

REVELATION (BOOK OF) -

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Jewish Origin.

The last book in the New Testament canon, yet in fact one of the oldest; probably the only Judæo-Christian work which has survived the Paulinian transformation of the Church. The introductory verse betrays the complicated character of the whole work. It presents the book as a "Revelation which God gave . . . to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass," and at the same time as a revelation of Jesus Christ to "his servant John." According to recent investigations, the latter part was interpolated by the compiler, who worked the two sections of the book—the main apocalypse (ch. iv.-xxi. 6) and the letters to the "seven churches" (i.-iii. and close of xxii.)—into one so as to make the whole appear as emanating from John, the seer of the isle of Patmos in Asia Minor (see i. 9, xxii. 8), known otherwise as John the Presbyter. The anti-Paulinian character of the letters to the seven churches and the anti-Roman character of the apocalyptic section have been a source of great embarrassment, especially to Protestant theologians, ever since the days of Luther; but the apocalypse has become especially important to Jewish students since it has been discovered by Vischer (see bibliography) that the main apocalypse actually belongs to Jewish apocalyptic literature.

The Letters to the Seven Churches:

The first part (i. 4-iii. 22) contains a vision by John, who is told by Jesus to send a letter to the seven angels of the seven churches in Asia (founded by Paul and his associates), rebuking them for the libertinism that has taken hold of many "who pass as Jews, but show by their blasphemy and licentiousness that they are of the synagogue of Satan" (ii. 9, iii. 9, Greek). These seven churches were those of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Owing to their heathen associations many of their members had lapsed into pagan or semipagan views and practises, under the influence of heretic leaders. Of these one is singled out by the name of Nicolaites (ii. 6, 15; comp. Acts vi. 5), called also Balaam (ii. 14, נִכּוֹלָאָה = "Nicolaos"), because, like Balaam, he seduced the people to idolatry and fornication by his false prophecies and witchcraft (Num. xxv. 1; xxxi. 8, 16). Another singled out was a woman, probably a prophetess, called Jezebel (ii. 20) on account of her idolatrous practises (I Kings xviii. 19, xxi. 25). Evidently the seed sown by Paul and his associates, who in their antinomian Gnosticism boasted of having penetrated "the deep things of God" (I Cor. ii. 10), had borne evil fruit, so that the seer of Patmos calls these heretics "false apostles and liars" (ii. 2), and their teachings "the depths of Satan" (ii. 24).

How much local cults, as that of Esculapius in Pergamos ("Satan's seat"; ii. 13), had to do with these heresies it is difficult to say; certain it is that many were "polluted" by pagan practises (ii. 13, 26; iii. 4). All the more severely does the seer condemn the Pauline teaching as "the teaching of Balaam" (comp. II Peter ii. 15; Jude 11; Sanh. 106b; Git. 57a; see Balaam). On the other hand, Jesus, through John, promises to the poor, the meek, and the patient toilers of the churches who refuse to partake of the meals of the pagans that "they shall eat of the tree of life" in paradise (ii. 2, 7); to those who are to suffer from the pagan powers that they shall, as true "athletes" of this world, be given the "crown of life" (ii. 10); to him "that overcometh" in the contest (comp. the rabbinical term, "zokeh") will be given a lot or mark ("goral") bearing the Ineffable Name, and he shall "eat of the hidden manna" (ii. 17; comp. Tan., Beshallah, ed. Buber, p. 21; Hag. 12b; Apoc. Baruch, xxix. 8;

Sibyllines, ii. 348); or, like the Messiah, he will "rule them [the heathen] with a rod of iron" and be given the crown of glory (ii. 26-28; the "morning star," taken from xxii. 16, if it is not the error of a copyist); those who "have not defiled their garments" "shall be clothed in white raiment," and their names shall be written in the book of life and proclaimed before God and His angels (iii. 4-5); while those who stand the test of Satan's trials shall be spared in the great Messianic time of trial and become pillars in the temple of the "new Jerusalem" (iii. 10-13, Greek), or shall partake of the Messianic banquet, sitting by (scarcely "in") the seat of Jesus (iii. 21).

Jewish Point of View of Writer.

Obviously, the writer of these visionary letters to the seven churches of Asia was in his own estimation a Jew, while believing in Jesus as the risen Messiah. He beheld him in his vision as "the faithful witness" (martyr) who is next to God, "who is, was, and will be" ("come" is the emendation of the late compiler), his seven angelic spirits standing "before his throne" (i. 4-5); "the Son of man" grasping seven stars in his right hand, while out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword (i. 13-16; ii. 1, 12 [taken from the apocalypse, xiv. 14]; iii. 1); who "holds the keys of hell and of death" (i. 18); who is "the holy and true one" that "holds the key of David" (iii. 7, with reference to Isa. xxii. 22); who is called also "the beginning of the creation of God" (iii. 14). However, the identification of "him who was dead and became alive again" with God, who is the First and the Last, the ever-living Almighty (i. 17; comp. i. 8 and ii. 8), is the work of the late compiler. The close of the visionary letters is found at xxii. 16, where Jesus is represented as saying, "I am the root and the offspring of David" (comp. Isa. xi. 1, 10), "the bright and morning star" (after Num. xxiv. 17 and [probably] Ps. cx. 3; comp. LXX.). To find in these chapters traces of a persecution of the early Christians by the Jews, as do most modern exegetes, is absurdly illogical. On the contrary, the writer condemns the anti-Jewish attitude of the Pauline churches; the document is therefore of great historical value. It is important in this connection to note the Hebraisms of the whole of this part of the book, which prove that the writer or—if he himself originally wrote Hebrew or Aramaic—the translator could neither write nor speak Greek correctly. As to the relation of this to the apocalypse which follows see below.

The Main Apocalypse:

The succeeding part (iv.-xx. 8) contains several Jewish apocalypses worked into one, so altered, interpolated, and remodeled as to impress the reader as the work of the author of the letters to the seven churches. In the following the attempt is made to acquaint the reader with the contents of the two original Jewish apocalypses, as far as they can be restored, the Christian interpolations and alterations being put aside.

First Jewish Apocalypse: After the introductory verses, part of i. 1, 8 ("I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was and will be ["will come" is a Christian alteration], the Almighty") and part of i. 12-19, the apocalyptic seer describes (iv. 1 *et seq.*) how he was carried up by the spirit (with the angel's word, "Come down hither," compare the expression "Yorede Merkabah"), and how he saw "a throne set in heaven and One sitting on the throne," after the manner of Ezek. i. 26-28. "Round about the throne were twenty-four seats, and upon these I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white raiment, and they had golden crowns on their heads": obviously heavenly representations of the twenty-four classes of priests serving in the Temple (Ta'an. iv. 2; I Chron. xxiv. 7-18; Josephus, "Ant." vii. 14, § 7; comp., however, Gunkel, "Schöpfung und Chaos," pp. 302-308, and Isa. xxiv. 23 [Bousset]). After a description of the four "hayyot," taken from Ezek. i. 5-10, 18 and combined with that of the seraphim in Isa. vi. 2-3, the text continues, "They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts [παυτοκράτωρ, translated "Almighty" in A. V.; comp. Amos iv. 13], who was, is, and shall be" (Greek text, "is to come"). And when the hayyot give glory and honor and

praise to Him who sits on the throne, Him who lives forever and ever ("הֵן הַ-וָּלָמִין"), the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves and, laying down their crowns, say, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for Thou hast created all things, and by Thy will they have been created."

