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Revelation Text: Chapter 6-7 (Seven Seals)

Part four of the units that deal with the text. Before we dive into Revelation 6, a look at where we are in the book.

Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting		4-5							
Scene 1		1							
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7		8:1							

In the previous recording, I covered chapters 4 and 5. Those two chapters are the introduction or the setting for the opening of the seals beginning in chapter 6:1. This sequence is interrupted by chapter 7, called a “church interlude” here. Following the interruption, the second series of seven scenes in the book of Revelation is completed in 8:1. Notice that the chapter division is unfortunate here. 8:1 describes the opening of the seventh seal and therefore belongs to chapters 6 and 7, not to chapter 8.

In chapter 5, John had noticed a scroll, representing God’s purpose for creation. It turned out the lamb was worthy to take this scroll and open it. At this point in the book, the lamb will begin to break each of the seals, and with each seal, there will be a scene that John sees and describes for us.



Four Horses and Their Riders

The first four seals form a group. The opening of each of the four brings out a horse and its rider. We get to see four horses in different colours. Before we ask the question of what each horse represents, we face a more general question of interpretation.

Does each horse represent a specific event or episode that happens only once? This is, of course, what futurism believes, the view that most of the book of Revelation is still in the future. In this case, the four riders represent disasters that are still to come, although occasionally futurists will see a beginning of fulfilment in the recent past. For instance, it has been argued that the First and Second World Wars represented one or two of these riders (of course, now that these wars are further and further away in the past, this makes less sense). But whether past or future, in this understanding, each rider represents one specific event.

Preterism, the view that the book of Revelation mostly or entirely describes things in the past, may also argue for one specific fulfilment for each seal, but in this case, it would be something related to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.



Basic Ingredients of History

In my understanding, they represent something more general. I believe we are looking at basic ingredients of history. As God's purpose moves forward, as his kingdom overcomes the kingdoms and empires of this world, beginning with the Roman Empire, these things accompany that process.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to understand this sequence as a look at imperialism, empire building, and its consequences. The four riders symbolize empire building through conquest and what follows from it.

Notice that they resemble the signs that Jesus spoke of in Mark 13 and Matthew 24. When asked about the destruction of the temple, Jesus spoke of wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, and persecution. He also stated, these things are not the end but the beginning of birth pangs. They definitely happened in the first century, before the destruction of Jerusalem. But they have happened in every century since. To a large extent, this is what history is made of.



Wasnezow, 1887, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

This painting by the Russian artist Wasnezow shows the four riders.

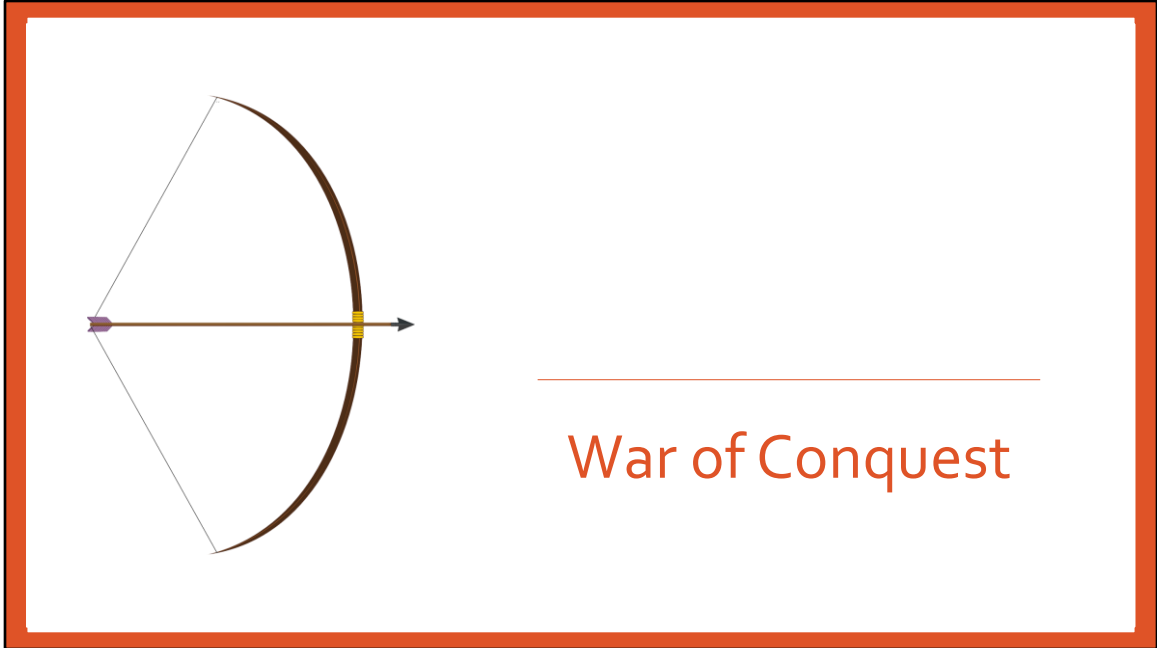
Assuming these are indeed basic components of history or the consequences of wars of conquest, what might each horse represent? The first one is white. In other places, this is a good colour. For this reason, some have argued that the white horse symbolises the gospel, moving victoriously through the world, or even that the rider on the white horse is Jesus himself. This is unlikely because Jesus is the one opening the seals. Besides, the colour white can symbolise purity, which is positive, but it can also stand for victory, which is more neutral. On a day celebrating a significant military victory, Roman citizens would sometimes dress in white. In this case, the victory is that of an empire, which is not positive. The white horse represents wars of conquest. As stated in verse 2, conquest is its goal.

