



Route 66, Revelation

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Revelation 6 notes – taken from various commentaries

Overview of the chapter:

The Opening of the Seals

The Four Horses and Their Riders (Revelation 6:1-8)

The White Horse of Conquest (Revelation 6:1-2)

The Blood-Red Horse of Strife (Revelation 6:3-4)

The Black Horse of Famine (Revelation 6:5-6)

The Pale Horse of Pestilence and Death (Revelation 6:7-8)

The Souls of the Martyrs (Revelation 6:9-11)

The Cry of the Martyrs (Revelation 6:9-11)

The Shattered Universe (Revelation 6:12,14)

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THE FOUR HORSES AND THEIR RIDERS

Revelation 6:1-8

“And I saw when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a loud voice like the sound of thunder, “Come!” And I saw, and, behold, a white horse, and he who was seated on it had a bow, and a conqueror’s crown was given to him, and he went forth conquering and to conquer. And, when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” And there came forth another horse blood-red in colour, and to him that sat upon it there was given to take peace from the earth, and to bring it about that men slay one another, and a great sword was given to him. And, when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And, behold, there came a black horse, and he who sat upon it had the beam of a balance in his hand. And I heard as it were a voice in the middle of the four living creatures saying: “A measure of wheat for a denarius, and three measures of barley for a denarius. But you must not injure the oil and the wine.” And, when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come!” And I saw, and, behold, there came a pale horse, and the name of him who sat upon it was Death, and Hades followed with him; and they were given power over a fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, and with famine, and with pestilence, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”

OT Prophecy Zechariah 6:1-8. Zechariah sees four horses which are let loose upon the earth to deal out vengeance on Babylon and Egypt and the nations which have oppressed God’s people. “These are going forth to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth” (Zech.6:5). The horses stand for the four mighty winds which God is about to let loose on the earth with a blast of destruction. John does not keep the details the same; but for him, too, the horses and their riders are the instruments of the avenging judgment of God.

THE WHITE HORSE - CONQUEST

Revelation 6:1-2

“And I saw, when the Lamb opened the first of the seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a loud voice like the sound of thunder: “Come!” And I saw, and, behold a white horse, and he who was seated on it had a bow, and a conqueror's crown was given to him, and he went forth conquering and to conquer.”

Opening of Seals = new terror falls upon the earth.

(i) White horse and its rider. What do they represent?

Revelation 19:11-12 which tells of a white horse and on it a rider, called Faithful and True and crowned with many crowns, who is the victorious Christ. It is to be noted that the crown in this passage is different from that in Revelation 19. Here the crown is stephanos which is the victor's crown; in Revelation 19 it is diadema, which is the royal crown. The passage we are here studying is telling of woe upon woe and disaster upon disaster; any picture of the victorious Christ is quite out of place in it. This picture tells of the coming not of the victor Christ but of the terrors of the wrath of God.

The white horse and its rider stand for conquest in war. When a Roman general celebrated a triumph, that is, when he paraded through the streets of Rome with his armies and his captives and his spoils after some great victory, his chariot was drawn by white horses, the symbol of victory.

But, as we said in the introduction to this passage, John is clothing his predictions of the future in pictures of the present which his readers would recognize.

The rider of the horse had in his hand a bow.

In the Old Testament the bow is always the sign of military power. In the final defeat of Babylon her mighty men are taken and their bows--that is, their military power--destroyed (Jeremiah 51:56).

God will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel (Hosea 1:5). God breaks the bow and shatters the spear in sunder and burns the chariots with fire; that is, against him no human military power can stand (Psalm 46:9).

The bow, then, would always stand for military power. But there is one particular picture which the Romans and all who dwelt in Asia would at once recognize. The one enemy whom the Romans feared was the Parthian power. The Parthians dwelt on the far eastern frontiers of the Empire and were the scourge of Rome. In A.D. 62 an unprecedented event had occurred; a Roman army had actually surrendered to Vologeses, the king of the Parthians. The Parthians rode white horses and were the most famous bowmen in the world. A "Parthian shot" still means a final, devastating blow, to which there is no possible answer.

