

REVELATION

AN INTENSIVE STUDY

1

The Lion and the Lamb 4: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and Life's Greatest Question

Revelation 5:5-6

Then one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more! Look, the **Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the **Root** of David, has conquered. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” Then I saw a **Lamb**, having been slain, having taken His stand, at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The **Lamb** had **7 horns** and **7 eyes**, which is the **7-fold Spirit** of God sent out into all the earth.

*Seven-fold theme of Lamb in Scripture

The **Lion** and the **Lamb** is **God's great surprise** in His triumph over evil. It is the interpretive key for all which lies ahead: **love made invincible through sacrifice**. **The Lion** has conquered absolutely, but only as **a Lamb--total victory through total self-sacrifice**. God's triumph over sin, death, and Satan demonstrate **not His love of power, but the power of His love**:

By this one stroke of brilliant artistry John has given us the *key to all his use of the Old Testament*.... It is almost as if John is saying to us again and again: “Wherever the OT says '**Lion**,' read '**Lamb**.'”

Wherever the OT speaks of the victory of the Messiah, or the overthrow of the enemies of God, we are to remember that **the Gospel recognizes no other way of achieving these ends than the way of the Cross**.... Omnipotence is NOT to be understood as the power of unlimited coercion, but as... the **invincible power of self-negating, self-sacrificing love**. [Caird, 74-75]

Yet the **Lamb** is far more than a meek sacrifice. **Divine love is invincible**; and this Lamb unites three distinct qualities in one Person: **self-sacrificing love** (“slain”), **invincible power** (“7 horns”), and **perfect wisdom** (“7 eyes”).

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Revelation 5:9-10

“**You are worthy to take the scroll** and to open its seals, **because You were slain**, and **with Your blood You purchased for God** men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. And **You have made them to be a Kingdom** and priests to serve our God and **they will reign on the earth.**”

Because the Lamb was slain the saints reign! The Cross legitimatizes Christ's right to determine human destiny. He will act as **Judge** because He first came as **Redeemer**.

In Revelation the term “**judgment**” is equivalent to wrath (14:7ff; 16:5ff; 19:2,11). And that judgment (*krima or krisis*), for the faithful church occurred in the death of Christ (John 3:16-19). No Divine judgments in the Apocalypse are aimed at those *who follow the Lamb* (7:3; 9:4; 14:1, 6-12; 17:14).

Revelation 5:14

The **four living creatures** said, “Amen;” and the **elders** fell down and **worshiped**.

Chapter 6

The seals present the general sweep of events in the Christian as predicted by Jesus in His Olivet discourse (Matthew 24:1-51; Mark 13:1-31; Luke 21):

Rev 6	Matthew 24
1. Gospel proclaimed	1. Gospel proclaimed
2. Persecutions	2. Persecutions
3. Famine	3. Famine
4. Pestilence, wars, strife.	4. Pestilence, wars, strife
5. Eclipses of the sun and moon, falling of the stars, heaven and earth shaken, appearing of Christ.	5. Eclipses of the sun and moon, falling of the stars, heaven and earth shaken, appearing of Christ.

In the seals Christ is everywhere present. This indicates that wrath as well as mercy flow from the cross. The **crucifixion of Christ** brings both **divine redemption and final retribution**.

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Revelation 6:1-2

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say *in a voice like thunder*, “**Come!**” I looked, and there before me was a **white horse!** Its rider held a bow, and he was given a **crown**, and he rode **conquering and continuing to conquer!**

There are **two main perspectives** the meaning of this first rider. Scholars pretty much evenly divide on this point. Many see the first rider on the white horse as an antichrist figure,¹ the *spirit of human conquest bent on destruction and leading to war*. Others interpret this first horseman depicting “*the preaching of the gospel in the world.*”² In that case, this 1st rider symbolizes Jesus sends forth **His people** “*overcoming and continuing to overcome*” by their trust in Him.