- Ch. v.: The seer then describes how he saw at the right hand of God a scroll written within and without and sealed with seven seals (it was customary for the last will to be sealed with seven seals and opened by seven witnesses; see Huschke, "Das Buch mit den Sieben Siegeln," 1860; Zahn, "Einleitung in das Neue Testament," ii. 591), which none in heaven, on earth, or beneath the earth was found worthy to open until one of the twenty-four elders pointed out that "the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, had merited to open the book and loose its seven seals." Then the lion (the Christian reviser rather awkwardly substituted "the slain lamb") suddenly appeared, with seven horns and seven eyes, standing between the throne and the four *hayyot* and the twenty-four elders; and he stepped forth and took the scroll while the *hayyot* and the elders prostrated themselves before him, saying, "Thou art worthy to take the book and open the seals thereof; for . . ." The remainder has been worked over by the Christian reviser.
- Ch. vi. 1-12: At the opening of the first seal by the Messiah the seer hears the thunder-call of one of the four *hayyot*, and sees a white horse appear, with a rider holding a bow (representing, probably, Pestilence); at the opening of the second seal, a red horse, with a rider armed with a great sword (representing War); at the opening of the third seal, a black horse, with a rider holding a pair of balances to weigh flour, bread having become scarce (signifying Famine); at the opening of the fourth seal, a "pale" horse, the rider thereof being Death. These four are to destroy the fourth part of the earth by the sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. What plague is ushered in at the opening of the fifth seal is no longer stated; apparently it is persecution of the saints, as the text continues: "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony they gave" (as martyrs; see Kiddush ha-Shem). "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth." And white robes were given them, and they were told to rest for a while until the number of the martyrs was full (comp. Apocalypse of Baruch, xxx. 2; IV Esd. iv. 36). After this the seer beholds a great multitude of people of every land and language, both Jews and proselytes, also arrayed in white robes, standing before the throne; and he is told that, "having undergone great tribulation, they have made their robes white by the blood of the martyrs" (of course, not "of the lamb," as the Christian reviser has it); and that now they serve God in the heavenly temple day and night, and the Shekinah dwells with them (vii. 9-17, which part is misplaced).
- Ch. vi. 12-17: At the opening of the sixth seal "the birth-throes of the Messianic time" appear, as depicted in Joel iii. 3-4; Isa. ii. 10, xxiv., xxxiv. 4; and Hosea x. 8. Fear of the great day of God's wrath (Mal. iii. 2) and of the wrath of His anointed (Ps. ii. 12) seizes the whole world.

Opening of the Seventh Seal.

- Ch. viii. 1-13: The opening of the seventh seal forms the climax. The awful catastrophe is marked by "silence in heaven about the space of half an hour." The four angels that hold the winds at the four corners of the earth are told to check the blowing of the winds on land, on sea, and on the trees until an angel has sealed upon the forehead, with the seal of the living God, the 144,000 servants of God, that is, 12,000 of each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Dan as idolater is excluded, and Levi takes his place along with the two sons of Joseph), in order to guard them against the impending destruction (vii. 1-8). The seven trumpets of the seven angels before God usher in seven great calamities: the first four involve a world conflagration ("mabbul

shel esh") that burns up the third part of the land and dries up a third part of the sea and the rivers, and an eclipse of sun, moon, and stars (viii. 2-12; comp. Sibyllines, iii. 80-90, 540); the remaining three, who are announced by an angel flying through the midst of heaven (viii. 13), bring even greater woes; first the torment of locusts, described in all its fierceness in the apocalyptic chapters of Joel (i. 6, ii. 2-9), coming forth from the abyss over which the angel Abaddon (Destruction; comp. Job xxviii. 22; comp. "Zefoni," Joel, ii. 20; Suk. 52a) alone has power (ix. 1-12); secondly, the letting loose from the banks of the Euphrates of the four kings (מלכים; not "angels," מלכים), with numberless hosts of wild Parthian horsemen wearing breastplates of fire and brimstone, and riding on horses that have heads of lions and tails of serpents, and out of whose mouths come fire, smoke, and brimstone (comp. Nahum ii. 4-5, iii. 3). As with the former plagues, a third part of mankind is killed; they were prepared for this task from the beginning of the world. "And yet," closes the seer, "the rest of the men which were not killed repented not, but continued to worship demons, idols of gold and silver, bronze, stone, and wood, practise witchcraft, and commit murders, fornications, and thefts" (ix. 13-21; see Sibyllines, ii. 255-262, iv. 31-34; and compare the four kings of the mighty hosts upon the banks of the Euphrates in the Midrash of Simeon ben Yoḥai, in Jellinek, "B. H." iii. 81).

The third and last wo, announced in xi. 14 (x.-xi. 13 interrupts the connection), is no longer given in what follows xi. 15a; for the Christian reviser changed the text which originally described the last judgment passed upon the non-repentant people, "the kingdoms of this world," and instead speaks of their having "become kingdoms of Christ." Only verse 18, telling of "the wrath of God that has come upon the nations that shall be destroyed as they have destroyed the land," contains traces of the former contents of the chapter; although possibly part of xiv. 1-5, referring to the 144,000 of Israel who had been saved, and the proclamation to all the nations to "fear God and worship Him who made heaven, earth, sea, and the fountains of water," "for the hour of His judgment has come" (xiv. 6-7), formed part of the original Jewish apocalypse; also xi. 16-18, the song of praise by the twenty-four elders before God and the vision of the reappearance of the Ark of the Covenant (xi. 19; comp. Yoma 53b, 54a).

In all probability this apocalypse was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, at a time of persecution, when many Jews died as martyrs, though many others yielded; hence only 12,000 of each tribe are to be selected.

Moses and Elijah.

The Second Jewish Apocalypse: Far more powerful, and expressive of intense hatred of Rome, the Babel-like destroyer of Judea, is the second Jewish apocalypse, or series of apocalypses, written during the siege and after the destruction of Jerusalem, and contained in ch. x. 2-xi. 13, xii. 1-xiii. 18, and xiv. 6-xxii. 6. After the manner of Ezek. ii. 8-iii. 3, the writer represents his vision as having been received in the form of a book, which he is to eat with its bitter contents. In imitation of Ezek. xl. 3 and Zech. ii. 5-6, the angel gives him a measuring-rod that he may measure the site of the Temple and the altar, which is to remain intact, while the rest of the Holy City is doomed to be trodden under foot by the Gentiles (the Roman soldiers) for forty-two months (Dan. vii. 25, viii. 14, xii. 7). He is then told that during this time there shall be two prophets, witnesses of the Lord (Moses and Elijah), who shall again manifest their power of restraining the heavens from giving rain (I Kings xvii. 1), of turning the water into blood, and of striking the land with plagues (Ex. vii.-x.); and whosoever shall attempt to hurt them will be devoured by fire from their mouths (II Kings i. 10). But they will finally fall victims to the beast that ascends out of the abyss to make war upon them. After their dead bodies have been lying for three and a half days in the streets of the Holy City, which shall have become a Sodom and Gomorrah, and the people of all tongues and of all nations have looked upon them and

rejoiced at the death of the prophets that had chastised them (by their preaching of repentance), refusing to give them burial, God's spirit will again imbue them with life, and they will, to the astonishment of the people, rise and ascend to heaven; and in the same hour a great earthquake will cause the death of 7,000 people (xi. 1-13). Of this eschatological feature no trace is found in rabbinical sources, except the appearance of Moses and the Messiah during the war of Gog and Magog (Targ. Yer. Ex. xii. 42). Possibly this is the older form of the legend of the Messiah ben Ephraim or ben Joseph being slain by Gog and Magog, based on Zech. xii. 10-11 (comp. Jellinek, "B. H." iii. 80).

