

The Four Horsemen (Part Three): The Red Horse

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," June 2004

**"When He opened the second seal
I heard the second living creature saying,
'Come and see.'
And 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."
—Revelation 6:3-4**

Human societies seem to be inherently violent. Times of peace are too soon rent and ended by conflict and war because of raw aggression, religious fervor, or pure greed. We need only to gaze back on the twentieth century—a period of astonishing scientific and technological progress—to find numerous examples of man's penchant for violence and inhumanity.

The previous hundred years witnessed three world wars: two hot and one cold. It saw mass murders—what we now call "ethnic cleansing"—in Germany, the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, the Sudan, and Rwanda, among others. Countless smaller conflicts nevertheless took multiple thousands of lives in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, the Balkans, Spain, Cuba, Central and South America, Israel, Northern Ireland, and many African nations. In addition, history will view the twentieth century as the period in which terrorism became commonplace.

That time also engendered the ultimate arms race that began with the tank and the airplane in the First World War, through the submarine and jet in the Second World War, and culminated with the intercontinental ballistic missile, mutually assured nuclear destruction, and the threat of space-based weapons during the Cold War. These wars spawned the development and use of chemical, biological, and radioactive weapons of mass destruction, in which a suitcase-sized device has the potential to snuff out the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in one blast. Nations played with the power of the atom, of magnetism, of electricity, of light—attempting to harness the very forces of nature—to find "better" ways to kill people in larger quantities.

In reality, the twentieth century was merely a magnified example of many earlier periods of man's history. Previous centuries saw European nations fight each other to exhaustion over decades of continuous religious and political wars. Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun were real people, and their wars of conquest spread terror and death over great swaths of Asia and Europe. Rome lived and died by the sword, as did all the great empires of history. Our time is no more violent—just more efficient.

Even some of the great men of the Bible became caught up in man's violent nature. To rescue Lot, Abraham took on a confederacy of kings and prevailed (Genesis 14:14-16). Josephus records that Moses was commander of Egypt's armies before God called him, and he himself writes that he killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite (Exodus 2:11-12). Joshua led the forces of Israel in the

wilderness and eventually conquered much of the Promised Land. Judges like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson won mighty victories. David fought so many wars and killed so many men that God denied him the opportunity to build Him a Temple (I Chronicles 22:7-8; 28:3).

Yet, the Bible predicts that the time of the end will be the bloodiest period that mankind will ever experience (Matthew 24:21-22). Thousands, millions, even billions of people will die in calamity after calamity—some "acts of God," some "natural," some manmade. The red horse and its rider represent one part of the manmade variety, the scourge of bloody conflict.

Symbols of War

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.

Wars and Rumors of Them

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.

His comments specify wars between nations and kingdoms, but John's description in Revelation 6 expands this out to "people . . . kill[ing] one another." This suggests that this horseman not only deals in mass destruction in civil, border, and world wars, but also in smaller conflicts down to individual murders. Thus, the second seal also covers rising violent crime, gang activity, mob hits, assassinations, family feuds of the Hatfield-McCoy variety, and personal disputes that turn violent.

In saying "wars and rumors of wars," Jesus seems to be saying that some wars will be threatened yet not fought. This is not the sense of the Greek, however. The word translated "rumors" (*akoé*) is the common Greek word for "sense of hearing" (in the active sense) or "report" (in the passive sense). Jesus really means that we will hear the noise of war with our own ears and we will also hear reports of wars occurring elsewhere. In other words, wars will be taking place all over the world!

Immediately, He cautions us not to let such reports trouble us; that is, He tells us not to let the constant wars cause us to panic. Typically, if a person becomes panicky, his fight-or-flight response kicks in, and his brain shuts down. Our Savior wants us to keep our wits about us because "the end is not yet." Regrettably, war is a natural, human activity, so an abundance of war and violence is not by itself a definitive sign of the end. Certainly, the end time will be one of terrible warfare, but many other factors must fall into place before we conclude that we are living at the close of the age.

Jesus then specifies that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." Looking at this from today's perspective, we might think He is repeating Himself, but He actually makes a distinction between ethnic warfare ("nation" = *éthnos*)—wars between different peoples—and political warfare ("kingdom" = *basileia*)—wars between realms or nation-states. Oftentimes, the former are civil wars within a nation comprised of various ethnic groups, such as the former Yugoslavia. The latter, then, are what we call international conflicts like the recent Gulf Wars. Jesus' distinction tells us that war is the norm both within nations and between them.

Relentless Aggression

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:

Will the wild ox be willing to serve you? Will he be led by your manger? Can you bind the wild ox in the furrow with ropes? Or will he plow the valleys behind you? Will you trust him because his strength is great? Or will you leave your labor to him? Will you trust him to bring home your grain, and gather it to your threshing floor? (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, a skipped verse from a section quoted earlier, 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).

Sudden Destruction

Currently, the United States and its allies are fighting a multi-front war against Islamic terrorists. Russia is likewise waging off-and-on battles with similar groups along its southern border. Of course, Israel has never stopped fighting the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights. While not at war, many European nations are on edge, wondering when their peaceful societies will be torn by Islamic unrest just as Spain recently experienced. In Africa, insurgents are battling a handful of legitimate governments and terrorizing their fellow citizens in the process. Beyond these, the whole world is on alert against potential acts of deadly terror.

The world is not a safe place. Conflict in hot wars, violent crimes, or personal disputes can break out in an instant. In the context of the end time, Paul cautions:

For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. (I Thessalonians 5:2-3)

Peace and safety can be shattered in a mere moment if one is caught off guard. Paul says, however, that God has not called us to the kind of judgment brought at the edge of the red horseman's great sword but to salvation through Jesus Christ (verse 9). We can escape it if we "watch and be sober" (verse 6), that is, if we are spiritually alert and serious during these unsettling times leading to Christ's return.

As terrifying as he is, the red rider is followed by another lethal horseman—one whose job is to "take care of" those who survive his brother's bloody onslaught.