This 2nd position is supported by a number of factors. The horse is **white**, and white is always used in the Apocalypse to signify **purity and heavenly glory**.³ This rider, whose *conquering is ongoing and unending*, is parallel to the **conquering Rider of Rev 19:11**, who is **Christ** the “**Word of God.**” The rider also draws characteristics from the Messianic King of Psalm 45:3-5 whose bow is a symbol of judgment.⁴ And he wears the “*stephanoi*” **crown** of the redeemed. Unlike the next three horsemen, there is **no woe** attached to this first rider. Finally, the idea of the **aggressive proclamation of the Gospel parallels Matthew 24:14**, where Jesus says His Gospel will be proclaimed amidst tribulation and persecution.⁵ If this interpretation is correct, *John intends the*

¹ For the strongest exegetical defense of the first seal as representing Antichrist, see Rissi, “The Rider on the White Horse,” pp. 407-18.

² Oscar Cullman, “Eschatology and Missions in the New Testament,” in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), pp. 415-20.

³ White (leukos) is used exclusively for the things of God in the Apocalypse unless 6:2 is an exception. There is the **white hair** of the “Son of man” (1:14), the **white stone** (2:17), the **white garments** of the righteous (3:5, 18; 6:11; 7: 13-14; 19:14), the **white cloud** upon which the Son of man sits in judgment (14:14), **Christ's white horse** and the **white horses of His army** (19:11,14; cf. 6:2), and the **great white throne of God** (20:11). It would be *extremely odd and inconsistent* with John's usual precision in the use of symbols if he used “**white**” in 6:2 to depict **Antichrist**.

⁴ DuPreez, p. 162.

⁵ Ladd, “Theology of the Apocalypse,” p. 74. Hendriksen has agreed: “. . . the idea that the Conqueror upon the white horse is the people of Christ is in harmony with the very genius and purpose of the book of Revelation. We

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Gospel to be seen as the catalyst which brings about every subsequent eschatological judgment.

This interpretation is **thematically consistent** with the remainder of the book. The preaching of the crucified Christ **effectively divides the world** into two camps, *even as His cross literally and spiritually divided the two thieves on Calvary*. By our **reaction to the Lamb** we are destined for **eternity** (7:9-17; 14:15-17; 19:2-10) or for **death** (6:15; 14:18-20; 19:19ff; 20:15).

Revelation 6:3-4

When the Lamb opened the **second seal**, I heard the second living creature say, **“Come!”** Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

This **“fiery red”** *horse and rider thunder forth* to spread the spirit of hatred and violence. If the horse and rider represent the **gospel-proclaiming Church**, then this 2nd rider probably depicts opposition to that message and the **consequences of rejecting it** in the form of violence and persecution. When people and nations reject the **King of Peace**, then coercion, violence, oppression and persecution arise out of their conflicts for power and control.

The sequence of **witnessing followed by persecution** is a major theme in the New Testament,⁶ especially the Apocalypse (11:7ff, cf. 1:9; 2: 10-13; 12:10-14). Also, as **white** is the color of the things of the Kingdom of God, **red (purros)** is the color applied to the **dragon, Satan**, and to his incarnation in **the Beast** who persecutes the woman, the church (12:3; 17:3).

have indicated that the very theme of this book is the victory of Christ and His church.... Carefully read the following passages: Rev 1:3ff.; 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:5; 6:16; 7:9-10; 11:15; 12:11; 14:1ff.; 14:14ff.; 17: 14; 19:11; 20:4; 22: 16. The idea of the conquering Christ is the thread running through this book from beginning to the end!” (Hendriksen, p. 116.).

⁶ Matt 10:34; Luke 21:13-18; John 8:58-59; 9:33-34; 15:18ff.; Acts 5:32-33; 6:8ff.; 13:48-50; 23:11-12.

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The **red horse of bloodshed** comes as the **terrible result of rejecting the white horse of the gospel of peace**.⁷ The first two riders symbolize the fulfillment of Christ's prediction: "*In this world you will have tribulation. But take courage: I have overcome [conquered] the world*" (John 16:33).