Then follows (xiii. 1, 12a, 5b, 10) the description of the beast (after Dan. vii. 4-7; comp. vii. 8, xi. 36). It bears (in "Augustus Divus") the name of blasphemy, and its mouth speaks blasphemy against God and His Shekinah on earth and in heaven (i. 5-6, misunderstood by the Christian translator). It has power over all nations and tongues, and over all those whose names are not written in the book of life (the awkward addition "of the lamb" betrays the Christian hand) from the foundation of the world, and it makes war upon the "saints" (the Jewish people, as in Daniel). For forty-two months (the three and a half years of Daniel) will its power last, trying the patience of the saints.

Vision of the Seven Plagues.

But then (xiv. 6-7) an angel in the midst of heaven announces good tidings to the people on the earth, saying, "Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea." Here follows (xv. 5-xvi. 21) the vision of the seven angels coming out of the Temple with "seven golden vials full of the wrath of God who liveth for ever and ever." The first angel pours out his vial upon the earth and there falls an evil and grievous sore (comp. Ex. ix. 8) upon the men who bear the mark of the beast and worship his image (an allusion to the cult of the emperors and to the Roman coins). The second angel pours out his vial (comp. Ex. vii. 19) on the sea, which turns into blood, so that all living things therein die. The third pours out his vial upon the rivers, and they become blood, the angel of the waters praising the justice of God ("zidduk ha-din"), which makes those drink blood who have shed that of the saints and prophets. The fourth pours out his vial upon the sun, which becomes a fire to scorch the people who blaspheme and repent not. The fifth pours out his vial upon the seat of the beast (Rome), and its empire becomes full of darkness; yet the people repent not. The sixth pours out his vial upon the great Euphrates (comp. Sanh. 98a), and it is dried up, so as to prepare the way for the kings of the East (the Parthians) to gather in Armageddon ('Ir Magdiel, symbolic name for Rome; xvi. 13-15 is an interpolation; see Targ. Yer. to Gen. xxxvi. 43; Pirke R. El. xxxviii.; Gen. R. lxxxiii.). The seventh pours out his vial into the air and causes an earthquake which splits the great city (Rome) into three parts, and the cities of the nations fall, and islands and mountains are removed, and Babylon (Rome) takes from the hand of God the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath (comp. Jer. xxv. 15).

Rome the Great Harlot.

In ch. xvii.-xix., in imitation of Isaiah's and Ezekiel's vision of Tyre (Isa. xxiii. 17; Ezek. xxvii.-xxviii.), the apocalyptic writer then proceeds to dwell on the judgment held over the great harlot that sits upon the many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk. He then sees in the wilderness "a woman sitting upon a scarlet-colored beast full of names of blasphemy [idolatry] and having [seven heads and] ten horns [comp. Dan. vii. 7], herself arrayed in purple and scarlet and decked with gold and precious stones, and holding in her hand a golden cup full of the filthiness of her fornication" (the picture is taken probably from the Syrian representations of Astarte riding on a lion with a cup of destiny in her hand). Greatly astonished at this sight, he learns from the interpreting angel (verses 5-14 and 16 are later insertions which anticipate the interpretation) that "the many waters" are the many nations given into the power of

the beast, and that the woman is the great city (of Rome) which reigneth over the kings of the earth.

Then he beholds (xviii. 1-8) one of the glorious angels descending from heaven, and crying out (in the words of the ancient seers—Isa. xxi. 9, xxiv. 11-13), "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, and has become the habitation of demons," for all the nations have drunk of the glowing wine of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her (Isa. xxiii. 17; Jer. xxv. 15, 27). "Go out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins and receive not of her plagues" Jer. li. 6, 9); "for her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities" (Ps. cxxxvii. 8; Jer. l. 15, 29). In rhythmic sentences, taken from the Bible, the voice is heard saying: "Fill her cup double of what she offered you, and give her as much torment and grief as she has had glory and pleasure." All that is said of Babel (Isa. xlvi. 7-9; Jer. l. 32-34) is applied to her; and Ezekiel's lamentation over the fall of Tyre (xxvi. 16-xxvii. 36) is repeated by the kings of the earth overthe fall of Babylon (Rome). "Alas, alas, Babylon the great, mighty city! in one hour is thy judgment come!" is the refrain (xviii. 10, 19). The rhythmic form in which the whole is composed indicates a Hebrew author, whereas the Christian interpolations always spoil both context and rhythm.

Finally (xviii. 21-24), an angel casts a large stone into the sea (comp. Jer. li. 63-64), saying, "Thus shall Babylon be cast down forever and no longer be found"; her musicians shall no longer be heard in her (comp. Ezek. xxvi. 14); nor shall any craftsman be seen; nor shall "the sound of a millstone" or "the voice of bridegroom and bride be perceived"; nor shall "the light of a candle" shine in her (comp. Jer. xxv. 10).

The Beast, the Dragon, and the Messiah.

In order to understand the relation between the prophecy concerning the beast and Rome and the visions of the dragon and the Messiah (the Christian "lamb") which precede and follow, it is necessary to bear in mind that since the days of Pompey Rome was in the eyes of the Jewish apocalyptic writers the fourth beast in the Daniel apocalypse (see Dan. vii. 7), the last "wicked kingdom" whose end is to usher in the Messianic kingdom (Cant. R. ii. 12; Gen. R. xliv. 20; Lev. R. xiii.; Midr. Teh. Ps. lxxx. 14; see Romulus). Rome was found to be alluded to in Ps. lxxx. 14 (A. V. 13), in the words **חַיִר מִיעֵד** ("the boar out of the wood"), the letter **ו** being written above the others so as to make the word **רַמֵּה** ("Rome") stand out in transposed order (comp. Enoch, lxxxix. 12, where Esau is spoken of as "the black wild boar").

The identification of Rome with Babylon is found also in the Jewish Sibyllines, v. 159, and the identification with Tyre in Ex. R. ix. 13—facts which indicate the lines of Jewish apocalyptic tradition. "The wild beast of the reeds" (Ps. lxviii. 31 [R. V. 30]) has also been identified with Rome (see Midr. Teh. Ps. lxviii. [ed. Buber, p. 15]). But in order to account for the delay of the Messiah, who was to "slay the wicked by the breath of his mouth" (Isa. xi. 4), a cosmic power in the shape of an Ahrimanic animal, the dragon, was introduced as the arch-enemy plotting the destruction of the Messiah, the Antichrist who with his hosts hinders the redemption ("me'akkeb et ha-ge'ullah"; Sauh. 97b; Nid. 13b; comp. II Thess. ii. 6-7). To this end the author used a mythological story (xiii. 1-6), borrowed from Babylonia, as Gunkel (*l.c.* pp. 379-398) claims, from the Apollonic myth, as Dieterich ("Abraxas," 1891, pp. 117-122) thinks, or from Egypt, as Bousset suggests. He sees (xii. 1-6) Zion in the garb of "a woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, and twelve stars on the crown of her head," while about to give birth to a child destined to "rule all nations with a rod of iron" (Ps. ii. 9), pursued by a seven-headed dragon; the child (the future Messiah) is carried up to the throne of God (that is, he is hidden), and she flees to the wilderness, where a place is prepared for her by God to be nourished in for 1,260 days (three and a half years; comp. xi. 3, xiii. 5, and Dan. vii. 8, xi. 25). Compare with this the Talmudic legend of the Messiah babe carried off by the storm (Yer. Ber. ii. 5a). Here follows a similar story

from another hand (xii. 7-15), telling of a battle raging in heaven between Michael, the "Synegor" (= "pleading angel") of Israel (Midr. Teh. Ps. xx.), and Satan, the "Kategor" (= "Accuser"), which ends in the casting down of the old serpent with his hosts—a victory brought about by the merit of the Jewish martyrs, which silenced the Accuser.

