

## THE SEVEN SEALS AND THE SEALED MULTITUDE

# REVELATION 6 & 7

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Chapters 6-7 begin the scenes of judgment in Revelation. As chapter 5 declared, only one was worthy to open the seals—“the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David...[who appeared as] a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain” (5:5-6 NIV). Now, the Lamb is removing the seals.

## THE SEVEN SEALS

### Seals 1-4—The Four Horsemen (Rev 6:1-8)

These first four seals release judgment in the form of different-colored horses where their riders bring various forms of dread upon the earth. The overall allusion is most likely to the book of Zechariah, where horses of various colors (appearing in a vision nonetheless) “are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth” and report back their observations to the angel of the LORD (1:10-11 NIV). Similarly, four colored horses, representing spirits (NIV) or winds (ESV) pull chariots in Zechariah 6:1-8, “going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world” to go “throughout the earth” (6:5-7 NIV). The colors and judgments of the specific horses in Revelation 6 have significance (see below), but two main points here are that (1) the vision John sees is in line with the vision of an Old Testament prophet, and (2) the horses and horsemen in these visions are likely meant to be yet another symbolic depiction of the absolute sovereignty of God.

“The justly famous four horsemen of the Apocalypse...seem to represent a chain of events that human history has known all too well: conquest, the breakdown of peace, death in war, economic injustice, famine and disease.”<sup>1</sup>

Michael Gorman

### Seals 5 & 6 —The Souls of the Witnesses (Rev 6:9-11) and the “De-Creation” (Rev 6:12-17)

The fifth seal takes place “under the altar” where an unnumbered group of souls awaits God’s judgment and avenging of their blood (6:9-10). The implied contrast here is stark between those in heaven who are anxious for God’s judgment, while those on earth—including some in the seven churches—would probably prefer that it not come anytime soon! Such a contrast can be distilled down to one of faithfulness versus unfaithfulness. The faithful on earth have nothing to fear in an ultimate sense, while the unfaithful stand to lose much. These faithful souls (literally) are told to “wait a little longer...” (6:11 NIV).

The sixth seal brings cosmic calamity. It includes an earthquake (something the churches were familiar with), changes in the sun and moon and stars, mountains and islands being removed, and sheer terror on the part of what seems like all the inhabitants of earth. Old Testament imagery abounds (see below)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 141.

and some have proposed that this seal unleashes a process of de-creation before the new or re-creation. Perhaps a more evident summation is that “John clearly describes the terror of an impenitent world.”<sup>2</sup> Gorman points out, though, that the descriptions of judgment are not primarily intended “to instill fear but to provide a wake-up call for those who are sleeping, not merely through life, but through empire.”<sup>3</sup> We might expect the seventh seal to come quickly and to consist of something along the lines of complete annihilation (how else could the sixth seal be outdone?); however, Revelation is full of surprises!

## THE SEALED MULTITUDE<sup>4</sup>



Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut of the angels restraining the four winds (ca.1496-8). Dürer’s woodcut of the four horsemen appears on the cover of Metzger’s *Breaking the Code*.

Image from Connecticut College Wetmore Print Collection  
[http://oak.conncoll.edu/visual/prints/German\\_prints\\_Durer\\_Apocalypse/content/\\_1634300027\\_large.html](http://oak.conncoll.edu/visual/prints/German_prints_Durer_Apocalypse/content/_1634300027_large.html)

### The 144,000

Instead of the seventh seal, the text shifts to another vision. Four angels “standing at the four corners of the earth” are commanded by a fifth angel to delay the harm they will inflict “until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God” (7:1-3 NIV). John then hears that 144,000 are sealed, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (7:4-8).<sup>5</sup> Gorman identifies this group as “the church on earth, situated in the midst of the tribulation associated with the seven seals of judgment.”<sup>6</sup> The vision then shifts away from earth.

### The Great Multitude

Rather than 144,000—a nice, round number—John now sees “a great multitude that no one could count” (7:9 NIV). Moreover, instead of one nation, this multitude is comprised of people from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9 NIV). This, then, is likely “a vision of the church in heaven.”<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, the scene here is reminiscent of chapters 4-5, where praise is continually proclaimed and various types of angelic, otherworldly beings are active participants in the worship. Overall, the chapter draws richly from the Old Testament, as can be seen by examining the cross references in most Bibles.<sup>8</sup>

All sorts of major implications come out of this vision. For instance, if the great multitude in heaven is so multi-ethnic, there seems to be a justification for global missions here on earth. In addition, if this is a brief glimpse of the final state of history, then how should this inform our current view of the nations? At the risk of

<sup>2</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 106.

<sup>4</sup> Technically, only the 144,000 are describes as being sealed. The countless multitude has no need of being sealed (i.e., protected) since it is already in heaven.

<sup>5</sup> See below for more information on the significance of these symbols. Metzger and others have pointed out how the list of tribes here is different than what we would expect. See Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 60n1.

<sup>6</sup> Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 133. He goes on to observe how these “sealed” of Israel are being protected in the midst of the persecution they are about to face. They are not being kept from experiencing the persecution, though.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See notes below for additional examples.

stereotyping, how often do we take seriously our “identity, mission, and allegiance” as part of the global church?<sup>9</sup> In its place, we often seem prone to substitute nationalism and even patriotism. Even if we don’t like to admit it, we often live as though we are Americans first, Christians second (or third...).