Probably, the other three riders and seals five and six as well are the result of empire building. Further slaughter, famine, epidemics, persecution, and a showdown with the lamb are bound to follow. Think Ukraine; we see it happening right now, as I record this.

If this is true, we should not think of the riders as judgements sent by God but as the

result and fruit of human empire-building.

Wiktor Michajlowitsch Wasnezow, 1887, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Apocalypse_vasnetsov.jpg, CC0



Interestingly, the rider on the white horse has a bow. This would have reminded the early readers of the Parthians. The Parthians were a warlike nation living east of the Euphrates, that is, beyond the easternmost boundary of the Roman Empire. They were great horsemen and highly skilled with bow and arrow. A Parthian horseman could ride full speed, shoot an arrow, and still hit a target. Several times, the Parthians had invaded the east of the Roman Empire and done much damage. It had taken great effort to expel them.

The Roman Empire never succeeded in subduing the Parthians. They were feared by the Romans and they posed a constant threat in the east.

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Civil War

Red is the colour of blood. This rider also represents war, but of a different kind: civil war or out-of-control war and slaughter. Civil war tends to be more drawn out and bloodier than wars of conquest. Just think of Syria or the Thirty-Year War in Germany in the 17th century. In Germany, it is estimated that a third of the population perished in that conflict, many of them through famine and epidemics.



Economic Hardship

Black is obviously a bad colour. This rider comes with a pair of scales and announces the price of wheat and barley. The price is high, literally one denarius. A worker had to work a full day to earn this much. It would buy him just enough wheat for himself. He could also use it to buy barley, and then it would suffice for three people. But there would not be anything left for other expenses.

In other words, this rider represents scarcity and therefore economic hardship – which often follows war (again, think Ukraine).

The third rider is told not to harm the oil and wine (6:6). This suggests that we are still in the context of war. Oil came from olive trees and wine from vines. Both crops need many years of growth before they produce good harvests. It would be foolish, therefore, to destroy them in a war of conquest, because it would diminish the value of the territory conquered: it would need many years to recover.

Probably, therefore, these four horses represent a sequence, they are linked. They show the consequences of war and empire-building, represented by the white horse. This leads to bloodshed, famine, economic suffering, and all sorts of diseases and epidemics: the next rider.



Various Plagues and Consequences of War

He rides a pale horse. Literally, the colour is green or pale green. This is a decidedly unhealthy colour for a horse – or a human being. Its rider is Death, and he is followed by Hades, the abode of the dead in Greek mythology, and here personified as a spiritual power. Notice in verse 8 that they are given authority. What happens on earth is firmly controlled and restrained by heaven.



Souls under the Altar

Next, John gets to see the martyrs, those who had been killed because of their testimony. This, too, is something not limited to one phase of history. True believers have often been persecuted.

What does it mean that John sees them “under the altar”? This is a place of honour. It suggests that God counts their death as a precious sacrifice. In this scene, we again learn that heaven is in charge, and that things have not run out of control, even as Christians are dying. A limit has been set in the form of a number.