It was thereafter, says the second version, that the woman (Israel) was pursued by the serpent; but she was carried by a great eagle into a safe place in the wilderness, where she was nourished for "a time, two times, and a half time" (three and a half years; comp. Dan. vii. 25); "and when the dragon cast forth a flood of water to drown her, the earth opened her mouth to swallow the water." Finally, unable to slay the woman with her Messiah babe, the dragon made war with the remnant of her seed, the pious ones "who observe the commandments of God."

Interpolations.

The prophecy concerning Rome seems to have received many interpolations and alterations at the hands of Jewish and Christian compilers. Both "the second beast, the false prophet who aids in the worship of the image of the emperor (xiii. 11-17), and the interpretation of the seven heads (xvii. 8-11) are later insertions. The number 666 (**נֶשֶׁךְ קָסָר**; xiii. 18), also, is scarcely genuine, inasmuch as the number 256 represents both the beast and the man (**רוּתִי** and **נוֹרִי**) as stated in the apocalypse. For the second beast, called Beliar, comp. Sibyllines, ii. 167, 210; iii. 63-90.

The story of the Messiah hidden with God in heaven is continued in xiv. 6-20, a passage which has but few traces of the Christian compiler's hand. Announcement (not of "good tidings") is made to the nations: "Fear God the Creator, for the hour of His judgment is come" (xiv. 6-7). Then "the Son of man coming on the cloud" (comp. Dan. vii. 13) appears, a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand, and a voice calling forth from within the Temple, "Thrust in thy sickle and reap, for the harvest of the earth is come"; "Tread ye the clusters of the vine of the earth, for the grapes are ripe" (comp. Joel iv. 13); and he "thrust the sickle, and gathered the clusters of the vine of the earth and cast them into the wine-press of the wrath of God" (comp. Isa. lxiii. 1-6); and as the wine-press was trodden, outside the city (comp. Zech. xiv. 4), there came blood out of the wine-press, reaching even to the bridles of the horses, for the space of 1,600 furlongs (comp. Enoch, xciv. 9, xcix. 6, c. 3).

The same scene is depicted in ch. xix. 11, 16 (also altered by the Christian compiler), where the seer beholds "upon a white horse" him who is "to judge and to make war"; his eyes are a flame of fire, and on his (triple ?) crown the Ineffable Name is written; he is clothed with a vesture dipped in blood (Isa. lxiii. 3), and his name is. . . . Heavenly hosts follow him on white horses, and out of his mouth goes a sharp sword with which he shall smite the nations. He shall rule them with a rod of iron (comp. Ps. ii. 9) and tread the wine-press of the wrath of the Lord of Hosts (Isa. lxxiii. 6); and on his vesture and thigh is written, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." The closing scene is described in xix. 17-18, 21: A voice ("of an angel standing in the sun"—certainly not genuine) calls, in the words of Ezek. xxxix. 17-20, all the fowls and beasts together for the great sacrifice ("supper") of God, at which they are to eat "the flesh of kings, of captains, and mighty men, of horses and of those who ride on them, and the flesh of all men both free and bond, small and great, . . . and the fowls were filled with their flesh."

Then the writer dwells, in ch. xx. 1-5, on the judgment passed in heaven upon the dragon, Satan, the primeval serpent, who is, like Azazel in Enoch, bound and cast into the abyss, there to be shut up for a thousand years, the seventh millennium which the Messiah shall pass together with the elect ones. Here the original apocalypse probably told of the resurrection of the "saints who had died in the Lord" (xiv. 13), and of the triumphal song they sang at the union of the Messiah, the bridegroom, and the daughter of Zion, the bride

(xv. 2-4, xix. 1-8).

Gog and Magog.

After the lapse of the seventh millennium (comp. "Bundahis," xxix. 8) the old serpent is again let loose to deceive the nations of the earth, and the numberless hosts of [Gog and Magog](#) beleaguer the Holy City. Then Satan is cast forever into Gehenna (comp. *ib.*), and "seats of judgment" (Dan. vii.) are set for all the dead who rise to be judged (xx. 7-15). Then all whose names are not written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire. "All the cowardly and faithless ones who yield to abominable rites, murderers, whoremongers, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars, shall meet the second death" (comp. Targ. Yer. to Deut. xxxiii. 6) "and be cast into the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (xxi. 8). There shall be "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isa. lxv. 17); the old ones shall disappear, and God's Shekinah shall be with men: they shall be God's people, and "He shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more sorrow or pain" (comp. Enoch, xc. 29; IV Esd. vii. 26; Apoc. Baruch, iv. 3, xxxii. 2; Hag. 12b; Ta'an. 5a).

Then (xxi. 9-27) in place of the old the seer beholds the new Jerusalem come down from heaven, prepared "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Isa. lxi. 10), in all the glory and splendor described in Isa. liv. 11-12, lxii. 6, with the twelve gates mentioned by Ezek. xlvi. 31-35, for the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve foundation-stones (the twelve names of the Apostles merely betray the Christian reviser's hand) are to be of precious stones, corresponding to the twelve on the high priest's breast-plate (comp. Ezek. xxxix. 10), the twelve gates, of twelve pearls; and the city with its streets, of pure gold, transparent as crystal (the same dreams of a golden Jerusalem with gates of pearls and precious stones are indulged in by the Rabbis; see B. B. 75a). No temple shall be there, as the Lord of Hosts will be its temple (comp. Ezek. xl. 35). The words "and the Lamb" (xxi. 22), "and the Lamb is the light thereof" (xxi. 23; comp. xxii. 5, taken from Isa. lx. 19) are Christian interpolations. Verses 24-27 are taken from Isa. lx. 2, 11; lii. 1 (comp. Ezek. xliv. 9), only so modified as to avoid the mention of "the night," while, instead of the passage concerning "the uncircumcised," it is said that "whosoever worketh abomination and falsehood may not enter; only they who are written in the book of life."

The Throne of God.

Finally, the seer beholds (xxii. 1-5) a crystal-like river of water flow forth from the throne of God (comp. Ezek. xlvi. 12 and Sanh. 100a, where the river is said to issue from the Holy of Holies). Jewish Gnostics (Hag. 14b) also spoke of the white marble throne and the "waters" surrounding it, exactly as "the sea of glass" near "the white throne" is described in Rev. iv. 6, xx. 11. On either side of the river he sees the tree of life (Enoch, xxv. 4-6) "bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations." "There shall be no more curse" (comp. Zech. xiv. 11, **רַבָּת**), for the servants of the Lord "shall see His face" (comp. Isa. xl. 5), and they shall reign for ever and ever" (comp. Dan. vii. 27).

