

Study 7: Revelation Chapter 6

Introduction

“...The seven seals that are about to be opened will give us a panoramic view of history – from the inside view of the Church of Christ. It is not history exactly, but *interpreted* history that we are introduced to here...”

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Notes for study 7: Revelation Chapter 6

“...The seven seals that are about to be opened will give us a panoramic view of history – from the inside view of the Church of Christ. It is not history exactly, but *interpreted* history that we are introduced to here.¹...”

Part 3 - The Opening of the Seals

Introductions

The opening of the seals introduces a “chain” of events, with a similar repetitive pattern. The first four seals are similar, followed by three different types. The seventh seal brings in the seven trumpets. The first four trumpets are similar, followed by three different types. The seventh trumpet announces the seven bowls of wrath. The first four bowls are similar, followed by three different ones. The final bowl brings in Armageddon – the final battle. Harkrider notes²:

It is interesting to analyze the uniform patterns by which these three series of sevens are joined together. Each series begins with four things that are similar, then two, and finally, one which stands unique and last.

The First Seal

The opening of the first four seals comes with a vision of four different horsemen, followed by the cries of the slain martyrs. The scene turns from what is going on in heaven to what is happening on the earth – but *from heaven’s perspective!*

The scene is introduced by one of the four living creatures that surrounded the throne “...*I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!”...*” (6:1 NIV). The message of “come” was not to John, as he was already there observing the proceedings, but rather to the horsemen to proceed as the vision rolled out.

The interpretation of the horsemen must be taken in the context of the letter as a whole. We have seen that the scroll is God’s plan of salvation that the angels longed to look into, and was not revealed until Christ revealed it in the gospel. The unlocking of the seals is the process of revealing the hidden things of the scroll – and hence the hidden things of the gospel.

“...*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...*” (6:2 NIV). White is used as a symbol of purity, and of triumph. In ancient times, the victorious kings returning from battles always rode a white horse to show their victory. This rider is also given a crown, and *he rode out as a conqueror*. The image refers to Jesus, and the bow is the instrument that He uses to pierce the heart of His people with the arrows of the gospel.

The first horseman is the beginning of the gospel, which went out in purity, and resulted in triumph and conquest over Satan by Jesus.

The Second Seal

Like the first horseman, the second is also announced and called by another of the living creatures “...*When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ...*” (6:3 NIV). Like the first call, the second also responds with a horseman appearing, but this time on a different coloured horse. “...*Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was*

¹ Bewes p. 53

² Harkrider, p. 79

given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword..." (6:4 NIV). The colour red suggests blood, and bloodshed, which is supported by the comments that its rider was given power to take away peace and to make war amongst men.



The white horse depicts Christ conquering as the gospel is sent into the world. The red horse depicts the bloodshed and the persecution that follows. The black horse is the forerunner of death, and shows the injustice between those who are poor and suffering because of the gospel, and those who are rich and have plenty. The pale horse depicts death, with hades and the disembodied spirits of the saints following behind.



The fifth seal depicts the spirits of the saints at the foot of the altar. Theirs was the blood that was shed and sacrificed. They were slain because of the word of God. They cry out "how long must we suffer"



The sixth seal depicts God bringing judgement against the oppressors and vindicating the saints who have suffered. The sky rolling back like a scroll depicts the end of the era – the end of the Roman Empire, and the end of the suffering for the christians.

If we look historically at the events of the first century, we see the gospel being proclaimed by Christ (the first seal – the white horse), followed by conflict and persecution brought against the early christians (the second seal and the red horse). Jesus said that conflicts would occur – even coming in some cases from our own families (Lk 21:12,16).

This horseman was given a *great sword*. Hailey notes³:

The sword (*machaira*) was the short sword of the Roman infantry, such as the one Peter used to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant (John 18:10f). *Machaira* was the word used by Jesus to indicate the sword He would send forth (Matt 10:34). In the Septuagint it is the word translated "knife" at the offering of Isaac by Abraham (Gen 22:6,10). Hence, the "great sword" given to the rider was a butchering sword or knife with which he would slaughter men in sacrifice; it was "great" (or "long," *meGas*) because of the extent to which it would be used.

The Third Seal

The third seal, like the first two is announced by one of the living creatures "...*When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!"...*" (6:5 NIV). This time, a black horse comes forth "...*I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand...*" (6:5 NIV).

Black is the colour of grief and mourning, and there is nothing from it that shows hope. "...*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!"...*" (6:6 NIV). The message proclaimed suggests famine with barely sufficient food to survive. This follows the war and the bloodshed.

In the rider's hand there is a "pair of scales". A voice is heard interpreting its significance in economic terms: "a quart of wheat . . . and three quarts of barley for a day's wage." This amount suggests food prices much higher than normal and implies inflation and famine (Mt 24:7). A quart of wheat would supply an average person one day's sustenance. Barley was used by the poor to mix with the wheat. The expression "Do not damage the oil and wine" is less clear. Some view oil and wine as luxuries not necessary for survival, and the rich would have them while the poor were starving (cf. Pr 21:17). (NIVBC)

The scene is reminiscent of the things going on in the region of Asia Minor. Some Christians in Thyatira might not have been able to work because of the trade guilds, and they and their families might be facing starvation, whilst the rich continued on in the lap of luxury with no concern for the welfare of the poor. Likewise, those who refused to worship the Emperor at Pergamum would see the scales of justice before the court and be tried for treason. Or those at Smyrna might be restricted from earning their income by the Jews, and likewise face this trial and suffering, including possible starvation.