Image from page 316 of "Book of martyrs,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/14783089805/>, CC0



Scene 6: The End

In the remainder of chapter 6, we deal with scene number 6. As argued in the introduction, looking at the structure of the book, this marks the end, the final judgement. And indeed, what we read here sounds like the end of creation and the total collapse of the cosmos. The sun turns black, stars fall from the sky, and the sky vanishes like a scroll that is rolled up. Even though this is apocalyptic language and not to be taken literally, it still tells us we are looking at the last day.

In the OT, it is called the day of the Lord. In Revelation, it has become the day of *their* wrath: it comes from both the one seated on the throne and from the lamb (6:6f).

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TRIBE	NUMBER
Judah	12,000
Ruben	12,000
Gad	12,000
Asher	12,000
Naphtali	12,000
Manasseh	12,000
Simeon	12,000
Levi	12,000
Issachar	12,000
Zebulon	12,000
Joseph	12,000
Benjamin	12,000

At this point, the sequence of seven seals is interrupted. John hears that the servants of God need to be sealed and he hears their number: 144,000, 12,000 from each tribe of Israel.

Notice this cannot be in chronological order. After the day of wrath, there is no more need for sealing (placing them under protection) as described here.

Futurism understands this scene as the future conversion of ethnic Israel, shortly before the second coming. Presumably, so this view, all of them or at least a large majority of them will suddenly repent and turn to Christ. (Maybe; I have my doubts.)

It is also possible to understand the 144,000 as the remnant of Israel in the first century, those Jews who believed in Jesus and initially made up the NT church, before being joined by a rapidly increasing crowd of non-Jewish believers.

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Revelation:

No separation Israel-church

Two tribes are missing; tribe of Joseph?

The servants of our God (7:3; 1:1)

TRIBE	NUMBER
Judah	12,000
Ruben	12,000
Gad	12,000
Asher	12,000
Naphtali	12,000
Manasseh	12,000
Simeon	12,000
Levi	12,000
Issachar	12,000
Zebulon	12,000
Joseph	12,000
Benjamin	12,000

However, I think the text points in a different direction. To begin with, Revelation does not make a separation between Israel and the church; there is only one people of God.

Then, notice that this is a strange list of tribes. Two tribes are missing, and instead we have a tribe of Joseph. Presumably, Joseph replaces Ephraim, and Dan is left out altogether.

Third and most importantly, those who are sealed are identified as the servants of our God (7:3). This phrase points us back to the very first verse in the book, where we are told that this book is to “show his [=God’s] servants” what must soon take place. The phrase “servants of God” therefore refers to the readers of this book. This is not Israel or some group of Jewish people; this group includes all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles. This is the church.

There is one place in the OT where we also find a census of God’s people. This is in the book of Numbers. Twice in that book, the people of God are numbered. To be more precise: it is the males who are of the right age to go out in the army of Israel who are numbered. This suggests the list in Revelation 7 is also to be understood as

the army of God. And this army is the church.

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What is the seal? Based on Ephesians 1, it may well be the Holy Spirit. The seal is a sign of ownership and protection.

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144,000

=

12 X 12 X 10 X 10 X 10

Why 144,000? Well, 12 is the number of God's people: 12 tribes, 12 apostles. That there are 12,000 tells us their number is large: 10x10x10. 12,000 multiplied by 12 makes for the full and complete number of God's people.

When John hears *lion*, he
sees *lamb*
When John hears *144,000*,
he sees...

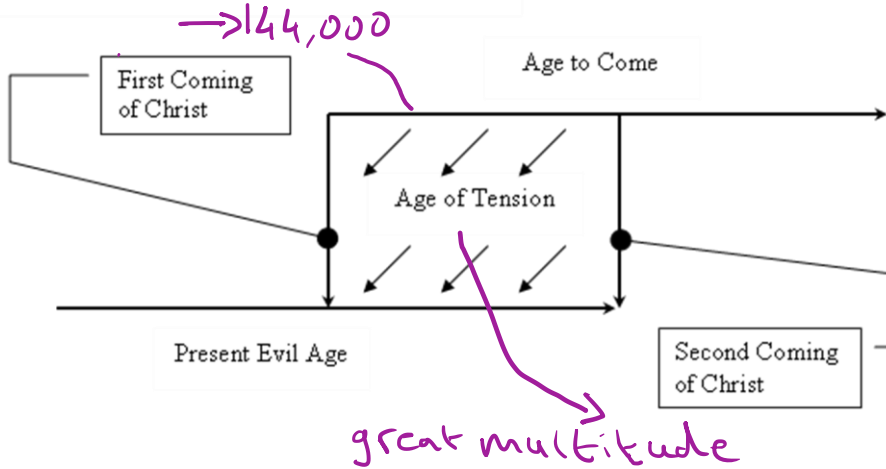


And now, something that is very important: When does John get to see them? At this point, there is a parallel to Revelation 5:5f. There, John heard about the lion of Judah, but when he looked, he saw a lamb. Here in chapter 7, John *hears* the number 144,000, but when he looks in verse 9, he *sees* a great multitude that no one can count. This means the two groups, the 144,000 and the innumerable crowd, are one and the same.

