

Armageddon at the Door
By Jon Paulien

Chapter Six
The Seven Last Plagues

We have noticed in earlier chapters that the Battle of Armageddon is named only once in the Bible, in Revelation, chapter 16. It is discussed as part of the sixth and seventh bowl plagues in that chapter. So before we take a closer look at the Battle itself, I want to take a little time to examine the overall context of the bowl plagues in which the Battle takes place. We have noticed in the previous chapter that the unholy trinity of Revelation 13 appears again in the context of Armageddon (Rev 16:13-16). But Armageddon appears in a new section of Revelation. The vision of the bowl plagues is first introduced in Rev 15:1:

And I saw another great and amazing sign in heaven, seven angels having the seven last plagues, because in them the wrath of God is brought to its full completion.

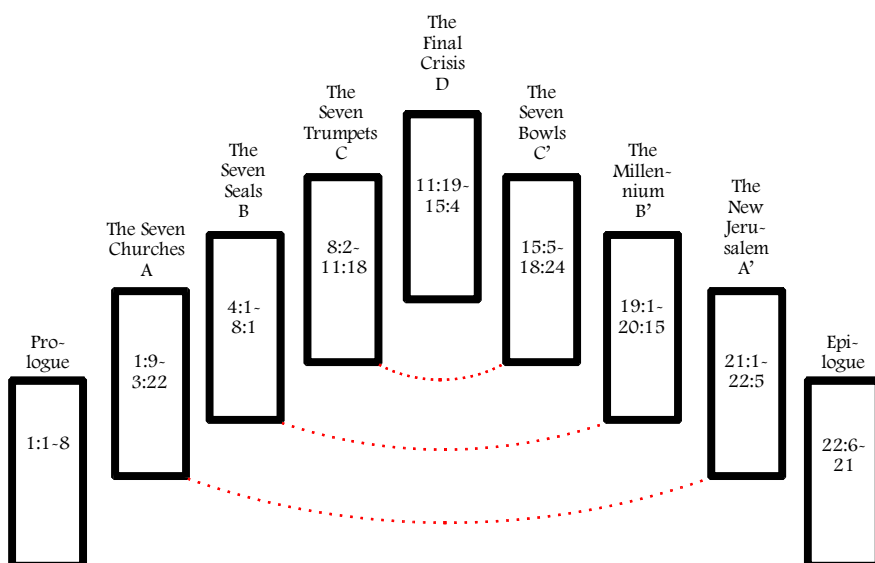
The Setting of the Seven Last Plagues

This text recalls the phrase “your wrath has come” in Revelation 11:18 (I outline the following in considerable detail in my earlier book *What the Bible Says About the End-Time*).

Rev 11:18 offers a summary in advance of the major events of the second half of the Book of Revelation. The “wrath of the nations” is described in the actions of the unholy trinity in Revelation 13. In response, God pours out His wrath in chapter 15 and the chapters that follow. So there is a natural thematic development in the second half of Revelation. The nations display their anger by attacking the remnant (Rev 12-14). God responds by afflicting the nations (Rev 15-18). Then the focus moves to the final events in the Great Controversy (Rev 19-22). This final part of Revelation is summarized by the “judgment of the dead” and the “reward of the saints” in Rev 11:18. The primary focus of chapter 16, then, is on the actions of God rather than on the actions of Satan or of the nations that follow him.

The bowls themselves are strikingly parallel to the seven trumpets. The main difference is that most of the trumpets affect thirds of the earth while most of the bowls affect the entire earth. As we see in the chart of Revelation’s structure below, the seven bowls follow the final crisis scenes of Revelation 12-14, but they also parallel the trumpets. As is the case with the other visions of Revelation, the seven bowl plagues begin with a sanctuary introduction (see the introductory volume to this series: *The Deep Things of God*, chapter 6).

