

The Seven Seal Scroll

The Four Horsemen of Revelation 6



The Opening of the Seven Seals

There are several schools of thought on when these events take place.

1. Period of Roman imperialism (historicist).
2. The destruction of Jerusalem (preterist).
3. The future tribulation after the rapture of the church (futurist).
4. A generic concept of conquest, war, famine, and death (idealist).

#1. From 96AD (Domitian's death) through Marcus Aurelius (180ad). The emperors of this period expanded Rome by military conquest.

#2. Matthew Henry, a historicist, interprets the seals as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem.

There are idealists who see an immediate reference to Jerusalem as well.

The First Seal: Revelation 6:1-2

^{6:1} Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" ² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

The first of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The rider on the white horse.

Who is the rider of the white horse?

Key symbols: white horse, crown, bow, “conquering and to conquer.”

1. Antichrist

- The “little horn” of Daniel 7 and leader of a revived Roman empire or European confederacy.
- The Antichrist receives his crown from Satan.

Objections to this view is:

- Not relevant to the people of John’s day nor fitting for 1:1, 3 where these events will take place soon.
- The word antichrist is not mentioned in the book of Revelation, but only in 1 John.
- The little horn of Daniel is better seen as Antiochus Epiphanes (see my sermon on Daniel 7).

Who is the rider of the white horse?

Key symbols: white horse, crown, bow, “conquering and to conquer.”

2. Vespasian or Titus

- The horse represents war and the white horse the leader of that war.
- Describes the period of war beginning in 66AD before the final destruction in 70AD.

Fitting for the 1st century readers but there is a better way.

Who is the rider of the white horse?

Key symbols: white horse, crown, bow, “conquering and to conquer.”

3. Christ

- He is the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19:11ff.
- White symbolizes purity and is used to describe Christ (clothing, hair, horse) many times in Revelation.
- Crown and conquering fits with context of Revelation 5 (cf. 5:5, 12).
- Bow: weapon of war against Jerusalem or reference to the gospel advance.

This is the majority view among interpreters (even some futurists interpret the text this way).

Objections to this view is:

- Christ cannot be the Lamb and the one the Lamb calls. But in 1:17 Christ rests his right hand on John when in v. 16 his hand is holding seven stars.

The Second Seal: Revelation 6:3-4

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" ⁴And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

The historicist views this as the period from 180AD to Diocletian in 284. A time of civil war and unrest.

The red horse?

Key symbols: bright red, great sword, no peace, slay one another.

1. Most believe this is a reference to war and specifically civil war.
2. If referring to the Jewish war, civil war did break out in Jerusalem with three to four factions in the city.

#1 Some futurists (Lindsey) speculate that red refers to Russia and the large sword a symbol of nuclear warfare. Hard not to see the cold war events make their way into his bible interpretation.

#2 Josephus describes the situation in these terms: Every city was divided into two armies encamped one against another . . . so the daytime was spent in shedding of blood, and the night in fear." (Wars 2: 18:2)

#2 the Greek word translated "earth" can also be translated "land" and be referring to Judea.

The Third Seal: Revelation 6:5-6

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!”

The black horse?

Key symbols: black, scales, wheat, barley, oil & wine.

1. Most believe this is a reference to famine during time of war (cf. Leviticus 26:26)
2. If referring to the Jewish war, civil war did break out in Jerusalem with three factions in the city. They burned the grain and food storehouses and looted the temple for the sacred oil and wine.

Leviticus 26:26, "When I break your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven and shall dole out your bread again by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied."

#2. Josephus reports that most of the 1 million people who died, died from famine and civil war.

The famine was not just severe because of the Roman siege but because these factions burned down the granaries and food stores of opposing factions.

Consider the verbal parallels between this horseman's decree and this description in Josephus: "Many there were indeed who sold what they had for one quart; it was of wheat, if they were of the richer sort, but of barley, if they were poorer. (Wars 5: 10:2)

The statement, do not harm the oil and the wine (v. 6) could allude to the fact that some sacrilegious Jews pillaged the oil and wine from the temple. Josephus writes that John Gischala, the leader of one of the factions, confiscated the sacred vessels of the temple: "Accordingly, drawing the sacred wine and oil, which the priests kept for pouring on the burnt offerings, and which was deposited in the inner temple, [John] distributed them among his adherents, who consumed without horror more than a hin in anointing

themselves and drinking. (Wars 5: 13:6)

The Fourth Seal: Revelation 6:7-8

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

The pale horse?

