

## Revelation 6:1-8 – The Four Horsemen, Part 1

In Revelation 6, as the Lamb begins to open the seals of the scroll, events begin to happen on earth. Thinking about what we just read, notice the connection between these earthly events, and the heavenly cause. The first four seals unleash the famous "four horsemen of the Apocalypse", but to think of this as the passage about the horsemen is to miss the point entirely. This is about the Lamb, Jesus after having ascended to the right hand of God, imposing His sovereign rule in real history. 4 times it says, "when He" (vv1, 3, 5, 7). The fifth seal (v9) reveals Christ's followers crying out to Christ asking Him to judge "those who dwell on the earth" (v10). I agree with Mounce who said, "This request does not rise from a personal desire for revenge, but out of concern for the reputation of God."<sup>i</sup> Like the prayers of the saints in golden bowls reminds us, Christ is now, ever since chapter 5, answering the prayers of his people, but He is doing it *ultimately for God*. In the same way the song of praise to the Lamb in 5:9-10 shows that He redeemed us *for God*, and *to God*, opening the seals is a set of symbols that shows Jesus beginning to rule over events for the sake of God's honour. The Lamb is the Lord. He saves sinners through faith in the Gospel in order to reveal God's mercy; He sovereignly overthrows empires in order to reveal God's justice.

The original source of these symbols comes from the Old Testament Book of Zechariah. In Zech 1, Christ Himself asks God to show mercy to the Jews, (Zech 1:12) And God replies in two parts: 1) God promises grace and comfort (Zech 1:13); 2) God declares His anger toward the nations who made the Jews suffer (vv14-15). God showed the prophet He was about to make His mercy and justice known. In verse 19, God shows Zechariah that there were four Gentile empires that trampled the Jewish people, and in verse 21, God shows Zechariah four symbolic angels going out to break the power of those four enemy empires. When Zechariah wrote this the first empire, Babylon, was past, and Persia was then in charge. At the time John wrote Revelation, the third, Greece, was past, and now the fourth and last of those four empires was ruling: The Roman Empire.<sup>ii</sup> Revelation, especially the opening of the first six seals, predicts the same punishment against Rome that Zechariah was shown. The first four seals, the four horsemen, are a kind of sequel to Zechariah 1.

I was really excited to see how much clearer chapter Revelation 6 has become to me, after comparing it to Zechariah. Revelation often depends on Zechariah: the lampstands (1:12), the seven eyes (5:6), the two olive trees (11:4), are some prominent symbols in Revelation that come from Zechariah. The four horsemen do as well. In Zech 1, they are described as the patrol God sent out into the world (vv10-11). In Zech 6, they show up again but as four chariots with horses, and in verse 7 God commands them, "Go, patrol the Earth!" But they do more than just reconnaissance: they impose "God's sovereign rule over the whole world".<sup>iii</sup> With Zechariah in mind, then, it should be no surprise that each time the Lamb opens a seal unleashing a horseman, one of the four Living Creatures shouts, "Come!" (Actually, it could also be translated, "Go!" and so it might even be a quote from Zech 6:7.)<sup>iv</sup>

So the command "Come!" or "Go!" in verses 1, 3, 5, and 7, echoes God's command to the four chariots in Zechariah 7, to impose the rule of the Lamb over the wicked Roman Empire. But more than that, in Zechariah 1 it is Christ, the Angel of the LORD, who prays to God for His people, who receives from God the pledge of grace and comfort [read Zech 1:13]. The same Christ who opens these four seals! God did give grace and comfort to His people, ultimately when He gave Christ to be our Redeemer! That's why the Church, the angels, and all Creation, praise the Lamb in chapter 5; that's why the Lamb sends the

four horsemen in chapter 6, and that's why the ministers of Christ's Church, symbolized by living creatures, echo the call to "Come!"--so that Christ's rule will be imposed on the fourth great Gentile Empire: Rome itself. Mercy and justice from God, for people living in the Roman Empire, through Jesus.