The period covered is later than the period of persecution depicted by the second seal, and was relevant to the time when John wrote the letters to the churches.

The Fourth Seal

As with the other seals, to vision that follows is announced by another (the last) of the four living creatures "...*When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"...*" (6:7 NIV). This time, the horse was pale (*chloros*) which describes

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.149) notes: "The scene of the four horses and riders is a panorama of the war on Jerusalem in a fourfold set of events, an extension of (the) twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew. They represent one set of events, not separate figures for separated periods or ages of the world, such as war in one age, famine in another century, carnage in another generation, and with a final fantastic millennium in the end of the world. It is a combined series fulfilled in one period as foretold by Jesus in Matt 24:34. The conquest of the victorious rider of the white horse through the bow could not be accomplished without the war on Jerusalem. The red horse of war could not perform without the black horse of famine, or without the pale horse of death in immediate pursuit. To separate the seals by centuries of time is to destroy the entire imagery."

³ Hailey, p. 190

something of an ashen green or blue colour – the colour of a person in sickness or death. This thought is exemplified by the rider of the horse “...I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him...” (6:8 NIV). As the vision progresses, the consequences increase. Things are getting worse, and they will continue to get worse for the persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. But, the persecution and the power of those who brought death was limited by Jesus, who has all authority (Mt 28:18). “...They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth...” (6:8 NIV). The persecution and death came by the semi-natural means (famine and plague – but remember that famine was probably brought about because the Christians refused to engage in the immoral practices that society demanded of them), and also by direct aggression (sword). It also came from the wild beasts of the earth. Many Christians were dragged into the Roman stadiums to face the lions (literally) as “sport” for the cruel Roman leaders.

Hailey notes⁴:

Here is the historical record: the Jews had opposed Christ and the gospel and persecuted the saints; Nero had bathed Rome in their blood; Domitian was beginning a persecution that had the whole empire steeped in their suffering before Constantine issued his edict of toleration more than two hundred years later. Persecution in some form has always been the lot of faithful children of God.

The Fifth Seal

The opening of the fifth seal is not “announced”, unlike the first four. “...When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained...” (6:9 NIV). The altar was a place of sacrifice, and the shed blood of the sacrifice was to be offered at the base of the altar of incense (Lev 4:7, 18, 30). These people had been slain *because of* the word of God. In the same way, John was on Patmos *because of* his teaching (1:9).

John sees these people who have suffered and been sacrificed. “...They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”...” (6:10 NIV). These saints were calling for judgement and retribution against their oppressors. This was not the beginning of their struggle, and it had obviously been going on for some time – and hence their cry “how long?”. Their struggles had been happening since the beginning of the gospel in Jerusalem, and continued through the persecutions under Nero and Domitian, as we have seen in the second, third, and fourth seals.

The question of *how long* is not answered, but the vision contains an assurance that God has not forgotten His people “...Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed...” (6:11 NIV). The white robe is a sign of purity, and the assurance that God is on their side. The saints were crying out under the prolonged persecution, and were told to wait a little while longer. The suffering would not end just yet. We are not told until chapter 13 that the persecution comes from the Roman Empire, and that God would bring down that Empire in the fullness of time. But *the time was not yet* – so wait a little time.

The Sixth Seal

As the sixth seal is opened, there is great disturbance on the earth “...I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place...” (6:12-14 NIV). It is tempting to think of this as the end

⁴ Hailey, p. 190

of the world and the final judgement. But the events follow the cries of justice from the suffering christians in the opening of the fifth seal, where God has promised justice *in a little while*. Further evidence for this can be seen in verses 15 & 16 where those who are revenged seek shelter and cry out. At the final judgement, this will not happen, and the earth will be destroyed *in the twinkling of an eye*. The events depicted are earth-shattering events – great earthquakes, no guiding light (the sun turned black), the stars falling like a great meteor shower, and the darkness engulfing the wicked. Hailey notes⁵:

The Spirit in the seer draws heavily from Old Testament pictures and descriptions of final judgements brought upon heathen nations that had sought the destruction of God's people. Isaiah had used these same symbols concerning ancient Babylon: "For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened in its going forth, and the moon shall not cause its light to shine ... I will make the heavens to tremble, and the earth shall be shaken out of its place" (Isa. 13:10, 13; cf. Also 29:6). "I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering" (Isa. 50:3; cf. Jer. 4:23f., 28). Joel also described a future judgement against Jerusalem: "The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood" (Joel 2:31). Jesus used these same figures from nature's calamities to describe the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (Matt. 24:29f.).

