

Revelation 6:12-17 – Afraid of the Lamb

This morning I am going to try and explain the meaning of the sixth seal, and along the way, to point out some applications that come from seeing the Old Testament source behind each of these groups of symbols. But remember the other seals, how when the Lamb, Christ, opened the first four, four horsemen rode out over the land of the Roman Empire showing that each of the eras in Rome's history, from the time of John, and the reign of Nerva, to the reign of Diocletian early in the 4th century, these eras—white horse, red, black, deathly pale--were increasingly urgent warnings Christ was giving to the people of the Roman Empire to turn from their rebellion against God and to be reconciled to God through Christ Himself. The fifth seal showed an era of brutal persecution of Christians, with a call to wait and trust God--that He cares about evil in the world and will not let it go unpunished forever, but that God is also faithful to keep His promises to forgive sinners who confess their sin and follow Jesus, to save them even when they die for Jesus. So coming to the sixth seal, we should expect to see a prediction of some kind of answer to the prayers of the murdered Christians who cried out, [read 6:10]. And that's what John sees next in his vision. John saw 5 symbol groupings that each come with a purpose—a lesson: he saw a great earthquake to turn people from their foolish ways; the sun and moon eclipsed to make people doubt their false beliefs; the stars and sky wiped away to vindicate God's fallen saints; mountains and islands removed to demolish a civilization's futile delusions, and finally, powerful people hiding in caves show the effect of all these judgements on the people who experience them: God causes them to fear the Lamb, the most important symbol in Rev. 6, standing for Christ the Lord, ruling from God's right hand in Heaven.

The symbols John saw

A great earthquake (v12) - The symbol of an earthquake is used often in the Old Testament to predict God judging and overthrowing nations. A good example is Haggai 2:6-7a, where God says He is about to shake the heavens and the earth, then adds He will shake "the nations", and then interprets this as meaning He will topple thrones and overthrow nations (Hag 2:21-22). An earthquake symbol in prophecy, then, is not the shaking of the ground, but the shaking-up of a people and nation. The same symbols are used in similar ways predicting the overthrow of Israel in Amos 8:8; of Judah in Joel 2:10; of Babylon in Isaiah 13:13; and of all the nations in Isaiah 24:18-20. But Jeremiah 10:22 uses exactly this phrase, "a great earthquake" to predict the fall of Judah at the hands of the Babylonian army. This same phrase is only used a few times in the Hebrew Bible.ⁱ "...Behold it comes—a *great earthquake* out of the land of the north to make the cities of Judah a desolation..." (my trans.) And then we read this—the result of the Holy Spirit showing Jeremiah the coming upheaval of his country: [read Jer 10:23-24] God's purpose in that original quote was to correct the Jews' *foolish ways*. Because John uses the same phrase, I suggest to you that when readers of Revelation see this prophecy fulfilled—the shakeup and overthrow of a nation—it is also to turn us from our *foolish ways*.ⁱⁱ

The sun and moon (v12) - In many passages, like Deuteronomy 4:19, 2 Kings 21:3, and 23:5, the Sun, Moon, and planets are symbols for the pagan gods. For example, Jeremiah 8:2 describes, "the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshiped." In ancient times, nations drew a straight line from the celestial gods they worshipped to their earthly rulers and kings.ⁱⁱⁱ They saw all these objects in space but they did not have a technical understanding of the difference between a moon and a planet, or a planet and a distant star. The brighter ones were worshipped as greater than the rest, to quote one of my Bible

cyclopedias: "...the religion of the Egyptians, of the Chaldees, Assyrians, and the ancient Arabians, was nothing else than star-worship... The sun, moon, and seven planets (those, that is, of the fixed stars which shine with especial brightness) excited most attention, and won the greatest observance."^{iv} When God turns out the lights on the gods pagans worship, it is meant make you doubt your *false beliefs*,^v to disillusion people concerning their false religions.

