



Revelation - Chapter Six

III. Revelation 4:1-7:17 - The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (continues)

Summary of Chapter Six

The Lamb begins to open the seven seals. The first seal was opened and John saw a white horse with a rider who had a bow, and a crown that was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

The second seal was opened and he saw another horse, bright red in colour. The rider of this horse was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword representing war.

When the lamb opened the third seal John saw a black horse whose rider had a pair of scales in his hands. He also heard a voice which said 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!', representing famine.

Then, with the opening of the fourth seal, John saw a pale horse and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him, representing death and pestilence. They were given authority over a quarter of the earth to kill.

When the fifth seal was opened, John saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God and for their witness. They cried out for the Lord to avenge their blood on those who dwell on earth but were given white robes and told to wait a little longer.

At the opening of the sixth seal a great earthquake took place, and the sun became black, and the moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell. After this everyone on earth hid themselves in caves and called to the mountains and rocks to fall on them to hide them from God.

III.b Revelation 6:1-7:17 - The Lamb starts to open the scroll's seven seals

As the vision of the Son of Man introduced edicts to seven churches in Chapters 2-3, so the vision of the Lamb's receiving the scroll (4:1-5:14) introduces a series of seven visions as the scroll's seals are broken. These visions introduce

instruments employed by the Lamb to bring his enemies to justice (seals 1-4), the rationale for his righteous wrath (seals 5 and 7), and the climax of judgment at history's end (seal 6). Many who take a futurist view of Revelation, refer to the document on Schools of Interpretation on the website, hold that the 'great tribulation' (see 7:14) begins with the opening of the first seal (6:1). Other futurists think the great tribulation begins in Chapter 11 with the 1,260 days.

III.b.i Revelation 6:1-17 - The First Six Seals

As the Lamb opens each of the first four seals, one of the living creatures shouts 'Come!' and a horse with its rider or riders responds to the summons. The horses' colours generally reflect those of the horses in Zechariah 1:8-11 and 6:1-8, symbolising emissaries sent by God to patrol the earth. Only by the Lamb's permission and under his direction can the forces, symbolised by these horses and their riders, inflict death through sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. The seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments all have a format of four judgments on the earth, plus three cosmic judgments.

- ¹ Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, 'Come!'
² I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

Revelation 6:1-2

I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals. Many futurists understand this to mark the beginning of the great tribulation. However it may be interpreted, it is clear that this is the start of a highly symbolic process for the scroll cannot be literally read until all seven seals are opened, that is how the sealing process works. What its contents and purpose are is not yet revealed but each seal invokes imagery of violence and destruction. What is also made clear is that the opening of the first four seals is a joint work of Christ and the four living creatures who respond with a voice of thunder Come! The result of each of these commands is that a different rider goes forth to undertake a mission.

The rider on the white horse, armed with a bow and given a crown, rode forth conquering and to conquer. In Revelation white is normally symbolic of purity and goodness, such as the white stone given in 2:17 and the white garments used to robe those who persevere (3:4-5 and 3:18), as well as those worn by the twenty-four elders and Jesus. Therefore, some think this rider represents Christ, the sword-wielding 'Word of God' who rides a white horse in 19:11-16. However, this rider, armed with a bow, like the Parthians a frequent enemy on the Roman Empire's eastern border, probably symbolises political and military leaders' destabilising quest to expand their realms, leading to war - the red horse (v.4); to famine - the black horse (vv.5-6); and to epidemic disease - the pale horse (v.8). Others think this rider on the white horse represents the Antichrist, who is, by definition, a counterfeit of Jesus Christ. He is the only one of the four riders to wear a crown, symbolising his importance: <<**Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak**>> (Zechariah 6:11).

Although there will never be total agreement with regard to the first rider's identity, the concern over false prophets in Chapters 2-3 suggests false prophecy as the most likely interpretation. This would parallel Jesus' last discourse in Mark, where false prophets are one of the signs, indeed the first sign, of the end of the age: <<False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect>> (Mark 13:22).

³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, 'Come!' ⁴ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

Revelation 6:3-4

He opened the second seal. The next horse was red, the colour of blood. Its rider was given a great sword, symbolising permission to take peace from the earth, with the result that warring armies slay each other. The pursuit of conquest brings bloodshed.

Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another. Futurists see this as representing the spread of war over the earth in the middle of the great tribulation. Jesus had said this would result from his First Coming even though its purpose was for reconciliation and salvation: <<Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword>> (Matthew 10:34).

⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, 'Come!' I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, ⁶ and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!'

Revelation 6:5-6

The third seal. The rider on the black horse carries scales for measuring grains and their prices. A heavenly voice comments on the significance of the pair of scales in the rider's hand, citing inflated grain prices at 8 to 10 times the normal price for John's day. Siege and disruption of commercial routes will produce scarcity, driving prices up; refer to Deuteronomy 28:49-57, 2 Kings 6:24-25 and 7:1-2.

That a voice came from the midst of the four living creatures gives an insight into it being the words of either Jesus or God, for they were the ones surrounded by these creatures.