The whole apocalypse, of which xxii. 10-15 is the conclusion, is, like the shorter one which precedes it, in every part and feature (except where altered by the Christian compiler) thoroughly Jewish in spirit and conception, as was fully recognized by Mommsen ("Römische Gesch." v. 520-523). It presents the development of the whole eschatological drama according to the Jewish view. It is Hebrew in composition and style, and bears traces of having originally been written in Hebrew, as is shown by the words ρκήνη (tabernacle; xxi. 3) for **מְלָאכִים; שְׁבִינָה** (angels) mistaken for **מֶלֶבִים** (Kings; ix. 14); ενίκηρευ (has conquered) for **בָּכָה** (is worthy); and others. The two apocalypses appear to have been, like that in Matt. xxiv., or like the Epistle of [James](#) and the [Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs](#), in the possession of Essenes who joined the Judæo-Christian Church after the destruction of the Temple (comp. Rev. xxi. 22, showing that the author did not believe in the future

restoration of the Temple). Hence it was easy for a member of the early Church to adapt the whole to the Christian view by substituting or inserting frequently, but not always skilfully and consistently, "the Lamb" for "the Messiah," and by occasionally changing or adding entire paragraphs (v. 9-14; vii. 9-10; xi. 82; xiv. 2-5; xvi. 15; xix. 7-10; xx. 6; xxi. 2; xxii. 7-10, 16-17, 20)

Possibly the seer of Patmos when writing the letters to the seven churches, or one of his disciples when sending them out, had these apocalypses before him and incorporated them into his work. This fact would account for the striking similarities in expression between the first three chapters and the remainder. Attention has been called also to the fact that the name "The Word of God" given to the Messiah by the Christian writer in Rev. xix. 13 corresponds exactly to the "Logos" of the Gospel of John i. 1 and "the Lamb" of John i. 29. To this may be added the conception of the Antichrist, dwelt upon alike in Revelation and in I John ii. 18, iv. 3, and II John 7. Owing to these and other similarities John the Presbyter, author of the letters to the seven churches and perhaps of the Second and Third Epistles of John (see introductory verses), was identified with John the Apostle, the assumed author of the Fourth Gospel. Under his name these books passed into the canon, notwithstanding the fact that the views held by the writer of the Book of Revelation differed widely from those expressed in the Gospel and in the Epistles. The Epistles are, like the Gospel, Pauline in spirit and written for Pauline churches; the Book of Revelation remains, under its Christian cloak, a Jewish document.

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Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** are described in the last book of the New Testament of the Bible, the Book of Revelation by John of Patmos, at 6:1–8. The chapter tells of a book or scroll in God's right hand that is sealed with seven seals. The Lamb of God opens the first four of the seven seals, which summons four beings that ride out on white, red, black, and pale horses.

The prophecy describes a period of time when a quarter of the population of the earth would be killed by a combination of wars, famine and disease. The prophecy describes the causes as 1) a conquering people whose weapon was the bow "I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest", 2) as people engaged in constant war "Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword", 3) high food prices leading to famine "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, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" and 4) disease "I looked and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him." These four are then summed up as follows "They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by the sword (war), famine, and plague and by the wild beasts of the earth".

Though theologians and popular culture differ on the first Horseman, the four riders are often seen as symbolizing Conquest^[1] or Pestilence (and less frequently, the Christ or the Antichrist), War,^[2] Famine,^[3] and Death.^[4] The Christian apocalyptic vision is that the Four Horsemen are to set a divine apocalypse upon the world as harbingers of the Last Judgment.^{[1][5]}



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, an 1887 painting by Viktor Vasnetsov. Depicted from left to right are Death, Famine, War, and Conquest. The Lamb is visible at the top.

Contents

White Horse

- As righteous
- As infectious disease
- As evil
- As empire prosperity
- As war

Red Horse

- As empire division

Black Horse

- As imperial oppression

Pale Horse

- Destroying an empire

Interpretations

- Prophetic interpretation
- Historicist interpretation
- Preterist interpretation
- LDS interpretation
- Other interpretations

Other Biblical references

- Zechariah
- Ezekiel

See also**References****External links**

White Horse

Then I saw when the Lamb broke one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying as with a voice of thunder, "Come." 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.

— **Revelation 6:1-2** (<https://www.biblica.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:1-6:2>) **New American Standard Bible (NASB)**

Based on the above passage, a common translation into English, the rider of the White Horse (sometimes referred to as the **White Rider**) He carries a bow, and wears a victor's crown.



The first Horseman, Conquest on the White Horse as depicted in the Bamberg Apocalypse (1000-1020). The first "living creature" (with halo) is seen in the upper right.

As righteous

Irenaeus, an influential Christian theologian of the 2nd century, was among the first to interpret this Horseman as Christ himself, his white horse representing the successful spread of the gospel.^[3] Various scholars have since supported this notion,^[6] citing the later appearance, in Revelation 19, of Christ mounted on a white horse, appearing as The Word of God. Furthermore, earlier in the New Testament, the Book of Mark indicates that the advance of the gospel may indeed precede and foretell the apocalypse.^{[3][7]} The color white also tends to represent righteousness in the Bible, and Christ is in other instances portrayed as a conqueror.^{[3][7]}

However, opposing interpretations argue that the first of the Four Horsemen is probably not the horseman of Revelation 19. They are described in significantly different ways, and Christ's role as the Lamb who opens the seven seals makes it unlikely that he would also be one of the forces released by the seals.^{[3][7]} It must also be noted that while the rider of the white horse wields a bow and wears a single crown, Christ rides forth with a sword, wearing many diadems.

Besides Christ, the Horseman could represent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was understood to have come upon the Apostles at Pentecost after Jesus' departure from Earth. The appearance of the Lion in Revelation 5 shows the triumphant arrival of Jesus in Heaven, and the first Horseman could represent the sending of the Holy Spirit by Jesus and the advance of

the gospel of Jesus Christ.^[8]

Other interpretations relying on comparative religious research ascribe the first Horseman as guiding for "the right path"; Mahabharata Lord Krishna was a charioteer to Arjuna by riding on white horses, while Arjuna himself was an archer.^[9]

As infectious disease

Under another interpretation, the first Horseman is called Pestilence, and is associated with infectious disease and plague. It appears at least as early as 1906, when it is mentioned in the Jewish Encyclopedia.^[10] The interpretation is common in popular culture references to the Four Horsemen.^[11]

The origin of this interpretation is unclear. Some translations of the Bible mention "plague" (e.g. the NIV) or "pestilence" (e.g. the RSV) in connection with the riders in the passage following the introduction of the fourth rider; cf. "They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." (Revelation 6:7-8 (<https://www.biblica.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:7-6:8>) NASB). However, it is a matter of debate as to whether this passage refers to the first rider, or to the four riders as a whole.^[1]

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, in his 1916 novel *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (filmed in 1921 and in 1962), provides an early example of this interpretation, writing "The horseman on the white horse was clad in a showy and barbarous attire. ... While his horse continued galloping, he was bending his bow in order to spread pestilence abroad. At his back swung the brass quiver filled with poisoned arrows, containing the germs of all diseases."^[12]