The stars and the sky (vv13-14) - The rolling up of the skies and falling of the stars like figs is taken directly from Isaiah 34:4 (it has nothing to do with Jesus' fig tree prophecy in Matthew)--it's a direct quote from Isaiah. So its meaning in Isaiah is the source of its meaning here. If this is supposed to be literal Revelation would only have 6 chapters—then, *The End*. But it's easy to show that's not what Isaiah meant: [read Isa 34:4]. The next verses describe how God will punish the land of Edom so that in verses 11-13, all the "nobles" and "princes" and kings are gone (v12), its buildings overgrown, and only wild animals live there (vv13-15). Verse 12 says "there is no one there to call it a kingdom"--God removed the government of Edom and turned it into a wilderness. So He didn't drop a planet or meteor on that country. The falling of stars is about the fall of government—but for ancient people that wasn't just a political catastrophe: it was a spiritual defeat of the gods they worship, since earthly rulers were like messengers and servants of the gods in the heavens. To cast down rulers was to cast down the gods, and vice versa. "The sky vanished" then means that their whole religion will disappear. The connection between the gods—the sun, moon, and planets—and the earthly people who serve them—the stars—is similar to the explanation Jesus gives to John about the meaning of "stars" in Revelation:^{vi} that they stand for "angels", i.e., "messengers" Jesus sends to do His bidding [read Rev 1:20]. But in the case of stars God throws to the ground, these stars are not representing Christ to his churches, but false gods to idolatrous nations. For an idol-worshipping nation, the stars stand for the civic leaders who serve the gods. In Revelation 1-4, the stars stand for Christian messengers from Christ. In Revelation 6:13, the stars stand for pagan messengers from the gods.^{vii} Especially in cases where the head of state was also the supreme priest or pontiff! The original context of this stars-like-figs quote is explained in Isaiah 34:8 [read]. *The Gospel Transformation Study Bible* says these judgements from Isaiah come, "...at least in part, on behalf of God's people (Isa. 34:8, 16–17). We need not exact our own vengeance, or fear that we shall not be vindicated, for wrongs committed against us. God will set right the scales of justice with his ultimate and righteous judgment."^{viii} In casting down the stars, God vindicates His *fallen saints*. He does this by removing the government that persecuted them.

The mountains and islands removed (v14) - Calvin says "mountains and islands" in Old Testament prophecy stand for a nation's "defences and military forces" that it depends on, his point being that people think they stand in God's way.^{ix} So in Isaiah, God says, "I will lay waste mountains and hills and turn rivers into islands", which the ESV Study Bible interprets as every "obstacle in human society"^x and then Isaiah continues, "they are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, 'You are our gods.'" (Isa 42:15, 17). God will put them to shame, humiliate and embarrass the cultures and civilizations of people who worship idols. The idea is that man-made things like a society, an institution, an army, or a government might seem to people to be as solid as mountains but if you think they can protect you from the one true God, you're kidding yourself. God will demolish your *futile delusions*. [read Nah 1:5-9]

Kings, etc., "of the earth" (c.f. V10) - (vv15-17) - the list here is interesting because it seems to be all about the power society gives to people: kings have authority over kingdoms, "great ones" over people under them, "generals" over soldiers, "rich" over the poor, "strong" over the weak--and then it says

everyone: "slaves" who are under their masters, and "free" who have no masters: they all look for something to hide them, some kind of refuge from the Lamb. They are desperate for anything to save them *from* Jesus. "Caves, rocks, and mountains" (vv 16-17) - These words come from Isaiah 2. 10 times in a row, Isaiah announces God will go "against" every kind of "human pride".^{xi} That's just before the passage Revelation 6:16-17 quotes: [read Isa 2:17-22] The symbol used in Revelation isn't talking about people in the future running for the hills. It's talking about God causing powerful people to *fear the Lamb*, so that no matter how great those people are, we would stop being impressed with human power.

The era of the sixth seal

Jesus evicted the gods of Rome, but most Romans still didn't embrace Jesus. The great persecution predicted in the fifth seal ended (mostly) in 311 with an edict from Emperor Galerius.^{xii} He cancelled the official targeting and persecution and killing of Christians (mostly). Maybe you remember that old book by Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*, who traded places, the poor boy becoming the prince, and the prince becoming the poor boy? Nobody could have expected that Rome was about to see the most extreme reversal I think a country has ever seen: the persecuted were about to become princes, and the princes the persecuted. A massive political earthquake.