### The Four Horsemen

The horses are about the Roman Empire. Today, we often feel like Revelation is so complicated it's almost impossible to be sure of what it means. But there are a number of reasons why the original readers would have already been biased toward seeing these four horsemen as having to do with the Roman Empire:<sup>v</sup> John's original readers, especially Jewish readers, when they read this, because they were already expecting God to judge Rome (c.f., Daniel's prophecies) would have expected these horses, prophesying something to take place soon, to have something to do with the Roman Empire. From the book of Daniel and other prophecies about Rome, they would have likely expected judgements something like these—the classic punishments for ignoring God, dating back to Lev 26. And in the Roman Empire of the first century, when John wrote this and where his readers lived, the horse was a symbol of the Roman God of War. So for the original readers, the first symbol, a horse, was sort of a *giveaway*. The basic meaning of the colours of these four horses, which I'll explain, is that in the Roman Empire, conditions were pretty good, but it was going to start getting worse and worse, and this was God's doing.<sup>vi</sup>

### The First Seal

[**read v1**] Jesus breaks the first seal, and a living creature standing for Christian preachers, shouts out with a voice like thunder, "Come!" When Christian preachers began teaching the prophecies in the Bible about the Roman Empire (and they did!)<sup>vii</sup>, it was not just their words: they were speaking God's Word, so the symbol here describes the voice of the preachers "like thunder". And John was amazed to see a white horse and rider [**read v2**]. Although the colour of the horse is the same white as the colour of Christ's horse seen in chapter 19, that's the only similarity: this isn't Jesus.

Many commentators, including great classics by Matthew Henry<sup>viii</sup> and Patrick Fairbairn,<sup>ix</sup> take the rider on a white horse to be Jesus Himself. That interpretation seems obvious at first, but for a couple of problems: 1) The seals are opened by Christ, symbolized as a Lamb (e.g., v1), and in the sixth seal, the people in the vision cry out to be rescued from the wrath of the Lamb--not to "the rider on the white horse". That is, in all six seals, Jesus is the Lamb opening the seals. Not to mention that it would be odd for Christ to be the one opening the seal--beginning to exercise God's rule upon the Earth--and then to be the one to come and do His own bidding in the opening act of this drama. 2) Saying the rider is Christ misses that the first four seals, the four riders on horses, are really one group of symbols drawn from the Old Testament book of Zechariah 1:7-17. In that prophecy, the four horsemen are a patrol that reports to Christ—it would be weird if Christ was also part of the patrol. Mounce concluded that there are so many problems with seeing this rider as Jesus that it seems "unlikely."<sup>x</sup>

*So the white horse and rider isn't Jesus, but symbolizes the time when Jesus began to impose His sovereign rule upon the Roman Empire.*<sup>xi</sup> The **white coloured horse** pictures a time when things were pretty good for the people of Rome. His **bow** is a clue to who was leading the Empire at that time. You see the bow was a common symbol for Crete. The people of Crete were famous archers in ancient times, even far back in Old Testament times.<sup>xii</sup> One Greek poet notes that when a certain tombstone was marked with a bow it identified the dead person as from Crete.<sup>xiii</sup> Coins recovered from Crete had Apollo holding a bow, and also Diana holding a bow. In ancient literature, the bow is a symbol of the island of

Crete, which at John's time was a province of Rome.<sup>xiv</sup> So the rider holding a bow is a clue to look for a time when the Roman Emperor was from Crete. "**Given a crown**" hints of a time when God gave the Roman Empire success and victory (this isn't a crown of rule in Greek, but an athlete's crown).<sup>xv</sup> And "**conquering [in order] to conquer**" (literally) implies by its grammar a desire "ultimate victory"—so we should look for a time when Rome's power was relatively unchallenged, and its military successful.<sup>xvi</sup>