So, then, the white horse and its rider with the bow stand for militarism and conquest.

THE BLOOD-RED HORSE - STRIFE

Revelation 6:3-4

‘When he had opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say: “Come!” And there came forth another horse, blood-red in color, and to him that sat upon it there was given to take peace from the earth, and to bring it about that men should slay each other, and a great sword was given to him.’

The function of the second horse and its rider is to take peace from the earth. They stand for that destructive strife which sets man against man and nation against nation in a chaos of tragic destruction.

In the Jewish pictures of the end time, an essential element is the complete disintegration of all human relationships. *Brother will fight against brother, neighbor against neighbor, city will rise against city, and*

kingdom against kingdom (Isa.19:2).Every man's hand shall be against the hand of his neighbor (Zech.14:13). Friend shall war against friend; friends will attack one another suddenly (4 Ezra 5: 9; 6: 24).

A time when all human relationships would be destroyed and the world a place of embittered hate.

It is still true that the nation in which there is division between man and man and class and class and hatred based on competitive ambition and selfish desire is doomed; and the world in which nation is set against nation is hastening to its end.

THE BLACK HORSE - FAMINE

Revelation 6:5-6

"When he had opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say: "Come!" And, behold, there came a black horse, and he who sat upon it had the beam of a balance in his hand. And I heard, as it were, a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying: "A measure of wheat for a denarius, and three measures of barley for a denarius.

But you must not injure the oil and the wine."

John is giving an account not of the end of things, but of the signs and events which precede the end. So here the black horse and its rider represent famine, a famine which is very severe and causes great hardship, but which is not desperate enough to kill. There is wheat--at a prohibitive price; and the wine and the oil are not affected.

The three main crops of Palestine were the corn, the wine and the oil; and it is these three which are always mentioned when the crops of the land are being described (Deuteronomy 7:13; Deuteronomy 11:14; Deuteronomy 28:51; Hosea 2:8; Hosea 2:22). The rider of the horse had the cross-beam of a balance in his hand. In the Old Testament the phrase to eat bread by weight indicates the greatest scarcity.

In Leviticus it is the threat of God that, if the people are disobedient "they shall deliver your bread again by weight" (Lev.26:26). It is the threat of God to Ezekiel: "I will break the stall of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with fearfulness" (Ezekiel 4:16).

It was not entirely abnormal that there should be wine and oil when there was no corn. The olive and the vine were much more deeply-rooted than the corn; and they could stand a drought which would wipe out the corn crop. When Jacob had to send down to Egypt for corn in the days of the famine in the time of Joseph, he was still able to send with his sons a gift of "the choice fruits of the land" (Genesis 43:11). But it is true that a situation in which wine and oil were plentiful and corn prohibitively dear would be the equivalent of one in which luxuries were plentiful and necessities scarce.

A denarius was the equivalent of four pence and was a working man's wage for a day. Normally one denarius bought anything from eight to sixteen measures of corn and three to four times as much barley. What John is foretelling is a situation in which a man's whole working wage would be needed to buy enough corn for himself for a day, leaving absolutely nothing to buy any of the other necessities of life and absolutely nothing for his wife and family. If instead of corn he bought the much inferior barley, he might manage to give some to his wife and family but again he would have nothing to buy anything else.

We have seen that, although John was telling of the signs which were to precede the end, he was nevertheless painting them in terms of actual historical situations which men would recognize. There had been desperate famines in the time of Nero which left the luxury of the rich untouched. There was an occasion when a ship arrived in Italy from Alexandria. The starving populace thought it was a cornship, for all the cornships came from Alexandria; and they rioted when they discovered that the cargo was not corn but a special kind of sand from the Nile Delta to spread upon the ground of the arena for a gladiatorial show. This passage finds an

amazing echo in certain events during the reign of Domitian, at the very time when John was writing. There was a very serious shortage of grain and also a superabundance of wine. Domitian took the drastic step of enacting that no fresh vineyards should be planted and that half the vineyards in the provinces should be cut down. At this edict the people of the province of Asia, in which John was writing, came very near to rebelling for their vineyards were one of their principal sources of revenue. In view of the violent reaction of the people of Asia, Domitian rescinded his edict and actually enacted that those who allowed their vineyards to go out of cultivation should be prosecuted. Here is the very picture of a situation in which corn was scarce and it was yet forbidden to interfere with the supply of wine and oil.

