

Revelation Chapter 6

An Interpretation

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Introduction:

1. The Lord Jesus was qualified to open the seals that revealed the future.
2. Seal #1 (6:1) was a time of successful warfare in the Roman Empire. The empire expanded without bloodshed. Secular historian Edward Gibbons considers the time the best days of Rome.

THE FIRST SEAL (FROM LAST LESSON):

(2) I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.



Discuss the painting.

THE SECOND SEAL

(3) When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." (4) And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.



Discuss the painting.

- **B.W. Johnson:**

There appears in the field of view a second **horse**, no longer white, but as **red** as blood. Upon the horse sat one with a **great sword** in his hand, to whom "was given power to **take peace from the earth**, and to make **men** that they should **slay one another**."

The **horse** is the symbol of war, but the changed color indicates that the conditions of war are entirely changed. Now a period of internal war is indicated.

The "**earth**" contemplated by John was the Roman earth, or empire. From it **peace** shall be taken away. Nor is it to be destroyed by foreign invaders. "They are to kill **one another**."

In as plain language as symbolism can disclose, it is indicated that the next great feature of history is that the land shall be torn by civil war.



- **Gibbon:**

Such were the barbarians, and such the tyrants, who, under the reigns of Valerian and Gallienus, dismembered the provinces, and reduced the empire to the lowest pitch of disgrace and ruin, from whence it seemed impossible

that it should ever emerge.

- **Fred Miller:**

History texts call the period from 180 to 280 the period of disorder. Eighty emperors ruled in a space of ninety years and most of them met death by violence. The post of emperor was actually bought and sold at public auction. The empire was ravaged by civil war for most of the period.

Every few months a new soldier of fortune would make a claim on the title and march on Rome from distant as well as more local locations, fighting, pillaging, and burning as they approached a war weary city. The depletion of stocks, burning of countryside, disruption of markets, and farms denuded of crops took their toll and the next two figures overlap the end of this period.

THE THIRD SEAL

(5) When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, "Come." I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand.



Discuss the painting.

- **B.W. Johnson:**

The **black horse** makes it plain that the land is torn by calamitous war, and is filled with sorrow, mourning and despair.

Black is the color of mourning. Jeremiah 14:2. The balances used for weighing food are a symbol of scarcity and famine.

- The word *famine* occurs in **Gibbon** many times during this era. He writes:

Pestilence and *famine* contributed to fill up the measure of the calamities of Rome. The first could be only imputed to the just indignation of the gods; but a monopoly of corn, supported by the riches and power of the minister, was considered as the immediate cause of the second.

When the troops of Maximin, advancing in excellent order, arrived at the foot of the Julian Alps, they were terrified by the silence and desolation that reigned on the frontiers of Italy. The villages and open towns had been abandoned on their approach by the inhabitants, the cattle was driven away, the provisions removed or destroyed, the bridges broken down, nor was any thing left which could afford either shelter or subsistence to an invader. Such had been the wise orders of the generals of the senate: whose design was to protract the war, to ruin the army of Maximin by the slow operation of *famine*, and to consume his strength in the sieges of the principal cities of Italy, which they had plentifully stored with men and provisions from the deserted country.

But a long and general *famine* was a calamity of a more serious kind. It was the inevitable consequence of rapine and oppression, which extirpated the produce of the present, and the hope of future harvests. *Famine* is almost always followed by epidemical diseases, the effect of scanty and unwholesome food.

(6) And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine."

- **B.W. Johnson:**

"Bread by weight" always implies scarcity. See Leviticus 26:26; Ezekiel 4:16-17. The prices named also signify the same.

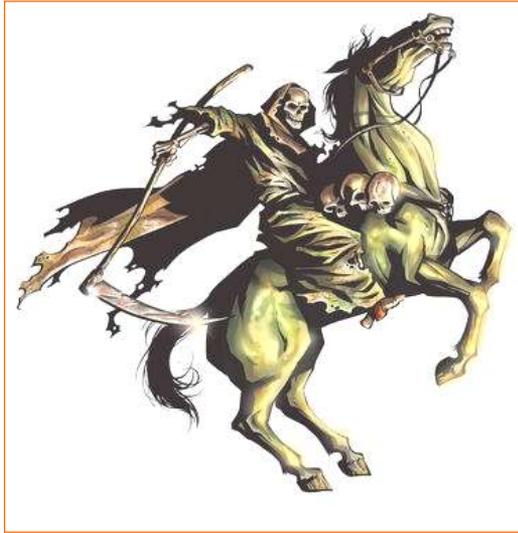
Oil and wine, though common foods, are entirely prohibited. An age of war, mourning, calamity and famine is certainly symbolized. See the parallel from history.

Discussion: How does inflation reduce citizens to poverty?