Revelation 6:5-6

When the **Lamb** opened the **third seal**, I heard the third **living creature** say, "**Come!**" I looked, and there before me was a **black horse**! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like *a voice among the four living creatures*, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages,^[b] and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

The third horse is black and its rider carries a **scale** which **signifies famine** (Lev 26:26; Ezek 4:16). A quart (choenix) of wheat or three quarts of barley for a **day's wages indicates severe scarcity**. The total earnings of a man buy only enough to sustain himself (wheat) or a meagre meal for his family (barley). Yet the rich still have the **luxury items of Babylon** (oil and wine)

If a spiritual symbolism is intended, this scene could point to a **famine for the Word of God** (cf. Amos 8:11-12), hence the reference to the still unharmed "*oil and wine*" representing **faithful believers** (Ps 23:5; Matt 25:40).

Revelation 6:7-8

When the **Lamb** opened the **fourth seal**, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "**Come!**" I looked, and there before me was a **pale horse**! Its rider was named **Death**, and **Hades** was following close behind him. They were *given power over a fourth of the earth* to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

⁷ Milligan does not see persecution of the church but rather the suffering of those who are the persecutors as the focus of the second seal. His comments on the results of rejecting the gospel are extremely insightful: "All persons engaged in these internecine conflicts have cast aside the offers of the Prince of peace [6:2]; and, at enmity with Him who is the only true foundation of human brotherhood they are also at enmity among themselves.... They seek to avoid that sacrifice of themselves which, made in Christ, which lies at the root of the true accomplishment of human destiny; and they are constrained to substitute for it a sacrifice of an altogether different kind; they sacrifice, they slaughter, one another" (Milligan, *Book of Revelation*, pp. 90-91).

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This fourth horse which appears is “**pale**” (**chloros**) in color, denoting the livid, ghastly light green hue of death. His rider is **Death personified (Thanatos)**, and **Hades (the grave)** follows.

Power is **given** to them over one fourth of mankind. The phrase “**was given**,” appears in the first, second, fourth, and fifth seals, highlights God's sovereignty. The ability of the church to conquer through the gospel (6:2), the power men have to slay one another (6:4), the extent of unjust oppression (6:8), and the righteousness of the “resting” saints (6:11) are all “*given*” by God.

Even **Death and Hades** exercise their power only to the extent God allows, for **Christ**, through His own death, has conquered death's domain (1:17- 18).

Death's power to kill is by “**sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth**.” These are the “**four severe acts of judgment**” enumerated in Leviticus 26:18-29 and Ezekiel 14:21. These afflictions have occurred throughout history and encompass all the woes by which mankind, including the saints, suffers.

Relationship of Seals, Trumpets and Bowls:

Revelation presents **four parallel perspectives of history** between the two Advents of Christ:

1. Christ's concern for the church (**7 churches**),
2. The church's experience in the world (**7 seals**),
3. God's partial judgments on a defiant world (**7 trumpets**),
4. The final intensification of divine wrath on all those confirmed in rebellion and destructive hate of Christ and His people (**7 bowls**).

In Revelation, there is increasing detail, scope, and severity in each successive series. The **fourth seal** affects a **fourth** of mankind (6:8), the **sixth trumpet** kills a **third** of mankind (9:13), and finally the **seven last plagues** fall on **all** who reject God and persecute His people (16:10; 18:20).

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There are **obvious structural similarities** between the **seals, trumpets, bowls**:

- The **first four judgments** are related and come in quick succession.
- In the **fifth judgment** there is a slower pace with greater detail.
- In the **sixth judgment** comes a dramatic presentation of the events which accompany or occur immediately prior to Jesus appearing in judgment (6:12-17; 9:13-19; cf. 10:6-7; 16:12-16).
- **Following the sixth judgment** which always portrays terrible retribution on the wicked, **John pauses to insert an interlude**. He never moves directly from number 6 to number 7.

The interlude always answer the same unspoken question each time: “*What is happening to the Church?*” or as the climax of the 6th seal expresses it: “*Who is able to stand*” in the day of God's wrath? These interludes vary in length (seals: **7:1-17**; trumpets: **10:1-11:14**; bowls: **16:15**).

Finally, **the seventh judgment is executed** and presents the end itself.

The pattern can be summarized as:

- **1-2-3-4** (rapid and related)
- **5** (more detail, tells us the group in focus)
- **6** (final intensification of evil)
- **Interlude** (what is happening to the Church)
- **7** (always pictures the End: final judgment).