So, then, this is a picture of famine set alongside luxury. There is always something radically wrong with a situation in which some have too much and others too little. This is always a sign that the society in which it occurs is hastening to its ruin.

It is from the midst of the four living creatures comes the voice telling of the famine prices of corn.

We have already seen that the four living creatures may well symbolize all that is best in nature; and this may well be taken to be nature's protest against famine amidst men. The tragedy has nearly always been that nature produces enough, and more than enough, but that there are many people to whom that abundance never comes. It is as if John was symbolically indicating that nature herself protests when the gifts she offers are used selfishly and irresponsibly for the luxury of the few at the expense of the many.

THE PALE HORSE OF PESTILENCE AND DEATH

Revelation 6:7-8

“When he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying: “Come!” And I saw, and, behold, there came a pale horse, and the name of him who sat upon it was Death, and Hades followed with him; and they were given power over a fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, and with famine, and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth. As we approach this passage we must once again remember that it is telling not of the final end but of the signs which precede it. That is why it is a fourth part of the earth which is involved in death and disaster. This is a terrible time but it is not the time of total destruction.”

The horse is pale in color. The word is chloros which means pale in the sense of livid and is used of a face blanched with terror. The passage is complicated by the fact that the Greek word thanatos is used in a double sense. In Revelation 6:8 it is used to mean both death and pestilence.

John was writing in a time when famine and pestilence did devastate the world; but in this case he is thinking in terms provided by the Old Testament which more than once speaks of "the four sore judgments." Ezekiel hears God tell of the time when he will send his "four sore acts of judgment upon Jerusalem"--sword, famine, evil beasts, and pestilence (Ezekiel 14:21). In Leviticus there is a passage which tells of the penalties which God will send upon his people because of their disobedience. Wild beasts will rob them of their children and destroy their cattle and make them few in number. The sword will avenge their breaches of the covenant. When they are gathered in their cities the pestilence will be among them. He will break the stall of bread and they will eat and not be satisfied (Leviticus 26:21-26).

Here John is using a traditional picture of what is to happen when God dispatches his wrath upon his disobedient people. At the back of it all is the permanent truth that no man or nation can escape the consequences of their sin.

THE SOULS OF THE MARTYRS

Revelation 6:9-11

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw beneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the sake of the word of God and because of the witness which they bore. And they cried with a loud voice: “How long, Lord,

Holy and True, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" And to each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest for still a little while, until there should be completed the number of their fellow-servants and of their brothers who must be killed."

At the breaking of the fifth seal comes the vision of the souls of those who had died for their faith.

Jesus left his followers in no doubt as to the suffering and the martyrdom they would be called upon to endure. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12,18). The day would come when those who killed Christians would think they were doing a service for God (John 16:2).

The idea of an altar in heaven is one that occurs more than once in the Revelation (Revelation 8:5; Revelation 14:18). It is not by any means a new idea. When the furnishings of the tabernacle were to be made, they were all to be constructed according to the pattern which God possessed and would show (Exodus 25:9; Exodus 25:40; Numbers 8:4; Hebrews 8:5; Hebrews 9:23). It is the consistent idea of those who wrote about the Tabernacle and the Temple that the pattern of all the holy things already existed in heaven.

The souls of those who had been slain were there beneath the altar. That picture is taken directly from the sacrificial ritual of the Temple. For a Jew the most sacred part of any sacrifice was the blood; the blood was regarded as being the life and the life belonged to God

Leviticus 17:11-14

"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, "None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood." "Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, because the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off."