THE FOURTH SEAL

(7) When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the

fourth living creature saying, "Come." (8) I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.



Discuss the painting.

- There were four sources of death in parts of the Empire: violent war, famine, pestilence, and by wild beasts. They overlapped rather than happening in a sequence of time. We have seen famine in the third seal.

- **B.W. Johnson:**

It is still a time of war. The **horse** is now pale, the bloodless color of the dead. Upon him sits an undescribed figure, called by the apostle **DEATH**. Behind the dread destroyer follows **Hades**, the unseen world, swallowing up the dying mortals and hiding them from human vision.

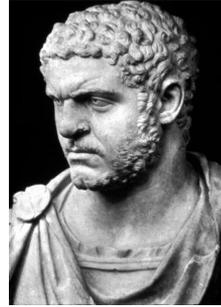
The means employed to destroy men are described. **Death and Hades** employ (1) the **sword** or war; (2) hunger, or famine; (3) death, or **pestilence**, for so is the word here used often to translated, and such is its meaning in this place; and finally (4) the destruction caused by the **wild beasts** of forests and field.

Do we find the scarcity, want, hunger, and pestilence,

indicated by the prophecy, during the latter portion of this period of civil commotion? Do we have an awful reign of **Death** in the forms signified by the **seal**?

- **Gibbon:**

But Caracalla was the common enemy of mankind. He left the capital (and he never returned to it) about a year after the murder of Geta. The rest of his reign was spent in the several provinces of the empire, particularly those of the East, and province was by turns the scene of his rapine and cruelty. The senators, compelled by fear to attend his capricious motions, were



obliged to provide daily entertainments at an immense expense, which he abandoned with contempt to his guards; and to erect, in every city, magnificent palaces and theatres, which he either disdained to visit, or ordered immediately thrown down. The most wealthy families ruined by partial fines and confiscations, and the great body of his subjects oppressed by ingenious and aggravated taxes. In the midst of peace, and upon the slightest provocation, he issued his commands, at Alexandria, in Egypt for a general massacre. From a secure post

in the temple of Serapis, he viewed and directed the slaughter of many thousand citizens, as well as strangers, without distinguishing the number or the crime of the sufferers; since as he coolly informed the senate, all the Alexandrians, those who perished, and those who had escaped, were alike guilty.

Pestilence and famine contributed to fill up the measure of the calamities of Rome. The first could be only imputed to the just indignation of the gods; but a monopoly of corn, supported by the riches and power of the minister, was considered as the immediate cause of the second.

An exact register was kept at Alexandria of all the citizens entitled to receive the distribution of corn. It was found, that the ancient number of those comprised between the ages of forty and seventy, had been equal to the whole sum of claimants, from fourteen to fourscore years of age,

who remained alive after the reign of Gallienus. Applying this authentic fact to the most correct tables of mortality, it evidently proves, that above half the people of Alexandria had perished; and could we venture to extend the analogy to the other provinces, we might suspect, that war, pestilence, and famine, had consumed, in a few years, the moiety of the human species.

THE FIFTH SEAL

(9) When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; (10) and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"



Discuss the painting.

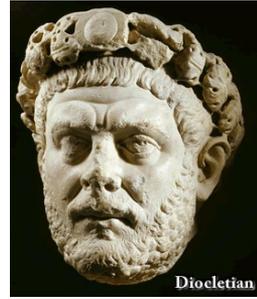
- **B.W. Johnson:**

These are clearly Christians who had suffered martyrdom. They had died "for the **word of God.**" They were **under** the **altar**. Since the temple is typical of the church, the altar, the center of worship, points to the church and its worship.

The brazen altar stood at the door of the tabernacle, and at the bottom of it all the blood of the offerings was poured (Leviticus 4:7). Their position probably points out that their own **blood** was poured out for Christ.

- **Gibbons:**

The resentment, or the fears, of Diocletian, at length transported him beyond the bounds of moderation, which he had hitherto preserved, and he declared, in a series of cruel edicts, his intention of abolishing the Christian name. By the first of these edicts, the governors of the provinces were directed to apprehend all persons of the ecclesiastical order; and the prisons, destined for the vilest criminals, were soon filled with a multitude of bishops, presbyters, deacons, readers, and exorcists.



(11) And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.

Discussion: Were their deaths a loss to the Kingdom of God?

- **B.W. Johnson:**

The **robes** of justification and victory. They are assured that the day when "they will be avenged" will soon come, but that they must wait a little season. Others must be added to the number of the martyrs before the number is fulfilled. It is a time of persecution.

THE SIXTH SEAL

(12) I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; (13) and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind.



Discuss the painting.