What we learn about them is this. 144,000 is the complete number of God's people; *complete*: not even one is missing. It also shows us the church as God's army. The multitude tells us that the real, non-symbolic number is huge, beyond counting.

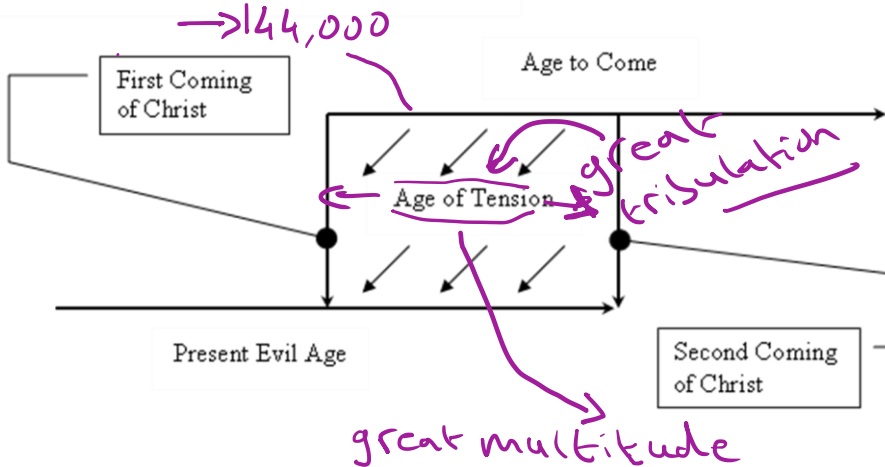
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Fig. 5: The end time according to the New Testament



On the one hand, then, this is the church marching into battle. And on the other hand, it is the great multitude of the redeemed, anticipated in Revelation 5:9f, from all ethnic groups, who here have arrived in the heavenly throne room (notice how much this scene reminds us of chapter 5). And thus, it is a look ahead, a preview. The second exodus has been completed.

Fig. 5: The end time according to the New Testament



Notice, in verse 14, that these are the ones coming out of “the great tribulation”. The great tribulation is not a short period right before Jesus returns. The great tribulation is the entire time span between the first and the second coming of Christ. It is the age of tension, the time of overlap between the present evil age and the age to come, and therefore the time of conflict between the two kingdoms. The church that marches into battle and tribulation will come out as a great multitude.

And with that knowledge, we are now ready for the last seal to be opened. This will take us beyond the end. Take a deep breath. Here we go.

We will now have half an hour of silence

(...)

That was exactly half a minute. Did that feel long? When I do this in class, often students don't make it for a full minute without saying something. Not everyone can handle this much silence, let alone half an hour.

And yet, at first sight, it feels a bit like an anti-climax. This is all? Half an hour of silence?

But then, this is the heavenly throne room. Loud and exuberant worship has been going on day and night for as long as we can imagine. And suddenly, there is silence for a full half hour. This is a long time. This is impressive. It is a solemn moment. It creates an atmosphere of awe. What does it mean?

There are parallels in the OT. Psalm 46, for instance, describes how God puts an end to war, destroying the weapons of war.

We will now have half an hour of silence

Be still, and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10)

And then, in Psalm 46:10, he demands: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

We will now have half an hour of silence

Be still, and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10)

The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep
silence before him (Hab. 2:20, ESV)

And in Habakkuk 2:20, after announcing judgement on Babylon, the prophet states:
“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”

In other words, this silence is the acknowledgement of the heavenly assembly that
God has done well, and that he is righteous and just in everything he has done.

This ends the seven seals. The empires and tyrants of this world are no more.

Credits

Horsemen: Wiktor Michajlowitsch Wasnezow, 1887, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Apocalypse_vasnetsov.jpg, CCo

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This is one of twelve units taking a closer look at the text of Revelation, section by section. You are free to pass this PDF on to others, but please don't change any of its content when you do.

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