The destruction pictured is "the end of the world as we know it" – from the perspective of the suffering christians at the end of the first century. The falling of the stars continues the picture of destruction, with the stars representing rulers and those in authority. John's imagery of them falling is *like the figs falling to the ground when a tree is shaken by a strong wind*. They appear to be falling from everywhere! Even the mountains, which are the permanent and symbolic of strength have fallen – a sign that there will be no part of the Roman Empire and its power brokers that will not be shaken and fall. The sky is depicted as a scroll which when the reading of the book is complete, is rolled up and put away.

The imagery gives assurance of the permanence of God's judgement against the oppressors of the christians. This is not the final judgement, but God's retribution to those who are oppressing the His people. Hailey adds⁶:

These all indicate and illustrate the fall and passing of a great national power when judged by Jehovah.

The vision continues as we see the reaction of those political leaders who are on the receiving end of God's judgement. "...Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"..." (6:15-17 NIV). Hailey notes⁷:

...this description of men seeking refuge in the caves and rocks and calling for mountains to fall on them, occurs three times in previous history; in each instance it refers to national calamity. Hosea used this language to describe the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians (Hos. 10:8); Isaiah used it in prophesying of Jerusalem's fall at the hands of Babylon (Isa. 2:19); and Jesus said this same thing would occur when the Romans came

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.152) notes: "The judgements depicted in this seal indicate a response to the plea of the souls under the altar in the fifth seal. The representations, symbols and language are so similar to the descriptions of Matthew 24:29-31 as to be identical in their significance. It describes the coming of the Son of man after the tribulation mentioned in the verses before it, as the sixth seal of Revelation 6 joined with the contents of the fifth seal before it. The divine visitations in the signs of terrestrial upheavals and celestial disturbances form an identical imagery. The comparison is impressive, if not conclusive evidence of their fulfilment in the same series of events."

⁵ Hailey, p. 197

⁶ Hailey, p. 198

⁷ Hailey, p. 199

upon Jerusalem (Luke 23:30). It is clear that the use of such symbols at the opening of the sixth seal points to the judgement of a persecuting world power. Later in Revelation it will be revealed that the Roman Empire suffered such a calamity. By divine judgement, God will vindicate the cause of His saints.

Concluding Comments

In the opening of the six seals, we see a progression in the suffering of God's people as God's plan of salvation is revealed. It begins with the message of Christ, and continues through increasing trial and persecution. In the sixth seal, the Christians are vindicated and justice is brought about. The seven seals are the first of a series of three "sevens". The seventh seal brings in the second series – the seven trumpets. From the seventh trumpet come seven plagues.

Comments on Wallace's View of the Text

I have not included a detailed account of Wallace's view of the meaning of each of the four horsemen, however compared to other explanations (and those espoused in these notes) I have found them less than convincing. Whilst Wallace has drawn conclusions from Gibbon's work concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, and paralleled it to Revelation, I have also drawn from Gibbon's work on the persecution of the Christians under the Roman Empire and paralleled *that* to Revelation, as well as an overview of the persecution derived from Philip Schaff's History of the Christian Church. (As I write this, I have yet to see how well these dovetail into Revelation, but this will unfold as we progress in the studies.)

Wallace's comments on the suffering of the martyrs are similar to those considered in this study, and will not be shown for comparison. The major difference is the *cause* of the suffering, which Wallace attributes to the persecution under the siege of Jerusalem.

As an aside to the persecution associated with the destruction of Jerusalem, the Lord forewarned Christians that they should flee the city (Mt 24:15-22 ; Lk 21:20-22) and go to the mountains. "Tradition" says that no Christians suffered in the persecution, however I have (so far) been unable to substantiate that claim from Josephus or other early writings, however several commentators have made allusions to it. One tradition has the Christians fleeing to the other cities and establishing Christian communities there. Schaff says⁸:

The Christians of Jerusalem, remembering the Lord's admonition, forsook the doomed city in good time and fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan, in the north of Peraea, where king Herod Agrippa II., before whom Paul once stood, opened to them a safe asylum. An old tradition says that a divine voice or angel revealed to their leaders the duty of flight. There, in the midst of a population chiefly Gentile, the church of the circumcision was reconstructed..."

Now, – if the Christians *had fled* Jerusalem (as the Lord commanded and 'tradition' seems to acknowledge), then how could it be that we have them under the altar and appealing to God for the persecution (as the fifth seal suggests)? To my mind, this presents a formidable problem for the "early date" / "destruction of Jerusalem" view of the book.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p.149) notes: "The records of Matthew 24, mark 13, and Luke 21, concerning Jerusalem, are counterparts of the seals of Revelation. The works of Josephus on the Palestinian wars give historical fulfilment in the account of the bloody war of the Jews and the siege of Jerusalem. The historical parallels in the history of the Roman empire by Edward Gibbon is a virtual commentary on the book of Revelation, in the portion covering the period of the Roman war against Jerusalem. Truly, these things must have shortly come to pass, and verily was the time at hand."

He further adds (p. 152) "The identity of the period of the seals of Revelation 6 with the events of Matthew 24 is unmistakable, as referring to, symbolic of, and fulfilled in, the destruction of Jerusalem."

⁸ Schaff, Vol 1. p. 402