The **fifth part** of each series is the interpretive key for **what group is in focus**:

- 7 Seals (**5th Seal = 6:9-11**): The saints calling for justice
- 7 Trumpets (**5th Trumpet = 9:1-6**) Those without the seal of God
- 7 Last Plagues (**5th Plague = 16:10-11**) The Kingdom and throne of the Beast

What group is in focus in each series?

- **The 7 seals**: the **opposition encountered by the faithful Church** as it proclaims the gospel in the world;
- **The 7 trumpets**: the **preliminary judgments** on those who reject the gospel and worship the creature-centered spirit of this world;
- **The 7 last plagues**: the **final outpouring of God's wrath** upon mankind's deliberate and determined wickedness at the very end of time.

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Thus, the 7 seals and 7 trumpets span the *entire period between the two Advents*. But the 7 plagues, called “the last” (15:1), are the final intensification of God's retributive activity against all who persecute the Lamb in the person of His saints (16:5-7). They are poured out in the final hours of history when the direction of all men's lives has become evident and irreversible (14:14-18; 22: 11). **As sin deepens, judgment deepens.**

Revelation 6:9-11

When the **Lamb** opened the **fifth seal**, I saw under the altar the **souls** of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “**How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until You judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?**” Then each of them was **given a white robe**, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

The idea of “**souls**” (*psuchas*) of martyred saints under the altar recalls the pouring of sacrificial blood (symbolic of life, *psuche*, Lev 17:11) at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Lev 4:7). The Christian martyr as a sacrifice offered to and accepted by God (cf. Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6).⁸

The saints' cry also echoes **Genesis 4**, where the spilled **blood of Abel** (the true worshiper of the Lamb) cried to God for justice against a brother who *worshipped the works of his own hands* (Gen 4:2-10; cf. Rev 9:20-21).

In **the Psalms**, the cry “**How long, O Lord?**” is the *cry of the persecuted for justice* (Ps 74: 10; 79:5; cf. Zechariah 1:12). It is the *cry of those who place their hope of salvation in the righteousness of*

⁸ Thomas, “Imprecatory Prayers,” p. 124; cf. Klassen, pp. 300-11. Says Ladd: “The fact that John saw the souls of the **martyrs under the altar has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state**; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of their God... the state of final and perfected blessedness awaits the return of Christ” (Ladd, *Commentary*, pp. 103, 106).

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God (Rev 15:3; 16:5,7; 19:2), and ask that He will soon vindicate His righteousness on earth (Ps 7:8; 26:1; 35:24; 43:1)⁹

The **saints' prayers for justice are the catalyst which moves God to act.** Revelation consistently links the saints' prayers to the divine judgments which come forth from the altar.¹⁰ (6:12ff; 8:3ff).

All true Christians are portrayed as “**martyrs**” in Revelation. Because of the Lamb's prior sacrifice for them, they may not all die, but all are ready to love Him more than life if required (12:11; 15:2)¹¹ **It is the world's antagonism to this devoted witness which brings judgment:**

Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her [Babylon] for the way she treated you.
I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the
blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. (Rev 18:20; 17:6 NIV)

The **white robes** denote justification (7:17; 19:7-8). **The robes are “given.”** They do not justify themselves; *God justifies them* (19:8).

echoing Christ's words to Saul's persecution of the church: “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*” (Acts 9:4).

In Revelation judgment is not determined primarily by the “*sin question*” but by the “*Son question.*” **How have people responded to the Lamb?**

⁹ Trites, *New Testament Concept*, p. 162. Caird agreed: “The point at issue here is not the personal relations of the martyrs with their persecutors, but the validity of their faith. **They have gone to their death in the confidence that God's word, attested in the life and death of Jesus, is the ultimate truth**; but unless in the end tyranny and other forms of wickedness meet with retribution, that faith is an illusion” (Caird, *Revelation of St. John*, p. 85).

¹⁰ Rev 6:9-11; 8:3-4; cf. 9:13; 10:6-7; 14:18; 16:7; 19:1-2. Thomas, “Imprecatory Prayers,” pp. 125-28.