Because of that, there were special regulations for the offering of the blood.

"The rest of the blood of the bull the priest shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering" (Leviticus 4:7). That is to say, the blood is offered at the foot of the altar.

This gives us the meaning of our passage here. The souls of the martyrs are beneath the altar. That is to say, their life-blood has been poured out as an offering to God. The idea of the martyr's life as a sacrifice to God is in the mind of Paul. He says that he will rejoice, if he is offered up on the sacrifice and the service of the faith of the Philippians (Philippians 2:17). "I am already," he says, "on the point of being sacrificed" (2 Timothy 4:6). In the time of the Maccabees the Jews suffered terribly for their faith. There was a mother whose seven sons were threatened with death because of their loyalty to their Jewish beliefs. She encouraged them not to yield and reminded them how Abraham had not refused to offer Isaac. She told them that, when they reached their glory, they must tell Abraham that he had built one altar of sacrifice but their mother had built seven. In later Judaism it was said that Michael, the archangel, sacrificed on the heavenly altar the souls of the righteous and of those who had been faithful students of the law. When Ignatius of Antioch was on his way to Rome to be burned, his prayer was that he should be found a sacrifice belonging to God.

There is a great and uplifting truth here. When a good man dies for the sake of goodness, it may look like tragedy, like the waste of a fine life; like the work of evil men; and, indeed, it may be all these things. But every life laid down for right and truth and God is ultimately more than any of these things--it is an offering made to God.

THE CRY OF THE MARTYRS

Revelation 6:9-11

There are three things in this section which we must note.

(i) We have the eternal cry of the suffering righteous--"How long?" This was the cry of the Psalmist. How long were the heathen to be allowed to afflict God's righteous people? How long were they to be allowed to taunt his people by asking where God was and what he was doing? (Psalms 79:5-10). The thing to remember is that when the saints of God uttered this cry, they were bewildered by God's seeming inactivity but they never doubted his ultimate action, and the ultimate vindication of the righteous.

(ii) We have a picture which is easy to criticize. The saints actually wished to see the punishment of their persecutors. It is hard for us to understand the idea that part of the joy of heaven was to see the punishment of the sinners in Hell. In the Assumption of Moses the Jewish writer (10:10) hears God promise:

And thou shalt look from on high and shalt see thy enemies in Gehenna. And thou shalt recognize them and rejoice, And thou shalt give thanks and confess thy Creator.

In later times Tertullian (Concerning Spectacles 30) was to taunt the heathen with their love of spectacles and to say that the spectacle to which the Christian most looked forward was to see his one-time persecutors writhing in Hell.

You are fond of spectacles; expect the greatest of all spectacles, the last and eternal judgment of the universe. How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot flames with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers writhing in the flames.

It is easy to stand aghast at the spirit of vengeance which could write like that. But we must remember what these men went through, the agony of the flames, of the arena and the wild beasts, of the sadistic torture which they suffered. We have the right to criticize only when we have gone through the same agony.

(iii) The martyrs must rest in peace for a little longer until their number is made up. The Jews had the conviction that the drama of history had to be played out in full before the end could come.

THE SHATTERED UNIVERSE

Revelation 6:12-14

"I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black like sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the heaven fell upon the earth, as a fig-tree casts its figs, when it is shaken by a high wind; and the heavens were split like a roll that is rolled up, and the hills and islands were moved from their places."

John is using pictures very familiar to his Jewish readers. The Jews always regarded the end as a time when the earth would be shattered and there would be cosmic upheaval and destruction. In the picture there are, as it were, five elements which can all be abundantly illustrated from the Old Testament and from the books written between the Testaments.

(i) There is the earthquake.

At the coming of the Lord the earth will tremble (Amos 8:8).

There will be a great shaking in the land of Israel (Ezekiel 38:19).

The earth will quake and the heavens will tremble (Joel 2:10).

God will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land (Haggai 2:6).

(ii) There is the darkening of the sun and moon.