I mentioned last week that during the fifth seal era, Diocletian was the emperor. But he retired from public life—the only Roman Emperor to ever retire—and left different factions fighting for power and control of his empire. One of those factions was led by Constantine, who had built up a strong power base in Britain and Gaul, and in time, with amazing strategy, Constantine emerged from the civil wars as Emperor. Perhaps the most pivotal victory for Constantine was at The Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, as his army attacked Rome. It was the beginning of a new era. Because of a vision Constantine had, he made his army start using the chi-ro symbol (which Christians have usually believed stood for the first two Greek letters of the word for "Christ"). But it seemed to work, and his army won that battle hands down, and conquered the city of Rome, which was kind of a big deal. It seems Constantine began to believe Christ was on his side, and so he began passing laws that protected and even gave privilege to Christians. The Edict of Milan in 313 Constantine's affirmation of the edict from Galerius to stop persecuting Christians.^{xiii} Constantine went further and even started favouring Christians. Most of the emperors after him actually called themselves Christians.

For many Christians who saw this turn of events, it wasn't all good news: "the fact that the emperors declared themselves Christian, and that for this reason people were flocking to the church, was not a blessing, but rather a great apostasy."^{xiv} Was this good or bad for Christianity in the long run? You see Constantine kept worshipping the Sun god.^{xv} But he had started a religious revolution—an earthquake that shook paganism apart. Superstitious fear of Christ swept through the land affecting kings and soldiers alike.^{xvi} Armies were afraid to look directly at the Christian symbol on the shields of Constantine's soldiers.^{xvii} But it didn't make them believers. In 324, Constantine ordered all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on Sunday. But he didn't clarify whether this was the Roman Sun god, Apollo, or the Son of God, Jesus Christ. So people in Rome could pick who they worshipped as long as it was on Sunday.^{xviii} It didn't take long for public worship of Christ to eclipse the worship of the Sun god, Apollo. The pagans' Sun was eclipsed. Following Constantine, more laws were passed that made it illegal for people to publicly worship the old gods at all. So in a fairly short time, the old religions were only found in outlying villages called *pagi*--where "paganism" got its name.^{xix} From the point of view of public life in

the religiously transformed empire, the host of gods and goddess and the priests, their earthly "messengers" or angels, even the pagan religion itself (the sky), had vanished and fallen.

17 years after the Edict of Milan, Constantine established Constantinople as the capital of his new "Roman" Empire. Idols of the old gods were taken from their temples and scattered throughout Constantinople as public decorations--in the eyes of the people they were demoted from sacred to secular.^{xx} The famous statue of Apollo, the sun god Constantine continued to worship for a long time, was moved to the new capital and put on top of a 120' monument. But Constantine had a sculptor remove the god's head and put his own head on the body.^{xxi} So it was not so much that the Empire became Christian, as that the power of the ancient Roman gods seemed to have been eclipsed. Constantine was not converted, at least not until his deathbed. He wasn't motivated by being born again, he was motivated by what seemed like a good strategy even if it was unpopular with the old elites. One historian argues that previous emperors had tried to regain the old glory of the Roman Empire through enforcing paganism but "Constantine believed that it could best be achieved on the basis of Christianity. Some of the staunchest opponents of this policy were in Rome, particularly in its Senate, where the members of the old aristocracy bemoaned *the eclipse of their ancient gods...*" (italics mine).^{xxii} Historians have pointed out that while Constantine's knowledge of "the Christian message was meager",^{xxiii} he clearly believed that Christ was powerful. "For him, the Christian God was a very powerful being who would support him as long as he favored the faithful."^{xxiv} Constantine's enemies had a superstitious fear of Christ while he himself had a superstitious respect for Christ. His influence married Christianity to political power, and this continued for a long time.^{xxv}

The Lamb is Good News or Bad News

Christians today are often tempted to feel the same way about the decline of the status of our religion. Constantine began an era of government toleration for Christianity, with many periods of State support for Christianity.^{xxvi} Now that this era seems to be ending, we moan the eclipse of our governments' endorsement. But we shouldn't. Isn't it ironic that when Christians lose their political power, they forget who opened the sixth seal? Being the official religion has never been good for Christianity, and it has often done great harm to our Gospel message. Instead of longing for political power, as followers of the Lamb who is all-powerful, we should give ourselves to spreading the Good News: You cannot hide from the wrath of the Lamb, so instead put your hope in His mercy.

