

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE FOUR HORSEMEN (Part 2)

Signs of the times is an expression that we associate with the end times. Berkouwer perceptively observes: “The purpose of discerning the signs, then, is to gain an understanding of the times. *You know what hour it is*, Paul says (Rom. 13:11). He is not crediting his readers with a theoretical insight into the philosophy of history and all of its ramifications, nor is he suggesting that they preoccupy themselves with an *end-time* distinct from their own time. No, Paul’s point is clear: *it is full time now for you to wake from sleep*. Such is the description of the *kairos*. How simply the New Testament talks about knowing and understanding time in the illumination of the eschatological expectation. In the light of the time that is coming it becomes possible to understand one’s own contemporary situation. This understanding does not include an answer to Augustine’s unanswerable *quid est ergo tempus?* This is an understanding of time from the point of view of the salvation that has appeared and is being proclaimed. On the road to the fulfilment, the harvest, we have *kairos*, the opportunity to do what is good (Gal. 6:10). We must *make the most of the time* (Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5). That is possible only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes so that no mistake is possible. Our knowledge of events is fraught with hesitation and uncertainty; explanations elude us. International tensions repeatedly bring to light our fallibility and finiteness. But what does the New Testament have to say about understanding time? A simple insight, a clear discernment into profound motives in the light of the Lord: *You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know* (1 John 2:20). This was written during a perilous period in the history of the community, when the lie threatened to replace the truth of God. This *knowing* is not an esoteric secret, nor is the *anointing* something to be arrogant about. It is a knowledge from the Spirit, founded in Jesus Christ, who has not abandoned His elect, but guides them into all the truth (John 16:13). In this clarity and simplicity there is something that calls forth our endurance when the complexities of human existence threaten to engulf us and obscure our vision. This simplicity and consolation cannot be lost unless we see the signs of the times from the fulfilment of time in Christ’s coming (Mark 1:15). The church must realize and understand that the night is far gone and the day at hand (Rom. 13:12). It is called to this insight in times of chaos and in times of prosperity and progress. The Kingdom of God is coming – in grace and judgment – and it compels us to make decisions with regard to everything that alienates man from salvation and everything that confirms him in it. This is how *time* should be understood by the Christian community. The language of the last things is not the language of the spectacular or the supernatural; nor is it dependent on the evolution of one’s worldview. It is too simple and childlike to satisfy scientific demands. But it was for this childlikeness that Jesus thanked His Father (Matt. 11:26). Childlike, we understand the call to steadfastness *all the more as you see the Day drawing near* (Heb. 10:25).”¹

- I. **THE SECOND HORSEMAN.** The rider of the White Horse rides away and is immediately followed by one on a red horse. The word *purros* means “blood red.” It is used in the Old Testament of the red heifer in Numbers 19:1-10. This is the only time that the color of a sacrificial animal is described. The NIV translates this *a fiery red one*, a color used elsewhere

to describe the dragon (Rev. 12:3). “This is the right color for describing fresh blood spilled in battle. The rider of this horse, as did the first one, has three descriptive phrases. He had power to take peace from the earth; he could make men slay each other; and he had a large sword. Like the first rider, these were given or allowed by God, who is Lord over earth’s battlefields. This rider is symbolic. He is *Warfare* personified. Inevitably he has followed throughout time the first rider *Conquest*. His sword is not the large two-edged sword (see v. 8) but the dagger used in hand-to-hand combat. The long history of warfare amply demonstrates the battle-lust that can infect a society so that people want to kill and destroy.”²

II. **THE THIRD HORSEMAN.** “The rider of the black horse, called forth by the living creature, carries a pair of balance scales for measuring grain. These are interpreted by *something like a voice in the midst of the four living creatures* – apparently the voice of the Lamb (5:6) or of God on his throne (4:6) – quoting exorbitant grain prices (*a quart of wheat for a denarius, three quarts of barley for a denarius*) but also ordering that there be no shortage of oil and wine. Local farming made the province of Asia self-sufficient in two of the three major agricultural products of the Mediterranean, olive oil and wine. Only for grains, the third crop, least expensive but most essential to sustain life, were the cities of Asia dependent on import, especially from Egypt and what is now Ukraine. Since a quart of wheat was considered one day’s supply for one soldier and a denarius was one day’s wage for an agricultural laborer, the price quoted means that a worker’s entire earnings would be consumed on his allotment of bread. The usual price of a quart of wheat seems to have been roughly one-eighth of a denarius, so the price quoted here reflects 800 percent inflation in grain prices. The price is inflated by severely reduced supply, as the mention of *famine* in connection with the fourth horse’s riders shows (6:8).”³

III. **THE FOURTH HORSEMAN.** “When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, John heard the fourth living creature summon the fourth horse and rider. The fourth horse is *pale* in color (verse 8). The Greek word means a pale, sickly green, the color that starvation and disease bring to the human face. The symbolism of this horse is revealed by the name of its rider, *Death*. Following closely behind the pale horse and its rider was *Hades* (verse 8). We must keep from reading too much into this picture. John does not say whether Hades followed on another horse, rode behind Death on the pale horse, or walked along behind him. It doesn’t matter. Hades closely follows Death. In the New Testament, Hades may mean hell or the condition of the dead prior to the final judgment. In Revelation the *second death* (20:14) signifies the condition of the unbeliever that begins at death and continues through the judgment into eternal hell. But here Hades refers to *the silence of death* (Psalm 94:17) before the judgment (see 20:13).”⁴

CONCLUSION: The late James Boice puts this portion of Revelation in this context: Christ is in control. “Some writers on Revelation have trouble believing that Jesus is actually controlling war, bloodshed, famine, plague, and death – that he sends the woes that are portrayed by these horsemen. They do not want to make him the immediate cause of these judgments, arguing instead that he only permits or tolerates what unfolds here. But that is not the message of this book. The message of Revelation is that Jesus Christ is totally sovereign over all things, including the forces of evil in this world, and that he uses these things for God’s purposes, as he always has. As far as the wicked are concerned, Revelation teaches that it is Jesus himself who is the judge and the executor of the judgments that are every person’s due. Moreover, the judgments that are depicted here will get worse, which is what the unfolding series of seals, trumpets, and bowls of God’s wrath that follow the four horsemen and their judgments portend. For, after all, this is just war. The four horsemen of the

apocalypse release only what human beings unleash against one another every day. Bruce Metzger says, *There are few chapters in Revelation that speak more directly to our time than this part of chapter 6. In books, in newspapers, in magazine articles, and in radio broadcasts, we read and hear about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who are riding across the earth today. We hear the cry for justice; we sense that there must be a judgment in which the guilty will not be able to escape.*"⁵

ENDNOTES

¹G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: The Return of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 252.

²K. H. Easley, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Revelation* (Holman, 1998), p. 107.

³D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 121.

⁴W. D. Mueller, *People's Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Concordia, 2005), p. 78.

⁵J. M. Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons From The Apocalypse* (P&R, 2020), p. 209.