 1,260 days (Rev 11:3–4). The end of this period of the 1,260 prophetic days takes us to AD 1798 when the two killed witnesses will be raised from the dead.⁶ This event will lead to conversions among humanity. Therefore, the fifth trumpet should happen in the time prior to AD 1798, while Revelation 7:3 is later and more universal in nature.

- *Two different sealings.* Revelation 7:3 refers to the eschatological sealing of the servants of God. Revelation 9:4 refers to those who in historic time have not accepted the seal of God. The seal of God is given to those who believe in Jesus in the biblical sense throughout church history. Paul repeatedly speaks about such a seal:
 - (1) “And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor 1:21–22, ESV).
 - (2) “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13, ESV).
 - (3) “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30, ESV).⁷

Results

Having compared similarities and dissimilarities between the two references to sealing in Revelation it seems that the differences surpass the similarities. Revelation 7:3 and 9:4 do not refer to the same time in human history, and Revelation 9:4 does not follow 7:3 chronologically. However, the two texts may describe similar situations—namely settings in which humans are threatened to be harmed.

Yet persecution, suffering, or whatever negative events there may be are not limited to a specific time of humanity’s existence but occur in more or less all periods of human history. Therefore, the two texts seem to speak to different situations. Revelation 7:3 describes the protection of God’s children through the eschatological sealing process, while Revelation 9:4 depicts the harm done to those who did not make a decision for God and Jesus and therefore never received the divine seal that all believers receive at conversion.

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¹ Revelation 5:1–2, 5, 9; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1.

² For a discussion of the time frame of the seal vision, see Ekkehardt Müller, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Studien zum Buch der Offenbarung*, Series: Adventistica: Forschungen zur Geschichte und Theologie der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten, vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 143–144.

³ For an explanation of the sixth trumpet including its expansion and the seventh trumpet, see *ibid*, 162–172.

⁴ See, e.g., David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary, 52B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 528–529; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 495–496; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), 143; Grant

R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 366.

⁵ See Ekkehardt Mueller, “Who Are the 144,000 and the Great Multitude?,” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010) 433–437.

⁶ On the 1,260 days see, e.g., Ekkehardt Mueller, “The End Time Remnant in Revelation,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 11/1–2 (2000): 196–198; Ekkehardt Mueller, “The Two Witnesses of Revelation 11,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 13/2 (2002): 32–33, 37–38, 43; William H. Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, Daniel & Revelation Committee Series, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 1: 56–93, 116–123.

⁷ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 6: 1029, commenting on the seal mentioned in Ephesians 4:30 states: “The reception of the Holy Spirit at conversion is God’s authentication that the believer is accepted, that the approval of Heaven rests upon his choice and experience.” On Ephesians 2:13 the commentary states: “There is an orderly change in the believer’s life: first there is the hearing, then the believing, and then the sealing that puts upon him, as it were, an impression or stamp” (p. 1001).