

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE JUDGMENTS OF THE SEVEN SEALS: 6:1--8:5

The first series of apocalyptic judgments that John surveys proceed from the sequential opening of the seven seals which seal the scroll of the world's title deed. The judgments are precursors of the world's reclamation for the kingdom of God. This idea that divine judgment must fall on an evil world before the consummation of God's kingdom is strongly rooted in Old Testament thought (Am. 5:18-20; Is. 2:12-21; Jl. 1:15; 2:1-11, 30-32; Zep. 1:7-18; Zec. 14:1-5). It was further characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic and is found in the teaching of Jesus as well (Mk. 13; Mt. 24; Lk. 21). In fact, there is to be observed a striking parallel between Revelation 6 and Mark 13:

	Mark 13	Revelation 6
War	v. 8	v. 2,4,8
Famine	v. 13b	v. 5-6,8
Martyrdom	v. 9-13	v. 9-11
Cataclysms	v. 8, 24-25	v. 12-14

It need not be thought that the disasters pictured in the seven seals begin at some particular point in history (though many have identified them with their own times). They seem to be generally characteristic of all history, and in fact, as Mark's Gospel makes clear, they are not so much "signs of the end" as they are "signs of this present age." The phrases in Mk. 13:5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35, 37 all aim at preventing the reader from interpreting these intermediate events as though they were final. The reader should understand the parallel descriptions in Revelation similarly as characteristic of this present age, but also, as escalating toward the end of the age as it draws near. The sixth seal, as will be shown, brings the reader to the brink of the end.

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

The famous horsemen of the Apocalypse are patterned after the vision of Zechariah. However, there is an irony in this allusion. In Zechariah's vision, the horsemen report on a world that is at rest from war (Zec. 1:8-11). John's use of the imagery depicts a world that will face war and its devastation. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse go forth to shatter the peace of the earth.

There are two interpretations of the **first horseman** that, although popular, we shall here reject. First, some see the first horseman as representing Christ, or perhaps Christ's kingdom, because of the white color of the horse and its similarity to a later vision (cf. 19:11). However, this interpretation seems to fit awkwardly in the context of the other horsemen. Others, particularly dispensationalists, see the first horseman as

PERSIAN DISPATCHES

Zechariah (1:7-11) uses the imagery of the Persian dispatches, well-known in the Achaemenid Empire, to represent divine dispatches reporting to God. In ancient Persia, these courier patrols were able to deliver messages from one end of the empire to the other in a matter of days.

John, following Zechariah, uses this same imagery to describe the opening of the first four seals.

representing the Antichrist. This interpretation fits the context better, but it is unnecessary to be so specific. It seems more feasible that the first horse is to be taken in the more general sense of militarism and conquest.

The **second horseman** rather obviously represents warfare and bloodshed.

The **third horseman** represents famine or scarcity, the inevitable result of war. A denarius was a normal day's wage, and a quart of grain was one person's average daily consumption, weighed out on a balance scale. Barley, generally cheaper than wheat, was the poor man's staple, and yet it would take all he could earn to simply supply a three-member family with the cheapest of food. Oil and wine were other staples of the day, and these also would be scarce.

The **fourth horseman**, either pale or perhaps yellowish green (such as the pallor of a diseased person), represents the pestilence of war, famine, plague, and wild animals (cf. Eze. 14:21). These afflictions will bring death to humans, and death is succeeded by Hades, the resting place of the dead. The idea of the "fourth part of the earth" should not be pressed too literally. The use of such fractional numbers probably means that the pestilence or plague is limited rather than universal (cf. 8:7-12; 9:15, 18; 11:13).

The Martyrs (6:9-11)

The persecution and martyrdom of God's people are central themes of the Revelation. Jesus clearly promised that his disciples would suffer for their faith (Jn. 15:18-22; 16:2-4, 33; 17:14-15;

WHO ARE THE PERSECUTED PEOPLE OF GOD?

Throughout the book, God's persecuted people are described by various phrases, such as, "those who have the testimony of Jesus" (1:2; 6:9; 12:11, 17; 20:4), the "saints" (13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:8; 20:9), and God's "servants, apostles, and prophets" (10:7; 11:18; 16:6; 18:20, 24). In spite of the popular "left behind" theory, which claims that these people are Jews during the great tribulation period, it seems more natural that such phrases refer to Christians, and it immediately calls into question the validity of the pre-tribulation rapture theory where Christians are evacuated from the earth prior to the great tribulation.

Lk. 21:12-19), and John identified himself with this suffering community (Rev. 1:9). Christians within the seven churches of Asia had also suffered, some to the point of death (2:3, 9-10, 13; 3:10). This theme of martyrdom will later resurface in the Revelation (12:11, 17; 13:6-7, 15; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4).

The souls of the martyrs were under the altar, an allusion to the Old Testament practice of pouring the ritual blood of sacrificial victims at the base of the altar (Lev. 4:7). The idea of martyrdom as a sort of sacrificial offering was not uncommon in the New Testament (2 Ti. 4:6; Phil. 2:17)

It is probably wise not to try to define specific times or circumstances of these martyrs too closely. They are clearly martyred for their

Christian testimony (cf. 1:2, 9; 12:11; 12:17; 19:10), and all the martyrs of the church may well be in view here in a collective way.