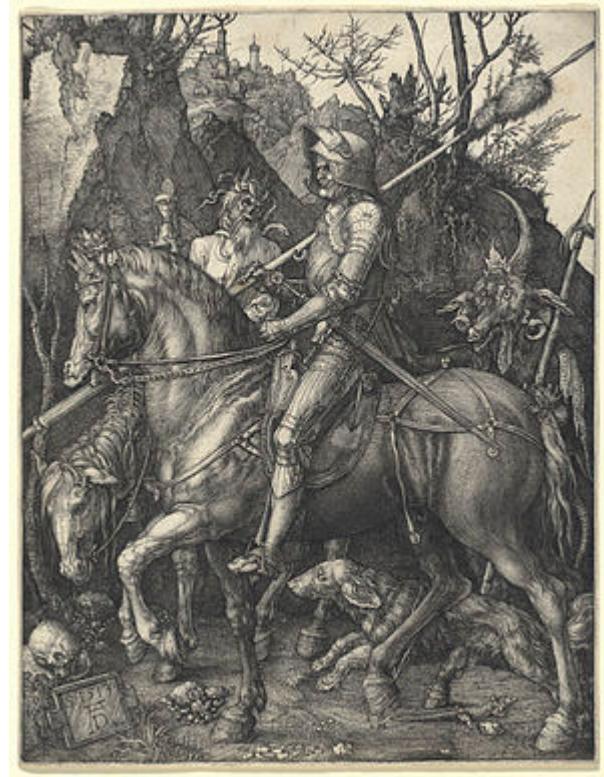
As evil

One interpretation held by evangelist Billy Graham, casts the rider of the white horse as the Antichrist,^[13] or a representation of false prophets, citing differences between the white horse in Revelation chapter 6 and Jesus on the white Horse in Revelation chapter 19.^[14] In Revelation 19,^[15] Jesus has many crowns. In Revelation 6, the rider has just one; a crown given, not taken. This indicates a third person giving authority to the rider to accomplish his work.

As empire prosperity

According to Edward Bishop Elliott's interpretation, that the Four Horsemen represent a prophecy of the subsequent history of the Roman Empire, the white color of this horse signifies triumph, prosperity and health in the political Roman body. For the next 80 or 90 years succeeding the banishment of the apostle John to Patmos covering the successive reigns of the emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the two Antonines (Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius), a golden age of prosperity, union, civil liberty and good government unstained with civil blood unfolded. The agents of this prosperity personified by the rider of the white horse are these five emperors wearing crowns that reigned with absolute authority and power under the guidance of virtue and wisdom, the armies being restrained by their firm and gentle hands.^{[16]:129-131,134}

This interpretation points out that the bow was preeminently a weapon of the inhabitants of the island of Crete and not of the



Albrecht Dürer, *Knight, Death and the Devil*, 1513

Roman Empire in general. The Cretans were renowned for their archery skills. The significance of the rider of the white horse holding a bow indicates the place of origin of the line of emperors ruling during this time. This group of emperors can be classed together under one and the same head and family whose origins were from Crete.^{[16]:140,142–144}

According to this interpretation, this period in Roman history, remarkable, both at its commencement and at its close, illustrated the glory of the empire where its limits were extended, though not without occasional wars, which were always uniformly triumphant and successful on the frontiers. The triumphs of the Emperor Trajan, a Roman Alexander, added to the empire Dacia, Armenia, Mesopotamia and other provinces during the course of the first 20 years of the period, which deepened the impression on the minds of the barbarians of the invincibility of the Roman Empire. Roman war progressed triumphantly into the invader's own territory, and the Parthian war was successfully ended by the total overthrow of those people. Roman conquest is demonstrated even in the most mighty of these wars, the Marcomannic succession of victories under the second Antonine unleashed on the German barbarians, driven into their forests and reduced to Roman submission.^{[16]:131–133}



Four horsemen, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1860

As war

In some commentaries to Bibles, the white Horseman is said to symbolize (ordinary) War, which may possibly be exercised on righteous grounds in decent manner, hence the white color, but still is devastating. The red Horseman (see below) then rather more specifically symbolizes Civil War.^[17]

Red Horse

When He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, "Come." 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.

— [Revelation 6:3-4 \(https://www.bible.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:3-6:4\)](https://www.bible.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:3-6:4) NASB

The rider of the second horse is often taken to represent War^[2] (he is often pictured holding a sword upwards as though ready for battle^[18]) or mass slaughter.^{[1][5][19]} His horse's color is red (πυρρός, from πῦρ, fire); and in some translations, the color is specifically a "fiery" red. The color red, as well as the rider's possession of a great sword, suggests blood that is to be spilled.^[3] The sword held upward by the second Horseman may represent war or a declaration of war, as seen in heraldry. In military symbolism, swords held upward, especially crossed swords held upward, signify war and entering into battle.^[20] (See for example the historical and modern images, as well as the coat of arms, of Joan of Arc.)

The second Horseman may represent civil war as opposed to the war of conquest that the first Horseman is sometimes said to



The second Horseman, War on the Red Horse as depicted in a thirteenth-century Apocalypse manuscript.

bring.^{[3][21]} Other commentators have suggested that it might also represent the persecution of Christians.^{[7][22]}

As empire division

According to Edward Bishop Elliott's interpretation of the Four Horsemen as symbolic prophecy of the history of the Roman Empire, the second seal is opened and the Roman nation that experienced joy, prosperity and triumph is made subject to the red horse which depicts war and bloodshed—civil war. Peace left the Roman Earth resulting in the killing of one another as insurrection crept into and permeated the Empire beginning shortly into the reign of the Emperor Commodus.^{[16]:147–148}



Death on the Pale Horse, Benjamin West, 1817

Elliott points out that Commodus, who had nothing to wish and everything to enjoy, that beloved son of Marcus Aurelius who ascended the throne with neither competitor to remove nor enemies to punish, became the slave of his attendants who gradually corrupted his mind. His cruelty degenerated into habit and became the ruling passion of his soul.^{[23]:86–87}

Elliott further recites that, after the death of Commodus, a most turbulent period lasting 92 years unfolded during which time 32 emperors and 27 pretenders to the Empire hurled each other from the throne by incessant civil warfare. The sword was a natural, universal badge among the Romans, of the military profession. The apocalyptic figure indicated by the great sword indicated an undue authority and unnatural use of it. Military men in power, whose vocation was war and weapon the sword, rose by it and also fell. The unrestrained military, no longer subject to the Senate, transformed the Empire into a system of pure military despotism.^{[16]:150–152}

Black Horse

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. 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; but do not damage the oil and the wine."

