

Revelation 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 6 Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, Come.

And I looked, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, Come.

And out came another horse, bright red. His rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come. And I looked, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine.

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, Come. And I looked, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him.

[1 : 13] And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with sword and with famine, and with pestilence, and by wild beasts of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God, and for the witness they had borne.

They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Then they were each given a white robe, and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, and the great ones, and the generals, and the rich, and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves, and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and 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.

For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand. Now that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb, has arrived, and taken up his position at the right hand of God, the book can be opened, and the prophecy concerning the events of the age to come put in motion.

[2 : 53] The Lamb is the one who is worthy to open the book's seven seals, from which the rest of the events of the book will unfold. The number seven is an important one in scripture more generally. The scriptures begin with the seven days of creation, and the repeated sevens of revelation are ushering in a new creation.

There are the seven messages to the churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Sevenfold patterns are found at various points in scripture. Beyond Genesis chapter 1, Genesis chapter 2 follows a modified seven-day pattern.

The instructions for the tabernacle in Exodus follow a seven-day pattern. John chapters 1 and 2 have a seven-day pattern, and it is possible that Jesus' signs in the Gospel of John also follow such a pattern.

The three sets of seven in the judgments and revelation, the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls, have some possible points of more specific contact with the order of God's works on the seven days of creation.

For the most part, the connections are less pronounced, but occasionally some more obvious connection will stand out. We might see some relationships with the plagues of Egypt at certain points too.

[4 : 01] Peter Lighthouse proposes the following connections. The first seal is the dazzling white horse, which is like the light on the first day of creation. The second, the red horse that divides and separates, is like the day two firmament.

The third seal involves events concerning the grain and fruit trees, which spring up on the third day. In the fourth seal, death and Hades are given authority over the earth, like the sun, moon and stars on day four of creation.

On the fifth seal, the saints below the altar are like the swarms created on day five. They are also given white robes, as the priest's garments were associated with day five of the creation pattern in the book of Exodus.

The sixth seal is associated with doomed humanity, as humanity was created on the sixth day of creation. The opening of the seventh seal leads to half an hour's silence in heaven, and the prayers of the altar of incense.

Both things that could be connected with Sabbath. Austin Farrow notes the parallel between the seven stars that were in the hand of Jesus in chapter 1 verse 16, corresponding with the angels of the seven churches, as verse 20 of that chapter makes clear, and the seven seals in his hand now.

[5 : 13] The messages of chapters 2 and 3 were given as Jesus addressed the seven angels in his hand, one by one. Now he will open the seven seals in his hand, one by one.

Chapter 6 contains the opening of the first six of the seven seals, after which there is a pause before the seventh is opened. The first four of the seven seals involve the arrival of a rider upon a horse, announced by the voice of one of the four living creatures.

The horses likely find their background in the visions of Zechariah. In Zechariah chapter 1 verses 7 to 10 we read, On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, I saw in the night, and behold a man riding on a red horse.

He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red sorrel and white horses. Then I said, What are these, my lord? The angel who talked with me said to me, I will show you what they are.

So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth. We see more about these in Zechariah chapter 6 verses 1 to 7.

[6 : 27] Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses, all of them strong.

Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, What are these, my lord? And the angel answered and said to me, These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth.

The chariot with the black horses goes towards the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country. When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth.

And he said, Go, patrol the earth. So they patrolled the earth. The horses are associated, among other things, with the four winds of heaven. The lamb has just gone up to the right hand of the enthronement, to the throne of God.

This might be seen as the event of the ascension. After the ascension, the seven spirits are sent out into all of the earth, and the events of the last days begin to play out. The events of chapter 6 present, in the form of visionary and apocalyptic symbol, what occurs after the ascension, and through the events of Pentecost and the years that immediately follow.

[7 : 46] God is shaking up the world. He is progressively unleashing the winds and fire of heaven upon it. The opening of the seals also fulfills events foretold in the Olivet Discourse and in Peter's Pentecost speech.

Matthew chapter 24, verses 6 to 8 reads, The seals are the beginning of the birth pangs described here in the Olivet Discourse.

They are not the end itself, rather they are an unsettling of the old world order upon its foundations. Acts chapter 2, verses 17 to 20, has more along these lines.

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even on my male servants and female servants, in those days I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy, and I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below.

[9 : 00] Blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

Lighthouse stresses that the seals are not the actual prophecy that is coming to pass. Rather, they are preparatory for the fulfilment of the prophecy of the end. The scroll or book can't be read until all of its seals have been opened.

The judgments are written down, but they can't be put into effect until the seven seals have been opened, and the seven trumpets have been blown. The opening of the first four seals exhibits a largely repeating pattern.

First, the lamb opens the seal. Second, John hears one of the four living creatures. Third, one of the four living creatures says, Come. Fourth, John looks and behold.

And fifth, a horse comes with a rider upon it. There are seven seals, but these first four are very similar, so we have a pattern of four and three. The horses and the horsemen are sent out by God.

[10 : 02] With the prophecy of Zechariah as background, the horsemen seem to be agents of God, seated or perhaps even enthroned upon their horses. These are not demons. We need to settle the identity of both the horses and the horsemen as we think through this.

The advent of each horse and rider is heralded by one of the living creatures, each in succession, declaring, Come. This should be seen as shorthand for the expression, Come, Lord Jesus.

It's the call for Christ to come in judgment and salvation. Lighthouse raises the possibility that the riders could be seen as four different responses to the calls of the living creatures, to Jesus, to come.