The Chiasm Of Revelation



After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

Revelation 15:5-8 (NIV)

In this sanctuary introduction to the seven bowl plagues, we see the heavenly temple, which is also called the Tabernacle of the Testimony. The language of this passage combines the image of the Mosaic tabernacle and with that of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. The Mosaic tabernacle was a portable tent sanctuary that traveled with the Israelites when they wandered for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai. It was smaller and much simpler than the temple of Solomon, which was a permanent building. The Greek word translated "temple" here (*naos*) was used to describe the Most Holy Place of the heavenly temple in Rev 11:19. That is the place

where God's throne appears. So the introduction to the bowl plagues of Revelation 16 parallels the introduction to the previous section (Revelation 12-14).

The temple in heaven was opened previously (in Revelation 11:19 and, possibly, in Rev 4:1, although the language of "temple" (*naos*) is not used there). It seems that the heavenly temple is consistently one of the main sources of plagues on the earth in the Book of Revelation (Rev 8: 5; 14:15-17; 16:1 and 17). The bowl plagues, the trumpets, and the seals all come from the heavenly temple. But God's mercy also comes from the temple (Rev 8:3-4), so the heavenly temple seems to be another way of speaking about the governing center of the universe. In other words, in heaven there is a place where the essential business of the universe takes place. It is also the place where worship occurs. The heavenly sanctuary and the heavenly throne room are one and the same. But why is the temple in heaven opened now?

Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests.

Revelation 15:6 (NIV)

These seven angels seem to be commissioned agents with a job description. They are to carry out punishments against those who have persecuted the people of God and blasphemed His character. But these punishing angels wear golden sashes around their chest like the "son of man" who tenderly cares for the churches (Revelation 1:13). This is no contradiction. The same uniform is worn for both actions. Both mercy and judgment are qualities of the same God. So the temple is the source of both judgment and mercy. What makes the difference in God's response is the attitude and disposition of those God is dealing with.

In the Old Testament, God set up the covenant in order to regulate and safeguard His relationship with Israel. The concept of covenant is all about relationship. The covenant regulates the way relationships are supposed to go. The beauty of the Old Testament covenant is that Israel knew exactly what kind of God they were dealing with. God not only required things of them, He subjected Himself to the same rules of relationship for Israel's sake (Deut 7:9). Yahweh was not arbitrary and capricious like the pagan gods. The covenant provided security for Israel. The people knew how God would respond in any situation. It was all spelled out in the covenant. Yahweh was consistent and Israel was secure in relationship with Him because of the covenant.

But there were two sides to the covenant. In the covenant between Israel and God, the behavior of both parties was specified. Since God is always faithful to His covenant, the “wild card” in the relationship of Israel with God was the human side of the equation. Israelites who treasured their relationship with God found the guidelines for maintaining that relationship in the covenant. As they responded appropriately to God, they would receive blessings, or positive consequences in response.

On the other hand, when they disobeyed the covenant, they suffered the consequences of a broken relationship with God. This process began in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and reaped the consequences. It was clearly spelled out in the “curses” of the covenant (Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:15-68) and experienced in the desert wanderings under Moses. The process draws to a close in the Book of Revelation.

It is from these “curses” of the covenant that the concept of “plagues” in Revelation got its start. Plagues are the consequences of disobedience to the covenant. In Leviticus 26 and in the Old Testament prophets, these included war, famine, pestilence and wild beasts (Lev 26:21-26; Ezek 14:12-21). These plagues lurk behind the description of the four horsemen in Revelation 6.

Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

Revelation 15:7-8 (NIV)

The four “living creatures” of Revelation are the agents of God closest to the throne. They lead out in the songs of praise that ring through the heavenly throne room (Rev 4:8-11; 5:8-14). They are also closely involved with the breaking of the seals and the four horsemen of Revelation 6. In Revelation 6 all of humanity is subject to the plagues unleashed by the horsemen, but in the seven last plagues poured out in the bowls of Revelation 16, only the wicked are affected.