- **B.W. Johnson:**

There was a **great earthquake**, the symbol of political or moral agitation and upheaval. The sun became black as **sackcloth**. The **sun, moon, and stars** are symbols of earthly dignitaries, great lights in the political or religious heavens.

In the dream of Joseph, which so maddened his brethren, these terms are used in this meaning, as well as by the ancient prophets. In the East it was common to liken the king or emperor to the sun, and the stars as the symbols of princes or rulers. For the use of the term we refer the reader to Daniel 8:10.

The **blackness of the sun** and the **bloody** hue of the **moon** point out scenes of mourning and bloodshed among rulers and princes. The **falling of the stars** would indicate the downfall of those who had high places on the **earth**, or rather within the Roman Empire.

(14) The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

- **B.W. Johnson:**

The heaven was removed as a **scroll**. The old religions, supposed to be of heavenly origin, pass away. Every **mountain** and **island** were moved. Mountain and island are used to denote earthly rulers and kingdoms, the latter

referring more especially to European provinces which are often called "the isles of the sea" in the Bible.

From the period of Diocletian, the great persecutor, the title, "Your Eminence," or, in other words, "**mountain**," was bestowed upon princes. As a **mountain** stood above the plain, so the rulers of the earth were exalted.

(15) Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; (16) and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits 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?"

- **B.W. Johnson:**

And the **kings of the earth**, and the princes . . . hid themselves. This implies great terror among "them that **dwelt on the earth**;" their belief that terrible judgments were impending from God; that the **wrath** of the **Lamb** was manifested, and their efforts to escape.

- We are seeing the collapse of paganism making way for the rise of Christianity.

- **John T. Hinds:**

The changes that transpired in the reign of Constantine, who was emperor from A.D. 307 to 337, will harmonize with the things pictured in this seal. In 308 the empire was divided among six emperors.

By A.D. 313 they were reduced to two - Constantine and Licinius.

The latter, who was a champion of Paganism, was defeated in A.D.

323 and Constantine became the sole emperor of the Roman world. Since Constantine was favorable to Christianity, the struggle was really a war between Christianity and Paganism. The defeat of the latter caused great mourning and distress among the enemies of Christianity.

In the Edict of Milan, A.D. 313, privilege was granted for each man to worship as he saw fit, and none were to be prevented from practicing or embracing Christianity.



In A.D. 321 he decreed that Sunday, the day the Christians observed as a day of worship, should be a day of rest in towns from business and labor. This was a concession to Christianity. In A.D. 325 he convened the first general council of the church over which he presided. In A.D. 326 he began the building of Constantinople to which he removed the capital of the Roman Empire.

He is supposed to have entered the church himself before he died. Gibbon refers to him as the patron of the church who "seated Christianity on the throne of the Roman world." (Decline and Fall, Vol. 11, p. 273.) He also says : "War and commerce had spread the knowledge of the gospel beyond the confines of the Roman provinces; and the barbarians, who had disdained an humble and proscribed sect, soon learned to esteem a religion which had been so lately embraced by the greatest monarch, and the most civilized nation, of the globe." Surely all this was a political and spiritual earthquake that shook pagan nations to their foundations, and brought mourning to their rulers, but honor and glory to the church. Whatever might be said in favor of other times, certainly none could more fittingly fulfill the scenes depicted in this seal.

To Summarize:

1. The believers who received this letter the Apostle John was writing would learn about a coming time of war in the Empire, but without the details.
2. The *first* horse revealed a time of successful but peaceful conquering was ahead.
3. The *second* horse was red and pointed to a coming time of civil war in the empire.
4. The *third* horse told of the consequences of the second horse, a time of famine would come on the Empire.
5. The *fourth* horse told of the consequences of the third horse, a time of pestilence and death were coming.
6. The *fifth* seal showed the condition of believers and ask God about avenging the blood of saints who were dying. They were told to wait until a certain time already picked by God.
7. The *sixth* seal revealed a disruption in the sun, moon and stars, an overthrow of a government. This came about as paganism was replaced with Christianity during the time of Constantine.

What can I say?

And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.

1 Peter 3:15 New Living Translation

Questions by Charles Dailey

1. Seal one, last session, was a time of successful warfare in the Roman Empire. (Introduction)
2. The Red Horse was a time of Civil War. (Verse 4)
3. The Black Horse was a time of bounty and joy. (5)
4. Buying bread by weight implies ample harvest. (6)
5. The periods indicated by the symbols of the horses overlapped (7)
6. Some who passed through the death period were given white robes while they waited for the killing of other to be finished. (11)
7. An earthquake may symbolize political upheaval. (12)
8. Mountains and islands may denote earthly rulers and kingdoms. (14)
9. Some rulers wanted relief from the wrath of the Lamb. (16)
10. The change of verse 17 may point to the rise of Constantine as emperor of the Roman Empire. (17)