— **Revelation 6:5-6** (<https://www.bible.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:5-6:6>) NASB



The third Horseman, Famine on the Black Horse as depicted in the Angers Apocalypse Tapestry (1372-82)

The third Horseman rides a black horse and is popularly understood to be Famine as the Horseman carries a pair of balances or weighing scales, indicating the way that bread would have been weighed during a famine.^{[3][21]} Other authors interpret the third Horseman as the "Lord as a Law-Giver" holding Scales of Justice.^[24] In the passage, it is read that the indicated price of grain is about ten times normal (thus the famine interpretation popularity), with an entire day's wages (a denarius) buying enough wheat for only one person, or enough of the less nutritious barley for three, so that workers would struggle to feed their families.^[3]

Of the Four Horsemen, the black horse and its rider are the only ones whose appearance is accompanied by a vocal

pronunciation. John hears a voice, unidentified but coming from among the four living creatures, that speaks of the prices of wheat and barley, also saying "and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine". This suggests that the black horse's famine is to drive up the price of grain but leave oil and wine supplies unaffected (though out of reach of the ordinary worker). One explanation for this is that grain crops would have been more naturally susceptible to famine years or locust plagues than olive trees and grapevines, which root more deeply.^{[3][21]}

The statement might also suggest a continuing abundance of luxuries for the wealthy while staples, such as bread, are scarce, though not totally depleted;^[21] such selective scarcity may result from injustice and the deliberate production of luxury crops for the wealthy over grain, as would have happened during the time *Revelation* was written.^{[2][6]} Alternatively, the preservation of oil and wine could symbolize the preservation of the Christian faithful, who used oil and wine in their sacraments.^[25]

As imperial oppression

According to Edward Bishop Elliott's interpretation, through this third seal, the black horse is unleashed—aggravated distress and mourning. The balance in the rider's hand is not associated with a man's weighing out bits of bread in scanty measure for his family's eating but in association with the buying and selling of corn and other grains. The balance during the time of the apostle John's exile in Patmos was commonly a symbol of justice since it was used to weigh out the grains for a set price. The balance of justice held in the hand of the rider of the black horse signified the aggravation of the other previous evil, the bloodstained red of the Roman aspect into the darker blackness of distress.^{[16]:161,164–167,170} The black horse rider is instructed not to harm the oil and the wine which signifies that this scarcity should not fall upon the superfluities, such as oil and wine, which men can live without, but upon the necessities of life—bread.^[26]

In history, the Roman Empire suffered as a result of excessive taxation of its citizens. During the reign of Emperor Caracalla, whose sentiments were very different from the Antonines being inattentive, or rather averse, to the welfare of the people, he found himself under the necessity of gratifying the greed and excessive lifestyle which he had excited in the Army. During his reign, he crushed every part of the empire under the weight of his iron scepter. Old as well as new taxes were at the same time levied in the provinces. In the course of this history, the land tax, the taxes for services and the heavy contributions of corn, wine, oil and meat were exacted from the provinces for the use of the court, army and capital. This noxious weed not totally eradicated again sprang up with the most luxurious growth and going forward darkened the Roman world with its deadly shade.^{[23]:138–139}

In reality, the rise to power of the Emperor Maximin, whose cruelty was derived from a different source being raised as a barbarian from the district of Thrace, expanded the distress on the empire beyond the confines of the illustrious senators or bold adventurers who in the court or army exposed themselves to the whims of fortune. This tyrant, stimulated by the insatiable desires of the soldiers, attacked the public property at length. Every city of the empire was destined to purchase corn for the multitudes as well as supply expenses for the games. By the Emperor's authority, the whole mass of wealth was confiscated for use by the Imperial treasury—temples stripped of their most valuable offerings of gold, silver and statues which were melted down and coined into money.^{[23]:142–143}

Pale Horse

When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come." 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.

— **Revelation 6:7-8 (<https://www.biblica.com/bible/?osis=nasb:Revelation.6:7-6:8>) NASB**

The fourth and final Horseman is named Death. Known as "Θάνατος/Thanatos", of all the riders, he is the only one to whom the text itself explicitly gives a name. Unlike the other three, he is not described carrying a weapon or other object, instead he is followed by Hades (the resting place of the dead). However, illustrations commonly depict him carrying a scythe (like the Grim Reaper), sword,^[27] or other implement.

The color of Death's horse is written as *khlōros* (χλωρός) in the original Koine Greek,^[28] which can mean either green/greenish-yellow or pale/pallid.^[29] The color is often translated as "pale", though "ashen", "pale green", and "yellowish green"^[21] are other possible interpretations (the Greek word is the root of "chlorophyll" and "chlorine"). Based on uses of the word in ancient Greek medical literature, several scholars suggest that the color reflects the sickly pallor of a corpse.^{[31][30]} In some modern artistic depictions, the horse is distinctly green.^{[31][32][33]}

The Greek word for plague is θανάτῳ, which is a variation of Θάνατος, indicating a connection between the Fourth Horseman and plague.^[34]

The verse beginning "they were given power over a fourth of the earth" is generally taken as referring to Death and Hades,^{[21][35]} although some commentators see it as applying to all four horsemen.^[1]

Destroying an empire

This fourth, pale horse, was the personification of Death with Hades following him jaws open receiving the victims slain by Death. Its commission was to kill upon the Roman Earth with all of the four judgements of God—with sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts. The deadly pale and livid appearance displays a hue symptomatic of approaching empire dissolution. According to Edward Bishop Elliott, an era in Roman history commencing within about 15 years after the death of Severus Alexander (in 235 AD^[36]) strongly marks every point of this terrible emblem.^{[16]:191-192}

Edward Gibbon speaks of a period from the celebration of the great secular games by the Emperor Philip to the death of Gallienus (in 268 AD^[37]) as the 20 years of shame and misfortune, of confusion and calamity, as a time when the ruined empire approached the last and fatal moment of its dissolution. Every instant of time in every province of the Roman world was afflicted by military tyrants and barbarous invaders—the sword from within and without.^{[16]:192[23]:189}

According to Elliott, famine, the inevitable consequence of carnage and oppression, which demolished the produce of the present as well as the hope of future harvests, produced the environment for an epidemic of diseases, the effects of scanty and unwholesome food. That furious plague (the Plague of Cyprian), which raged from the year 250 to the year 265, continued without interruption in every province, city and almost every family in the empire. During a portion of this time, 5000 people died daily in Rome; and many towns that escaped the attacks of barbarians were entirely depopulated.^{[16]:193}



Gustave Doré—The fourth Horseman, *Death on the Pale Horse* (1865).



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse
(by Arnaldo dell'Ira, neo-roman project of mosaic, 1939-1940).

For a time in the late 260s, the strength of Aurelian crushed the enemies of Rome, yet after his assassination certain of them revived.^{[23]:246} While the Goths had been destroyed for almost a century and the Empire reunited, the Sassanid Persians were uncowed in the East and during the following year hosts of central Asian Alani spread themselves over Pontus, Cappadocia, Cilicia and Galatia, etching their course by the flames of cities and villages they pillaged.^{[16]:197}

As for the wild beasts of the earth, according to Elliott, it is a well-known law of nature that they quickly occupy the scenes of waste and depopulation—where the reign of man fails and the reign of beasts begins. After the reign of Gallienus and 20 or 30 years had passed, the multiplication of the animals had risen to such an extent in parts of the empire that they made it a crying evil.^{[16]:194}

One notable point of apparent difference between the prophecy and history might seem to be expressly limited to the fourth part of the Roman Earth, but in the history of the period the devastations of the pale horse extended over all. The fourth seal prophecy seems to mark the malignant climax of the evils of the two preceding seals to which no such limitation is attached. Turning to that remarkable reading in Jerome's Latin Vulgate which reads "over the four parts of the earth,"^{[16]:201[38]} it requires that the Roman empire should have some kind of quadripartition. Dividing from the central or Italian fourth, three great divisions of the Empire separated into the West, East and Illyricum under Posthumus, Aureolus and Zenobia respectively—divisions that were later legitimized by Diocletian.^{[16]:202}