Remember that John was told to write down what he saw in this vision about events "to take place after this" (Rev 1:19): *i.e.*, *right after he had the vision*. John wrote the Book of Revelation, around the time Emperor Domitian died in the year 96. It was the beginning of a brand-new era of Roman politics and history. This era is depicted by the white horse. *Just before it happened*. The new emperor was Nerva, whose family was not originally Italian like all emperors before him, but from Crete (the bow);<sup>xvii</sup> the Empire was successful (the crown), and the emperors after Domitian enjoyed a "golden age" of victory ("conquering to conquer"), according to the Roman historian Suetonius, who said the Empire was "happier and more prosperous" than before.<sup>xviii</sup> Historians have called it the era of "the Five Good Emperors",<sup>xix</sup> from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius (the old Caesar played by Richard Harris at the beginning of the movie *Gladiator*). These peaceful conditions in Rome lasted for almost 9 decades, until the death of Marcus Aurelius (about 96AD until 180AD). This whole period is pictured in the victorious, white horse era. For the pagan people and rulers of Rome, things were good. Lining up the white horse details with history, we get three things: a starting point to know what time periods come next in Revelation; a hint of God's patience to give even the Romans time to repent and believe in Jesus when times were good; and a contrast to more clearly see how much worse things got afterwards. Like in Zechariah 1, Jesus was not about to let His people suffer while the Empire oppressing them was at rest. The white horse describes a time when the empire was at rest—the calm before the storm.

### The second seal

[**read v3**] The second seal is opened by the Lamb, and Christian preachers continue, in the name of Christ, like in Zechariah 1, interceding for God's people, prophesying the judgement God was sending on the Roman Empire. [**read v4**] Just like the first horse, the colour of this one tells us something about a time period in the Roman Empire. The colour is "**fiery red**" in Greek.<sup>xx</sup> – we would probably guess it means something like "judgement and bloodshed", even if verse 4 didn't come right out and say that this rider was sent "**to take peace away,**" and then add, "...so that people would slay each other." Bloodshed would bring an end to the time of peace depicted under the white horse. "**from the earth**" doesn't mean the whole planet but like in the Old Testament most of the time when Israel is called, "the earth" or "the land" (So for example one of the leading newspapers in Israel today is literally called, "The Earth" [*Haaretz*], meaning Israel's land). The "earth" in question is the lands of the Roman Empire, since that is the main arena for the whole Revelation as it expands on Daniel's prophecies about the fourth beast, Rome, and the Antichrist that arises from Rome. The way these predictions so accurately line up with history help to confirm this is the right way to interpret the phrase "the earth". When this rider takes peace away from the land of the Romans, the result is that they "**slay one another**"--civil war. **A great short sword** isn't the same kind word for Jesus' sword in 1:16, but a "short sword" like the kind the Roman Army used during this time. But the rider carries a "**great** short sword"--sort of a contradiction—hinting that we should expect a time when Roman armies with Roman shorts words would kill each other in "great" numbers.

The era of the fiery-red horse was fulfilled in civil wars, mutinies, assassinations, and bloodshed within the Roman Empire from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. This was the period from the rise of Emperor Commodus (the bad emperor played by Joaquin Phoenix in the movie *Gladiator*), until the death of Carinus in 285AD (about 100 years in all).<sup>xi</sup> In verse 4, the ESV says the rider “was permitted to take peace away from the earth”—the Greek says “it was given to him to take peace away”. This was not something Jesus just allowed; these events were decreed by Jesus. Not to be cruel, but to show that when an Empire spits in God’s face, kills God’s Son, and tramples God’s people, they will in time be held accountable. But even then, one purpose is so that some will see what God is doing and ask the Lamb for mercy. If you doubt that God really rules over events on Earth like these two horsemen suggest, then come back and hear the rest of these sermons on Revelation, and the amazing coincidences of almost 2000 years of history lining up precisely, and in order, with the symbolic prophecy in Revelation should be enough to make you think twice about ignoring the Lamb of God any longer.

The most poignant applications we will see in chapter 6 are in the longings of Christians who suffered and died for the sake of the Gospel under the cruel brutality and intolerance of the Roman government. Their sufferings are predicted when Jesus opens the fifth seal in verses 9-11. That sermon will be in two weeks, Lord willing. In the meantime, let me remind you of the connection between the judgements that actually happened in the history of the Roman Empire, and the One who was ultimately responsible for making these things happen. He is the Lamb, pictured in chapter 5. But He is not mild, or weak, or vulnerable, or cute, or wounded. He is a Lion, a conqueror, a victor, and a Judge. But He is also a Redeemer. He is the same compassionate Intercessor who asked God, in Zechariah 1, to show mercy to the Jews. And Zechariah 1:13 says, “And the LORD answered gracious and comforting words...” (Zech. 1:13) So I beg you, don’t ignore the Lamb any longer. He is not to be trifled with! The horses coloured white, red, black, and pale, are like an apocalyptic warning system, signaling with increasing urgency that the people of Rome were running out of time to repent. So are we.

