

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Revelation 6:1-8

In the third and fourth chapters of The Revelation of Jesus Christ (last book in the Bible), we read of Him as the slaughtered and worthy Lamb ascending to God's throne in heaven and receiving His decree for the events that would occur from the time of His exaltation. We then read in chapters six through eight of Christ opening the seven seals, and the events associated with each (1st in 6:1f; 2nd in 6:3f; 3rd in 6:5f; 4th in 6:7f; 5th in 6:9-11; 6th in 6:12-16; interlude in ch.7; 7th in 8:1-5).

The first four seals describe what are commonly called "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". *Apocalypse* is from a Greek word meaning "uncovering or revealing of something hidden". *Apocalypse* is translated "revelation" in 1:1, where the title of this last book in the Bible is given as "The Revelation of Jesus Christ". Therefore, when we speak of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, we speak of the four horsemen in Revelation 6:1-8. They are identified by the colors of the horses upon which they ride: *white* (vv.1f), *red* (vv.3f), *black* (vv.5f), and *pale* (vv.7f).

1. In the first seal, the rider on the white horse is Jesus Christ bringing His people under His Lordship (vv.1f): "1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, 'Come and see.' 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer."

The conquering Christ here rides a "white horse", as He will do again at His final act of victory at the Last Day (19:11ff). Interestingly, many military leaders would not ride a white horse into battle, for it made them conspicuous to their enemy. But Jesus Christ intends to be conspicuous, and therefore rides a *white* horse.

White is an appropriate color for Jesus Christ. It symbolizes purity (Daniel 12:10), cleanness and sinlessness (Isaiah 1:18). Every instance of *white* in this book refers to Jesus Christ. *White*, in addition to being the color of His horse (6:2; 19:11), is the color of His head and hair (1:14), the stone with the new name He gives to His people (2:17), the robes of righteousness He gives to them to wear (3:4f, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14), the cloud on which He now sits (14:14), and the throne He will occupy at the Final Judgment (20:11).

Jesus Christ wears a "crown" He received from God. The Greek text in this book employs two words indicating the different crowns He wears. In 19:12-16, as "King of kings and Lord of lords" He wears "many *diadems*", the crowns of *rulers*. Here in 6:1-2 He wears a *stephanos* (pronounced *stef'-an-os*), the crown of a *victor*. "It was woven as a garland of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle, or olive, or in imitation of these in gold" (*Thayer's Greek Definitions*).

Jesus Christ deservedly wears this victor's crown. In His death on Calvary He conquered sin by fulfilling the law (see "It is finished!" in John 19:30), for "the strength of sin is the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56b). In His resurrection from His grave He conquered death and Hades by removing their sting and swallowing them in victory (1 Corinthians 15:54-56a). In His ascension to heaven He conquered Satan and his hosts by disarming them and publicly showing them to His subordinates (Colossians 2:15). In His ascension to God's throne He "*prevailed* [or *conquered*] to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Revelation 5:5). (The Greek word translated "conquer" in 6:2 [*nikaō*] is the same Greek word translated "prevail" in 5:5.)

Jesus Christ the Conqueror "went out conquering and to conquer" God's elect who are still in rebellion against Him.

For this conquest He has a "bow", which is a symbol of victory (Psalm 7:12). He fits it with arrows of spiritual conviction, and shoots them into the hearts of His rebellious people through the preaching of His gospel. These rebels are cut to the heart, cease their warfare against Him, and follow Him as His disciples. Examples of this are found on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37ff), Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-6ff), and myself.

2. In the second seal, the rider on the red horse represents slaughterers of Christ's disciples (vv.3f): "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."

The lesson here to be learned is that when Christ goes forth to savingly conquer His people, He is followed by this slaughterer of them. He rides on a horse that is "red", the color of the blood he sheds. He will "take peace" from Christians by his *warfare against* them. His minions "kill" them by *slaughtering* them, for "slaughter" is the meaning of the Greek word here translated *kill* (*sphazō*). These slaughtered disciples are identified in the fifth seal (6:9-11) as "those who had been slaughtered [*sphazō*] for the word of God and for the testimony which they held".

They are slaughtered by the red horse rider's "sword". The Greek text of this passage (vv.1-8) employs two words indicating two types of swords. The pale horse rider (vv.7f) uses the *rhomphaia* (pronounced *hrom-fah'-yah*), which may be a long javelin that could be thrown (more on this later). This red horse rider uses the *machaira* (pronounced *makh'-ahee-rah*), the short sword given by God to civil magistrates for executing capital criminals (Romans 13:4 – figuratively speaking). This is a "great sword" because of the authority behind it.