The seven golden bowls remind us of the cup of God’s wrath (Revelation 14:9-11 and Isaiah 51:17-23). In the third angel’s message (Rev 14:9-11) those who worship the Beast and his Image (cf. Rev 13:14-15) and receive the Beast’s mark (cf. Rev 13:16-17) drink the wine of God’s fury from the “cup of his wrath” (Rev 14:10). In the Aramaic translation of Isaiah 51:17-23, the word for “cup” could mean either “cup” or “bowl.” The same word can be used for both. This means the “cup of wrath” of Revelation 14 and the “bowls of wrath” of Revelation 15

are one and the same. So the bowls of wrath in Revelation 15 and 16 are a further extension of the cup of wrath in Revelation 14. The seven bowls are actually an extension of the third angel's message of Revelation 14.

According to Rev 15:7, one of the four living creatures around the throne of God gives each of the seven angels a bowl of wrath to pour out on the earth. These bowls recall not only Isaiah 51 but also the bowls used in the Old Testament for drink offerings in the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 27:3; Numbers 4:14; 1 Kings 7:40, 45, and 50; and 2 Kings 12:13 and 25:15). The drink offerings in the sanctuary were part of the ongoing relationship between God and His people in the Old Testament. But in Revelation this positive image becomes negative. The pouring out of these bowls onto the earth demonstrates that mercy has ceased and human probation is now closed.

This becomes even clearer from Rev 15:8. The temple in heaven is filled with smoke from the glory of God. As a result of this glory, no one is able to enter the temple throughout the time when the bowls of wrath are being poured out. There is no intercession going on. The services that keep people in relationship with God are suspended. Once again this was originally a positive image taken from the inauguration of the wilderness tabernacle and the dedication of Solomon's temple.

Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34-35 (NIV)

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of

the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple."

1 Kings 8:10-11 (NIV)

In each of these dedication services there was such glory inside the tabernacle and the temple that the services had to stop. In Rev 15:8 there is a reversal of this inauguration imagery. In the context of the seven bowls, the glory of God doesn't celebrate the opening of the temple in heaven, it enforces its close. The emptiness of the temple reflects a time when no one will be performing intercession from inside the temple. Mercy has ceased and probation has closed. The seven bowl plagues pour out the wrath of God unmitigated by any trace of mercy (Rev 15:1). Probation is over and the consequences of disobedience are lived out.

This scene seems to be parallel to the one near the close of the seven trumpets. In Revelation 10:7, when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God is finished. The "mystery of God" represents the gospel, which will be proclaimed throughout the earth until just before the second coming of Jesus (Matt 24:14). The sounding of the seventh trumpet, therefore, occurs at the same time as the emptying of the temple in Revelation 15. This means that *all seven bowls are part of the seventh trumpet*. They are located within the final period of earth's history, after the close of probation. Let's take a look at what happens on earth when the bowls are poured out.

The First Four Bowl Plagues

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."

Revelation 16:1.

The term "poured out" is frequently used with reference to the blood of the sacrifices in Leviticus. When an animal was slaughtered at the brazen altar, its spurting blood was caught in a bowl for dipping and sprinkling. The leftover blood was then poured out at the base of the altar. The same Greek word is used in verse 6, but is usually translated as "shed" instead of "poured out," masking the connection: ". . . for they have shed ('poured out' in Greek) the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve." Rev 16:6. John chooses the language of sacrifice and persecution to describe God's response to the persecution of His saints.

The pouring out of the bowls in Revelation 16 is in response to the anger of the nations. The bowls are poured out because the nations have poured out the blood of God's people. There is an immediate and direct correspondence between the two. The seven bowls are God's just response to the oppression of His people.

The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

Revelation 16:2

As we have stated above, the seven bowls of Revelation parallel the seven trumpets. The first bowl is poured out on the "land," in other words, the earth. This is the same word used in the first trumpet. The second trumpet and bowl both fall on the sea, the third on the

rivers and springs, and the fourth involves darkness in each case. But the parallels are not complete. The first four trumpet plagues all fall on the natural world, at least in terms of the surface imagery. But this first bowl plague and also the fourth directly affect humanity.

