

The Four Horsemen (Part One): In The Saddle?

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The book of Revelation contains many strange and fantastic images that inspire the imagination and motivate Bible students to chase out their veiled meanings. Who has not wondered about the identity of the Beast or considered the implications of Satan the Devil as a dragon? Throughout the book's pages, a parade of scrolls, trumpets, vials, books, stars, swords, creatures, battles, angels and demons, and even fallen women passes by.

Like any good book, Revelation includes good guys and bad guys involved in a titanic conflict to determine the fate of the world. As the book opens, the Hero arrives on the scene, confident that all will turn out well, but the situation seems hopeless—the good guys are weak, disunited, and lethargic, and conflicts and disasters erupt and intensify everywhere. The forces of evil, led by a sinister and powerful ruler, appear invincible and on the brink of victory. Yet the Hero is more than worthy of His task, and undaunted, He leads His army through storm and fire and waste to triumph and immortality. The book ends in paradise, where the victors live happily ever after.

What makes Revelation so intriguing is that it is not a novel but true prophecy guaranteed by the Word of God to be true and soon to come to pass! The book opens with the words, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place" (Revelation 1:1). In the final chapter, this assurance of authenticity is repeated:

Then he said to me, "These words are faithful and true." And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. "Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." (Revelation 22:6-7)

This is reminiscent of Isaiah 55:11: "So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void [margin: *empty, without fruit*], but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." When God speaks a prophecy, it will be fulfilled because He will bring it to pass!

This certainty causes curious Christians to try to identify and interpret every symbol in the Apocalypse. Some of them are easily determined because at times the text itself defines them. For instance, Revelation 5:8 defines *incense* as "the prayers of the saints," and Revelation 19:8 identifies *fine linen* as "the righteous acts of the saints" (for more of these, see Revelation 1:20; 5:6; 7:14; 11:4; 12:9; 14:4; 17:15; 19:10; 20:14).

Perhaps the most intriguing image in the New Testament's only book of prophecy is that of the four horsemen—white, red, black, and pale—that exemplify the first four seals of Revelation 6. Fertile minds have used this fantastic imagery in literature and art down through the centuries as harbingers of doom or embodiments of destruction and death. Few things are more frightening than mysterious, dangerous figures riding on strange, thundering warhorses!

And with good reason.

The Seven-Sealed Scroll

The setting for the release of the four horsemen begins in Revelation 4, which describes God's throne room in heaven with all its splendor and attendant beings. As chapter 5 opens, a scroll with writing on both front and back and sealed with seven seals is introduced, shown in the right hand of the Father. This last detail highlights His sovereignty and the divine origin of the scroll. That He holds it in His right hand suggests might or authority (Exodus 15:6; Psalm 20:6; 44:3; 110:1; Lamentations 2:3-4; etc.), and that He is sitting on the throne alludes to coming judgment (see Proverbs 20:8; Matthew 27:19; Acts 25:6).

The scroll itself includes a few peculiar details not found in ordinary scrolls. First, John uses the word *biblion* for it, a diminutive of the normal *biblos*, implying that this particular scroll was not lengthy—a booklet as compared to a book. *Biblion* is often used of letters, contracts, and other documents whose contents would not fill more than one sheet of parchment or vellum.

However, this scroll is "written inside and on the back," or as it is literally in the Greek, "written within and behind." The Greeks had a specific term for such a relatively rare document: *opisthografon*, literally "behind writing." Since writing covered the entire surface, nothing could be added to it. Thus, the image symbolizes a complete and finished work.

Finally, this scroll bears seven seals, a detail that has provoked various interpretations down through the centuries. The best, most logical solution is that the scroll is successively sealed along one edge so that, as a seal is broken, the parchment can be opened only so far as the next seal. Thus, a scroll like this was sealed as it was rolled closed, and the seals must be broken in reverse order. This also means that, as the seals are broken, the previous ones remain open until all seven parts of the document lay revealed.

In the scene in Revelation 5, though, "no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it" (verse 3). The apostle John weeps because no one worthy comes forward. He is soon comforted: "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (verse 5).

This figure, called "a Lamb as though it had been slain" (verse 6) is obviously Jesus Christ our Savior (see John 1:29), and He proved worthy by prevailing, *enikeesen*, a word that can also be translated as "overcome," "triumphed," or "conquered," all of which imply victory through conflict or struggle. As Hebrews 2:10 puts it, "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings." He proved Himself worthy to be our Redeemer, High Priest, and soon-coming King by living sinlessly against the pulls of human nature and by dying as a perfect sacrifice in our stead (see Revelation 5:9, 12).

In so doing, He also qualified to be Judge of all (John 5:22; II Timothy 4:1, 8; Jude 14-15). Taking on this last role, "He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne" (Revelation 5:7).

Self-Interpreted

A tour through several commentaries on Revelation 6:1-8 reveals widespread agreement on the interpretation of the last three horsemen, but on the first one the interpretations vary. Certainly, none

of them agrees entirely with the modern church of God understanding, specifically of the white horse and its rider. Most expositors suppose the first horseman represents Christ Himself conquering the world through the spread of the gospel. In Part Two, we will see in full how this interpretation cannot be correct.

Christians who believe in the divine authorship and authority of the Bible are careful to allow it to interpret its own symbols. Some of the above-mentioned commentaries pay lip service to this foundational principle of Bible study, yet they seem to apply it infrequently, perhaps because they really do not believe the Bible's sixty-six books are a coherent whole—though written by more than two dozen men over fifteen hundred years—and inspired by One who is profoundly intelligent and organized. For us, who believe the Bible is God's Word in print and not the product of mere men, there is no need to cull the writings of the ancients for clues to the Bible's mysteries. All the answers we need can be found within its own pages.