Sadly, many governments use their sword for persecuting and even slaughtering Christ's disciples. "Herod the king killed James the brother of John [both were apostles of Christ] with the sword [*machaira*]" (Acts 12:2). Governments have used their sword to martyr Christ's disciples throughout this present age. These include imperial Rome in the first three

centuries, ecclesiastical Rome in the Dark Ages, and various anti-Christian regimes in more recent times.

Be advised that if you follow Christ, His enemies will persecute and perhaps even slaughter you – like they did to Him! And they will do more:

3. In the third seal, the rider on the black horse represents inflictors of economic hardship against Christ's disciples (vv.5f): “5 When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come and see.’ So I looked, and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales [balances in KJV] in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart [measure in KJV] of wheat for a denarius [penny in KJV], and three quarts of barley for a denarius [penny in KJV]; and do not harm the oil and the wine.’”

As the “white horse” is naturally followed by the “red horse”, so is the “red horse” naturally followed by this “black horse”. The red horse rider intends to slaughter Christ’s disciples, and this black horse rider intends to inflict economic hardship on those disciples who remain.

Black is the color of mourning and darkness (Jeremiah 4:28; Revelation 6:12). This black horse suggests that dark days filled with mourning are in store for those disciples who have not been slaughtered.

The “scales” in the hand of this black horse rider are for measuring food purchased for sustaining one’s life. A “denarius” represents one day’s wage (see Matthew 20:1f). Here it is enough to purchase “a quart of wheat”, enough for one man’s daily food, or “three quarts of barley”, a courser food but in a measure enough to feed more people. The price of these commodities is probably ten times more than normal. The command “do not harm the oil and the wine” probably means “You Christians are deprived of the finer things of life.”

Economic hardship has been the price many Christians have been forced to pay for their loyalty to Christ. In many cases “no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” – the infamous 666 (Revelation 13:16-18). Christians in the first centuries were expelled from trade guilds if they did not worship the guild’s tutelary deity or patron. Christians today may be forced to close their businesses or fired from their jobs – especially those employed by governments – if they faithfully and uncompromisingly follow Christ, or speak of Him to others or carry a Bible.

4. In the fourth seal, the rider on the pale horse represents the common woes of mankind, from which Christ's disciples are not immune (vv.7f): “7 When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, ‘Come and see.’ 8 So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth.” (The Greek noun here translated “sword” is *rhomphaia* or long sword, not *machaira* or short sword in v.4. The Greek verb here translated “kill” is *apokteinō*, not *sphazō* or “slaughter” as in v.4.)

The color of this fourth horse is “pale”. The Greek word (*chlōros*) means “greenish-yellow, pale green”, but it is used generally of that which is “pale, pallid” (*Liddell-Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*). This color suggests the sickly pallor of a corpse, befitting the rider of this horse.

The rider of this horse is named “Death”, for that is what he inflicts. His inseparable companion is “Hades”, probably personifying the place where unbelievers go when they die (Luke 16:23). Death kills, and Hades gathers the slain. “Death” and “Hades” are the only two names given to anyone associated with these four horses.

Death and Hades are given “power ... over a fourth of earth”: not *all* of it, but *much* of it. Since Christians are on the earth, they are killed with the rest of the afflicted humanity. Of course, Hades does not gather the slain believers, for they are ushered to glory.

Death is given power to “kill” people in four ways. First is “with *sword*”, as in wars between nations. Second is “with *hunger*”, as in famines. Third is “with *death*”, as in outbreaks of pestilences such as Black Death, bubonic plague, measles, smallpox, influenza, and others. Fourth is “with *beasts*”, as when feeding people to wild animals.

Christians suffer these woes along with the rest of humanity. The difference between them is that Christians are not gathered by Hades, but by Christ unto Himself in glory (see vv.10f).

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All four of these horsemen of the Apocalypse have been riding on their missions since Christ the Lamb began opening the seals of the scroll of God’s decree two thousand years ago. Jesus Christ on His *white* horse graciously conquers His rebellious people. The *red* horse rider slaughters many of them. The *black* horse rider inflicts economic hardship on many disciples who are not slaughtered. Death on his *pale* horse, accompanied by Hades, kills great portions of mankind, including Christ’s disciples, as though willing to kill many in order to kill a few (see Matthew 2:16).

– Daniel E. Parks (January 29, 2017; #966)