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<sup>i</sup> Mounce, Robert H.. *The Book of Revelation (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (p. 148). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> In Zech 1:19, 21, the four horns to be scattered are the four empires prophesied by Daniel [so John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*: “the greater number [of commentators] refer to the four great empires predicted by Daniel, so Jerome; Kimchi, Hengstenberg, Keil, Baumgarten, Wordsworth.”]

<sup>iii</sup> ESV Study Bible, Crossway Books, note on “Zechariah 6:7”

<sup>iv</sup> The imperative, “Come!” in verses 1, 3, 5, and 7, has the basic meaning of come or go. [15.7 ἔρχομαι: to move from one place to another, either coming or going - ‘to come, to go.’ - Louw-Nida Lexicon, #15.7, with a cited reference to Lk 3:3, where John the Baptist “went”.

<sup>v</sup> Collins, pp. 124-125

<sup>vi</sup> The colours of the horses in Zechariah 1 are “normal” horse colours, indicating that conditions on the Earth were “normal”—life was carrying on as usual for those nations who had persecuted the Jews. That normalcy is what made God so angry (Zech 1:11, 15).

<sup>vii</sup> E.g. Hippolytus, “*A discourse by the most blessed Hippolytus, bishop and martyr, on the end of the world, and on Antichrist, and on the second coming of our lord Jesus Christ.*”, XVI. Phillip Schaff, *Early Church Fathers*, ANF05, Hippolytus, “Appendix to the Works of Hippolytus”.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, “Revelation 6:1-2”

<sup>ix</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinctive Nature, Special Function, and Proper Interpretation*, p. 402

<sup>x</sup> Mounce, Robert H.. *The Book of Revelation (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (p. 141). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

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Among various problems with the Christ interpretation, Mounce says the fatal problem is that the phrase, "it was given to him" (he was given, ESV) is used in Revelation, especially 6 times in chapter 13, when it is, "the divine permission granted to evil powers to carry out their nefarious work." [Caird, G. B. *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Harper's New Testament Commentaries). New York: Harper and Row, 1966. Quoted in Mounce, Robert H.. *The Book of Revelation* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (p. 142). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.]

<sup>xi</sup> see footnote 6 for the comparison with horses' colours in Zechariah.

<sup>xii</sup> the Cherethites in the Old Testament were associated with Crete, and famous for their archery (c.f. Bruce W. Gentry, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, "Cherethites", BibleWorks Edition; and Fausset Bible Dictionary, "Cherethims": "Crete seems a kindred name to Cherethites; it was famed for archery, as were they; for which David chose a number of them as his body guard.")

<sup>xiii</sup> Elliott, Vol 1., p142.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p.140

<sup>xv</sup> Friberg's Lexicon, #24938.

<sup>xvi</sup> A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures* (Online Bible Edition), "Revelation 6:2"

<sup>xvii</sup> c.f. Elliot citing Victor Aurelius, Tillemont, *The Ancient Universal History*, and *The Encyclopaedia Metropolitana* (Vol 1, p. 140, fn #1-3)

<sup>xviii</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the 12 Caesars*, "The Life of Domitian" (ch. 23), trans. J.C. Rolfe, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/home.html]. Accessed June 8, 2018. C.f. E.B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, Vol. 1., pp. 130-131, and fn.5.

<sup>xix</sup> Wikipedia, "Nerva-Antonine Dynasty", "The Five Good Emperors"

[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nerva%E2%80%93Antonine\\_dynasty#Five\\_Good\\_Emperors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nerva%E2%80%93Antonine_dynasty#Five_Good_Emperors)]. Accessed June 6, 2018.

<sup>xx</sup> Friberg, #23861

<sup>xxi</sup> Collins, p. 131