Only a few of the commentaries consulted for this article series even mention Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24 (also Mark 13; Luke 21) as a key to interpreting the Four Horsemen. One of them seems almost surprised that Jesus foretold the exact same series of signs sixty years before to His disciples! Why should they be any different when the same Revelator communicated both prophecies? They are parallel.

Notice the questions Jesus' disciples ask to solicit from Him what has come to be known as the Olivet Prophecy: "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). In Jesus' response, He concentrates almost entirely on the second question—the signs of His coming and of the end—and the question of when is answered mostly in their aggregate. The closest He comes to answering when appears in verse 14: The end will come when the gospel has been preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations. Only He knows when this goal will be reached.

Nevertheless, the Olivet Prophecy consists of a series of signs of the end. As we read earlier, the book of Revelation identifies itself as a disclosure from Jesus Christ of "things which must shortly take place." It is plain that Revelation is a book concerned with the events of the end time that crescendo at Christ's return and culminate in the new heavens and new earth, and Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24 covers the same ground, concluding with the second coming. We would be derelict not to compare the two.

Before leaving Matthew 24 for the time being, we should note verse 8 as vital to understanding the timing and duration of the Four Horsemen: "All these are the beginning of sorrows." This short sentence separates Jesus' commentary on the Four Horsemen, which are the first four seals of Revelation 6, and His comments on the fifth seal, the tribulation and martyrdom of the saints (Matthew 24:9-10). The implication is that the Four Horsemen will ride roughshod on the earth to commence the time of "sorrows," and it may also indicate a length of time between the fulfillment of the fourth seal and the opening of the fifth. The first four seals, then, might be broken in quick succession and allowed to inflict mayhem for a long period before the fifth seal is opened.

And Jesus' choice of words in verses 4-7 suggests that the Horsemen were let loose long ago!

Horses in Scripture

The Four Horsemen possess one obvious common factor: Each one rides a horse. Horses appear frequently in Scripture, more than 150 times across both Testaments. Most often, they appear in the context of battle, although a small number of passages emphasize their aggressiveness (Jeremiah 5:8; 8:6; Ezekiel 23:20) or stubbornness (see Psalm 32:9; Proverbs 26:3). However, the imagery of horses is overwhelmingly inclined to represent martial strength (Deuteronomy 17:16; II Chronicles 9:25; Psalm 20:7; Proverbs 21:31; Isaiah 30:16).

Probably the most complete biblical exposition on horses appears in Job 39:19-25. God says to Job:

Have you given the horse strength? Have you clothed his neck with thunder [or, *a mane*]? Can you frighten him [or, *make him spring*] like a locust? His majestic snorting strikes terror. He paws in the valley, and rejoices in his strength; he gallops into the clash of arms. He mocks at fear, and is not frightened; nor does he turn back from the sword. The quiver rattles against him, the glittering spear and javelin. He devours the distance with fierceness and rage; nor does he stand firm because the trumpet has sounded. At the blast of the trumpet he says, "Aha!" He smells the battle from afar, the thunder of captains and shouting.

The picture is of an animal eager and well-suited for war and carnage. Elsewhere, the Bible shows horses to be speedy (Jeremiah 12:5; Joel 2:4) and fierce when they charge in battle (Habakkuk 1:8), causing panic and fright (Jeremiah 8:16). They are also strong (Psalm 147:10), many times the strength of a man, and formidable, especially in the gear of war.

This is the exact impression the image of the Four Horsemen is designed to elicit. They represent an oncoming, relentless, unstoppable, and terrifying enemy bent on destruction and death. They are embodiments of some of humanity's greatest fears. And, as Jesus says, they are just the beginning of woeful onslaught mankind must endure before the end of the age!

Symbols of Judgment

Taken as a whole, the Four Horsemen are dreadful judgments upon mankind for sin. As we will see, they descend upon humanity at the direct command of Christ the Judge, and He gives them free rein to do their worst upon the earth's inhabitants—to kill up to a quarter of the planet's population (Revelation 6:8). In today's terms, that comes to about a billion-and-a-half people!

Since Romans 6:23 clearly declares that "the wages of sin is death," the incessant commission of sins upon the earth makes its inhabitants ripe for judgment (for more examples of this metaphor, see Jeremiah 6:9; Amos 8:1-3; Joel 3:12-13; Revelation 14:17-20). Because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23), God is certainly justified in sending His judgments at anytime, against anyone, and to any degree of severity. Paul writes in the previous chapter:

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds"; . . . to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil. . . . (Romans 2:5-6, 8-9)

The apostle asks, "Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? . . . Their condemnation is just" (Romans 3:5-6, 8). As Psalm 96:13 prophesies, "For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth" (see Psalm 9:8; 98:9; Acts 17:31). Though the Four Horsemen cause terrible devastation and loss of life, their deeds are, in effect, humanity's just deserts (Revelation 16:5-7). Had men not cut themselves off from God through sin, these measures would not have been necessary.

Yet, underlying God's severe and just punishments are His goodness and mercy. Those hewn down by the Four Horsemen will have an opportunity for salvation in the resurrection from the dead (Revelation 20:12-13; see Isaiah 65:20-25), a time far more congenial to accepting and embracing God's way of life than is available in this world. Perhaps the lessons learned in this life of sorrows will prove beneficial to them in the world to come.