Constantine kept the religious title pagan emperors used to use, *Pontifex Maximus*,^{xxvii} the "greatest priest", but switched it to a Christian office. He oversaw church councils that dealt with heresy, like the Council of Nicea. But he allowed heretical priests to gain power in his court, and it was heretic priest named Eusebius who eventually baptized Constantine before he died, and then influenced Constantine's son to protect the spread of *Arianism*, a heresy similar to the belief of Jehovah's Witnesses today.^{xxviii} This mixing of political and religious power led to lots of trouble in the Christian Church as history continued to unfold. In verse 17 John saw all classes of people despairing because the world as they knew it was ending: Jupiter, Saturn, Apollo (the Sun god), and Mars had been overthrown by Christ. And they were afraid the Day of Judgement had come. But the frightened voices in verse 17 were wrong: "the great day of their wrath" had not arrived. It is still to come: this seal is only the end of chapter 6—Jesus doesn't come back until chapter 20! Which means that as we begin to see how this seal was fulfilled with its earthquakes, eclipses, falling stars, vanishing skies, and removal of mountains; seeing how the Lamb opening the sixth seal sovereignly punished Romans for their foolish ways, their false

beliefs, vindicated His fallen saints, and demolished their futile delusions, what will you do now? Do you see how ironic it is that they were afraid of the Lamb? The Lamb that appeared as though slain? The Lamb who already gave His life for theirs if only they would turn and be saved through faith in Him? The Lamb can save you. Don't wait for Him to judge you. But don't doubt for a moment that He is coming.

ⁱ Subsequently to preaching this message on July 1, 2018, I found 3 other occurrences of this same phrase, “great earthquake” in Hebrew: “רַעַשׁ גְּדוֹל”-once I broadened the parameters to exclude the waw prefix: Ezekiel 3:12, 13; Ezekiel 38:19. The first two are connected with Ezekiel’s inaugural vision of the awesome presence of God. The third is in the context of God’s judgement upon Gog, with the stated purpose of showing God’s “greatness and... holiness... Then they will know that I am the LORD” (Eze 38:23). Because there are three other occurrences of this phrase, it is not right to claim, as I did in my sermon, that the application must be the same as in Jeremiah 10:22-24. Nonetheless, the application I suggested, “to turn us from our foolish ways”, is still a legitimate application from these other texts.

ⁱⁱ Cuninghame, quoted by Oral Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007) p. 150, fn. 48.

ⁱⁱⁱ Collins, p151, fn49.

^{iv} McClintock & Strong Cyclopedia, "Astronomy". BibleWorks Edition.

^v See for example, Nicoll, Expositor's Greek New Testament, "Rev 12:12", BibleWorks Edition: "the Babylonian Damkina, mother of the young god Marduk and “queen of the heavenly tiara” (i.e., the stars, cf. Schrader, pp. 360, 361). For Hebrew applications of the symbolism cf. Gen 37:9-10 and Test. Naph. v. (καὶ Ἰούδας ἦν λαμπρὸς ὡς ἡσελήνη καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦς πόδας αὐτοῦ ἦσαν ἰβ' ἀκτίνες). The Egyptian Osiris was also wrapt in a flame-coloured robe—the sun being the “body” of deity (Plut. de Iside. 51)."

^{vi} “Though the ancient Hebrews believed that God made all the heavenly bodies, including the stars (Heb. kôḳāb; Gen. 1:16; Amos 5:8), it was widely believed by many ancient people that the stars were cosmic deities (Isa. 47:13). Belief in the animation of the stars was never a major tenet among the Hebrew people, though such beliefs were sometimes echoed in periods of monotheistic apostasy (Amos 5:26). The Torah prohibited the worship of the stars (Deut. 4:19; 17:2-5). Nevertheless, the people of Israel were familiar with astronomical observations and constellations (Job 38:31-32; Isa. 13:10; Amos 5:8)...