Local crops such as olive oil and wine are unaffected, however, showing that the scarcity is limited to the necessities of wheat and barley, not comprehensive. Some think the command not to damage the olive oil and the wine may have a social significance, since the rich were the primary consumers of olive oil and the

wine. It could also be a prediction of events like that of AD92, when the emperor Domitian during a grain shortage ordered the vineyards cut down to make room for more wheat fields. This caused such a backlash that he rescinded the order. In other words, extreme measures would have to be taken due to the progressive pouring out of judgement. A quart is approximately 1kg and a day's pay was a Denarius.

⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, 'Come!' ⁸ I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

Revelation 6:7-8

The fourth seal released Death to ride the pale green horse, Greek *chlōros*, probably either yellowish green or greyish green, representing the colour of corpses. Death had Hades following close behind him. Their authority to kill is limited to a fourth of the earth: God's providence restrains both his own wrath and humanity's violence.

Hades, Hebrew *She'ol*, can represent a common grave or the underworld, but it is normally associated with the abode of the human soul after death, where it awaits the Day of the Lord and the general resurrection of the dead.

To kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, Greek *thanatos*, literally death but here meaning epidemic disease, such as bubonic plague, sum up the disasters symbolised by the red, black and pale horses. They also echo covenant curses inflicted on Jerusalem in the exile, as recorded in Ezekiel 14:12-21. Note that *thanatos* appears twice in v.8 for Death and pestilence respectively.

The death of a fourth of the earth would bring great suffering as Jesus had warned: <<***For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be***>> (Matthew 24:21 ESV), which futurists take as support for viewing Revelation Chapters 6-19 as representing the great tribulation.

They were given authority. Whether they refers specifically to Death and Hades or to all four horsemen is the subject of debate. It can be seen from the foregoing passages that to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth can be applied to all as well as to the final pairing.

It should also be noted that their authority for such devastation comes from Jesus. Through the prophet, God had warned Israel of just such judgement as this: <<***And when they say to you, 'Where shall we go?' you shall say to them: Thus says the Lord: Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity. And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says the Lord: the sword to kill, the dogs to drag away, and the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth to devour and destroy***>> (Jeremiah 15:2-3).

It is clear that these four terrible horsemen all stand under the sovereignty of God and the Lamb, who opens the seals. They all ride out at the bidding of the four living creatures who worship at God's throne. Whatever dreadful things may happen on earth, they are all within God's plan and under God's sovereign control. God in effect is the one who draws the bow and sends out the arrows of misfortune, here no less than in: *<<I will heap disasters upon them, spend my arrows against them: wasting hunger, burning consumption, bitter pestilence. The teeth of beasts I will send against them, with venom of things crawling in the dust. In the street the sword shall bereave, and in the chambers terror, for young man and woman alike, nursing child and old grey head>> (Deuteronomy 32:23-25), or: <<You shall be a mockery and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to the nations around you, when I execute judgements on you in anger and fury, and with furious punishments – I, the Lord, have spoken – when I loose against you my deadly arrows of famine, arrows for destruction, which I will let loose to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you, and break your staff of bread. I will send famine and wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children; pestilence and bloodshed shall pass through you; and I will bring the sword upon you. I, the Lord, have spoken>> (Ezekiel 5:15-17). John is not blaming God for these calamities; he is issuing a warning to those who do not accept Christ and encouragement for those who do, for his sovereign judgement will prevail.*

Listing calamities to come was common in Jewish and Christian prophecy, not least in prophecies attributed to Jesus, for example: *<<For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places>> (Matthew 24:7), <<When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come>> (Mark 13:7), and: <<When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately>> (Luke 21:9). Jesus said that such disasters were: <<the beginning of the birth pangs>> (Mark 13:8b), and that they must occur. Similarly in John's vision, the things described under the first four seals are harbingers of more terrible judgments to come.*

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; ¹⁰ they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' ¹¹ They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

Revelation 6:9-11

The fifth seal reveals the Lamb's rationale for releasing combatants to devastate the earth.

Under the altar in God's throne room in heaven, where sacrificial blood would traditionally pool: <<*You shall bring the bull in front of the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull, and you shall slaughter the bull before the Lord, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and all the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar*>> (Exodus 29:10-12), and: <<*The priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense that is in the tent of meeting before the Lord; and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt-offering, which is at the entrance of the tent of meeting*>> (Leviticus 4:7), John sees the souls of believers who had been slaughtered. Thus they are pictured as sacrifices, for bearing witness to the word of God: <<*Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years*>> (Revelation 20:4).

There is a viewpoint that, since John uses the term 'under the altar' rather than the more familiar 'at the base of or before the altar' then he may not have been witnessing the souls of those in heaven but of those far below, still on earth!

The souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given. Even though they had faced persecution from Jews, such as Stephen and James, and under Nero, including the deaths of Peter and Paul, Christian martyrdom was not yet widespread when this vision was given. Also, Christian martyrs are usually acknowledged as bearing testimony to Jesus. Therefore, it may be that this scene includes OT martyrs as well as those who had already died for Christ. Some, however, see it as an image of the martyrs who were yet to give their lives for their faith.

