

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>21</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 6:1-17</b>		
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### THE FOUR HORSEMEN (Part 1)

“Human minds,” writes Gerald Bray, “with their own notions of right and wrong, will never be able to plumb the depths of God’s judgment. Our minds are finite and our perceptions are relative. The story of Esau and Jacob, the twin sons of Isaac, reminds us of this. Jacob stole his brother’s birthright by deceit and inhumanity toward the starving Esau (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:1-38). It is true that Esau sold his birthright, which he should not have done, but in the circumstances it is hard to condemn him severely for that. By any normal standard of human judgment, Esau was badly treated, and Jacob should never have been allowed to get away with his behavior. And yet what does the Bible say? *Is not Esau Jacob’s brother? declares the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.* (Mal. 1:2-3). That this was more than just a matter of preferring Judah over Edom (the descendants of Esau), which the original text might suggest, is made clear by the apostle Paul, who quoted it in connection with his far-reaching discourse on divine election (Rom. 9:13). Paul was well aware that God’s choice was unjust from a (fallen) human perspective, but God’s righteousness and justice are not necessarily what we would expect. We have no right to call God unjust merely because we do not like what he has done or do not understand it. His mind and will set the standard by which justice is to be measured, and we all fall short of that in one way or another. Nobody has any claim on God’s mercy, and those who think that they do are the guiltiest of all. This is the context in which we must place God’s wrath, a much misunderstood concept that needs to be properly rehabilitated. Wrath is an expression of his righteousness, as Paul makes clear in Romans 9:19-24. Disobedience to God’s will comes at a price, and that price is destruction. This is not the result of some inner divine nastiness but the inevitable application of his justice to creatures who have provoked him and invited their own demise.”<sup>1</sup>

- I. **SEALS BROKEN AND CONTENTS DISCLOSED.** Dennis Johnson helpfully sets the stage: “The breaking of a scroll’s seals was preparatory to disclosing its contents. The measured pace by which the Lamb breaks the seals in succession, each accompanied by a new vision, builds suspense and anticipation in Revelation’s hearers. Not until all seven are broken can the events prescribed in the scroll be disclosed. Yet the visions that accompany the breaking of the seals not only tantalize our curiosity; they also prepare us to understand the visions that John will see when the seventh seal is shattered. The first four seals belong together, as will the first four trumpets and bowls in later series. Two features link the first four seals with each other. As the Lamb breaks the first four seals, the four living creatures, one after another, issue a thunderous summons, *Come*. Responding to the living creatures’ summons are four horses with riders. In each case the horse and its color appear first, then its rider and his significance. The colors of the horses (white, red, black, and ashen/pale) roughly correspond to the colors of chariot horses (red, black, white, dappled) in one of Zechariah’s visions (Zech. 6:1-8). The chariots that appeared to Zechariah symbolized *the four spirits* [or winds] *of heaven*, sent out from the Lord’s presence to the four points of the compass, bringing judgment on the nations that had oppressed Judah. John likewise sees four horses

and riders gallop through the earth, summoned by God's attendants to wreak havoc on his enemies. The first four seals show the instruments that the Lamb uses to judge those who oppose his rule and oppress his church. The breaking of the fifth seal opens a window on the rationale that lies behind the release of these horses of judgment to roam through the earth. Those martyred for the sake of God's word and their testimony about Jesus cry out for justice, echoing the psalmists' lament, *How long?* Although their vindication must await the end of this age of divine forbearance – the age in which the number of martyrs is being filled to completion – their lament has not fallen on deaf ears. Both the restrained expressions of the Lamb's wrath through human aggression in the present (seals 1-4) and the unlimited display of his wrath in the dissolution of the universe at the climax of history (seal 6) show that the martyrs' blood is not forgotten. The fifth seal's vision of martyred souls under the altar anticipates the seventh seal, when John will see the prayers of embattled saints offered with incense upon the heavenly altar (8:1-5)."<sup>2</sup>