Jesus, or the Spirit of Christ, is the four horsemen. Later in chapter 19, Jesus is presented as the rider on the white horse, and perhaps we can see allusions to elements of the other three horsemen's work in his description.

Revelation chapter 19, verses 11 to 16. Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, the white horse. The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.

[11 : 08] His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God.

And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Perhaps we are to see the church itself in the horses.

The opening of the first seal, at the very beginning of the chapter, is heralded by a voice like thunder from one of the living creatures. This would seem to be the first living creature, which is the lion. The white horse that comes out comes out as a conqueror.

He bears a bow and also a crown. If indeed this is Christ as described in Revelation chapter 19, the conquering may be the conquering of the gospel. Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and his word of his gospel is proving victorious wherever it goes in the world.

[12 : 20] People are hearing and receiving it and rejecting the kingdom of Satan. The opening of the second seal brings conflict. It is announced by the second living creature, the ox. And the horse that comes is bright red, red like fire and red like blood.

Christ is casting fire to earth and judgment, and blood in conflict and judgment will also follow his coming. The gospel brings a sword. It puts people against members of their own household.

This is part of the prophecy in Matthew chapter 24 in the Olivet Discourse. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. The opening of the third seal is heralded by the third living creature. Once again he calls, He is calling for the advent of Christ.

This time the horse is black, perhaps associated with famine and death. The wheat and the barley are struck, but the oil and wine are not. Some, such as David Chilton, have looked for a literal fulfillment of this in the final days of Jerusalem.

[13:26] While there was indeed severe famine, the reference here might not be to literal types of foods, but to different peoples. The oil and wine are associated with the new covenant. They connote rest, anointing and reward.

The opening of the fourth seal leads to the coming of a fourth horse, the pale horse, a horse ridden by death himself with Hades in the wake. This horse is heralded by the fourth of the living creatures, the eagle.

The correspondence of the living creatures as those who herald these different horses maybe suggests that there is some sort of way in which the horses are their counterparts. The horses also seem to be associated with the four winds of heaven, much as the four living creatures are associated with the four points of the compass.

With the opening of the fifth seal, the pattern changes. The opening of the seal is not announced by one of the living creatures. Rather, we see the souls of those who have been slain for the word of God beneath the altar.

The altar is associated with the earth. The altar is before the temple. It's not within the actual building itself. The building represents the heaven. The courtyard represents the earth.

[14:34] The land is associated with the altar. And the laver is associated with the sea. Whereas in the opening of the first four seals, it was the living creatures that were saying, come. Here it is the saints who are saying, Maranatha, calling for Christ to come in judgment and deliverance.

Their souls are beneath the altar because their souls are associated with the pouring out of their blood. The blood for purification offerings, as we see in the book of Leviticus, had to be poured out at the base of the altar.

There is a sacrificial movement in play here, but it is not yet completed. Their calling for judgment and vengeance upon those who dwell upon the earth is a call for the sacrifice to be completed.

They are given white robes that anticipate their victory, but they are also instructed to wait until the full measure of their fellow servants and their brothers are complete. The full numbers of the martyrs have not yet been reached.

Our mind should naturally turn here to Matthew chapter 23, verses 34 to 35. Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

[15:53] Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. The opening of the sixth seal is heralded by a great earthquake and the sun becoming black as sackcloth, the moon becoming like blood.

Austin Farris suggests that we should pay attention to the colours here. We've had a white horse for victory, red horse for bloodshed, black horse for famine, and then a livid or green horse for pestilence.

And then the four horses and their colours are paralleled with elements of the next part of the seals. First, there are white robes for victory, associated with the white horse for victory.

Then there is an earthquake, and the sun made black as sackcloth, and the moon as blood. Black and red like the second and third horses for famine and bloodshed. And finally there are seven new plagues, which begin with a plague upon a third of the earth and upon the green grass, which would match with the green horse and the plagues upon a fourth of the earth.

Cosmic symbolism of the lights of heaven being turned out, the heavens being rolled up like a scroll, and things falling from heaven should all be familiar to us from the Old Testament. We also see such language in Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse.

[17:03] Matthew chapter 24 verse 29, for instance. Similar language to this prophecy is used in Isaiah chapter 34 verse 3.

All the hosts of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their hosts shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. The whole order of creation is being torn apart or unsettled here.

The ground is being unsettled through the earthquake. The sun is being made black, the moon like blood, the stars falling from the heavens, and the sky being rolled up like a scroll. Mountains are being moved out of place, and islands too.

The whole of the cosmic order, which symbolises nations and rulers and authorities and powers, is being put out of joint. As the seals are being opened in preparation for the finale that follows, everything is being shaken up.

People try to flee, but there is nowhere to hide. The wrath of the lamb is coming upon the earth. We ought to attend to the expression the wrath of the lamb. We don't usually think about lambs having anger, but this is no ordinary lamb.

[18:16] This lamb is the lion of the tribe of Judah. Like the beasts of the book of Daniel, he is a symbolic creature, a hybrid of many different elements. As the lamb, it is perhaps his identity as the redemptive sacrifice that is most emphasised, but that is not all that he is.

He is also a kingly creature who will avenge his saints, a conqueror who will overcome those who oppose him. A question to consider.

In the previous chapter, the lamb ascended into the presence of the throne, but in this chapter, we see that the saints are still at the base of the altar. They seem to need to follow the lamb in his movement up into God's presence.

How might reflecting upon this help us to think better about the relationship between Christ and his body, his church?