In the first bowl plague, ugly painful sores break out on people. In the Greek “sores” is the same word as the one used for the “boils” that broke out on people during the plagues of the Exodus (Exod 9:8-12). In the Old Testament, the same word is also used for leprosy (Lev 13:18-27). As such, it came to be seen as a punishment for sin (2 Kings 5:25-27 and 2 Chr 26:16-21), a curse of the covenant (Deut 28:27 and 35). This is perhaps why Job’s friends thought he was under God’s curse when he broke out in boils (Job 4:7-9; 15:20-26).

In the story of Revelation, therefore, one of the consequences of rebellion against God in the last days is tremendously painful skin sores. These sores fall on those who have the mark of the beast and worship the image of the beast. They are the oppressors of God’s people and not just people at random. These sores distract them from carrying out the death decree of Rev 13:15. In chapter 16 God carries out what He stated in Rev 14:9-11.

The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

Revelation 16:3

Like the second trumpet (Rev 8:8-9), this bowl falls on the sea and causes water to be turned into blood. In the second trumpet only a third of the sea turned to blood and a third of the living creatures died. In the second bowl, the plague is intensified to include the entire earth. All the waters in the sea turn to blood and every living thing in the sea dies.

Once again the question arises whether this plague is literal or symbolic. The plague is based on one of the ten plagues that fell on ancient Egypt at the time of Moses and the Exodus. According to the Bible's book of Exodus, the literal water of the Nile was literally turned into blood (Exod 7:14-24). So the plague of Revelation 16 may be equally literal. Some have suggested that this could refer to a "red tide" where the red color is not literally blood, but a change in the water's microscopic composition. Be that as it may, the result of this plague is quite deadly for the fish in the sea and this would cause huge disruption for the world's human population as well.

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.

Revelation 16:4

The third bowl parallels the third trumpet as well. In the third trumpet, a third of the rivers and springs of the world are embittered by the action of the plague. This embittering results in the death of everyone who tries to drink the water. But in the third bowl, all the rivers and springs in the world turn to blood and there is no reference to death. Once again the language of the bowl plague appears to be quite literal and universal. But there is a difference between this bowl and the two previous ones. In this one a song follows the plague, praising the justice and fairness of God for executing judgment that is appropriate to the crime.

Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve."

And I heard the altar respond: "Yes, Lord god Almighty, true and just are your judgments."

Revelation 16:5-7 (NIV)

This song picks up on the themes of the song sung in the previous chapter, the song of Moses and of the Lamb (Revelation 15:3-4). Both songs assert that the outcome of the conflict at the end of time is to demonstrate that God's ways are just and fair. You see, the saints and prophets had been tried in earthly courts simply for serving God and rejecting the counterfeit. But the judgment of those earthly courts runs counter to the final judgment of God. At the close of earth's history God reverses the judgments of the earthly courts and carries out His own judgment on the very ones who falsely accused His people.

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire.

Revelation 16:8

Here the parallel between the trumpets and the bowls ends up as a direct contrast. In the fourth trumpet the sun, as well as the moon and the stars, is smitten with partial darkness. So one might expect the fourth bowl to produce total darkness. But this is not what happens. Instead, the intensity of the sun's light and heat is increased to unbearable proportions. Instead of darkening the sun, its strength is increased and the pain of the fourth plague is one of excessive heat.

When I was a child I thought I had experienced this plague! July days in New Jersey can be almost unbearably hot and humid. And at that time people were just beginning to hear about air conditioning. I can distinctly remember the first time I rode in an air conditioned bus and the great relief from the heat I experienced. But there was no such relief at home or in the

family car. I can remember lying in my bed at night with pillow and sheet drenched with sweat. I would repeatedly wake up because drops of sweat slid down my side or from my forehead onto my eyelids.