¹¹ “Both 'bear witness' and 'testimony' reflect the same Greek root, **martyr**.... to be a martyr [is] not necessarily to be killed, but to make a witness that risks it” (Eller, *Most Revealing Book*, p. 43). There is a very real sense in which the New Testament concept of martyr was anyone who maintained his testimony for Jesus to the end of life. For a detailed study of the etymology of martyr, see Trites, “Martus and Martyrdom,” pp. 72-80: “The very nature of the church is to be a martyr people.” Jesus called each person who followed Him to bear a cross (Matt 10:38; 16:34). He was not referring to heavy burdens, but to a willingness to die for one's faith: “The cross is nothing else than an instrument of death. Every disciple of Jesus is in essence a martyr; and John has in view all believers” (Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 104).

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Revelation 6:12-14

I watched as **the Lamb** opened the **sixth seal**. There was a **great earthquake**. The **sun** turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the **whole moon** turned blood red, and the **stars in the sky** fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The **heavens** receded like a scroll being rolled up, and **every mountain** and **island** was removed from its place.

Revelation 6:15-17

Then the **kings** of the earth, the **princes**, the **generals**, the **rich**, the **mighty**, and everyone else, **both slave and free**, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! **For the great day of Their [or His] wrath has come, and who is able to stand?**”

The cry of the saints in the fifth seal: “*How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*” (6:10 NASB) is now answered by a revelation of the “*wrath of the Lamb!*” (6:17).

John, like the Old Testament apocalyptic prophets, uses “**earthquake**” as the symbol for the final outpouring of judgment upon evil powers as God comes to judge (cf. 11:19; 16:18; Isaiah 2:21; 13:13; Ezekiel 38: 19-20; Nahum 1:5-6; Joel 2:10-11; etc.). **But this theophany is clearly a Christophany**, revealing to a self-absorbed world **the Lamb** who conquered on the cross.

The **other six cosmic events** at the opening of the 6th seal can also be traced back to **Old Testament judgment-theophanies**. They mirror Jesus' description in Matt 24:29-30 of the calamities which will accompany His appearing.¹²

The **sevenfold classification of mankind in 6:15** reveals that all, from emperor to slaves, will tremble before the Lamb at His coming. They have **despised the Lamb's grace** and now He appears as “**the Lion of Judah**” (5:5). They call for the rocks and mountains to fall upon them rather than face the Lord's splendor (**Isaiah**

¹² The darkening of the sun and moon (Mark 13:24; cf. Isa 13:10; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:31); the falling of the stars (Mark 13:25; cf. Isa 34:4; Ps 102:25-26); the moving of the mountains and islands (Ezek 38:20; Nah 1:5; Jer 4:24).

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2:19 and Hosea 10:8). For those who despised His grace, God's wrath as a **grim reality**. They **would** rather die than behold His face.

Yet **their destruction is ever God's strange act**, described here in the paradoxical phrase "*the wrath of the Lamb.*"¹³ The same self-sacrificing Christ who is pictured as loving Savior, gentle Shepherd, and eternal Sustainer to the righteous in **Rev 7:14-17** is seen only as a terrifying Executioner by those who have spurned His gracious work for them in **6:14-17**.

None of this judgment imagery is intended to terrify the saints. Rather it is intended to assure them that God will act to bring an end to this present wicked order, restore His good creation and **right every wrong in final judgment**.

Throughout Scripture, the **Day of vengeance** on evil *is also pictured as the Day of God's redemption* for the humble (Isaiah 2; 25; 59:15-20; 61:1-2; 63:1-6; Rom 2:5; cf. Eph 4:30). Therefore:

John does not go directly to the 7th Seal; but presents an interlude (7:1-17). This interlude is **his response to the question** of the terrified wicked at Christ's appearing: "*The great day of their wrath has come—and who is able to stand?*" (**6:17**).

¹³ "Whoever heard of a lamb being angry? It is a terrible thought--the gentlest of all God's creatures angry. This is the wrath of love, the wrath of sacrificial love, which, having done the absolute utmost for us and our salvation, tells us as nothing else could the certainty with which evil awaits its doom at the hand of God" (Morris, *Revelation of St. John*, p. 111).