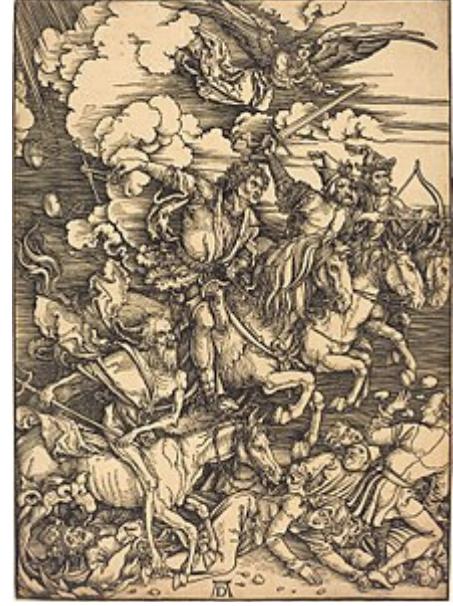
Diocletian ended this long period of anarchy, but the succession of civil wars and invasions caused much suffering, disorder and crime which brought the empire into a state of moral lethargy from which it never recovered.^{[16]:203} After the plague had abated, the empire suffered from general distress, and its condition was very much like that which followed after the Black Death of the Middle Ages. Talent and art had become extinct in proportion to the desolation of the world.^[39]

Interpretations

Prophetic interpretation

Some Christians interpret the Horsemen as a prophecy of a future Tribulation,^[6] during which many on Earth will die as a result of multiple catastrophes. The Four Horsemen are the first in a series of "Seal" judgements. This is when God will judge the Earth, and is giving the World a chance to repent before they die.

John Walvoord, a premillennialist, believes the Seals will be opened during the Great Tribulation and coincides with the arrival of the Antichrist as the first horseman, a global war as the second horseman, an economic collapse as the third horseman, and the general die off of 1/4 of the World's population as the fourth horseman, which is followed by a global dictatorship under the Antichrist and the rest of the plagues.^[41]



The Horsemen of the Apocalypse, in a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer (ca. 1497–98), ride forth as a group, with an angel heralding them, to bring Death, Famine, War, and Conquest unto man.^[40]

Historicist interpretation

According to E.B. Elliott, the first seal, as revealed to John by the angel, was to signify what was to happen soon after John seeing the visions in Patmos and that the second, third and fourth seals in like manner were to have commencing dates each in chronological sequence following the preceding seal. Its general subject is the decline and fall, after a previous prosperous era, of the Empire of Heathen Rome. The first four seals of Revelation, represented by four horses and

horsemen, are fixed to events, or changes, within the Roman Earth.^{[16]:121,122}

Preterist interpretation

Some modern scholars interpret Revelation from a preterist point of view, arguing that its prophecy and imagery apply only to the events of the first century of Christian history.^[21] In this school of thought, Conquest, the white horse's rider, is sometimes identified as a symbol of Parthian forces: Conquest carries a bow, and the Parthian Empire was at that time known for its mounted warriors and their skill with bow and arrow.^{[3][21]} Parthians were also particularly associated with white horses.^[3] Some scholars specifically point to Vologases I, a Parthian shah who clashed with the Roman Empire and won one significant battle in 62 AD.^{[3][21]}



Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Saint-Sever Beatus, 11th century.

Revelation's historical context may also influence the depiction of the black horse and its rider, Famine. In 92 AD, the Roman emperor Domitian attempted to curb excessive growth of grapevines and encourage grain cultivation instead, but there was major popular backlash against this effort, and it was abandoned. Famine's mission to make wheat and barley scarce but "hurt not the oil and the wine" could be an allusion to this episode.^{[21][30]} The red horse and its rider, who take peace from the earth, might represent the prevalence of civil strife at the time Revelation was written; internecine conflict ran rampant in the Roman Empire during and just prior to the 1st century AD.^{[3][21]}

LDS interpretation

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe their first prophet, Joseph Smith, revealed that the book described by John "contains the revealed will, mysteries, and the works of God; the hidden things of his economy concerning this earth during the seven thousand years of its continuance, or its temporal existence" and that the seals describe these things for the seven thousand years of the Earth's temporal existence, each seal representing 1,000 years.^[42]

About the first seal and the white horse, LDS Apostle Bruce R. McConkie taught, "The most transcendent happenings involved Enoch and his ministry. And it is interesting to note that what John saw was not the establishment of Zion and its removal to heavenly spheres, but the unparalleled wars in which Enoch, as a general over the armies of the saints, 'went forth conquering and to conquer' Revelation 6:2 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt/rev/6.2>); see also Moses 7:13–18 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/moses/7.13-18>)"^[43] The second seal and the red horse represent the period from approximately 3,000 B.C. to 2,000 B.C. including the wickedness and violence leading to the Great Flood.^[44]

The third seal and black horse describe the period of ancient Joseph, son of Israel, who was sold into Egypt, and the famines that swept that period (see Genesis 41 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/ot/gen/41>)–42 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/ot/gen/42>); Abraham 1:29–30 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/abr/1.29-30>); 2:1, 17, 21 (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/abr/2.1,17,21>)). The fourth seal and the pale horse are interpreted to represent the thousand years leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ, both the physical death brought about by great warring empires and the spiritual death through apostasy among the Lord's chosen people.^[44]

Other interpretations

Artwork which shows the Horsemen as a group, such as the famous woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, suggests an interpretation where all four horsemen represent different aspects of the same tribulation.^[45]

American Protestant Evangelical interpreters regularly see ways in which the horsemen, and Revelation in general, speak to

contemporary events. Some who believe Revelation applies to modern times can interpret the horses based on various ways their colors are used.^[46] Red, for example, often represents Communism, the white horse and rider with a crown representing Catholicism, Black has been used as a symbol of Capitalism, while Green represents the rise of Islam. Pastor Irvin Baxter Jr. of Endtime Ministries espouses such a belief.^[47]

Some equate the Four Horsemen with the angels of the four winds.^[48] (See Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel, angels often associated with four cardinal directions).

Some speculate that when the imagery of the Seven Seals is compared to other eschatological descriptions throughout the Bible, the themes of the horsemen draw remarkable similarity to the events of the Olivet Discourse. The signs of the approaching end of the world are likened to birth pains, indicating that they would occur more frequently and with greater intensity the nearer the event of Christ's return. With this perspective the horsemen represent the rise of false religions, false prophets and false messiahs; the increase of wars and rumours of wars; the escalation of natural disasters and famines; and the growth of persecution, martyrdom, betrayal and loss of faith.

Other Biblical references

Zechariah

The Book of Zechariah twice mentions colored horses; in the first passage there are three colors (red, speckled/brown, and white),^[49] and in the second there are four teams of horses (red, black, white, and finally dappled/"grisled and bay") pulling chariots.^[50] The second set of horses are referred to as "the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world."^[50] They are described as patrolling the earth, and keeping it peaceful. It may be assumed that when the tribulation begins, the peace is taken away, so their job is to terrify the places in which they patrol.^[3]

Ezekiel

The four living creatures of Revelation 4:6-8 are very similar to the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1:5-12. In Revelation each of the living creatures summons a horseman, where in Ezekiel the living creatures follow wherever the spirit leads, without turning.

In Ezekiel 14:21, the Lord enumerates His "four disastrous acts of judgment" (ESV), sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, against the idolatrous elders of Israel. A symbolic interpretation of the Four Horsemen links the riders to these judgments, or the similar judgments in 6:11-12.

See also

- The Book with Seven Seals
- Events of Revelation (Chapter 6)
- Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in popular culture
- Four Horsemen of the Infocalypse, an analogous usage in the use of computers

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