The vision of Revelation 7 “is— or should be—at the heart of the church’s self-understanding. This is what God is up to in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Michael Gorman

## TRYING (HARD... AGAIN) TO MAKE SENSE OF THINGS

With these major points in mind, the challenge still remains of trying to understand the meaning and significance of the various symbols in these chapters. What follows here is a limited survey of what some of the well-regarded commentators have said for the major symbols. Metzger’s summary in chapter 6 of *Breaking the Code* is also very helpful.

- White horse and rider with a bow and crown (6:2)—These may symbolize “the spirit of conquest and militarism,” where the bow reflects the OT image of military power, and the crown represents victory. An additional allusion to the Parthians is also possible here, as they were “the most famous archers of antiquity (and white horses were their trademark).”<sup>11</sup>
- Red horse and rider with a great sword (v. 4)—The red color symbolizes bloodshed and the sword mentioned here is “the Roman short sword,” possibly representing violence internally within the Roman Empire. This reflects the kind of strife depicted in both Zechariah 14 and Isaiah 19; furthermore, violence and political turmoil were familiar phenomenon within first-century Palestine.<sup>12</sup>
- Black horse and rider with a pair of scales (vv. 5-6)—They likely represent famine. Inflated prices for staples of wheat and barley are present—a possible allusion to Ezekiel 4.<sup>13</sup> deSilva mentions how Rome purchased grain from Asia Minor at low prices, while “the residents of the provinces where this grain was produced often paid high prices.” In addition, “[m]arket demands made the production of oil and wine far more attractive, often leading to scarcity...[of grain] in the provinces.”<sup>14</sup> The prohibition suggests a restriction in scope (or could it be a form of sarcasm aimed at the economic injustices of Rome?).
- Pale horse with a rider named Death, and Hades following (vv. 7-8)—The color of the horse suggests the color of a corpse, and the four plagues mentioned reflect those in Ezekiel 14.<sup>15</sup>
- Souls of the slain located under the altar (v. 9)—The position of these martyrs reflect the location where blood was poured out in the OT sacrifices on the altar of burnt offering (cf. Lev 4 and Exod 29), and likely conveys the idea that these martyrs’ deaths are a kind of sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>11</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, [NIC] rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 142.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>14</sup> David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 146.

- White robe (v. 11)—This is likely a symbol “of blessedness and purity.”<sup>17</sup>
  
- Great earthquake, a black sun, a moon like blood, falling stars, a vanishing sky, and removal of mountains and islands (vv. 12-14)—John’s audience “held that the well-ordered movements of heavenly bodies were a token of God’s providential control,” so these descriptions would have signaled the end of the world.<sup>18</sup> The notion of an earthquake recalls Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19, as well as Isaiah 2 and Haggai 2. The descriptions of the sun and stars here also reflect Joel, Isaiah 34, and Matthew 13.
  
- Reference to kings, great ones, generals, the rich and powerful (v. 15)—These categories likely portray “that those who might normally have reason to feel secure will be utterly undone.”<sup>19</sup>
  
- Four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds (7:1)—Angels are commonly depicted as controlling the weather in apocalyptic literature. The four corners of the earth represents “‘the four quarters’ of the compass [which] is a widespread cosmological conception in the ancient world,” also reflected in Job 37 and Isaiah 11.<sup>20</sup> The four winds “represented the four cardinal points of the compass and included all winds.”<sup>21</sup> These winds were thought to be highly destructive agents in apocalyptic literature (cf. Dan 7 and Jer 49).<sup>22</sup>
  
- Another angel with the seal of the living God (vv. 2-3)—The seal may refer to a signet ring used to “authenticate and protect ancient documents.”<sup>23</sup> The idea here is that the servants of God are marked as being so, which comes from Ezekiel 9, and stands in contrast to the mark received by those who are not servants of God.
  
- The 144,000 of Israel (vv. 4-8)—For starters, Aune points out that it is “important to note that those who are sealed are only part of a larger group...If the twelve tribes of Israel are interpreted literally, then some Jews are specially designated over others through sealing. If the twelve tribes of Israel are interpreted figuratively, then some Christians are specially designated over others through sealing.”<sup>24</sup> Mounce takes this number figuratively, as “a symbolic way of stressing that the church is the eschatological people of God who have taken up Israel’s inheritance.”<sup>25</sup> The number stands for completeness and “refers to that generation of faithful believers about to enter the final turbulent period that will mark the end of human history.”<sup>26</sup>
  
- The great multitude clothed in white robes with palm branches (vv. 9-10)—This alludes to the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15, and their attire portrays victory and Christ’s righteousness. The palm branches reflect a celebration, mirroring John 12.<sup>27</sup> Vv. 13-14 reveal that this multitude is comprised of “the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (ESV).

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>20</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52B of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. (Dallas: Word Books, 1998), 450.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>22</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>24</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 460.

<sup>25</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 162.

- The great tribulation (v. 14)—This refers to “that final series of woes which will immediately precede the end,” and has an OT connection to Daniel 12.<sup>28</sup>

- Robes made white in the blood of the Lamb (v. 14)—Clear OT connections can be found here (e.g., Isa 1:18), where the sacrifice of the Lamb enables them to be made righteous.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 164.