Since that time I have learned that the heat and humidity I experienced as a child was only the “tip of the iceberg!” I have since been to Singapore, where people essentially dash from air conditioned apartment to air conditioned car to air conditioned office to air conditioned store to air conditioned restaurant. Even a short walk at six o’clock in the morning will leave one’s clothes completely soaked with sweat. On one occasion I remember taking off a shirt and wringing several ounces of moisture into the hotel tub! It is hard to think straight under that level of heat and humidity. But the wicked who experience the fourth bowl plague focus their minds on God as a result of this plague. Notice the remarkable verse that follows:

They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

Revelation 16:9

The crucial point in this text is that the plague serves as a call for repentance to the wicked but they refuse it. The plagues do not cause them to change their mind and they absolutely refuse to glorify God. This points back to the first angel’s message in Revelation 14:6-7. The angel there calls on every nation, tribe, language and people to fear God, give Him glory and worship Him. An opportunity is provided for everyone to turn away from the worship of the beast and his image and to give glory to the true God of heaven. According to Revelation 11:13 some people **do** repent just before the close of probation (Rev 11:15, cf. 10:7), but most

of humanity does not. The close of probation is not some arbitrary decree on the part of God, it is a settled disposition for good or for evil on the part of the human beings to which God has appealed through the three angels of Revelation 14. The close of probation results from people settling into a life commitment either positively or negatively.

God, nevertheless, takes responsibility for His actions in relation to the lost. He “has control over these plagues” (Rev 16:9). As we have already seen, He participates in the deception at the end of time, almost to the point of claiming to be its author (2 Thess 2:11). The unity of the nations against His people at the end of time is all part of His controlling plan (Rev 17:17). But while God takes responsibility for His own actions, the wicked do not take responsibility for theirs. Instead, they try to blame Him for the consequences of their own actions.

It is hard for westerners to understand the tension between the sovereignty and control of God on one hand, and the responsibility of human beings for their own actions, on the other. People often find the extreme viewpoints more comfortable than the tension in the middle. Some people doubt the sovereignty of God over this universe. They believe that the universe is essentially out of control, and that life is impossible to manage. If God is “dead” then the universe must be managing itself, a scary concept. Others people feel that God is so in control that they have no freedom or responsibility. At either extreme, life has no meaning. We are either the result of random processes, or we are prisoners in a cage of God’s making.

The Bible, however, is not a western book. It is grounded in Hebrew thought and

philosophy. In Hebrew thought, there is no contradiction between the idea that God is fully in control and the idea that human beings are nevertheless responsible for their actions. The beauty in this Hebrew tension is that we can trust that everything will turn out all right in the end and still do everything in our power to help everything turn out all right. God is fully in control of the plagues, yet they are fully the consequence of human actions. While that strains western logic, God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa 55:6-7).

The Meaning of the Plagues

Let me reflect on the first four plagues for a little bit. Are the bowl plagues literal or figurative? It is difficult to know from the language of the text. On the one hand, a figurative reading is normally preferred in the book of Revelation. The very first verse of the book tells us that the vision upon which Revelation is based was "signified." It was placed in symbolic language to express the deeper meaning of God's purposes for the end of human history. So the seals and trumpets (Revelation 6-9) should probably be read in a symbolic way because they contain language that points to a figurative approach (Rev 8:8; 9:7, 17). But what about the bowl plagues? Could they be taken symbolically?

When I look at the first four bowls symbolically I see the following. Figuratively, the plagues could represent the consequences that come as a result of sin--the curses of the covenant, much like the seven seals. The boils could represent the suffering caused by sin. The waters turning to blood could be like the shedding of the blood of those the wicked oppressed.

The scorching sun could represent the intensified glare of God's word as it points out sin and calls for judgment on those who oppose God.

But when reading these texts in the Greek, you get the impression that something more direct and literal is in view. If a symbolic reading does not bring convincing clarity to the meaning of the text and a literal reading does, the literal reading can be preferred, but this would be the exception in Revelation, not the rule.

If you take the first four bowl plagues literally, they represent the terrible physical and emotional experience of the last generation of the wicked. God's restraining hand on the actions of Satan is removed. Wars increase. Crime and instability are rampant. Diseases get out of control and no amount of medical or pharmaceutical remedy seems able to stem the tide. The weather goes haywire, producing extremes of heat, wind and rain. Strange chemical changes produce water that is corrosive and undrinkable.

It is not certain then, on the basis of the text, whether the literal or the symbolic reading was intended. The symbolic reading is not particularly fruitful theologically. On the other hand, a truly literal reading has its challenges as well. Even if some sort of universal war played a part in the destruction of the wicked, the casualties of such a war would have to be enormous beyond imagination to turn all the waters of the ocean bloody red.