II. ***THE RIDER ON THE WHITE HORSE.*** The identity of the rider has been strongly debated. Some argue that it is Christ or as he is presented in the preaching of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, another very capable Evangelical commentator, gives seven very compelling reasons that in all probability point to Christ being the rider on the White Horse.<sup>4</sup> However, as Stern points out, "Some consider the **rider** on the **white horse** to be the Messiah depicted as a **conqueror** (as at 19:11ff.) in the sense that his Gospel conquers the world. But this makes him only one rider among many; moreover, the rest of the *four horsemen of the Apocalypse bring judgment, not relief. Better to see this rider as bringing judgment in the form of war and conquest.*"<sup>5</sup> Keener concurs and notes, "The very image of an archer on a white horse would strike terror into the heart of a pro-Roman reader. The only mounted archers of antiquity were the Parthians, whose tactics and skills had made them Rome's most feared enemies; old Persian armies, whose heirs the Parthians were, always included sacred white horses. Although the Old Testament uses the *bow* as a symbol of judgment by battle more generally, Roman readers would think of this eastern nation that had defeated them in some recent wars; Parthians' skill as archers was common knowledge. Other contemporary \*apocalyptic writers (\*Similitudes of Enoch) also suggested a dreaded Parthian invasion, hence ancient readers would have readily understood that this horseman meant conquest and war."<sup>6</sup> There are those who hold that the rider is in fact the Antichrist and represents false teaching, but I agree with James Boice: "I think it is too early in the book of Revelation to apply to the vision of the rider on the white horse what is said of the Antichrist, who does not appear until much later; and the similarities between the description of this rider and the vision of Christ riding a horse in Revelation 19 are all weak. The Christ of chapter 19 carries a bow. The Christ of chapter 19 was been crowned with *many crowns*. This rider has only one crown. The words for *crown* are not even the same – in chapter 19 the word for *crown* is *diadema*, which is the royal diadem of authority; while the word in chapter 6 is *stephanos*, which is the wreath of victory at athletic games. In addition, Christ *has* conquered. This rider is merely *conquering, and to conquer*. A few historical details also point in the direction of this horse and rider representing conquest. The rider of Revelation 6 has a bow, and the bow was the characteristic weapon of the Parthian cavalry, for whom white was also a sacred color. The Parthians were a threat to the eastern flank of the Roman Empire at this time, having defeated a Roman army in AD 62 – not many years before John wrote his apocalypse. What John may be suggesting, then, under divine inspiration, is a successful Parthian invasion that would disrupt the Roman peace, which would mean world war. Incidentally, a historical memory of the fear with which the Romans regarded the Parthian army survives in our English expression *a parting shot* – meaning a final retort. Originally the expression was *a Parthian shot*, and it referred to the accurate, devastating arrows of the Parthian archers who were able to strike and kill enemies while they were

galloping on their horses. Revelation 6:2 may also be merely a picture of any conquering general. When a Roman general celebrated a triumph, he either rode through Rome on a white horse or entered the city riding a chariot that was pulled by white horses. Noting this and other arguments, Leon Morris says (rightly, in my opinion), *The four horsemen must surely be taken together, and they all indicate destruction, horror, terror. This one surely stands for war.* Similarly, Robert Mounce summarizes this image by saying, *John has in mind military conquests in general.*<sup>7</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** “The clearest indication that the first rider of Revelation 6 is Christ’s instrument of judgment but not Christ is this rider’s association with the three that follow him, since it is beyond dispute that they symbolize disasters that lead to loss of life: violent warfare, siege and famine, and finally epidemic pestilence and the grave. All four ride forth to afflict the earth in obedience to the cherubim’s commands. The rider of the white horse could well be called Conquest. It is appropriate that he lead this terrible calvary of violence, famine, and death, for the expansionist aspirations of rulers precipitate military conflict and scarcity of such resources as food and medicine, leading to malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and death. He is armed with a bow, the weapon of the feared Parthian mounted archers who threatened the Roman Empire’s eastern boundary in the first century – a grim reminder to those who dwelt in the east (Asia, for instance) that the celebrated *Pax Romana* was not as inviolable as the Caesars’ devotees believed. Yet this portrait of human avarice for power, galloping greedily through its present domain toward regions yet to conquer, is nothing more than God’s instrument of judgment, sent forth by the Lamb through his breaking of the first seal.”<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. Bray, *The Attributes of God: An Introduction* (Crossway, 2021), p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> D. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Ladd argues that the rider is not Christ himself but symbolizes the proclamation of the Gospel into all the world cf. his *Commentary on Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of The Book of Revelation* (Baker, 1940), p. 93-96.

<sup>5</sup> D. H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (JNTP, 1989), p. 808.

<sup>6</sup> C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVP, 1993), p. 779.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons From The Apocalypse* (P&R, 2020), p. 204.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, op. cit., p. 119.