



[Revelation 6:3-4](#)

(3) When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come and see." (4) Another horse, fiery red, went out. And it was granted to the one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that *people* should kill one another; and there was given to him a great sword.

New King James Version

The second horseman is perhaps the most easily identifiable of the famed [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#), since both of its symbols, the fiery red color and the great sword, are well known to represent war. However, underlying this facile identification of the symbols are a few interesting details that add depth to them.

The Greek word John uses for "red" is *purros* or *pyrros*, meaning "the color of fire" (compare our words "pyre," "pyromania," "pyrosis"). This is not the normal Greek word for red (*eruthros*), but a more specialized term that suggests fieriness or flickering reds, oranges, and yellows like a flame. It is the same word that John uses to describe the redness of the Dragon ([Satan](#)) in [Revelation 12:3](#) (the third and only other occurrence is in a proper name, *Sopatros Purrou*, which is strangely not fully translated in [Acts 20:4](#)). This particular color intimates heat and ferocity like an out-of-control wildfire.

The Hebrew language does not have a similar, biblical term. However, the color red or scarlet in the [Old Testament](#) frequently symbolizes blood, whether the blood of sacrifice ([Leviticus 14:4](#), 6, 49-52; see [Hebrews 9:19](#)) or the blood of violence ([II Kings 3:22-23](#); [Isaiah 63:2-3](#); [Nahum 2:3](#); etc.). Scarlet has two other interesting meanings: that of wealth and luxury ([II](#)

[Samuel 1:24](#); [Proverbs 31:21](#); [Lamentations 4:5](#); etc.; see [Matthew 27:28](#); [Revelation 17:4](#); [18:12](#), 16) and of [sin](#) ([Isaiah 1:18](#); see [Revelation 17:3](#)).

One could make a case that all these meanings could apply to the second seal.

The horseman's "great sword" is a translation of *máchaira megálee*. Again, this is not the ordinary sword of war (*romfaia*) but a short sword or long knife like a dagger. Frequently, *máchaira* is the knife used to prepare a sacrifice or to slaughter an animal for food. It is also the sword worn by magistrates and executioners. That the red horseman's sword is "great" (*megálee*) means either that it is larger or longer than usual or that it is highly effective in doing its job. Surprisingly, *romfaia* appears in [Revelation 6:8](#): "And power was given to [the four horsemen] to kill with sword, with hunger, with death. . . ." A "great sword," then, is the equivalent of a thoroughly effective instrument of death.

The sword is often a symbol of God's judgment. David writes in [Psalm 7:12](#), "If [the wicked] does not turn back, He [[God](#)] will sharpen His sword." In [Isaiah 34:6](#), 8, in the context of the Day of the Lord, God combines the sword of judgment with the idea of sacrifice and slaughter:

The SWORD of the LORD is filled with blood, it is made overflowing with fatness, and with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of [Edom](#). . . . For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

Even to His own people, if they do not obey Him, God promises, "I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of My covenant" ([Leviticus 26:25](#)). Like this horseman, "the SWORD of the LORD shall devour from one end of the land to the other end of the land; no flesh shall have [peace](#)" ([Jeremiah 12:12](#)). Clearly, the purpose of the great sword given to the rider of the red horse is to inflict violent death on masses of people in divine judgment.

As if there never was any intent to obscure the meaning of this figure, John's description of the red horse says matter-of-factly, "And it was granted to the

one who sat on it to take peace from the earth, and that people should kill one another" ([Revelation 6:4](#)). This second seal plainly represents conflict, war, destruction, and bloody death.

Of course, this parallels the second point in Jesus' Olivet Prophecy in [Matthew 24:6-7](#): "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." The wording implies an expected increase in conflicts due to the stresses of the time leading up to the end. In other words, amplified contention is a precursor of the end time.

It is interesting to note that the second seal is introduced by "the second living creature saying, 'Come and see'" ([Revelation 6:3](#)). [Revelation 4:7](#) gives us the order of the living creatures as lion, calf, man, and eagle, so the living creature that introduces the seal of war is probably the calf. Just as the first seal's introduction by the lion presages the white horseman's prime characteristic of ferocious pursuit of prey, so does the calf foretell the red horseman's main trait.

The calf, young bull, or ox, as translations variously render it, is known for its staying power and strength ([Numbers 23:22](#); [Psalm 144:14](#); [Proverbs 14:4](#); [Hosea 4:16](#)). An ox can pull a plow or wagon or turn a mill all day for days on end without complaint. Some have been known to work and work until they die from exhaustion. Rarely will one make its frustration or weariness known. A calf or ox will just keep going—a relentless, untiring worker.

We are to consider the red horse and his rider along the same lines. In this vein, they compose a picture of inevitable, unceasing, untiring, insatiable warfare. Perhaps we are to think of them in terms of a wild ox, as God describes it in the book of Job ([Job 39:9-12](#)).

A wild ox cannot be trusted to do its domesticated cousin's chores; he is just as likely to charge and gore anyone who tries to yoke him! Likewise, David cries out, "Deliver Me from the sword, . . . from the horns of the wild oxen!" ([Psalm 22:20-21](#)). [Isaiah 34:7](#) uses the same imagery: "The wild oxen shall

come down with them, and the young bulls with the mighty bulls; their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust saturated with fatness." Though the ox can be a placid, indefatigable worker, a wild ox can be a gory terror!

The red horseman, with its fiery red horse, great sword, and relentless aggression, is a fearsome symbol of unremitting, intensifying, uncontrolled, horrific conflict. God intends this figure to instill terror in mankind in the hope that he will [repent](#) of his enmity and be saved from its destruction and death ([II Peter 3:9-13](#)).

— Richard T. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:

[**The Four Horsemen \(Part Three\): The Red Horse**](#)

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