But either way there is a theological issue that needs to be addressed as we approach the part of the chapter where Armageddon is mentioned (Rev 16:16). According to the text of Revelation, the bowl plagues come after the close of probation, when there is no longer

intercession taking place in the heavenly temple (Rev 15:5-8). They fall exclusively on the wicked, who are no longer repenting.

So what is the point of these plagues? If people can no longer repent it seems vengeful and capricious to torment them further. It is one thing to remove oppressors and abusers from the universe, it is quite another to drag them from torment to torment along the way. That sounds like cutting of a cat's tail inch by inch. If the job needs doing you can get it done with a lot less torment than that.

The answer may lie in the major underlying theme of the seven bowls: the justice (fairness) of God. The actions of the seven bowls are not arbitrary. God is not some celestial sadist who enjoys the suffering of His creation. There is an ultimate purpose in everything He does. The crucial text is Revelation 16:5-7 (NIV): "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve." In being the objects of God's executive judgment, the wicked are receiving in kind what they have done to others. The punishment of the plagues is appropriate to the crime.

You see, the justice (fairness) of God is the ultimate issue. How can God judge people for all eternity on the basis of a few years of up and down behavior? How do we know the wicked wouldn't change if they knew God better or had the opportunities that the righteous had? Can we really trust the end-time judgment of God?

The plagues demonstrate that those counted wicked continue to oppose God no matter

the circumstances. Sufferings that have led millions to cry out to God over the centuries only cause their opposition to become even more pronounced and severe (Rev 16:8-11). Earlier plagues had brought people to repentance (Rev 11:13), but now the wicked have turned away so long and so completely that they are no longer capable of opening themselves to God's salvation. At the same time, the sufferings of the righteous in the last days do not turn them away from God. Instead their loyalty to God intensifies. The same sufferings have a solidifying and intensifying effect on all. The righteous become more righteous and the wicked become more wicked.

The close of probation is not an arbitrary decree on the part of God. It is simply a time when world affairs are so arranged that everyone makes a settled decision for or against God at the very same time. The plagues also are not arbitrary, even though they come after the close of probation. They also serve God's purposes. The plagues of Revelation 16 demonstrate the truth of Rev 15:3-4: "Just and true are your ways." In other words, even though God's judgment is based on what to us is inconclusive evidence, it is completely fair and completely accurate. The pouring out of the bowl-plagues demonstrate to the universe that God knows what He is doing, whether or not we fully understand it or accept it.

The fifth bowl continues describing plagues along the lines of the disasters that struck Egypt at the time of the Exodus.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

Revelation 16:10-11 (NIV)

The fifth bowl plunges the beast's entire kingdom, presumably the world (Rev 13:4, 8), into darkness. In contrast to the throne of the beast, other parts of Revelation mention the throne of God (Revelation 12:5; 14:3; and 16:17, etc.). Is this darkness literal or figurative? Literal darkness would certainly be annoying, but would probably not, in and of itself, be the kind of threat that the earlier plagues were. Darkness does not cause pain of itself unless the pain is from a fear of the dark.

So this is not normal darkness. It represents some kind of challenge to the beast's authority over the earth. A throne is a place from which authority and power flow. It may be through literal darkness or perhaps a revelation of some kind that the sea beast's authority is brought into question before the world. The sense of "wondering after the beast" is gone (Revelation 13:8). As was the case with the fourth plague, the "darkness" fails to elicit repentance from those whose minds are made up against God.

The first four bowl plagues are poured out on individuals and people begin to realize that something terrible is happening. But the fifth plague is different. It is poured out on the seat of the beast. God is now specifically targeting the systems and institutions that have opposed Him and oppressed His people. While up to this point people may have been unsure that decisive events were occurring, these events are now fully in the international news media. The pouring out of the fifth bowl is like the overture to the battle of Armageddon. It is the beginning of God's full and final action on those who have opposed Him and His people.