The sun will set at midday, and earth will grow dark in the clear day light (Amos 8:9).

The stars will not shine; the sun will be darkened in his going forth and the moon will not cause her light to shine (Isaiah 13:10).

God will clothe the heavens with blackness and will make sackcloth their covering (Isaiah 50:3).

God will make the stars dark and cover the sun with a cloud (Ezekiel 32:7).

The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood (Joel 2:31).

The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give her light (Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24; Luke 23:45).

(iii) There is the falling of the stars. To the Jew this idea was especially terrible, for the order of the heavens was the very guarantee of the unchanging fidelity of God. Take away the reliability of the heavens and there was nothing left but chaos.

To the Jew the last word in chaos was a world of falling stars. But in the end time the host of heaven would be dissolved and fall down as the leaf falls from the vine and the fig from the fig-tree (Isaiah 34:4).

The stars will fall from heaven and the powers of heaven shall be shaken (Matthew 24:29).

The end will be a time when the most reliable things in the universe will become a disorderly and terrifying chaos.

(iv) There is the folding up of the heavens. The picture in this passage is of a roll stretched out and held open, and then suddenly split down the middle so that each half recoils and rolls up.

God will shake the heavens (Isaiah 13:13).

The heavens will be rolled together as a scroll (Isaiah 34:4).

They will be changed like a garment and folded up (Psalms 102:25-26).

At the end the eternal heavens themselves will be rent in two.

Today, with our increased scientific knowledge, we might well paint the picture in different terms; but it is not the picture that matters. What matters is the terrors which John and the Jewish seers foresaw when God would invade the earth when time was coming to an end.

THE TIME OF TERROR

Revelation 6:15-17

“And the kings of the earth and the great ones and the captains and the rich and the strong, and every slave and every free person hid themselves in the caves and the rocks of the hills, and said to the mountains and to the rocks: "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

As John saw it in his vision, the end time was to be one of universal terror. Here again he is working with pictures familiar to all who knew the Old Testament and the later Jewish writings.

When the Day of the Lord came, men would be afraid; pangs and sorrows would take hold of them; they would be in pain as a woman who travails; and they would be amazed at one another (Isaiah 13:6,8).

At that time even the mighty man would cry bitterly (Zephaniah 1:14).

The inhabitants of the land would tremble (Joel 2:1).

God would come to be a witness against his sinning people (Micah 1:1-4).

He would be like a refiner's fire, and who might abide the day of his coming? (Malachi 3:1-3).

The Day of the Lord would be great and terrible, and who could endure it? (Joel 2:11).

Men would say to the mountains, "Cover us," and to the hills, "Fall on us" (Hosea 10:8),

Words which Jesus quoted on the way to the Cross (Luke 23:30).

Two significant things about this fear.

(i) It is universal. Revelation 6:15 speaks of the kings, the captains, the great ones, the rich, the strong, the slave and the free. It has been pointed out that these seven words include "the whole fabric of human society." No one is exempt from the judgment of God. The great ones may well be the Roman governors who persecute the Church; the captains are the military authorities. However great a governor a man is and however much power he wields, he is still subject to the judgment of God. However rich a man may be, however strong, however free he may count himself, however much of a slave, however insignificant, he does not escape the judgment of God.

(ii) When the day of the Lord comes, John sees people seeking somewhere to hide. Here is the great truth that the first instinct of sin is to hide.

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve sought to hide themselves (Genesis 3:8).

H. B. Swete says: "What sinners dread most is not death, but the revealed presence of God."

The terrible thing about sin is that it makes a man a fugitive from God; and the supreme thing about the work of Jesus Christ is that it puts a man into a relationship with God in which he no longer need seek to hide, knowing that he can cast himself on the love and the mercy of God.

(iii) We note one last thing. That from which men flee is the wrath of the Lamb. Here is paradox; we do not readily associate wrath with the Lamb but rather gentleness and kindness. But the wrath of God is the wrath of love, which is not out to destroy but even in anger is out to save the one it loves.