Stars are sometimes used as symbols for angels. Job 38:7 alludes to the sons of God (angels) as morning stars. Similarly, in Rev. 1:20 the seven stars of the vision are identified as angels of the seven churches. This is probably also the sense of Dan. 8:10, where the little horn caused some of the “host of heaven” and the stars to fall to the earth (cf. Isa. 14:12-13; Rev. 12:4). Jude 13 calls certain apostates in the Church “wandering stars” (cf. the unfaithful angels in 1 Enoch).” [Mark R. Fairchild, Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, "Star". BibleWorks Edition.]

^{vii} These are the preaching elders of the local churches in Revelation 1:20 and in the seven letters in chapters 2-3. This raises an interesting possibility regarding why the symbol of the four living creatures in Revelation 4-6 also stands for preachers. In the case of the living creatures they stand for all preachers. In the case of the stars in Revelation 1:20, a star stands for an individual preacher to a particular church. Someone might object that it’s confusing to interpret a star and a living creature as both symbolizing preaching elders in churches. But I would respond that the two symbols are needed to differentiate between the collective “all preachers”, and the particular preacher. When symbolizing preachers as a collective, under the symbol of the four living creatures, if the symbol had just been a man with four faces—a lion, ox, man, and eagle (Rev 4:7)—we would naturally interpret it in connection with the four banners of the tribes of Israel (see my explanation in my sermon on Revelation 4:8-11, May 20, 2018). And we would infer therefore that the symbol is about representative leaders of God’s people in the Church. But because the symbol is specifically “living creatures” with these faces, like the cherubim, and with six wings like the seraphim, mixing features together drawn from two different kinds of angelic beings, we are assured that the symbol does in fact refer to “representative leaders of God’s people in the Church”, who are also “messengers” (the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words for “angel”), i.e., preachers. Because there are just four of them, drawn from the banner-holders of the camp of Israel, they stand for all those who lead God’s people in local churches. Because they are angels, they therefore stand for all those who relay God’s Word to local churches. So when Revelation uses the symbol of living creatures, it means all preaching elders, and when it uses the symbol of stars in the context of the Church it means a particular preacher or group of

preaching elders. When it uses stars in the context of a non-church setting, it refers to particular secular or civic leaders.

^{viii} *The Gospel Transformation Study Bible*, "Isaiah 34:1-17" (Crossway Books) Olive Tree edition.

^{ix} John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, "Isaiah 42:15", Online Bible Edition.

^x ESV Study Bible, note on "Isaiah 42:15" (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p.1316.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, note on "Isaiah 2:12-16", p. 1245.

^{xii} Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), p.106.

^{xiii} Gonzalez, 107

^{xiv} Gonzalez, p. 124

^{xv} Gonzalez p107; D.F. Wright, "Constantine the Great", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978) p255.

^{xvi} Gonzalez, p117

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} Gonzalez, p.123

^{xix} Elliott, p. 246. Also see Merriam-Webster, "pagan" and "What do pagan and heathen really mean?"

[<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pagan>] Accessed June 28, 2018.

^{xx} c.f. Gonzalez, p.119

^{xxi} Gonzalez, p. 120

^{xxii} Gonzalez, p.118

^{xxiii} Gonzalez, p.122

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*

^{xxv} In my sermon, I said this continued for 250 years. This is wrong. I didn't double-check the dates. The end of this era must be no later than the end of the Western Empire I think. Collins seems to suggest 450AD, but Elliott is more likely right that the era marks the establishment of Christianity in the State, causing fear among non-Christians. Theodosius did not give even Jews the protection of the law, though his mass slaughter suggests he was not a true believer. But he himself finally bowed to the authority of the church (Gonzalez, pp192-193). This was the end of the beginning of the establishment of Christianity as the official religion. It coincides with the holding off of the barbarian invasions indicated by Rev 7:1.

^{xxvi} Gonzalez, p113

^{xxvii} Wikipedia, "Pontifex Maximus" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontifex_maximus]. Accessed June 28, 2018.

^{xxviii} Peter Toon, "Eusebius (of Nicomedia)", *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p.355; Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Arianism", *Ibid.*, p67.