These souls are not disembodied spirits for they have a voice and are visible to John. Like Abel, God's first martyr, <<*he died, but through his faith he still speaks*>> (Hebrews 11:4b), they cry out for justice to be done. Their prayer is the heart of the fifth seal. It is the prime example of what was meant by <<*the prayers of the saints*>> (5:8b).

Their lament: how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth echoes that of the psalmists: <<*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?*>> (Psalm 13:1), <<*How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself for ever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?*>> (Psalm 89:46), and: <<*How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?*>> (Psalm 119:84). The surprising answer is that the Lamb will restrain his wrath against his witnesses' assailants until the last martyr has been slain, until the number would be complete both of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed. Until then, the souls of deceased saints will rest a little longer (14:13) in a white robe of victory and purity. The rest of the book progressively shows how the Lord answers their

prayers to avenge their deaths, beginning in vv.15-17 with the very ones who had put them to death.

There are some who take offence that these martyrs seem to be calling for vengeance rather than forgiveness as is seen elsewhere in the Bible, especially from the Cross: <<*Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'*>> (Luke 23:34a). The question is 'are they seeking vengeance or justice?' Jesus also said: <<*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?*>> (Luke 18:7). At God's command, Elisha had sent an assistant to anoint Jehu as king in order to avenge God's people for the harsh treatment they had endured under Ahab and Jezebel: <<*You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord*>> (2 Kings 9:7). The prophet wrote: <<*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*>> (Amos 5:24), and nowhere in the NT is that countermanded. It seems appropriate therefore to ask God for justice and then leave it to him: <<*For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'* And again, 'The Lord will judge his people'>> (Hebrews 10:30).

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

Revelation 6:12-17

The sixth seal shows a preview of the coming destruction of the first heaven and earth (20:11 and 21:1) at the full display of the wrath of the Lamb. The slaughtered Lamb of sacrifice in the centre of the throne is no passive victim, but 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah'. The Lamb's role in judgment should come as no surprise in light of his equality and partnership with him who sits on the throne in the worship of the elders, living creatures and all creation (5:13). From this point on, God and the Lamb never act independently, but always in unison. When they act together in judgment, the inevitable question is: who is able to stand?

A great earthquake previously announced the terrifying arrival of the Lord in his glory: <<*Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently*>> (Exodus 19:18), <<*The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth*>> (Psalm 97:5), <<*And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the*

flame of a devouring fire>> (Isaiah 29:5b-6), and: <<*For in my jealousy and in my blazing wrath I declare: On that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel; the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and the animals of the field, and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all human beings that are on the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground*>> (Ezekiel 38:19-20). However, his Second Coming will shake both earth and heaven: <<*For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land*>> (Haggai 2:6), and: <<*At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' This phrase 'Yet once more' indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain*>> (Hebrews 12:26-27). Most of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation Chapters 2-3 had experienced devastating earthquakes during the century before the book of Revelation was written. Christians in these cities could graphically envision earthquakes preceding the Lord's terrifying arrival.

John sees the sun become as black as sackcloth, the full moon turned blood red, the stars cast like figs from a fig tree in a gale, the sky vanished like a scroll, and every mountain and island displaced: <<*All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree*>> (Isaiah 34:4), <<*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed*>> (2 Peter 3:10). The luminaries that have marked earth's times since creation: <<*And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.'* And it was so>> (Genesis 1:14-15), will be removed. All of this communicates the truth that the end has finally arrived.

Rebellious humanity, from kings and the rich and the powerful, and everyone else, including both slave and free, will seek cover from God and the Lamb, begging the mountains and rocks fall on us and hide us: <<*On that day people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth*>> (Isaiah 2:20-21), and: <<*The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars. They shall say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, Fall on us*>> (Hosea 10:8), <<*Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes*>> (Joel 1:15), and: <<*For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head*>> (Obadiah 15). The great day of their wrath has come indeed!

Their desperate question: who is able to stand in the face of God and the Lamb: <<*But you indeed are awesome! Who can stand before you when once your anger is roused?*>> (Psalm 76:7), <<*The mountains quake before him, and the*

hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and by him the rocks are broken in pieces>> (Nahum 1:5-6), <<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; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness>> (Malachi 3:2-3), assumes that none can. Yet John is about to see those who stand by grace (7:1-17).

The stars of the sky fell to the earth. Those who do not view the sixth seal as predicting the destruction of the first heaven and earth, in light of the presence of stars in the sky in 8:12, believe that this may refer to a massive meteor shower.

The final passage of this chapter is one of utter devastation. Yet it contains all that Jesus had foretold would happen with the exception of one important element: <<Jesus said, 'I am; and "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power", and "coming with the clouds of heaven"'>> (Mark 14:62), and: <<For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16). John is not seeing that in this part of the vision but it will certainly take place.