Key symbols: death, Hades, kill with sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts.

1. Echoes of God's judgment on Jerusalem in 586 BC (cf. Ezekiel 14:21).
2. If referring to the Jewish war, death and carnage was the reality of God's judgment.

Ezekiel 14:21, "For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!"

#1. Futurists see the word "earth" referring to events that have not taken place. If the word is translated "land" then this seems to be an explicit reference to Judea.

They see the death of a quarter of the human race.

Others interpret this that ¼ of people are dying by these terrible means. Not a mass extinction event.

Josephus, "So all hope of escaping was now cut off from the Jews, together with their liberty of going out of the city. Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured the people by whole houses and families; the upper rooms were full of women and children that were dying by famine; and the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged. The seditious . . . as not enduring the stench of the dead bodies . . . had them cast down from the walls into the valleys beneath. However, when Titus, in going his rounds along those valleys, saw them full of dead bodies, and the thick putrefaction running about them, he gave a groan . . . and such was the sad case of the city itself (Wars 5: 12:3-4)."

The Fifth Seal: Revelation 6:9-11

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Verse 9: The altar is a reference to the temple and upon the altar were sacrifices presented before God.

In this case, it is not the blood of bulls and goats but the souls of Christians who were slain and offered up as a sacrifice to God.

Verse 10: It seems that those responsible for their death are those who dwell on the earth (or land).

Options: Martyrs under Domitian (Historicist). Martyrs in future tribulation, not the church but tribulation martyrs (futurist).

But there are biblical parallels...

Matthew 23:33-36

³³You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

This is a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and uses the same language (altar, martyrs)

Luke 18:1-8

Parable of the persistent widow...

... Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

“Give them justice” can be translated “avenge.”

In the midst of this judgment, this is God’s answer to their prayer. He will soon destroy Jerusalem and those who persecute the church.

The Sixth Seal: Revelation 6:12-17

¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

I've argued before that these symbols of earthquakes, sun blackened out, stars falling, is the end of an empire, nation, or age.

Futurists read this literally as cosmic disturbances.

They interpret "stars" as a meteor shower.

Hal Lindsey sees this global earthquake caused by a nuclear explosion. The smoke will darken the sun and make the moon appear red. The falling stars (v. 13) are Russian bombs.

Idealists typically view this as a second coming of Christ.

Decreation Language in the Prophets

Isaiah 13:1, “The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.”

“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (Isaiah 13:10).

Here is the description of God’s judgment against Babylon by the Medes (13:17).

Decreation Language in the Prophets

Isaiah 34:4-5, "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction."

Cf. Jer 4:24; Ezek 32:7; Hos 10:8; Joel 2:31; Nah 1:5; 3:12

Here is the description of God's judgment against Edom.

Jer 4:24, "I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro."

Ezekiel 32:7, "When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
and the moon shall not give its light."

Hosea 10:8, "The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed.
Thorn and thistle shall grow up
on their altars,
and they shall say to the mountains, "Cover us,"
and to the hills, "Fall on us.""

Joel 2:31, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."

Nah 1:5, "The mountains quake before him;
the hills melt;

the earth heaves before him,
the world and all who dwell in it.”

Nah 3:12, “All your fortresses are like fig trees
with first-ripe figs—
if shaken they fall
into the mouth of the eater.”

Historical Parallel

“So now the last hope which supported the tyrants and that crew of robbers who were with them, was in the caves and caverns underground, [hoping] that after the whole city should be destroyed, and the Romans gone away, they might come out again, and escape from them. This was no better than a dream of theirs; for they were not able to lie hid either from God or from the Romans.” (Josephus, Wars 6: 7:3).

Biblical Parallels

Malachi 3:2, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.”

Matthew 24:29,34 “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.... Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

Biblical Parallels

Luke 21:20,25-28,32, “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.... And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.... ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.

Significance of Revelation 6

1. The Lamb conquers in judgment, using the “four disastrous acts of judgments” upon Jerusalem (Ezekiel 14:21).
2. The judgment upon the enemies of the Lamb are catastrophic and bring an end to their dominion/kingdom/nation.
3. The martyrs who died for the spread of the gospel are vindicated along with the prophets of old.
4. No one can stand against the power of the Lamb. Nothing can protect them or deliver them from his wrath (vv. 16-17).
5. These historical events are not isolated but consistent with the power and character of Jesus. He is the great judge and Lord of history.

Ezekiel 14:21, “For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!”