The Cosmic Disasters (6:12-17)

The kinds of cosmic disasters that John views here are typical of the Old Testament and apocalyptic imagery symbolizing the collapse of civilization and the end of the world (cf. Is. 13:9-10; 24:18b-23; 34:1-4; Je. 4:23-29; Eze. 32:7-8; Jl. 2:10-11,30-31; 3:14-16; Hag. 2:6-7). Jesus used this same imagery to describe the close of the age (Mt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24-25; Lk. 21:25-26). The primary impression is one of overwhelming catastrophe. John has stitched together various phrases from Old Testament books so as to depict the consummation of all the prophecies depicting cosmic doom. Virtually every phrase in this section has an Old Testament precedent taken from the passages named above.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *What are the dangers in taking descriptions like John's four horsemen and attempting to directly correlate them with current events?*
- *How can the tension between martyrdom and preservation be explained in passages such as Luke 21:16-19?*
- *John uses the phrase "the wrath of the Lamb" (6:16). What does this say about God's character and his divine judgments within history as well as at the end of history?*

THE TWO GREAT COMPANIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE (7:1-17)

Between the breaking of the 6th and the 7th seal, there is an interlude in which are pictured two great multitudes of God's people. The "beginning of birth pains" (Mt. 24:8) that characterize the course of the age, which is the metaphor Jesus used, has escalated to the point in time for the breaking of the final seal. This climax will be a complex of events that involve the people of God as well as the unleashed powers of evil, and finally, it will culminate with the salvation of God's people, the defeat of Satan and his minions, and the consummation of the kingdom of God—the redemption of the earth. The final verse in Chapter 6 heralds the arrival of the great tribulation, the day of the Lamb's wrath.

The two multitudes are pictured in two striking images. The first is a company of 144,000 believers, 12,000 from each tribe of Israel. The second is a vast throng from the nations of the earth. In some sense, both groups represent the people of God.

The 144,000 (7:1-8)

The commencement of the Lamb's wrath, here pictured as four avenging angels, comes in the metaphor of four mighty winds. The sirocco or whirlwind is often used in Old Testament as a metaphor for judgment (cf. Ps. 83:13; Is. 66:15; Je. 4:11-17; 23:19; 30:23; 49:36-38; Da. 7:22; Ho. 13:15; Am. 1:14; Na. 1:3), and the four winds are used metaphorically in apocalyptic literature to describe disaster (cf. Apocalypse of Pseudo-John 15). For ancient peoples, winds that blew straight (N S E W) were not harmful, but winds that blew diagonally from the corners of the earth were considered to be destructive (cf. 1 Enoch 76).

The angels controlling the four destructive winds were prohibited from destroying anything until God's servants had been marked for preservation.

The Sealing

The metaphor of the seal as a mark of preservation is borrowed from Ezekiel 9, where a man with a scribal writing kit was to mark a Hebrew *taw* (in oldest script, an “X”) in the foreheads of those who grieved over Jerusalem’s sins. In the Revelation, both the people of God and the enemies of God receive identifying marks. God’s people are marked by the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father (9:4; 14:1; 22:4). God’s enemies will be marked with the name of the beast (13:16; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). It is unlikely that either of these marks are intended to be taken literally. Rather, they are metaphors affirming that God knows those who belong to him and those who do not (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19).

ANCIENT SEALS

Ancient seals were marks of ownership, usually applied to commercial products. The name or symbol of the owner, inscribed in reverse on the sealing ring, was impressed in a clay bulla so that the owner was clearly identified.

Here, God’s people are sealed in their foreheads to identify them as belonging to God. Based on both the Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation, early Christians often identified this “seal” as the sign of the cross.

The Identity

A simple reading might suggest that the 144,000 are Israelites or Jews, but two things give us pause. First, we have already seen that true “Jewishness” in the Revelation is probably not to be connected with pedigrees but with faith in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:6, 20; 2:9; 3:7, 9). Second, the listing of the twelve tribes is unusual in that it has no parallel in all the Bible (compare it with the lists in Ge. 49 and Eze. 48, for instance). In the Revelation, Dan and Ephraim are missing though the list includes both Joseph and his son Manasseh. This seems to suggest that the reader is not to take the twelve tribes as a face-value listing. Thus, if the 144,000 represent something other than Jewish bloodlines, what is it? The most consistent answer, due to the fact that the imagery of Israel is transferred over to Christians elsewhere in the Revelation, is that the picture represents the church. If there is an Israel “according to the flesh” (I Co. 10:18), we have a reasonable basis for assuming an Israel “according to the Spirit,” and indeed the New Testament references tending in this direction are numerous. James, for instance, addresses the dispersed church as “the twelve tribes” (Ja. 1:1; cf. 1 Pet. 1:1).

The Number

The number 144,000, like many numbers in the Revelation, probably has symbolic significance. As the square of the number twelve times the square of the number ten, it may denote the fullness or completeness of God’s people. Twelve is the number of both the tribes of Israel and the apostles who stand at the head of the new Israel. Ten and its multiples occur frequently in the book as a symbol of completeness (2:10; 5:11; 9:16; 13:1; 17:12; 20:2-4).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Many have interpreted the “mark of the beast” to be something literal. Would this then mean that the “seal of God” is also literal, since both are on the foreheads of the respective groups?*
- *Do you think the seal of the living God is intended to preserve God’s people from physical harm or from spiritual harm?*